

SEAC Educational Strategy for Cultural Astronomy (Amended draft)

Context

Cultural Astronomy has survived the challenges of its second incarnation in the 1960's. The initial academic hostility from other disciplines has significantly waned though not disappeared, and early and continuing non-scholarly claims and publications in the name of cultural astronomy are now largely side-lined by the work of scholars prepared to submit to peer-review. This achievement has been gained by many scholars' efforts to establish field method protocols which promise testable procedures for establishing astronomical intent in human cultures, and by the enthusiastic public support and interest into research findings in cultural astronomy. Nevertheless the discipline remains facing a long-standing challenge – breakout. Our discipline continues to be highly marginal and faintly recognised in educational syllabi, academic staff establishment and scholarly journals. Within SEAC a number of steps can be taken to assist in enhancing our discipline's significance, reputation and performance. Their adoption will require moving beyond working as a collection of individual scholars towards representing the discipline's collective interests. The Education Committee of SEAC recommends the following proposals to the Executive Committee and the SEAC AGM of September 2017.

The Role of the SEAC Education Sub-Committee

A representative group of about ten SEAC members should renew and/or begin committee membership every three years to continue SEAC education policy between conferences.

The committee's brief is to implement, enhance and suggest innovations to SEAC's education strategy in cultural astronomy – the search for the meaning of 'astronomy' in cultures.

The committee expects from cultural astronomers the highest standards of scholarship and a willingness from practitioners to participate in peer review.

The role of the Education Committee is to:

- a) Encourage and support to the wider scholarly community the achievements of the discipline and to encourage multi-disciplinary research projects.
- b) To encourage the growth of educational courses in cultural astronomy at all levels of education and in outreach activities directed at the general public.
- c) To encourage the growth of educational provision of cultural astronomy courses in cognate academic niche areas such as archaeology, anthropology, history and mythology.
- d) To review and recommend at each AGM updates and priorities of an annual SEAC education strategy.

In this context we recommend the following SEAC education strategy.

1. Recording

The education committee should collect, maintain and update a registry of cultural astronomy courses in Europe and beyond and, after ratification by the EC, publish this list on the SEAC web page.

2. Benchmarking

Encourage the identification and production of national Benchmark Statements which set out expectations about the standards of degrees in Cultural Astronomy. Each national Benchmark Statement must describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject. After ratification by AGM, publish these Benchmark Statements on the SEAC web page.

3. Curriculum Development

The SEAC Education Committee supports and encourages scholarly courses in Cultural Astronomy and offers a SEAC 'Kite Mark', displayed on the SEAC web page, for those courses that the Committee has validated.

In the present context of tiny provision and low take-up of cultural astronomy courses in the world, this situation requires targeted and tailored responses according to local situations, and a few suggestions follow.

One such initiative could be an enhanced MA/MSc in Cultural Astronomy methods for archaeologists in particular, and a title of 'Skyscape Archaeology' or similar offers easier acceptance from a sceptical profession like archaeology. Such a course could include an introduction to the five extant methods within archaeoastronomy (Statistical; Monte Carlo; Archaeological/architectural peculiarities; quantified landscape phenomenology; virtual modelling). For each of these methods conceptual issues of constructing indicators, scaling judgements and how to take measurements in the field can be addressed. A critical history of the discipline would provide an engagement with the main extant theoretical paradigms, and a regional study and field based dissertation would complete a Masters level diet of modules. Such a course can be delivered by distance learning and blended delivery systems.

A similar Masters course could be targeted for anthropologists, adding to the epistemological modules suggested above modules on structuralism/semiotics for the study of myth and art, the uses of ethnographic analogy, the comparative method and, where appropriate, the ethno-astronomy of extant cultures.

4. Outreach

Cultural astronomy, as a keystone discipline between the sciences and the humanities, has enormous potential for the development of outreach courses. The public has great respect for science and for scholarly debates on our ancestor's appreciation of the sky and their cosmologies. Inter-disciplinary courses combining cultural astronomy with archaeology, anthropology and history allow triangulating theories according to the knowledge sets of these cognate disciplines. Such courses can be delivered in small scale child and adult education classes, or on a very large scale as a 'MOOC'. We also encourage and support vigorous engagement in public talks, online, the press and TV/film documentaries to raise our public profile.

Further outreach initiatives should include attending archaeology and anthropology conferences to present Cultural Astronomy papers.

5. SEAC web-page enhancements

We need to raise the SEAC profile by enhancing our web page. Presently in a Google search with the term 'cultural astronomy' SEAC hardly figures in the url listings. This needs to change. Possible additions include: guides to SEAC kite-marked Cultural Astronomy courses, Cultural Astronomy benchmarks, to scholars web pages, selected and edited versions of conference filmed talks with slides (see below), and regular outgoing social media (eg. blogs and tweets) short pieces on cultural astronomy topics, book reviews, documentaries and movies etc..

6. Conference Organisation

Our annual SEAC conferences can be enhanced as an educational organiser. Three areas presently suggest themselves:

- a. At the SEAC 2016 annual conference the web streaming of proceedings to a select group of subscribers generated £1,500 registration income and world-wide attention. The Education Committee seeks the support and agreement of the Executive Committee to encourage a similar and wider system to all future SEAC conferences. Initially we should encourage invitations for virtual attendees to all those mailing lists we possess for colleagues who have attended SEAC meetings in the past and to ISAAC and INSAP members. SEAC should consider opening such access to wider constituencies.
- b. During each conference we should evaluate which few filmed talks delivered at SEAC, with the speaker's permission and EC approval would be appropriate for web delivery on the SEAC web page.
- c. In the last few conferences we have organised a final small 'brains trust' type group to provide a commentary on the quality and direction of conference papers, posters and discussions and a specialist workshop in IT CA applications. In addition we could consider allowing space for other workshops or debate/discussions either within or outside the main conference agenda with particular reference to the critical evaluation of the available theoretical paradigms.
- d. In the longer term we should consider offering, when and where appropriate, and if in the capacity of the LOC or some other SEAC constituency, summer schools in Cultural Astronomy in the run-up to conference as an adjunct.

Summary

Cultural Astronomy urgently needs to break-out of its present impasse, and a broad front education strategy can assist in this task. Immediate initiatives and gains can be made by the SEAC Education Committee taking action with recording (1 above), benchmarking (2), and enhancing the SEAC web page (4) and our Conference organisation (5). Curriculum development and out-reach (3 & 4) relies on SEAC members and associates individual initiatives and can be encouraged and supported by the SEAC Education Committee. The SEAC Education Committee needs to provide a review and update of its strategy at each conference.

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