

IAC Partnership with ING

Francisco Sánchez Martínez (Director IAC)

The Instituto de Astrofísica de Canarias (IAC) opened its observatories to the international scientific community in 1979, as a result of the Agreement on Co-operation in Astrophysics. Ever since, its vocation has been to serve as more than a mere venue for telescopes and instruments from different countries. It has gradually become involved in new telescopes and it has strengthened its bonds of co-operation with the user institutions.

The Isaac Newton Group of Telescopes, pioneer in astronomical observations at the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory, is one of the most complete and advanced collections of optical/infrared telescopes in Europe. For over 20 years, these telescopes have given the British, Dutch and Spanish scientific communities the chance to make state-of-the-art observations, which have made a tremendous contribution to pushing back the frontiers of knowledge in many fields of astronomy. Discovery of the optical counterparts of gamma ray bursts, studies of galaxy formation and the search for and characterisation of brown dwarfs are but a few of many examples we could mention.

The vital role these telescopes have played in the development of Spanish astronomy is beyond doubt. Their value can be seen from the fact that many more observing proposals are submitted to the WHT and INT than can be carried out. On the WHT, four out of five good observing proposals from Spanish groups cannot be carried out due to lack of telescope time.

It is well-known that optimum use of 10-m telescopes requires medium-sized telescopes (between 2 and 4 metres) to act as support and to prepare projects to be carried out on larger diameter telescopes. With the imminent start of operations of the Gran Telescopio

de Canarias, the ING telescopes will play an important role.

For this reason, PPARC's decision to reduce the funding available for operating the ING telescopes was a cause of deep concern for the IAC. In the face of this uncertainty and concerned about the ING's future, the IAC decided to explore possible ways to reinforce co-operation with the ING to ensure its continuity and to guarantee that its telescopes will continue to operate in optimum conditions.

The agreement with PPARC and NWO has ensured operational continuity of the ING, whilst, at the same time, providing additional time for Spanish astronomers. The IAC contribution consists of qualified staff, astronomers and engineers, plus an infrared imaging spectrograph for the WHT (LIRIS). The overall IAC contribution is equivalent to about half a million euros per year. The Spanish astronomy community increases its share of ING telescope time by 9.1% a year. In particular, this time is being used to prepare the science that will be done with the GTC.

Because drafting of the legal texts of agreements between institutions of several different countries is seldom easy, formal signing of the agreement has been delayed. This, however, has not prevented the agreement from being applied. Since 2002, observing time has been made available and IAC staff have gradually joined ING telescope activities. Furthermore, the first commissioning of the LIRIS instrument was highly successful, far exceeding the expectations of both the ING and the IAC.

Spanish astrophysicists have already benefited from the increased access to time on these telescopes, with a start being made on several programmes that were approved after the relevant



From top to bottom: IAC in La Laguna (Tenerife), Observatorio del Teide (Tenerife) and Observatorio del Roque de Los Muchachos (La Palma). Both observatories are operated by the IAC.

announcement of opportunity was made to the entire Spanish astronomical community.

We are sure that this agreement will help to reinforce co-operation among our institutions, thus facilitating increased collaboration in the future within the "European Research Area" that the European Union is promoting. We are convinced that this will strengthen astronomy on La Palma, where the exceptional natural conditions will continue to be attractive for the installation of new generation telescopes. This will have a direct impact on European astronomy, particularly if the European Extremely Large Telescope is finally installed at the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory in the next decade. □

Francisco Sánchez (director@ll.iac.es)