

Minutes of a teleconference held between the Chairs of the OPC, OPO and UC

4 November 2008, 16:00-17:00 CEST (minutes approved and made public on 8 November 2008)

Present: Monica Tosi (Chair, OPC), Gautier Mathys (Head, OPO), Jacco van Loon (Chair, UC)

A list of agenda items had been circulated by the UC Chair in advance of the meeting, and these were adopted. The UC was asked by the OPC Chair for their views on the OPC procedures in the week prior to the teleconference; the Portuguese, Spanish and UK communities were polled on this issue by their representatives on the UC. A summary of these views, a comprehensive set of textual responses, and an attempt to synthesize an outline of desirable procedures had been circulated by the UC in advance of the teleconference. Given that this item on the agenda was likely to need most discussion, it was agreed to briefly discuss the other agenda items first.

The UC Chair asked about the status of the Grantecan time-share agreement, the OPC experience with the process, and any current allocation of ESO Large Programs. The Head of OPO explained that the OPC had fulfilled its task of ranking the proposed programs on their scientific merit, and that the technical evaluation of the highest 3 ranked programs, in interaction with their PIs, had been completed, but that complications had arisen since only one of the instruments is currently offered (OSIRIS, not CANARICAM). The situation is still under consideration, towards final decision about time allocation. The next call for ESO/GTC proposals is planned for March 2009.

The UC Chair asked whether the technical problems with the Laser Guide Star (LGS) are having an effect on the OPC's ability to allocate programs that ask for it, in particular as it had been suggested that a fair number of Large Programs had been proposed for use of the LGS. The Head of OPO informed that completion of the first part of a recovery project has improved the reliability of the LGS considerably. The LGS will be operated in 1-week blocks, once per month (in dark time). This does imply some scheduling constraints, and a limited amount of LGS time for new programs.

The UC Chair noted a widespread concern amongst users that with the decommissioning of FORS1 the pressure on the various instrument/telescope combinations may become seriously imbalanced. He argued that the OPC are the best informed about the demand and quality of scientific proposals for the use of these various combinations, and that it could be beneficial if this information could somehow be fed into long-term strategic decisions. The OPC Chair confirmed that it is not the task of the OPC to make recommendations about operational issues, e.g., decommissioning of particular instruments, but realizes that some scientifically excellent proposals may not be selected because of the high pressure on certain instrument/telescope combinations. The Head of OPO informed that the pressure on UT1 had been high, but does not seem to have increased this round, and that ESO are aware of the imbalance, but that changing the telescope configurations is a non-trivial operation.

ESO's view on long-term programs was discussed. There have been suggestions from some users to implement the possibility to ask for long-term status but a small allocation in terms of total telescope time. This has been discussed, in the context of Target-of-Opportunity requests and also

most recently at the ESO Workshop on Large Programs (mid-October 2008). It had not been found desirable to implement a new type of program of this kind, partly because of complications with scheduling. A program of this kind will have to be re-applied for, for the duration of the program.

On the same topic, the UC Chair inquired whether ESO had an intention to increase the allocation of Large Programs. This was partly motivated by the news that a workshop and possibly an extra call for proposals were being considered, for large spectroscopic surveys with the upgraded VIMOS and UVES/FLAMES in 2009. The Head of OPO explained that the VLT/VLTI Science Operations Policy, as approved by the Council, allows for up to 30% of time on VLT and VLTI to be allocated to Large Programs, and that there was no indication that ESO wished to increase this fraction and that in actual fact only 15-20% was currently being allocated. However, Large Programs are definitely encouraged at La Silla, where their maximum duration has been increased to 4 years as of Period 83. STC had indeed recommended that spectroscopic public surveys be accommodated (greatly helped by improved red-sensitivity of the optical spectrographs), but no special measures may be needed. The OPC Chair expressed the view that sufficient time should remain available for the many scientifically excellent regular proposals for, e.g., FLAMES.

A discussion of OPC procedures followed. The OPC Chair explained that this term a test to improve the procedures is being attempted, which caused some confusion. All six subpanel members had been asked to complete comments (as well as grades) on all proposals, in advance of their subpanel meeting. Application of a triage procedure had been suggested and will be decided at the next OPC meeting. In view of that discussion, input from the UC has been solicited. The users response was deemed very helpful, in particular the many generally well-argued suggestions why certain procedures might or might not work as desired. The OPC Chair agreed that although triage is known to work well at other panels, e.g., HST, the multi-telescope nature of ESO complicates triage in ESO subpanels as the critical rank depends on telescope as well as the outcome of the other subpanels. The OPC Chair also agreed with user comments that triage is risky if the full scale of grades is not used, which is hampered by the fact that proposals graded 3 or worse are automatically excluded from allocation. The Head of OPO warned that triaging out too many proposals could result in idle time during poor weather where otherwise reasonable programs might have entered the queue. He also agreed with user comments that discussion of low-ranked proposals would still be necessary in order to safeguard the compilation of quality feedback to the proposers. To ensure sufficient scrutiny of proposals it was suggested that three assessors would be the minimum useful.

With that slight change, agreement was reached in principle on the following preferred procedures:

- all panel members grade all proposals in advance of their subpanel meeting;
- 1 principal and 2 secondary assessors per proposal write comments in advance of the meeting;
- no automatic triage is recommended;
- subpanel chairs moderate the discussions, concentrating on feedback where there is consensus.

The OPC Chair will propose not to apply triage this round, and propose the above 3-referee system without triage for the next round.

The teleconference participants were thanked for their contribution, and the meeting was adjourned.