A SYSTEM FOR IN-HOUSE MANAGEMENT OF SCAR MEETINGS

Action Required

EXCOM is invited (i) to note further progress in development of plans to run SCAR meetings from within the Secretariat so as to keep costs of meetings down, (ii) to suggest changes as needed, and (iii) to approve plans for implementation in 2012.

Background

At XXX SCAR in 2008 the Executive Director presented Working Paper WP 29 to stimulate discussion on standardising the arrangements for OSC, on lowering the cost of the registration fee, and on the frequency of OSCs. Delegates agreed this was a very important topic that merited extended debate. WP 29 suggested that we need to examine a number of different systems to find one that would work for us with little or no adaptation. Delegates agreed that it would be difficult, starting in 2009, to spin up a system ready for the OSC in 2010. 2012 is a more realistic target.

Delegates agreed with the principle that SCAR could hire someone to manage the meeting registration and associated arrangements provided that this was self-sustaining and cost neutral. They also agreed that the registration fee could be set in such a way as to allow some small ‘profit’ element that could be used to invest in travel to the OSC by young scientists.

The progress report below addresses these issues.

In addition, Delegates agreed with the paper’s suggestion that full costings should be obtained from AWI, AAD and AARI so that it was clear to what extent the host organisation subsidised the three previous meetings in cash or in-kind (e.g. with staff), and how the registration fee had been used, and that these costings should form the basis for a revised paper for EXCOM in 2009.

That work has not been done because there simply has not been time and because looking backward in that way seemed less relevant in the context of trying to find a workable in-house system for the future.

Progress Report

The International Glaciological Society (IGS) has faced much the same problem as SCAR has in managing its meetings. To solve the problem it has recently moved to a comprehensive Member Relationship Management (MRM) system. This manages their membership database. It looks both more advanced and at the same time more user friendly than the SCAR database management system. It offers the advantage that as well as having our routine contacts we could add to them all the individuals who register for meetings, hence greatly expanding our contacts network. We have not been able easily to do this in the past, because our three previous conferences have been managed by three different organisations independently from the Secretariat and its database.
The MRM system incorporates an in-house management (EM) system that enables individuals to log on from outside, register for meetings, and make payments through a secure system directly into the IGS bank account. The system is being trialled with the Glaciology Conference that is being organised for Newcastle this July. The payment system is SAGE, and is separate from the EM system.

IGS also has its own abstract submission system, which was devised for it by the same people at SPRI who devised the SCAR web site. It is thus a no-cost system, and happens to be highly user-friendly. It is connected to the proprietary EM software, enabling IGS easily to manage all aspects of an event from registration and payment, to abstract submission and approval, to arrangement for field trips and ice-breakers, to the printing of name tags, to the burning of CDs with conference programmes and abstracts. This is what we have been looking for.

In summary, the IGS database and meetings management system has four main components:

(i) The Proprietary MRM member management database system;
(ii) The Proprietary EM software;
(iii) The SAGE payment software, enabling people to pay using credit cards (this could also be useful for our merchandising concepts – buying SCAR ties, mugs etc.);
(iv) SPRI software for submission and management of abstracts for meetings.

The MRM system also incorporates an accounting system that is clearly much more advanced than our simple (and slow) Excel-based accounting system.

The MRM system has the advantage that it incorporates a portal that would enable users to link directly to it through the SCAR web site, thereby obviating the need for Secretariat staff to spend time handling payments, paper registrations and so on.

Given the introduction we have had to the MRM system by IGS it would seem worthwhile for SCAR to investigate acquiring appropriate parts of the MRM system to improve our overall efficiency (databases and accounting), as well as to facilitate our in-house management of major SCAR meetings.

We had imagined (in paper XXX-WP29) that event and abstract management might require half a person time for the course of each year. Based on the IGS experience that would appear to be a significant over-estimate. Once an individual has been trained it should not take much time to manage such a system. Such a system, once developed, could potentially be available for any SCAR meeting, which would take the chore out of meeting arrangements for local organisers – thus improving our service to the community.

The IGS MRM software is provided by Technology Services Group (TSG), which they found in a competitive process that we might not wish to repeat. It would probably be an advantage for us to use the same system, since we can then benefit from IGS’s learning experiences.

IGS has loaned us a set of TSG brochures that will be made available at the EXCOM meeting.
At this point in time it is not possible to cost these activities, however it would seem sensible to add a provisional sum of $10,000 to the 2010 budget to cover possible start up costs so that we have a system being built during 2010-2011 ready for implementation for the 2012 meeting. IGS’s total costs were significantly greater, but their version of the MRM package included many bespoke add-ons that we would not require. Though it is not cheap, we would benefit from getting charity rates.

Such a system would be expected to pay for itself in a relatively short time through minor loadings on registration fees. It should help us to achieve the goal of low cost meetings in a relatively short space of time.

EXCOM is requested (i) to endorse the Secretariat’s exploring options and costs with TSG, during 2009, and (ii) the inclusion of $10,000 in the 2010 budget to cover possible start up costs for installation of such a system so that it can be readied for the 2012 meeting (there is an implication that further costs will be needed in 2011 to complete what is started in 2010).

At this point in time it is not possible to say what the potential drain on staff time may be from installing such a system. We will not know that until we have begun working with TSG. However, while IGS found that significant time was required to learn the system, it now requires very little time to manage it. The previous paper on this topic (XXX-WP29) goes into some depth on the duties expected to be involved on the part of a staff person to arrange meetings, and on the question of costings, so we do not repeat those points here. However, it is interesting to note that IGS achieves a lot of what is required by relying on volunteers from among the retired glaciologist community. Our discussions with IGS reinforced the validity of the statement from paper XXX WP29 that:-

“Once a standardized, fully automated, on-line system is created, the workload of staging a meeting would be significantly reduced. Standard procedures would lighten the workload for all involved and an automated system will greatly reduce the labour intensive portions of the process, such as abstract submission, handling and review. There may be some up-front costs to develop this system. Moving most of the programme management to the SCAR web site will have a secondary effect of getting even more people to log into the SCAR web site rather than a specially created one-time site managed by the local organizer and which is discontinued after the meetings. The SCAR web site based page would also be the “go to” location, avoiding having a new URL for every conference.”

Having such a system in place would (as stated in XXX WP29) allow us to package our cycle of scientific meetings as an organized system of scientific forums to promote and enhance Antarctic Science. This would be an effective advertisement and promotional tool for SCAR and the basis for a long-term strategy for these types of activities over the next 10 years.

In talking to IGS we found no evidence to support the view raised by one Delegate at XXX SCAR that experience from EGU suggested that this would be a complicated and expensive business for SCAR; quite the contrary.