

Report on the 36th Young European Radio Astronomer's Conference (YERAC)

The 2006 YERAC was held at the Conference Centre “De Bron” in Dalftsen, The Netherlands, from 12–15 September. The YERAC is an annual event, organized each year by one of the European radio astronomy institutes or observatories, with the purpose of bringing together 30-60 young researchers (Ph.D. candidates, or new postdocs). Most are busy with research in radio astronomy or a related field, and the conference is an opportunity for them to present their work in a relaxed atmosphere, and talk informally with other young astronomers. As the only theme of the meeting is radio astronomy, the talks can be expected to cover a wide range of astrophysical topics, and this year's YERAC was no exception.

There were presentations on extragalactic topics (AGN jets, variability, polarization and magnetic fields, QSOs; clusters; normal galaxies), our Galaxy (star-forming regions, molecular clouds, planetary nebulae, the nuclear region), stars and stellar objects (pulsars, protostellar objects, binary systems) and instrumentation (digital spectrometer, VLBI, pulsar backend). All of them made use of PowerPoint or similar software packages, and almost all are now available on the internet (www.astron.nl/yerac/ and click on Presentations). There was ample time for discussion at the end of each presentation. On Wednesday afternoon (13 September) a visit to the Westerbork Observatory was organized. In beautiful weather (in fact, the whole week was warm, sunny and dry), everyone was able to inspect the 25 m parabolic reflectors, visit the receiver and other rooms in the control building, and inspect the frontend systems.

One evening we had an informal discussion on non-science issues which concern young astronomers, which was most interesting. Not surprisingly, the question of jobs figured prominently: what are the prospects? New projects (ALMA, SKA) may produce more openings, but how many, what kind, and on what timescale? Will many new Ph.D.s be faced with the prospect of a succession of postdocs, or is there a possibility of more tenure-track positions? In some countries, there are limits to the number of years one can be employed in temporary positions, and still be eligible for a tenured appointment. But there were also concerns expressed about an increased tendency for grants to not include social security, health insurance, or retirement benefits. As more scientists are forced to spend a longer portion of their early career in such employment, they run a number of risks: little or no disability or unemployment coverage, minimal hospital insurance, and the risk of having to retire with an insufficient pension. There was also interest expressed in public relations and (radio) astronomy: is it being done well enough, especially in Europe?

Instruction and/or a workshop on the topic would be desirable.

Finally, a few words about the venue. Perhaps it was partly the weather (which was wonderful, perhaps even too warm - a complaint not often heard in the north Netherlands!), but the location - on a quiet river - and facilities received general approval. The atmosphere was just right for the informal discussions during breaks or in the evening, which should be one of the fringe benefits of meetings like YERAC. Moreover, the accommodation was comfortable, and the food tasty.

YERAC participants

James Anderson, JIVE, Dwingeloo
Willem Baan, ASTRON, Dwingeloo
Michiel Brentjens, ASTRON, Dwingeloo
Francis Froberg, University of Bonn
Simona Giacintucci, University of Bologna
Volker Heesen, Bochum University
Carolin Hieret, MPI, Bonn
Ramesh Karuppusamy, ASTRON, Dwingeloo
Dorota Koziel, Jagiellonian University, Krakow
Denis Valerievich Kratov, SAO, Zelenchukskaya, Russia
Nadia Kudryavtseva, MPI, Bonn
Kosmas Lazaridis, University of Salonika
Oleg Malov, Pushchino, Russia
Patrizia Manzitto, Catania Astrophysical Observatory, Italy
Nuria Marcelino, IRAM, Granada
Nicola Marchili, MPI, Bonn
Brian Moloney, University College Cork
Francisco Montenegro, INAF-IRA, Bologna
Shane O'Sullivan, University College Cork
Subhashis Roy, ASTRON, Dwingeloo
Eduardo Rubio, University of Amsterdam
Paul Ruffle, Jodrell Bank, University of Manchester
Antonietta Russo, Arcetri Observatory, Florence
Tamara Azretovna Semenova, SAO, Zelenchukskaya, Russia
Paolo Serra, University of Groningen
Rebeca Soria-Ruiz, JIVE, Dwingeloo
Yulia Vladimirovna Sotnikova, SAO, Zelenchukskaya, Russia
Richard Strom, ASTRON, Dwingeloo
Daria Teplykh, Pushchino, Russia
Simona Toscano, Catania Astrophysical Observatory, Italy
Valeriu Tudose, University of Amsterdam
Jan Wagner, Metsahovi, Finland
Patrick Weltevrede, University of Amsterdam

Marek Wezgowiec, Jagiellonian University, Krakow
Stefan Wijnholds, ASTRON, Dwingeloo

For the record, the attendees came from ten European countries (including the Netherlands). The largest contingents were from Germany, Italy, Russia and the Netherlands; Ireland and Poland were also represented with more than one participant each. It was unfortunate that there was only one person from the UK, and no one from Sweden (but there had been a last minute cancellation from each country); France was also not represented. Forty percent of the attendees were women.