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Report on effectiveness of task 2, advertising radio astronomy capabilities

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1. Document information

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1.1 Dissemination Level

Dissemination Level		
PU	Public	X
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services)	
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)	
CO	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	

1.2 Content

1. Document information.....	2
1.1 Dissemination Level	2
1.2 Content.....	3
2. Report on effectiveness of task 2, “Advertising Radio Astronomy Capabilities”	4
2.1 Introduction	4
2.2 Implementation.....	4
2.3 Progress	5
2.4 Evaluation	6
2.5 Conclusions.....	6

2. Report on effectiveness of task 2, “Advertising Radio Astronomy Capabilities”

2.1 Introduction

QueSERA Task 2 focused on reaching astronomers in Europe that normally would not engage in radio astronomy for geographic or topical reasons. Just as there are a number of astrophysical topics that traditionally rely on radio observations, there are a number of subjects where radio astronomy tools are not often applied. Traditionally, the radio astronomy topics are addressed in countries where radio astronomy instrumentation has been available. Additionally, it is often perceived that radio astronomy requires a set of special skills for data processing and if these skills are not acquired from a supervisor in early career stages, researchers may be hesitant to apply radio astronomy tools for their research. As a result there are astronomical university groups around Europe where very little or no radio astronomy is practised. These are most often in countries where there is no (national) radio facility. In Task 2 the objective was to advertise the capabilities that the RadioNet facilities offer to the larger astronomy community in Europe. It was also a recognized strategic priority to start informing more European astronomers about the SKA project.

It was thought that the outreach of Task 2 was best implemented by direct contact with RadioNet-affiliated experts. Ideally, setting up new collaborations would be the best way to effectively engage a new community. Other possible ways to address the issues include presentations at conferences that address those topics where radio astronomy may offer a different perspective on the subject. In addition there are a number of occasions where the various astronomy facility providers present themselves to the community. Presenting RadioNet and the capabilities it offers at such events was also deemed to fall within the scope of Task 2. Finally, it was realised that the RadioNet facilities were falling short in advertising their capabilities in a homogeneous way; there is no high level portal where potential users are assisted in evaluating which of the RadioNet facilities offers the most promising capabilities to address a specific astrophysical question.

Task 2 was not concerned with presenting the RadioNet facilities to the general public or to the national and European policy makers, these communication channels were addressed by Task 3 and 1 respectively.

2.2 Implementation

At the start of the project, the various options to advertise RadioNet facilities were discussed in a document¹ that was discussed and adopted by the RadioNet3 board on Dec 14 2012.

Within this work package it was decided to implement three actions to fulfil the objectives of the programme.

1. Targeted visits to institutes and countries where radio astronomy is not traditionally very visible.

¹ Deliverable D2.1, http://www.radionet-eu.org/radionet3wiki/lib/exe/fetch.php?media=na:d2.1_rn3_deliverable_12.12.18.pdf

2. Stimulate “radio-astronomer” talks at meetings on astronomical topics that have little radio contributions
3. Enhance the visibility of RadioNet facilities on the web specifically aiming at prospective users.

In addition it was recognized that there was a role for RadioNet3 at the EWASS (European Week of Astronomy and Space Sciences), as this is a main conference where European astronomers get together and can be informed of the capabilities and developments of the research facilities.

In the aforementioned document the particular rules for the various actions were laid down. Budgets for “Targeted visits” were defined, a list of countries was published and the boundary conditions for these visits were defined. Similarly, the rules for attending “non-radio meetings” were drafted. For these combined activities a programme committee was formed, which would approve trips in both categories and assign travel budgets.

The suggestion to start a new web portal was not explicitly resourced, but was discussed in more detail in the context of the synergy activity in the ERATec Work Programme. The progress of that activity is not reported here.

Following the acceptance of this implementation plan, the travel options were advertised in a small advertisement (<http://www.radionet-eu.org/call-travel-support>, March 2013) that the RadioNet members were asked to post at their institutes. In addition the Project Scientist did start a registry of upcoming meetings, recording the planned presence of radio astronomers.

2.3 Progress

The advertised travel options led too much fewer applications than anticipated. In the category of “targeted visits”, only one visit was proposed that was eligible for funding. Although the report on the trip is quite positive², this was on the whole a disappointing turnaround. As a counter measure the programme committee started a top-down selection to try to convince RadioNet experts to visit institutes in “non-radio” countries. Even with specific targets, none of the suggested visits was actually made.

For the visits to “non-radio meetings” there was a bit more interest. The programme committee had to turn down a number of proposals where it was felt that proposed conferences already had substantial representation. Still a number of proposals classified for support and resulted in RadioNet representation at a number of meetings.

At the time of the mid-term review (November 2013) it was clear that the implementation of the programme depended too much on the altruistic motivation of the RadioNet experts (see below) and that the more straightforward (and more financially demanding) way to reach the astronomy community was probably through large-scale astronomy meetings like EWASS. Although the travel subsidy programme stayed in place for the entire duration of the programme, the focus shifted to supporting RadioNet at three EWASS meetings. At the 2013 meeting (in Turku, Finland) the Project Scientist organised a special session “The role of modern radio observatories in black hole and jet studies” that was well attended³. For the 2014 (Geneva) and 2015 (Tenerife) meetings the RadioNet3 management organised a

² follow http://www.radionet-eu.org/radionet3wiki/doku.php?id=na:quesera:advertising_radio_astronomy_capabilities#meetings

³ http://www.radionet-eu.org/radionet3wiki/lib/exe/fetch.php?media=na:quesera:ewass2013_fm.pdf

booth. Through a professional level of representation it was possible to reach the greater European community and advertise RadioNet facilities at the venue where also the other existing European collaborations (ESO, ESA) also advertise their telescopes.

2.4 Evaluation

Clearly, advertising their facilities to the larger astronomy community remains an important activity for all RadioNet beneficiaries. Making an effort beyond advertising the options in a call for proposals can arguably best be done in a concerted effort on RadioNet scale, as the RadioNet (TNA) facilities have nicely complementary characteristics, which can be presented in a consistent and attractive manner. In addition, the outreach effort of the individual observatories is often limited and mostly concerned with reaching the general public at a national level; something that is quite different from reaching the astronomy community across Europe.

Advertising the astronomical capabilities of the facilities to peers clearly requires different expertise and communication skills. We had thought these were typically found with the staff of the RadioNet facilities. While this is probably true, we had not appreciated the problem of motivating these experts to do such outreach. Their motivation to make the effort to travel to institutes and national meetings had to be balanced against their other activities. Although at board level the facility directors apparently recognize the strategic importance of these activities, this work still had to come mainly out of the 'science time' of the staff. Irrespective of whether they have small or large assignments for doing scientific research, their objective is to focus on specific research paths, looking to acquire new data, access to new expertise or finish a paper. We realize now that this is seldom aligned with the task of advertising the capabilities of the facility. Maybe it is then no surprise that the only travel to a "targeted institute" was made by a JIVE management member, as there is a clear mission with JIVE to advertise the facility at a European scale. It is also understandable in this context that there was more interest to go to "non-radio meetings" as that typically aligns better with the scientists objective.

At the level of the RadioNet management there was fortunately much interest to represent the facilities in international meetings and participate in the discussions at EWASS. We think this made good use of the RadioNet resources and met an objective in line with the original aims.

2.5 Conclusions

Although the resources available were spent in line with the original objectives, QueSERA Task 2 did not prove as effective in reaching new users for RadioNet3 as originally hoped. The main reason for this is that the planned implementation relied too much on bottom-up motivation of participating scientists. Outreach, even when targeting peer astronomers, requires dedicated professionals.

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