

Youthful spirit

To the Editor – From 27 to 31 March 2007, the 13th conference of a unique series took place in Durham (UK). The Young Atom Opticians (YAO) meeting brings together PhD students and postdoctoral researchers in atomic physics from all over Europe (and beyond). Originally conceived by Alain Aspect and Jürgen Mlynek over a beer, the meeting has been held annually since 1995, in a different European country every year. From the beginning, the purpose of the YAO conference has been to get young researchers to talk to each other and to exchange ideas. And youth is indeed the main characteristic of this meeting; it is organized and attended exclusively by young researchers, while their senior colleagues stay at home. This recipe has been successful for creating an informal atmosphere. Students discuss day-to-day problems, and the questions after the talks come from students — something that is usually not seen in large conferences.

The first YAO meeting, organized by Ernst Rasel, then a PhD student, was

held in a small chalet on a mountain top in Austria in 1995, the year of the first successful Bose–Einstein condensation in atomic gases. With the spectacular growth of the atomic physics community throughout the last decade — reflected in Nobel prizes in 1997, 2001 and 2005 — the number of young ‘atom opticians’ has grown remarkably and the original small meeting of 15 people has developed into a full-scale conference. This year, 82 people from twelve countries participated. A total of 61 talks were given — spanning topics from atomic mixtures in optical lattices to chip-based atomic clocks and atom interferometry in space — providing all participants with a chance of presenting their own work. Many talks dealt with experiments that are still ‘under construction’; new ideas and techniques were discussed, no matter whether these have been proven successful already, or not. The most notable exception to the rule of ‘youngsters only’ is that each year two senior speakers are invited to introduce their field of research in keynote lectures.

In Durham, Ed Hinds talked about atom chips, and Tilman Esslinger about strongly correlated cold atomic gases.

The sole responsibility for the success of the conference lies with the organisers — PhD students themselves — who put together the scientific program, but also are in charge of raising the funds necessary for the organization of the meeting (while the continuity of the event has been guaranteed by the commitment of successive EU Research Training Networks for this field). Traditionally, the organizers take care of all the subsistence costs of the participants, thus enabling broad participation, free from financial constraints. Next year’s YAO meeting is organized by the students of the European laboratory for nonlinear spectroscopy (LENS) in Florence.

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