

**Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday March 23, 2011
at UniBE in Bern**

**Swiss Commission for Astronomy
(SCFA)**

1) Call to Order

The chair, G. Meylan, calls the meeting to order at 2:00 pm.

Attendance at the meeting :

Present : W. Benz, G. Beutler, P. Jetzer, G. Lake (part time via skype), S. Lilly (replacing M. Carollo), G. Meynet, D. Pfenniger, W. Schmutz (part time via skype), M. Steinacher (guest from SER), F.-K. Thielemann, S. Udry, and G. Meylan (chair).

Excused : M. Carollo, and T. Schildknecht.

2) The Second SCFA Student Summer School in 2012

In September 2010, the First SCFA Summer School for PhD students in Switzerland was held in St-Luc, Valais. It was organized by UniBas and UniGE colleagues with “Stars and Stellar Explosions in Galaxies” as the general subject.

This positive experience has nevertheless allowed the identification of a few points to be improved for the next edition in 2012. There are essentially three points : (i) we should decide if the profile has to be more specialized or more educational, consequently scientifically broader ; (ii) we should aim for a more important budget : there is already a strong increase from the SCFA, via sc|nat, with a total contribution of CHF 10'000 ; we should still look for other financial sources ; (iii) we should advertize the school more efficiently in trying harder to recruit students from all Swiss universities, i.e., EPFL, ETHZ, UniBas, UniGe, and UniZh and any other Swiss institutes.

In order to plan, for Summer 2012, the Second SCFA Summer School for PhD students in Switzerland, it is decided to ask for submissions of proposals, by May 31, 2011, directly to the secretary of the SCFA (Schatzmann Claire claire.schatzmann@epfl.ch) The SCFA will select one of those proposals during its next teleconference to be held in June 2011.

3) Technological cooperation between Chile – Switzerland in the framework of the E-ELT project

In order to gain experience in hardware and software activities related to astronomy, the possibility of some cooperation between Chilean and Swiss astronomers and engineers was discussed at the occasion of the visit of State Secretary Dell’Ambrogio to the ESO facilities in Chile in early September 2010.

Francesco Pepe (UniGE) got in touch with Chilean colleagues from the *Departamento de Astronomia, Universidad de Chile* and from the *Departamento de Astronomía y Astrofísica, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile* in order to discuss techniques for the measurements of transit of exo-planets and related software for analysis.

The names of the potential people, susceptible to play the role of entre points in Chile or in Switzerland are reminded here. In Chile, Prof. Mario Hamuy, Departamento de Astronomia, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile (mhamuy@das.uchile.cl) and, on the other hand, Prof. Leopoldo Infante, Departamento de Astronomía y Astrofísica, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile (linfante@astro.puc.cl). In Switzerland : Alain Maurissen for CSEM, Georges Meylan for EPFL, Marcella Carollo for ETHZ, Willy Benz for UniBE, and Stéphane Udry for UniGE.

Any similar initiative in the future is, from now on, left to the responsibility of the above Swiss institutes. Any coordination of a visit by a Chilean delegation to more than one Swiss university during the same trip is, of course, highly desirable.

4) The future of IRSOL

The most important item of this meeting is the final discussion about the future of the *Istituto Ricerche SOLari Locarno* (IRSOL), since the SER has put a deadline on 31 March 2011 for the possible submission of a funding request under Article 16 FIFG.

As an introduction to this item, a presentation of the case is given by Philippe Jetzer (UniZH), President of the IRSOL Foundation, who has initiated the present discussion in the framework of the SCFA.

In the light of the report which has been written about IRSOL by the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC), taking into account the outcome of the meeting between IRSOL and SER held on July 6, 2010, the SCFA unanimously decides, after a long discussion, to write a short and factual letter to State Secretary Dell’Ambrogio in order to address the request by SER “*Schweizer Roadmap für Astronomie 2007-2016: Staatssekretär Dell’Ambrogio regt an, den seit ihrer Publikation erfolgten Änderungen im Bereich der Sonnenphysik Rechnung zu tragen und eine klare Stellungnahme der betroffenen Wissenschaftsgemeinschaft und der Schweizerischen Kommission für Astronomie der sc|nat zur Bedeutung des IRSOL einzuholen.*”

The SCFA concludes that it is not its task to strategically place IRSOL in the national and international technical and scientific environment but unanimously agrees on the outline of the letter which summarizes the discussion and addresses the main SCFA conclusions.

The letter about the present status and potential future of IRSOL as seen by the SCFA was written during a few exchanges of drafts between the members of the SCFA during the few days following this meeting and was sent to the State Secretary Dell'Ambrogio on March 25, 2011. See a copy of this letter in Annex 1 below.

5) Miscellaneous

None.

6) The meeting is adjourned at 4:25 pm.

Annex 1

SWISS COMMISSION FOR ASTRONOMY

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N/ref. GM/cm

Dr. Mauro Dell'Ambrogio
Director
State Secretariat for Education and Research SER
Hallwylstrasse 4
CH-3003 Bern

Lausanne, 24 March 2011

Concerns: **The Istituto Ricerche Solari Locarno (IRSOL) in Locarno**

Dear State Secretary,

As the conclusion of a meeting with representatives of the Foundation Istituto Ricerche Solari Locarno (FIRSOL), on 6 July 2010 in Bern, you invited the Swiss Commission for Astronomy (SCFA):

- to outline the change in the landscape of Swiss research activities related to solar astronomy compared to the situation described in the "Roadmap for Astronomy in Switzerland 2007-2016" which was published in late 2006 by the SCFA and
- to provide you with an assessment and evaluation from the SCFA of the potential future of the IRSOL.

In view of forthcoming decisions to be taken with respect to IRSOL, this letter answers your requests and provides you with the unanimous position of the SCFA, excluding Prof. Philippe Jetzer (UniZH), who is also President of the FIRSOL and, consequently, has a conflict of interest in this matter.

The SCFA acknowledges the excellent instrumental and scientific achievements of IRSOL under the leadership of ETHZ in the domain of high-resolution solar spectro-polarimetry. Observations at IRSOL led to significant advances in our knowledge of the polarization of the solar spectrum.

During a brief introduction, before the meeting of the SCFA, Prof. Jetzer showed that IRSOL intends in the future to continue its research and instrumentation development in the specific area of solar spectro-polarimetry. This work is likely to result in a new, improved version of ZIMPOL to be installed at the 1.5m GREGOR telescope on Tenerife (Spain), in exchange of guaranteed observing time. This telescope belongs to a consortium of German research institutes with, in particular, the Kiepenheuer-Institut für Sonnenphysik (KIS), in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, with whom IRSOL has started to collaborate closely.

Given the small size of IRSOL, its association with a larger institute carrying out first class solar research is essential to provide not only the required scientific leadership but also the scientific environment necessary to fundamental research. Unfortunately, at the present time this leadership and environment in the particular research area of IRSOL can no longer be provided by any Swiss institution. The new Swiss landscape in solar physics that has emerged since the writing, in late 2006, of the “Roadmap for Astronomy in Switzerland 2007-2016”, due to the retirements of chairs in solar physics at ETHZ and UniBE, has left IRSOL and its research area somewhat isolated in the country.

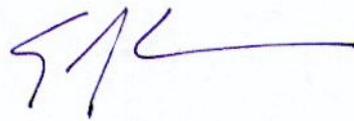
The Physikalisch-Meteorologisches Observatorium Davos and World Radiation Center (PMOD/WRC), in Davos, has a long standing record in developing instrumentation to monitor variations of the solar irradiance. The research efforts of PMOD/WRC focus on understanding the impact of the Sun on Earth's space environment and on the solar influence on the terrestrial climate. New in the Swiss solar research landscape are the declared interests of the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz (FHNW), in Brugg-Windisch, to create a space research group in order to participate in space experiments devoted to the study of solar X-rays. This group has already received funding to carry out studies of such an instrument in the framework of an ESA mission (Solar Orbiter) to be launched in 2017, if selected. Even though these two groups provide a background of solar research in Switzerland, none of them can provide IRSOL with a direct connection to a Swiss university.

Other Swiss institutions have occasional collaborations with IRSOL. However, these interactions remain at a level that cannot be qualified as having a large potential for the future. They are mainly related to undergraduate students with temporary activities related to advanced laboratory work.

In summary, the SCFA concludes that, with its current organisation and its stated scientific interests, which are complementary to those of PMOD/WRC and FHNW, IRSOL is likely to remain somewhat isolated in the Swiss academic landscape for at least some years to come. However, its connection with renowned solar physics institutes outside of Switzerland, and in particular with the scientific leadership provided by KIS, suggests that IRSOL can continue to play a significant role in the domain of solar spectro-polarimetry for a number of years. The long-term future of this specialized area of research has not been further investigated by the SCFA and would probably need to be considered as well.

On behalf of the SCFA, I remain available for any further information you may need.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. Georges Meylan
President Swiss Commission for Astronomy

Cc :

- Prof. Philippe Jetzer (FIRSOL and SCFA)
- Dr. Martin Steinacher (SER)
- All other members of the SCFA : Prof. Willy Benz (UniBE), Prof. Gerhard Beutler (UniBE), Prof. Marcella Carollo (ETHZ), replaced during this meeting by Prof. Simon Lilly (ETHZ), Prof. George Lake (UniZH), Prof. Georges Meynet (UniGE), Prof. Daniel Pfenniger (UniGE), Prof. Thomas Schildknecht (UniBE), Prof. Werner Schmutz (PMOD/WRC), Prof. Friedrich-Karl Thielemann (UniBAS), and Prof. Stéphane Udry (UniGE).