

ESO WELCOMES FINLAND AS ELEVENTH MEMBER STATE

CATHERINE CESARSKY, ESO DIRECTOR GENERAL

In early July, Finland joined ESO as the eleventh member state, following the completion of the formal accession procedure. Before this event, however, Finland and ESO had been in contact for a long time. Under an agreement with Sweden, Finnish astronomers had for quite a while enjoyed access to the SEST at La Silla. Finland had also been a very active participant in ESO's educational activities since they began in 1993. It became clear, that science and technology, as well as education, were priority areas for the Finnish government.

Meanwhile, the optical astronomers in Finland had been engaged in the Nordic Optical Telescope at La Palma and a consensus evolved that full access to ESO would be important for the further development of Finnish astronomy as a whole.

Consequently, in September 1999, we were approached informally by a Finnish delegation, headed by Mirja Arajärvi, special government advisor to the Minister of

Education and Science, and exchanged preliminary information. I was then invited to Helsinki and, with Massimo Tarenghi, we presented ESO and its scientific and technological programmes and had a meeting with Finnish authorities, setting up the process towards formal membership. In March 2000, an international evaluation panel, established by the Academy of Finland, recommended Finland to join ESO "anticipating further increase in the world-standing of Astronomy in Finland". In February 2002, we were invited to hold an information seminar on ESO in Helsinki as a prelude towards membership. This we did in May 2002 and this time six of us went to Helsinki: in addition to Massimo, I was accompanied by Ian Corbett, Richard Kurz, Claus Madsen and Richard West. The event attracted a great deal of attention and was very successful.

The Finnish Government decided in March 2002 to ask for formal negotiations

which started in June 2002, and were conducted satisfactorily through 2003, making possible a visit to Garching on 9 February 2004 by the Finnish Minister of Education and Science, Ms. Tuula Haatainen, to sign the membership agreement together with myself.

Before that, in early November 2003, ESO participated in the Helsinki Space Exhibition at the Kaapelitehdas Cultural Centre with approx. 24,000 visitors.

ESO warmly welcomes the new member country and its scientific community that is renowned for its expertise in many frontline areas. The related opportunities will contribute to strengthening of pioneering research with the powerful facilities at ESO's observatories, to the benefit of Astronomy and Astrophysics as well as European science in general. ESO also looks forward to collaboration with the Finnish high-tech industry and further interaction in the areas of outreach and education.

ESO's stand at the Helsinki Space Exhibition at the Kaapelitehdas Cultural Centre.



H. Heyer (ESO)