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THE AUSTRALIAN SPACE DISCOVERY CENTRE: A PUBLIC FACE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN
SPACE AGENCY

Abstract

Established in 2018, the Australian Space Agency's prime purpose is to facilitate the growth of a globally competitive national space industry. The Agency's operations and activities are carried out under four Strategic Pillars, one of which – Inspire – is focused on the development of the future Australian space workforce, to support the growth of the industry.

The centrepiece of the Inspire Pillar is the Australian Space Discovery Centre (ASDC), opened in May 2021. Part science centre and part space careers information hub, the ASDC is a unique facility focused on encouraging high school students and university undergraduates to undertake STEM studies and choose careers in the space sector. Co-located with the headquarters of the Australian Space Agency in Adelaide, South Australia, the ASDC acts as a “visitor centre” for the Agency: it highlights Australian innovation and achievement in the space sector, foregrounds the breadth of space careers available, and raises public awareness of the role of space activities in everyday life.

This paper will outline the development and operation of the ASDC as a public face for the Australian Space Agency. It will address the challenges of creating a public facility during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a complete reworking of the operating model for the centre, and offering “hands-on” programs to both school and general visitors under strict public health requirements. It will also look at the issues involved in incorporating an operational satellite control facility, housed within the ASDC, into the centre's programs, and examine the evolution of the role of the “Space Communicators”, the ASDC's casual docents.

Lessons learned in the development of the ASDC may be of value to other young space agencies seeking to enhance public engagement and encourage youth towards STEM careers.