



## INTRODUCTION

This is the sixth issue of the semi-annual newsletter for E-Cass readers. The intention is to keep the community up to date on the activity of ACURA. ACURA is the Association of Canadian Universities for Research in Astronomy, with a membership of 20 universities. ACURA exists to promote the interests of Canadian university astronomers, including the highest priority LRP projects requiring funding by the Federal Government. The current projects of interest to ACURA are the TMT and the SKA. ACURA also maintains an active role in advancing the interests of its member institutions in the governance of federally supported astronomy, currently undertaken by NRC.

ACURA is primarily concerned with the promotion of its two highest priorities – the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) and the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) following the ground based priorities for world observatories in the LRP. In the past few months it has also discussed with NRC and CFI the complex issue of sources of operational support for astronomy national facilities which by parliamentary mandate fall under NRC's responsibility. More on these issues below.

### Activity on the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT)

On July 28, 2014 the TMT partnership, now incorporated as the TMT International Observatory (TIO), announced the formal start of construction on the Mauna Kea site, following final approvals on the site sublease by the University of Hawaii and the state. This was accompanied by a press release issued by the TMT and an article in the Globe and Mail here in Canada. There will be a Ground-Breaking (GB) ceremony at the site on October 7, followed by a reception at Waikoloa attended by many invitees across the international TMT community.

The TMT partners (now designated as Members) signed onto the project are now China, Japan, Caltech and UC, with India expected to join at about the time this letter reaches press. The Government of Canada has not yet announced a decision on whether Canada will be a Member. In the interim Canadian interests in TMT are represented by ACURA's status as an Associate Member respecting its past contributions, signifying its intent for Canada to become a Member,

and its agreement to continue with in-kind contributions to TMT. These contributions will be provided to TMT by NRC Herzberg through an agreement between ACURA and NRC. Associate Members are present at Board meetings but have no vote. The Associate Member status is in place for one year (until Spring 2015) at which point TIO, in light of the (anticipated) decision by Canada, will undertake a second decision whether to proceed with construction. This decision may be influenced by whether Canada joins, and permits existing Members to withdraw at this stage without financial penalty should they decide to do so. India and NSF (through AURA) are also Associate Members because of their existing contributions and expectations to participate. As an Associate Member, Canada will have representation at the GB ceremonies, mainly through ACURA. NRC will also be represented by a member of its senior administration, respecting NRC's current and past contributions to TMT.

Meanwhile ACURA and its Coalition partners (CASCA and Industry) have continued their activity in support of joining TMT. On the ACURA side, the focus is on promoting support from the presidents of ACURA universities, and on meetings with Industry Canada and the Department of Finance. We have also made, together with the Coalition, a pre-budget submission to the House Committee on Finance on August 6, detailing the funding needed for Canada to join the project.

Throughout the Coalition interactions with government on TMT we have been advised to consider use of the forthcoming Canada First Research Excellence Fund (CFREF) recently announced by the Federal Government. This fund, to be used for supporting excellence in research within the universities beginning early next year, will ramp up slowly (\$50M in the first year) and will total \$1.5B over 10 years). However, ACURA, following advice from some of its member institutions, considers it premature to plan the use of this fund for TMT until we understand how the fund will be implemented, and until universities have had a chance to consider TMT together with their other priorities. The fund is certainly inappropriate and insufficient to cover the cost of the enclosure (\$150M) needed to cover Canada's contribution of the TMT enclosure within the first few years. Accordingly, the basic strategy will be to continue to push for the full cost (\$300M over 10 years) to join in TMT.

### [Activity related to the Square Kilometre Array \(SKA\)](#)

Activity here in the past six months has been to finalize the transformation of the Canadian SKA Consortium Board to the new ACURA Advisory Council on the SKA (AACCS). As such it will be a standing committee of the ACURA Board. The ACURA Board has now approved both the terms of reference and the position of Council chair which will be Bryan Gaensler. Bryan will be arriving from Australia to take up a position as director of the Dunlap Institute at the University of Toronto in January, 2015, and will then also begin his role as Council chair. Bryan is also ACURA's nomination to NRC for the currently vacant Canadian scientific director position on the international SKAO Board. We are fortunate to have Bryan at the helm in both SKA positions.

## Funding for operating national facilities in Canadian astronomy

Recently the JCMT community raised a concern that the CFI declared an application for operational support of JCMT after withdrawal of NRC support this year as ineligible. The argument is that JCMT is a national facility and falls under the responsibility of NRC. This ruling has implications for any facility of national scale that has, or has had, support from NRC, and obviously reduces flexibility to support Canadian astronomy. Follow-up discussions by ACURA with CFI and NRC indicated that the restriction is imposed by Industry Canada, leaving the agencies with no flexibility in this area. Both CFI and NRC recognize that this “balkanization” of funding astronomy facilities is unhealthy and potentially problematic downstream for facilities that have had any connection with NRC. CHIME was raised as an example of a project that might be ineligible because it is sited at DRAO. At the last regular meeting between ACURA and NRC in May it was resolved that NRC will consider discussing this issue with all agencies, possibly by resurrecting the (currently inactive) Agency Committee on Canadian Astronomy (ACCA) this fall. The ACCA contains representatives from NRC, CFI, NSERC and CSA. ACURA intends to follow developments in this area and to continue to argue for flexibility in how national facilities are supported.

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ACURA Executive Director

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