

Minutes of AAE General Meeting – 5th December 2009 at 11.30

Venue: RAS, Burlington House (Lecture Room)

Present: Mike Dworetzky (President), Alan Pickwick (Treasurer), Teresa Grafton (Secretary), Anne Urquhart-Potts (Editor Gnomon), Robert Massey, Francisco Diego, Shaaron Levenson, Stuart Eves

Apologies: Dave Buttery, Sotira Trifourki, James O'Neill, Sandra Voss, John Griffiths

1 WELCOME

MD welcomed members to this general meeting called to discuss AAE's future role and function.

2 BRIEF HISTORY OF AAE AND WHY WE ARE MEETING

- Association was formed c. 1981 as a lobbying group to facilitate the inclusion of astronomy in the new National Curriculum. In the beginning we had invaluable help from an 'insider' HMI Tony Lacey. The process was very successful and Astronomy was established in the National Science Curriculum initially at all four KS (though not 'kindergarten').
- Since these early days there has been a paring down of content but it is still represented at KS 2,3 and 4.
- AAE also produced and circulated curriculum materials – ie. Primary and Secondary Packs. These were popular and sold well (via ASE) and were a principal source of income.
- There were also initiatives in teacher training.

Why are we meeting now?

AAE is no longer involved in lobbying or actively promoting resources and its membership is dwindling. There are fewer than 100 (under 100 separate postings of Gnomon). Gnomon represents a major expense, amounting to around 50% of our income.

3 AAE SUCCESSES AND CURRENT THREATS TO ASTRONOMY IN NC

There are no major threats to astronomy in the curriculum so AAE does not need to be a pressure group in the original sense.

AAE successes are detailed above. The association no longer produces packs though a revised Secondary pack is currently with AP who reported that time is an issue.

4 WHAT CAN/SHOULD WE DO TO SUPPORT ASTRONOMY IN THE NC

Stuart E. reported that a new text book is about to come out (price £12.95) and a new GCSE syllabus due in 2011. He reported that GCSE Astronomy numbers are increasing.

AP reported that changing regulations governing the production of coursework – i.e. how it is to be supervised - may threaten the GCSE's future. (NB this will affect all subjects but because Astronomy necessarily involves activity after school hours it is likely to have a more significant effect).
Stuart E mentioned the Extended School Initiative.

There was a brief discussion concerning the proportion of GCSE astronomy students who are school as opposed to F.E based. There is also a cohort of individual (distance-learning?) students.

ACTION R.M will investigate the statistics relating to the above.

It was suggested That AAE might look for ways of supporting GCSE Astronomy in schools.

RM talked about the Space Education Office - a UK-wide resources distribution centre based in Yorkshire. He suggested that AAE should link to or support this.

RM also reported that the RAS have put money into a review of online resources (currently on RAS website) which the AAE website might perhaps host or support.

7 SIXTH FORM PROBLEMS AND DECLINING UNIVERSITY COURSE ENTRIES

At this point, the discussion shifted to a consideration of how the above might constitute a new area of concern for AAE. Since 2006 there has been a 40% drop in entries to Astronomy-based university courses. It appears that sixth formers are being actively discouraged from applying by head teachers and teachers. At the same time, Physics entries have actually risen. It is likely that the reason for this is linked to the issue of future employment opportunities.

5 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- FD described an initiative he runs at UCL ('Your Universe'). School children come into the university to meet with Astronomy students and see them at work. It looked very promising in terms of giving children a sense of the excitement of research.
This was felt to be an idea that could travel and be a possible future focus for AAE.
- Links with education sector
AUP said that in early days AAE acted as a networking medium for planetarium personnel. BAP has now assumed this role. However, AAE continues to occupy a narrow and distinctive slot in terms of its unique link with teachers and the education sector.
- With this in mind, RM suggested that there should be an AAE representative on the RAS Education committee. He noted that Julian King is currently very busy as the committee chair.

- Resources and teacher support
'A' Level materials: AP is to reissue these in worksheet format. AAE could then distribute these – e.g. online?
- Events
The 2008 AGM held at RAS was very successful and attracted a number of enthusiastic teachers. AAE should do more of the same and move around the country.
- Membership
Need to expand. AUP suggested that this could be free – at least for the first year. NB. A significant number of current members are retired educators. About 50% are active in schools.

6 GNOMON AND OTHER MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Website

Gnomon currently goes onto the website though not immediately.

The newsletter could be e-mailed to subscribing members with a discount offer for electronic delivery. One advantage of this format would be that links could be included. The need to re-format Gnomon would necessitate the appointment of a website editor (James O'Neil is out of commission at the present time).

AAE pays £100 p.a. for the current website and £10-15 p.a. for the URL.

RM suggested that RAS could possibly host the AAE website.

There was also discussion of the potential use of Twitter and Facebook as media of communication about the Association.

After Lunch

8. OTHER IDEAS

FD introduced members to Magic Planet' (visual technology manufactured by Global Imagination – see the website) and described the 'Your Universe' initiative
See IYA website - also:

www.ucl.ac.uk/youruniverse

Stuart E described the UK Space conference at Charterhouse School. About 20 different schools involved. Future events might include FD's programme.
Dates for 2010 - 24th-28th March.

The meeting closed at 14.10

Those able to stay were taken on a tour of the Burlington House Headquarters and the Library collections (special thanks to RAS Librarian Peter Hingley).