EAAE Meeting at ESO Headquarters

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The 'Catch a star' (CAS 2004) competition is enjoying ever increasing popularity in schools across Europe. The announcement of the prize winners for CAS 2004 took place during the EAAE meeting – in an animated atmosphere as can be seen in these pictures.

The European Association for Astronomy Education (EAAE) held its triennial General Assembly at ESO Headquarters on March 4–6, 2005. The formal sessions were embedded in a meeting on "New Teaching Opportunities in Astronomy" which exposed more than 70 participants from all over Europe to the latest didactic trends in this area. The EAAE was created in 1995 and has been closely associated with ESO ever since in a very fruitful collaboration with the ESO EPR Department and its Educational Office.

The meeting was opened by EAAE President, Fernand Wagner (Luxemburg), who gave an overview of current EAAE activities, together with other officials of the Association. This being the International Year of Physics and the centenary of Einstein's trailblazing research papers, much attention was given to the question of how to incorporate the related physics topics into current school curricula. This is clearly not an easy task – relativity is an elusive subject for young people (and the public). Fortunately, there are several applications in daily life, e.g. GPS navigation. There is no lack of connections with astronomical objects either and this science is thus a very useful medium (gravitational lenses, black holes) for discussing this subject. Other sessions dealt with exoplanets, one of the hottest topics in present astrophysics and always of great interest to school students for obvious reasons.

EAAE and ESO are currently involved in several joint educational projects. For one of these, "Catch a Star! 2004", the winners were announced via a Webcam; the five top prizes are trips to various observatories and went to teams from Spain, Bulgaria, France, Germany and Belarus.

The ALMA Interdisciplinary Teaching Project (ALMA ITP, see Messenger 117, pp 63–65) met with much interest, and the possibility to link many different teaching topics within one specific research project is considered as one of the most promising paths towards better and more exciting science teaching in the schools.

Plans are now being drawn up for a European Astronomy Day in 2006 (most probably on Friday, October 20), with associated opportunities for active participation of school students and their teachers. During the ensuing discussion many useful suggestions were made for international projects on this occasion.

It has become increasingly clear that in order to raise and maintain the interest of young people in science, it is necessary to begin as early as possible, addressing the age group of 5–9 year-olds. This implies science teaching already in the primary school. A full session therefore dealt with this topic and the participants received positive reports from several pilot projects. During three long sessions on new teaching methods, several teaching projects at the foremost frontline were presented and thoroughly discussed, some involving semi-professional equipment like large CCD's and image processing, robotic telescopes, etc. There is no doubt that doing science " (almost) like the scientists" is a great stimulus to the students.

The participants came away from the meeting with a good feeling that many new developments are now taking place and that there is much new material and experience which may advantageously be introduced into the classes. The EAAE members look forward to further intensifying their efforts to improve astronomy education in Europe's schools and ESO, through its Educational Office, will continue to support the EAAE in the best possible way. Indeed, this direct "link" between the world's top telescopes and Europe's schools has already proved its worth in numerous ways, stimulating science teaching in many places.