

BINA/BIPASS STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

(Thursday 22/02/2024, 09:00 UT)

PRESENT:

- MDB = Michaël De Becker (ULiège, Belgium)
- PDC = Peter De Cat (ROB, Belgium)
- SKG = Shashikiran Ganesh (PRL, India)
- SJ = Santosh Joshi (ARIES, India)
- LM = Laurent Mahy (ROB, Belgium)

ABBREVIATIONS:

- AI = Action item

(start at 09:00 UT)

1. END REPORT OF BINA-2

All the information to prepare the end report of BINA-2 is available (e.g. short description of work visits) but the report has not been written yet. For the Belgian side, there is no template. The only information that is available is that it should be at maximum 5 pages (both in English and in Dutch, because the PI is Dutch speaking) and that it should summarize both the network activities and the future perspectives between the partner institutes. PDC and SJ should coordinate this effort to make sure that the end reports at the Belgian and Indian side mention the same things.

→ AI PDC & SJ: Make end report of BINA-2

2. PROCEEDINGS OF 3RD BINA WORKSHOP

PDC finished the preprocessing of the 95 papers that were submitted and accepted for the proceedings of the 3rd BINA workshop. The resulting versions were submitted to the editors of the Bulletin de la Société Royale des Sciences de Liège in mid-December 2023. They have been working hard on making them ready for publication since mid-January. This includes recompiling everything, making corrections for layout (e.g. inclusion of headers and page numbers), and language editing. The type setting and language editing is done by one person and, unfortunately, turns out to be a huge task. For several papers, the reviewers/guest editors did not do a good job and the help of Michaël is required to solve some of the issues. He also receives all the e-mails that are being sent to the authors with suggestions and language corrections that need to be validated by them. Most authors reply quickly, some of them are slow. By now, about 2/3 of the proceedings papers are ready, but the papers will only be published once all of them are ready. This is expected in the first half of April (educated guess).

3. BIPASS PLANNING FOR 2024

FROM BELGIUM TO INDA (1 long visit young colleague each year)

Stephane GORIELY (ULB) to visit Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA; Bangalore) and University of Calicut (UOC; Calicut). The details of this visit are not known yet.

FROM INDIA TO BELGIUM (1 short visit staff member + 1 long visit young colleague each year)

No official requests yet.

4. BINA WEBSITE

Nothing has been done since the previous meeting. The general structure of the website is already available (<http://bina.oma.be/>), but most of the topic, the information is still missing/not included. PDC & LM should schedule a meeting with Joan Vandekerckhove (who created the website) to discuss about the possibilities (who gets permission to update what, and how to do it?) and to prepare a strategy and a corresponding to-do list to get the website ready in an efficient way.

→ AI PDC & LM: Discussion with Joan Vandekerckhove about BINA website

→ AI PDC & LM: Prepare strategy/to-do list to get the website ready

5. FUTURE FUNDING POSSIBILITIES FOR THE INDO-BELGIAN COLLABORATION

BELGIAN SIDE:

@BELSPO: MDB, PDC, and Katrien Kolenberg had a discussion to prepare for a meeting with BELSPO officials to talk about future funding possibilities within BELSPO (including money for network activities, outreach activities, and manpower). However, during a telephone call, Mrs. Brigitte Decadt from BELSPO mentioned that the bilateral collaborations will disappear completely. We should check the BELSPO hierarchy to find out if there is a high-level BELSPO official (that has some influence on decisions about funding possibilities) that we could contact to have the type of discussion that we had in mind.

@ERASMUS+ : This is a mobility grant at European level for visits including teaching at universities. There is call each year with several (funding) restrictions (including one based on geographical location). A proposal requires a fair amount of work (several steps) and the full procedure takes about half a year. Moreover, there is lot of competition within the university, between the universities, and between the countries. MDB has already received an ERASMUS+ grant several times. Some of them were submitted within the BINA context and he is convinced that it helped to get these proposals accepted, which is an additional argument to keep BINA alive.

INDIAN SIDE:

@DST: Dr. S.K. Varshney is retired. It is not clear how the funding possibilities at DST for bilateral collaborations will evolve in the near future.

@NRF: Nation Research Foundation, a new funding agency that also wants to bring in private investments, is being formed.

SUGGESTIONS:

In the near future, we should organise a meeting to discuss about the ARIES-BELSPO agreement (see Item 6) where high-level officials from both BELSPO and DST should be present. As this is an ideal opportunity to have a discussion about future funding possibilities, we can request to put it on the agenda of this meeting too.

For BIPASS, there is funding for long work visits for young colleagues. In the case that some of these work visits are not as long as originally intended, there will be some left-over funding, in the best case at both side. We will only know this at the end of the BIPASS project, but we could already investigate now if such funding could be used as a starting budget to organise another BINA workshop. It could help to find additional funding elsewhere needed for the full organisation of such an event.

→ AI SKG & LM: Investigate if left-over BIPASS funding from work visits could be used for the organisation of a workshop

6. ARIES-BELSPO AGREEMENT

On 21/02/2024, SJ has send an e-mail to PDC with a draft for an amendment to the Memorandum of Understanding between DST and BELSPO on the operation costs of 3.6-m DOT. It states that BELSPO

should pay 123200 EUR/year for the 7% of Belgian time starting from April 2024 for a time span of five years.

To put the suggestions below into context, a summary of the current status of the discussion about the renewal of the ARIES-BELSPO agreement is included in the minutes of this meeting:

- The discussion started at the end of 2022 when the director of ARIES explained that a financial contribution is required in the future for the use of DOT to cover the operation costs. In the beginning of 2023, the members of the Belgian astronomical community have prepared a detailed report about the use of the 7% Belgian time on the DOT, showing that the DOT has been unavailable to Belgians for 3 years since the start of its scientific observations and several other issues were encountered during the observations preventing the DOT observations gathered during Belgian time to be used in publications. It was therefore suggested to create a DOT user committee to keep track of the issues and stimulate an improvement of the overall performance of the DOT. This report was shared on 15/02/2023 with all the stakeholders, including ARIES.
- The situation has been discussed within the Belgian National Committee for Astronomy (BNCA). As a result, the president of the BNCA has sent an official statement to BELSPO saying that (a) it recommends a free-of-charge extension of the 7% guaranteed time for at least three years and (b) if the telescope operations are not improving after this extension period, BELSPO should not invest money for telescope time on the DOT.
- During the in-person discussion in Bhimthal in March 2023, the director of ARIES explained the financial situation and stressed again the need for a financial contribution from Belgium for the use of the DOT in the future. He also expressed the wish to organize an external evaluation of the Devasthal observatory, which is considered as an excellent idea... but we did not see any follow-up on that point yet.
- Questions from BELSPO invoked an additional discussion within the Belgian astronomical community, leading to an official request, sent by BELSPO on 09/07/2023 to ARIES, to extend the 7% guaranteed observation time for Belgian astronomers up to the start of the 2026 monsoon season under the same conditions. It allows to evaluate if the DOT observations show a sufficient improvement to make a decision about the continuation of the long-term collaboration on the use of the DOT by the end of 2026. This evaluation may be based on the official technical downtime reported by the Observatory Management, and the evaluation of the quality of the data may be based on the ability to use the collected data for scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals.

To our knowledge, BELSPO did not receive a reply from ARIES yet.

Therefore, the Belgian participants in the meeting have made the following suggestions to increase the chances of a positive outcome of the forthcoming discussion:

1. To make the negotiations as efficient as possible, it would be better to directly include BELSPO into the discussion.
2. It is not realistic to assume that we can converge to a final version of the amendment in one week, as suggested by the signature date (29/02/2024) currently included in the draft version of the amendment.
3. The BELSPO budget for 2024 is fixed, so a financial contribution from them can only be expected at the earliest in 2025.
4. The amendment should include a section that describes the procedure that will be followed in the case of technical issues. (context: long periods of down-time of the DOT in the past and some persisting technical issues that are not solved yet after almost 7 years of activity)
5. We strongly advice to include the creation of a DOT user committee that unites all users (Indian, Belgian, and others) with external peers (non-Indian, non-Belgian) to allow an objective evaluation of the progress and make suggestions for improvements. (context: it would significantly increase the credibility of the Devasthal Observatory that has the potential to become an important observatory in the northern hemisphere)
6. Based on the experience of the previous years, the 7% Belgian time amounts to, on average, 12-14 nights/year. A financial contribution of 123200 EUR/year would therefore be equivalent to 9000-10000 EUR/night, which is difficult to justify in comparison with the cost of telescope time at other

observatories. (context: for one night of time with HERMES on the 1.2-m Mercator telescope, the HERMES consortium partners pay 1000 EUR/night, for which they get fully-reduced, high-quality, and ready-to-be-analysed spectra in return).

(end at 10:30 UT)

NEXT MEETING:

To be decided.