

ESO at JENAM 2009

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From 20 to 24 April over 1100 astronomers celebrated the European Week of Astrophysics and Space Science at the University of Hertfordshire in Hatfield, UK. The occasion was the joint meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) and the European Astronomical Society (EAS). These meetings are generally known as the National Astronomy Meeting (NAM) for the UK and the Joint European National Astronomy Meeting (JENAM). The scientific programme was divided into plenary sessions in the mornings, followed by parallel sessions during the afternoons and flanked by meetings of the EAS and the RAS.

Francoise Combes (Observatoire de Paris) received the EAS Tycho Brahe prize and gave a lecture on galaxies with decoupled kinematical components. ESO and ESA were each asked to organise one plenary session and to offer several parallel sessions. ESO also hosted a prominent exhibition stand in the main thoroughfare between the lecture halls that became a popular meeting point for astronomers (see Figure 2).

The meeting was opened by Lord Drayson, the British Minister of State for Science and Innovation, who emphasised the importance of astronomy and space science for today's society. Lord Drayson then visited the various exhibitions — including the ESO stand, where he had a long conversation with Tim de Zeeuw, the ESO Director General, and Patrick Roche, the UK member of the ESO Council. Lord Drayson showed great interest in VLT operations, the ALMA construction activities and ESO's plans for the future ELT (see the photograph on the Astronomical News section page).

The ESO plenary session was scheduled for the second day and was opened by Tim de Zeeuw with an overview of ESO's programmes and plans. He was followed by Michel Mayor (Geneva Observatory) who presented a discovery made with data from the 3.6-metre telescope at La Silla — that of the lightest yet known exoplanet, with only 1.9 Earth masses, orbiting Gliese 581. This star harbours a planetary system, now known to have at least four planets, one of which lies within the habitable zone. Linda Tacconi (Max-Planck-Institut für Extraterrestrische Physik) presented exciting results of the kinematics of massive galaxies at redshifts between 1.5 and 3. She demonstrated how the combination of millimetre and infrared observations can shed light on the structure of these distant galaxies and what can be learned about how these galaxies form and evolve.

Five symposia and 26 special sessions were organised in addition to the plenary sessions. These symposia and sessions covered essentially all of astrophysics and many astronomers struggled to decide which talks to attend and what to miss out on. Many exchanges took place between astronomers who were catching up on a missed session. Three of the special sessions concerned specific ESO issues: status reports on the E-ELT study, updates on ALMA's construction and plans for its scientific exploitation, and a session devoted to informing the community on how to make the best use of the existing telescopes on La Silla and Paranal.

The ESO exhibition was centrally placed and many astronomers stopped by to catch up on the latest developments at ESO. In addition, ESO organised two press conferences: a very successful conference to announce the discovery of the exoplanet with the lowest mass yet and another, less visited, to inform the public about the progress in the planning for the E-ELT.

This year's JENAM was one of the largest astronomical meetings in Europe and the organisers should be congratulated for its smooth running and an exciting programme. The pictures from the ESO exhibition reflect the breadth of the ESO activities and the interest taken by astronomers.

Figure 1. The thin VLT mirrors explained to future users.



Figure 2. ESO's exhibition stand was a popular spot at JENAM 2009.

