

Minutes of the Telecon of the UK 8m Users Group, Thursday 20 March 2008

Agenda:

- [1] new members / retired members
- [2] presence at NAM
- [3] ESO Users Committee meeting in April
- [4] status of Gemini semesters O8A and O8B (and Aspen?)
- [5] STFC priority list/consultation (STFC contact asked to leave)
- [6] any other business

Present:

Alfonso Aragon-Salamanca
Mike Barlow
Richard Bower
Matt Burleigh
David Clements
Paul Crowther
Isobel Hook
Matthew Jarvis
Richard McMahon
Simon Morris
Patrick Roche
Ray Sharples
Ilona Soechting
Jacco van Loon (Chair)
Mark Wilkinson

[0] apologies and agenda

Apologies received from: Simon Berry (Colin Vincent may dial in), Philip Best, Malcolm Bremer, Gerry Gilmore, Tim Gledhill, Patricia Sanchez-Blazquez, Stephen Smartt, and Aprajita Verma.

Proposition to move item [4] "presence at NAM" to become item [2];
Proposition to add item [6] "any other business".

Agenda was accepted with these modifications.

[1] new members / retired members

Following recommendations expressed at the October 2007 meeting of the Users Group, revision of membership is considered, with the aim of improving the balance and representation. Complications arising from the rapidly changing stage and considerable uncertainty with regard to Gemini have prevented this revision from taking place sooner.

The following new members are welcomed:

Patricia Sanchez-Blazquez (UCLan)
David Clements (Imperial)
Stephen Smartt (Queen's Belfast)

Oxford has 8 (9) members, partly because of the Gemini office. Andy Bunker is returning to Oxford, and has expressed a wish to stay on. Dimitra Rigopoulou steps down as member. Isobel Hook and Aprajita Verma are to become "observers" not voting members.

Nottingham, Durham, Edinburgh and Herts each have 3 members, which is ok. Richard Bower (Durham) suggests Mark Swinbank (also Durham) to replace him.

It was suggested, both at the telecon and by others, that terms of reference be formalised. This would make the Users Group's role and functioning clearer, and make it more able to perform its advisory role to the various telescope-related committees.

It was therefore desired that there be a difference between the telescope users, and Science Advisory Committee and Board/Council members. The latter would be "observers", participating in the meetings of the Users Group but not voting members. The former would be full members with voting rights.

ACTION on the Chair to draft terms of reference.

[2] presence at NAM

The October 2007 meeting of the Users Group recommended enhancing the UG's visibility and knowledge amongst the community. This has already been achieved to some extent through use of the STFC mailinglist to circulate the minutes of the October 2007 meeting (although the request for input prior to the meeting had not resulted in responses). There was a desire to be present at NAM 2008.

NAM session P23 (2 April, 2-3:30), "current facilities and new instruments", is of immediate relevance to the Users Group. There will be two presentations by members of the Users Group: "The Gemini observatory", by Ilona Soechting, and "The ESO Very Large Telescope and its interferometre", by Jacco van Loon. There will also be a poster on KMOS.

The Chair, Jacco van Loon intends to introduce the UK 8m Users Group as well as to solicit input into the upcoming ESO Users Committee meeting in April.

Attention was drawn also to the STFC session on Wednesday 3 April.

[3] ESO Users Committee meeting in April

The ESO Users Committee representative, Jacco van Loon briefly presented the main points from the annual ESO Poll and the End-of-Mission reports (see Appendix A).

The User Portal is now required for submitting proposals (and for any other procedures). The User Portal should also facilitate speeding up data access, and this will be a major item to push on the ESO Users Committee meeting.

This year's special topic is Advanced Data Products (ADPs). The question was raised as to ESO's policy about what they should deliver. This is expected to be discussed in detail at the ESO Users Committee meeting. The representative emphasized that this special topic had been suggested by ESO, and coming from ESO itself it was expected that ESO would come with a plan and policy.

New this semester is a time share with Grantecan for CanariCam and OSIRIS, as part of Spain's accession to ESO. However, access to Grantecan is severely restricted. Although 122 clear nights will be offered to ESO PIs, with up to 40 nights per year and ending by 2011, only Large Programme proposals requesting a minimum total amount of time of 20

nights will be considered! This means in practice that only a few large programmes will get time, and it is unclear what the UK share in this will become.

Additional input was invited from the UK 8m Users Group:

There was a concern that FORS1 would be less available. At least this seems to be the case in period 82 as a result of the commissioning of second-generation instrument XSHOOTER (medium-resolution spectrograph from UV to K-band in one shot), but this will probably also be its fate as only four cassegrain instruments can be accommodated (i.e. FORS1 cannot be moved to UT2, which is with VISIR and VIMOS relatively less oversubscribed). This issue is expected to be part of ESO's traditional presentation on the status of, and imminent plans for, its instrumentation, but otherwise it will surely be tabled.

Another concern was raised with regard to VISTA and VST. VISTA commissioning was confirmed to be on track for July with first science data to be taken towards the end of 2008, and VST is scheduled to become on-line in March 2009. The OPC may want to look again at the approved survey programmes for the VST, as these were designed quite a long time ago. There was some uncertainty about the level of open, non-survey time offered on VISTA. There may be none, or at the 10-20 per cent level. This will be (asked to be) confirmed at the ESO Users Committee meeting.

There was also dissatisfaction about the support for MACs; for instance the finderchart tool does not work on a MAC. The finderchart tool and MAC support in general are two recurrent topics at the ESO Users Committee meeting.

[4] status of Gemini semesters 08A and 08B (Aspen?)

Chair of the Gemini NTAC, Paul Crowther presented the current status of UK within the Gemini agreement and in particular the availability of semesters 08A and 08B to UK users. He confirmed that the approved 08A programmes were back in the queue as normal, and that full access to 08B is foreseen.

There is a "plan" (desire) to reduce UK access by a factor two from 09A on, which is just when exciting instruments such as Flamingos-2, MCAO and NICI start becoming available. 2009 is the decision point about STFC's continuation with Gemini beyond 2012.

It was unclear who is taking the lead in seeking buyers for UK time on Gemini; Graham Brooks is STFC's member on the Gemini board and he will probably be the best informed about the progress on selling UK time. It was suggested that there may be more interest in buying UK time on Gemini North, which is UK's only 8m facility in the Northern hemisphere. On the other hand, Gemini South will get several powerful new instruments soon, which is expected to boost UK's oversubscription rate on the Gemini South.

The "Aspen" process is said to continue, and the UK are committed to building WFMOS and GPI. The status of PRVS could not be disclosed at present, however.

[5] STFC priority list/consultation (no STFC contact at the telecon)

Time was reserved on the agenda to discuss the UK 8m Users Group's response to the consultation on STFC's Programmatic Review and PPAN's priority list.

There was meant to be a questionnaire distributed, about ground- and space-based facilities, but this seems not to have materialised as yet.

It was suggested that a joint response to STFC may be useful, but that it would still be useful for individuals to send their own responses. The Gemini Office is preparing their own response and this was considered appropriate.

There was general agreement about the fact that a single-facility approach is not a sensible way to prioritise astronomical facilities, as astronomical programmes often rely on a multitude of facilities for instance to cover the electromagnetic spectrum or the combination of survey telescope and powerful follow-up facility with the right instrumentation, or the coverage of both hemispheres for instance to follow-up GRBs or planet discoveries. What is needed is a scientifically motivated strategy for operating an appropriate suite of facilities (telescopes AND instruments).

There was also concern about the consultation process, and the basis for the rankings. More transparency is still needed, and more time. For instance, the documents upon which the rankings are based are not yet public. With at least some of them believed to be out-of-date by 18 months, it was feared that more information might have been out-of-date. The community would not be able to comment on this unless they have access to this information! Feedback was given to individual facilities, but very late (only a few days before the consultation closes) and without any explanation for the resulted priority.

The astronomy panels that have been established may have influence on the rankings, but again these panels reinforce the idea that the "problem" is divided up into "areas" which hampers forming a complete, coherent strategy for UK's astronomical research. The panels will get information by April 24, about the reasons for PPAN's ranking.

A poll amongst the astronomical community on what facilities people want would be one, effective, way of consultation. There was surprise such poll had not been considered by STFC this time, as it had been previously by PPARC.

A small subcommittee was established to help the Chair draft a Users Group response. This was then circulated after the meeting amongst all members. The response can be found in Appendix B; it was accepted to represent the views of the Users Group, and most members offered to sign-up for it explicitly.

[Prof John Womersley is thanked for accepting the response via e-mail directly]

[6] any other business

There was no other business suggested to be discussed.

The Chair thanked so many members for joining the telecon, and Ilona Soechting for arranging the telecon logistics.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:30.

Appendix A: UK issues for the 32nd ESO Users Committee

Minutes of ESO Council meeting 4/5 December 2007

Richard Wade was re-elected President of ESO Council.
Monica Tosi (Italy) has replaced Simon Morris as Chair of the OPC.

VISTA as UK in-kind contribution to ESO is being re-evaluated, and possible compensation items are being considered.

Israel has expressed interest in joining ESO.

Site testing for ELT continues near Paranal, La Silla, Morocco and La Palma (the latter face delay because of delays in FP6 deliveries).

EELT preparation was selected as a 5 Meuro FP7 programme. The total effort is 6.01 Meuro of which UK has a 16.4 per cent share (1 Meuro).

Poll 2008

A total of 40 UK users completed the questionnaire, a few more than last year. But not many responses came in after a general announcement to the entire UK astronomical community; only after reminding the UK PIs did many more arrive. 151 unique PIs were counted, so the response rate was 1 in 4 (at best).

The majority had service mode observations rather than visitor mode. The questionees were generally quite successful proposal writers: about 2 in 3. But they only consider that "reasonable".

The main issue UK users have is with the delay in access to their data. Their experience with Gemini is much better (days of delivery, not end-of-semester). Now that the user portal has arrived, this issue should be addressed. Delay in access to data has serious negative consequences for scientific exploitation (e.g. GRBs!) and followup.

The user portal has resulted in mixed experiences, from applause to despair.

ESO pipelines are not thought highly of. It is hoped that by developing scientific pipelines ADPs will become available, and vice versa. It is rather difficult to understand how many users can write their own software quicker than get an ESO pipeline to work (properly). There was a request for more help (manual?) on data reduction as this is what users tend to spend more time on. ADPs are welcomed, for instance explicitly for FEROS, UVES, LABOCA, FORS2 (GOODS), VIMOS (zCOSMOS), KMOS in future, in fact it was suggested that new instruments should come with a valid scientific pipeline (to be maintained) and that large programmes should deliver ADPs. It is imperative that it is made clear how the ADPs were created, as these might not be suitable to everyone's needs. By the way most questionees did not know what ADPs are.

With regard to the OPC, many users understand the limitations of panels having to assess many proposals, but some were dismayed about mistakes (visibility of targets was questioned unjustifiably, for instance). It was suggested to give PIs a chance to respond to initial, pre-OPC feedback, as used to be the case in UK panels. This would obviously increase the load on the OPC, but could avoid problems. Most requests for improved feedback are already endorsed by the OPC (I can say this having been at both sides of the fence now). A useful request was that a specific reason be given if a highly ranked proposal is not scheduled.

There was one serious allegation (although the questionee seemed to accept it as the nature of the game), about politics influencing decisions of the OPC. For instance in the case of GRB followup programmes, where there are a few competing programmes from different countries. If this is true this is totally unacceptable.

Remarks about the proposal forms included the lack of a category for purely technical programmes, ToO proposals that cannot request multiple instruments, and the

impossibility of asking for less than 10 hours for instance for a long-term monitoring programme that only needs occasional brief measurements. The latter point was made by two questionees. Also, the requirements on the findercharts are too restrictive, and there is no support for MACs.

EMMI will be sorely missed by two questionees, but they may not be aware that EFOSC2 has taken its place. There was a separate request from outside the Poll for SOFI to be maintained as a valuable followup instrument to imaging surveys with VISTA (and UKIDSS) - ISAAC is not always needed for the brighter targets.

End-of-mission reports - La Silla

I counted only 19 EOM reports from UK-affiliated astronomers (including ING).

Support and logistics in general were rated good to excellent by everyone. The main "complaint" is with respect to the very slow network connection to the outside world. Also, more than one astronomer would like to see more general purpose user machines at the Ritz. People were generally not impressed by the on-line pipelines, but the impression is that they may not be expecting much, which might be based on previous experience.

End-of-mission reports - Paranal

I counted only 9 EOM reports from UK-affiliated astronomers.

Generally people were impressed or just happy, but in a few cases there was a clear lack of instructions as to the procedures for travel, leaving Paranal et cetera. In two cases the daytime support could have been better (dedicated and informed).

There were no complaints about the network - one user compared it to La Silla and found it superior at Paranal. But there were "complaints" about the difficulty of communicating between laptops and visitor machines and thus data transfer.

Although more flexibility with adding extra targets was asked for, on the other hand there was also praise for adding late backup targets, for instance.

UT2 was idle without reason - seems a waste?

Appendix B: UK 8m Users Group's response to STFC's Programmatic Review

The UK 8m Users Group (hereafter: UK8mUG) wishes to respond to the PPAN ranking of the astronomical facilities currently supported by STFC.

Although the UK8mUG agrees with setting a high priority for the UK's continued involvement in the European Southern Observatory's facilities and associated developments, it cannot accept the low priority given to the Gemini Observatory without knowing the reasons for this poor ranking.

The feedback given to the UK Gemini Office, whilst positive in its commitment to remain a partner in Gemini until at least 2012, does not include any statement about the reasons

for classifying Gemini into the category "Lower Priority". As this places Gemini in a precarious position in the face of the STFC budget shortfall, the UK8mUG is concerned about the ranking of Gemini and about the accuracy of the [undisclosed] information on which this assessment by PPAN was based. The lack of information in the feedback limits our ability to respond, and our response now cannot therefore be considered final.

In defence of Gemini, the UK8mUG wishes to emphasize that several unique instruments will soon become available on both Gemini North and Gemini South - e.g., Flamingos-2 on Gemini South, for which there is significant UK interest. Gemini is currently also UK's only access to an 8m-class facility in the northern hemisphere - access to Spain's GTC is restricted to a few (2-4), European-wide large programmes only. Access to the northern skies is of paramount importance, not only because there are unique astronomical objects that can only be probed from the northern hemisphere, but also because it assures that UK astronomers can remain fully competitive in the follow-up on all sky surveys (e.g., SCUBA-2, Herschel) and temporal events (e.g., GRBs).

The UK8mUG is very unhappy with the lack of transparency and low levels of consultation which went into the STFC Programmatic Review and the resulting priority list. Without a general release to the community of the information used, and the ranking criteria and scores, it is extremely difficult to determine whether the resulting priority list has any validity. The UK8mUG would like to strongly suggest that STFC release the above information to the Panels which are being consulted on the priority list, and the general STFC community.

The UK8mUG also feels strongly that any ranking must be based on a well thought out and coordinated science strategy. It is far from obvious that this can be achieved by panels with remits limited to areas such as 'ground based astronomy'. As an example, the high priority space missions which will be considered will obviously need substantial ground based all sky follow-up by 8m-class telescopes in order to achieve their science goals. We therefore hope that the panels will be allowed enough time to properly discuss such a collective strategy, before terminal decisions about facilities are made.

Sincerely Yours,

Jacco van Loon, Chair, and the UK 8m Users Group

footnote: The role of the UK 8m Users' Group is to collect feedback, comments and suggestions from UK users of the Gemini telescopes and ESO VLT, in order to represent UK interests and opinions at the various ESO and Gemini committees (STC, GSC, Gemini OpsWG etc).