



Users' Committee

29th Meeting

Garching, April 11 and 12, 2005

Fact Sheets and Reports

By UC Members

Fact Sheet by Dr. Lex Kaper (The Netherlands)

This year only few responses to the inquiry distributed among the Dutch astronomers (i.e. not only those having recently used ESO facilities). The comments received concentrate on the communication between ESO and its user community, the future availability of instruments capable of spectropolarimetry, data-reduction/pipeline software for SINFONI, and the introduction of the pdflatex proposal forms. No comments were made regarding the special topic on Public Surveys.

Communication to the users in relation to the observing proposals can still be improved upon. The call for proposals should be announced by email and the list of approved proposals and their PIs should be published, e.g. in the ESO Messenger, as is the case for HST. The current availability of the abstract and publication list when querying the Science Archive is considered as a big improvement.

Some users would like to be informed about ESO's policy regarding the availability of instruments capable of performing spectropolarimetric observations at either La Silla or Paranal. They urge ESO to reconsider the polarimetry option for the planned second-generation VLT instrument X-shooter, especially when FORS1 will be decommissioned. The result of a questionnaire sent to all ESO-users in 2000 was that 25% of the people wished to have spectropolarimetry. The way it looks now, this capability will no longer be available in either La Silla or Paranal.

Although SINFONI and VISIR are offered to the ESO user community, proper data-reduction/pipeline software is not (yet) available. Apparently, usable version(s) of this software are available, but are not released. This hinders rapid publication of scientific results, which is a drawback especially when using these highly competitive instruments. Furthermore, a quick-look facility is not installed for SINFONI. It is not possible to inspect the data on-line to assess the quality of the observations.

Another issue that always comes up shortly before April 1 and October 1: the difficulties with submitting observing proposals. Usually there are a few bugs in ESO's software that processes the tex files - sometimes it can take several hours to figure out what went wrong and to devise workarounds. Last year ESO changed the format for figures - now we have to go through all kinds of hoops to convert our eps files to pdf or jpg. Even worse, the submission page accepts only long-obsolete versions of pdf (up to PDF1.3) - but the documentation doesn't mention this anywhere. So to add insult to injury, one has to figure out a way to create these old versions of pdf and re-do the whole conversion.

Fact Sheet by Dr. Pierre North (Switzerland)

The on-line questionnaire proposed by Enrico Cappellaro was advertised among 57 astronomers, who have been either PI or CoI in periods 73 to 75, or have used the Swiss telescope at La Silla. 15 answers were collected. Besides, only one EOM report was received.

Overall, it appears that the level of satisfaction of Swiss astronomers is generally high: most judge "good" the information, tools for proposal preparation and submission and the archives, and most rate the instrumentation as "excellent" or "good". The satisfaction level is lower regarding the tools for data reduction: more than half of the users rate them as "acceptable" or "insufficient".

Interestingly, La Silla remains a most important facility (often together with VLT etc) for 13 people for their present research, but this may be due to the large number of answers received from astronomers of Geneva-Lausanne (9/15), who use extensively the Swiss Euler telescope and the HARPS spectrograph, both at La Silla. However, they will all shift to VLT, VLTI and/or ALMA for their future research.

There is some skepticism about public surveys: EIS was judged "very useful" by only one user, and most think that future surveys done with VST and VISTA should not take more than 25 percent of observing time. The fear was expressed, that surveys will serve primarily small groups instead of proving really public. It was suggested that the OPC judges Public Survey proposals as well as other ESO programmes. The users' expectations lie mostly in "accurate data reduction and calibration" and "user-friendly tools for data mining". Someone mentioned the SDSS as an example to be followed.

There is a clear wish for improvement of data reduction pipelines. Service mode rules are considered "a fair compromise" (regarding the efficiency-flexibility balance) by most users. Service mode is strongly praised by two users, though one of them regrets that monitoring programmes remain difficult to carry out.

The usefulness of the UC is generally recognized, although judged limited. Someone suggested that a direct monitoring of problems through a centralized ESO web page would be more efficient.

One user suggested to move the submission deadline 2-3 weeks after the end of the observing period to let time for evaluation of recent observations; the user would then be in a better position to decide (especially in case of service observing) whether it is worth applying for more observing time. The same user also questions the efficiency of Large Programmes, and raises the question of target protection (preventing other proposals to duplicate the science of already approved proposals and their targets).

Fact Sheet by Dr. Nuno C. Santos (Portugal)

The Portuguese astronomical community has about 60 members in different institutions. In order to have an input from them, I have sent a questionnaire through the Portuguese Astronomical Society mailing list. A total of 7 answers were received by the 29th of March 2005.

In general, people seem very happy about ESO facilities, support, and the quality of the obtained data.

According to the replies, the Portuguese community is interested in most of ESO instrumentation at La Silla and Paranal, but also in future facilities like ALMA, VST and VISTA. Instruments and telescopes mentioned include: 3.6 + HARPS and EFOSC2, 2.2 + FEROS, NTT + all instruments (at La Silla), and VLTI + AMBER, SINFONI, VIMOS, FORS1&2, NACO, UVES, FLAMES and GIRAFFE (at Paranal). The ESO archive has also been used with some frequency.

I also received a few suggestions and complaints about some specific points, as follows:

Documentation. Most of the documents are easily available. However, data reduction instructions/advice for specific instruments could be more obviously placed. Especially on new instruments, I feel that more care should be taken in advising users on data reduction issues.

Also, phase 2 proposal preparation has a lot of instructions that are a bit spread over the ESO website - it can be very confusing.

FORS1 and FORS2 Archive data. Having used the archive to get some data from FORS1 and FORS2, MOS mode, I realized that some information that is apparently not available in the archive would be interesting, namely:

- The log of the observations during the nights involved (even if having very scarce information, it is better than nothing!);
- Charts of the masks with indication of the slits positioned on the objects. I note that, without this information, identification of the source in each one of the slits is extremely difficult in crowded fields. It can be attempted, from the header information on the "HIERARCH ESO INS TARG\# RA" and "HIERARCH ESO INS TARG\# DEC" keywords (where \# is the slit number), but with a high degree of confusion in cases where more than one object is close-by, and the slit is not exactly centered in the object. This will also be the case for MXU data in FORS2.

Having asked ESO, this information was refused. ESO message stated that "The finding charts are private material produced by the PI and they are not accessible

to the [archive] users." This may have some reason, but I'm afraid that I don't understand why this is so.

ESO Support. Would it be possible to have a more direct contact with ESO instrument specialists when having a problem? Passing by the USD intermediate implies information loss and longer discussions.

La Silla Service mode and Schedule. In P74 and now in P75 the HARPS scheduling did not work very well. A program that asks for split time in different runs over the period has been, in the last two periods, given consecutive time. For P75 we also still do not have the schedule for the observations (this is the end of March!!!).

For P76, why ESO wants to limit service mode proposals to those asking for at least 6h (at La Silla)? This cuts many programs aiming at measuring a small number of bright targets, and eventually leads people to overestimate the time needed to increase the chances of having time. My major point is: service mode in La Silla looks quite ambiguous. Why is it so difficult to put things like in Paranal?

Phase I. (*several people mentioned this point*) Reports from OPC members are not always clear. In some cases it seems like they did not carefully read the proposal, or did not understand it. The feedback quality should be improved. An FP6-EC like approach would be useful.

Data delivery. When asking for time for say P74 we only get the data at the deadline for P75. This makes it difficult to really use the P74 data to backup the P75 proposal. Something should be done about this, e.g. releasing the data the 1st March and not 1st April.

Globally, waiting 1 year between proposal preparation and receiving the data is too long. Would it be possible to somehow change the procedures?

Fact Sheet by Dr. Sabine Moehler (Germany)

Asking the German users for input to the UC meeting prompted 12 replies by the common web form and 3 emails with more detailed comments as well as 3 emails with comments about P2PP after the last P2PP deadline. I assume that this rather low number is at least partly due to the overlap with the proposal submission deadline on April 1st, the Calar Alto deadline and the Easter holidays. Together with the end-of-mission reports (La Silla only, as I received none for Paranal so far) these responses indicate a high level of satisfaction of observers with ESO both in visitor and service mode.

- Results from web questionnaire -

Information rated good/excellent by 75%

Instrumentation rated good/excellent by 100%

Tools for proposal preparation and submission rated good/excellent by 90%

One user suggested to allow a check of overheads via P2PP already for Phase I. There was also a suggestion to unify the various modes of proposal submission among the major observatories, but not if it means that something like the HST APT system comes out of this unification.

Another suggestion was to provide more information about the kind of programmes which block the queues at VIMOS and WFI for $23\text{h} < \text{RA} < 8\text{h}$, esp. what is meant by "other high priority programmes".

Tools for data reduction rated good/excellent by 60%

Archive rated acceptable/good by 75%

These results show that the satisfaction is highest for the instruments (which is well supported by the end-of-mission reports) and the preparation and submission of proposals. Users are somewhat less happy with the data reduction tools, the archive and information in general.

Facilities

The answers here suggest that the importance of the VLT and La Silla telescopes for German users will decrease in the future, while that of VLTI will increase strongly. Interest in ALMA is about half that of the VLT/VLTI, respectively, both now and in the future.

Public Surveys

While about half of the users found the EIS data useful, the other half considers them either useless or has no experience whatsoever with EIS. The comments for this section indicate that reasons for that lie in a lack of reduced data and catalogues as well as a lack of suitable analysis tools and easy access.

The ESO plan to ask the community to plan and manage future Public Surveys is mostly seen favorably, but users would like to see a close monitoring of the process to ensure that the data are not only promptly made public, but are also easily usable and accessible. The strongest emphasis on requirements for Public Surveys is on accurate data reduction and calibration (40%), followed by user-friendly tools for data mining (30%), availability of data reduction tools (20%) and fast data delivery (10%).

One user complained about the new procedure for Public Surveys: The only feedback to the letter-of-intent was the information of the deadline for the actual proposal, so the necessity of a letter-of-intent is unclear. There was no information about GTO Proposals, as should have been provided to avoid conflicts. The documentation for the proposals was badly organized and incomplete.

A majority of users wants to see 50% to 75% of the VST/VISTA time reserved for public surveys.

Observing Rules and Restrictions

With regard to data reduction and calibration 45% of the users would like to see improvements in the data reduction pipelines. The importance of accurate monitoring of observing conditions and the calibration of standards in all observing modes is emphasized by 20% and 25% of the users, respectively. Only a minority (10%) would like to see improvements in the calibration plan.

Concerning the observing restrictions to ensure maximum efficiency in service mode observations only 25% consider the current rules to strict. However, when asked for specific rules that might be too strict, users mention the length of observing blocks (35%), the real time tuning of observations (35%), P2PP (20%), and the scheduling (10%).

Phase 2

FIMS - Regarding FIMS for the preparation of MXU masks for FORS2, it would be a big advantage if it were possible to move a given slit along its long axis (by cursor) after the slit was created in "centering" mode. That is, it should be possible to lengthen the slit on one side of the target and to shorten it on the other side, so that the target can be placed off-center.

P2PP - seems not very useful for large programs, where one wants to observe a large number of stars, with all instrument parameters set to the same values throughout the night.

It is not possible to sort your target list according to right ascension, what would be very helpful for large programs.

Finding Charts - The rules in P2PP for finding charts are considered unnecessarily strict and some requirements are unclear to users.

There were also several complaints about the production of finding charts with skycat. Not only does skycat alone not provide this possibility, even a complete fims installation produces finding charts only in a few cases, but messes up in other cases.

It is not possible to attach the same finding chart to more than one OB, even if it belongs to the same target.

Miscellaneous Problems and Comments

WFI manual - too old and filled with too many TBDs, some contradictory.

La Silla - More vegetarian food at La Silla would be appreciated.

RITZ - While most users like the RITZ there were some complaints about problems with (unwanted) music.

Visiting Astronomers program - It would be nice to have a room with a kitchenette or at least a fridge for the one month stay, so that people do not have to take lunch and dinner in restaurants every day.

Fact Sheet by Dr. Malcolm Bremer (UK)

The UK has been a full member of ESO for over two years and there are clear signs that the UK community is getting used to being in the ESO "club". This year I asked users to respond to a web-form survey in addition to emailing me any individual comments.

The raw numbers from the survey will be presented at the meeting, but here I give my personal impression of the survey response. One thing is clear, this is a better way of gauging user satisfaction than just noting comments in emails.

I think the UK is getting used to phase 1 and P2PP, but is not too impressed by the reduction tools supplied (or not) by ESO. They are generally happy with the level of information provided by ESO (manuals etc) and by the quality and usefulness of the instrumentation. The archive could be improved but is acceptable as it stands today.

They see the VLT as vital, ALMA very important in the future and have comparatively less interest in VLTI (though some interest on a 5-year timescale). Users were evenly split over La Silla between those who see it is important over the next 1-2 years, those who see it as important in the next 5 years and those who have no interest in it.

UK users think the survey plan (where the surveys are carried out by the community) is the right way to go, providing that the process is monitored (they were not too impressed by EIS). It is clear that they want the majority of the time on VST and VISTA to go on surveys (75%).

They have a very specific view of surveys: They want the survey to provide accurately reduced and calibrated data, they do not want to reduce the data themselves, but they want tools to be provided to exploit the data and catalogues (in other words to do the high level science analysis). They don't want a fast publication of the survey, like the GOODS APJL special issue; they really want the survey to be truly public and not something where those on the survey team has a clear advantage in exploitation over everyone else.

They are happy with the ESO calibration plan, but would like improvements to the way data is pipeline reduced, with better monitoring of conditions and more (?) standards to ease calibration.

About half think that the Phase 2 rules for service observing are too strict, the main complaint being the 1 hr OB length restriction. Some commented that too many trivial things require waivers and that data access needs to be quicker.

There are also specific points brought up by individual users in emails to me. Obviously these will be more negative than the typical feedback above (which is in general positive) as the users were prompted to email me by specific problems they encountered.

Some users wanted to install a pupil mask in Conica to be used for Fizeau interferometry, a technique that was always foreseen for Conica. There is a wheel designed to take aperture mask. The users got little help from ESO in their attempts to use the wheel. A proposal was highly ranked by the OPC but rejected because it was claimed that the wheel is full, even though it has 20 positions, mainly containing masks that are not in use. A resubmission was rejected saying that the masks might be installable by April 2006 (though did they mean 2005?). To benefit from this, the group required some technical info from ESO, and have requested it four times over the past year but always receive a reply that ESO will get back to them shortly! The USG tried to help but received the same reply from Paranal.

The users feel they are in a catch-22 situation. The official system is supposed to be based on scientific value, but without the the green light from Paranal the OPC can't assign time and value is based on OPC ranking. If Paranal states technical infeasibility, the OPC is not expected to provide an independent science ranking. The leader of the group is an ex ESO employee so fully understands the pressures on the mountain, but feels that communication with Paranal (over this) needs improvement. Overall, this person has a positive view of ESO and believes that the organisation is doing a good job, but there is a clear issue in communication/workload with the mountain.

Other users are unhappy that there is no I2 cell in HARPS. From their email:

The ESO HARPS science oversight committee insisted that HARPS was built with an I2 cell so that it be a community instrument. This was accepted though so far ESO have not delivered HARPS with an I2 cell, nor indicated a timeline for HARPS with an I2 cell (at least on the HARPS web page).

Apart from Mayor et al., the precision radial velocity community use I2 cells because they are very much easier to build and install than super-stabilised spectrometers. Importantly, most of the community is skeptical about the long-term stability of the Th-Ar technique. If there was a problem with the I2 cell, couldn't ESO get the company that supplied it produce a redesign. Other observatories have had no problems with I2 cells as far as these users are aware.

This user has found his use of ESO frustrating: great instruments, great telescopes but so much time is locked up with GTO teams who in his view ought to provide the pipelines etc that make the instruments usable to the ordinary user. For HARPS he feels the lack of an I2 cell means this is effectively a private instrument.

Another group of users have a specific problem with the way a priority A programme was handled. The programme was submitted in March 2004 and awarded 62 hours of Priority A time (8 hours preimaging and 54 hours MOS spectroscopy). It had previously been highly rated by the OPC but failed to be scheduled due to VIMOS problems in 2003.

However, although the preimaging was performed in a relatively timely manner, only 1 hour of MOS observations were performed. The users' complaint concerns two separate issues:

- 1) Why was only 1 hour of the MOS part of the proposal performed, despite the high ranking of the proposal?
- 2) Why were the users not kept informed of the likelihood of the observations being performed in the current observing period?

Concerning the first point, the MOS required very relaxed site constraints (thin cloud, with 7 days of new moon, <1.2" seeing). The field was at 2 hrs, nevertheless the users believe that even if this was a "popular" RA, the fact that the programme was given an A-grade implies there was meant to be sufficient time available to carry out the programme.

On the second point, the PI contacted the support scientist on several occasions, requesting further information and, for example, specifically asking about any weather or instrument problems. He was simply told that the observations were in the queue and would be executed. It was only when he requested leave to submit a waiver to allow my observations to be performed outside the normal constraints (to increase the chances of them being executed) that he was told that there was no chance of them being executed, even with a waiver. What is concerning is that surely somebody at ESO must have known this several weeks before the user was informed. The user takes about a week to prepare the phase 2 and because the programme is carried out at both the VLT and Subaru, if the VLT fails to observe, some targets are obtained with Subaru. This means that on re-allocation at the VLT the phase 2 preparation has to be redone, so the original week is lost.

Fact Sheet by Dr. Merja Tornikoski (Finland)

Finland joined ESO in 2004, and even though many Finnish astronomers were familiar with the SEST telescope on La Silla and have gained experience in observing with SEST (this was made possible through a special agreement between Finland and Sweden), many of us are still taking our first steps in getting familiar with the other ESO telescopes and instruments. There were several ESO proposals submitted (and some also accepted) immediately when it was possible, but many of them came from teams that already were familiar with the ESO instruments through collaboration. I expect the number of Finnish astronomers to submit ESO proposals to steadily increase for the next few years.

In early March I circulated an e-mail among the most potential (to my knowledge) ESO users of the Finnish community, 30 names. I invited them to participate in the poll managed by Dr. Enrico Cappellaro on his web site, and I also invited them to contact me about any concerns, questions and wishes about ESO-related matters.

Only one (!) person from the Finnish community (as documented by the ip address ending with .fi) participated in the poll. Also only one person (but a different one) had submitted an End of Mission report (with very positive feedback). The small number should, however, not be interpreted as our community's lack of interest in ESO, but it probably rather reflects the novice-stage that many of us still are as ESO users.

Some local astronomers, when discussing with them face-to-face, mentioned that they did not consider themselves competent to comment on ESO survey strategies, service mode observing rules etc. while they are still learning how to choose the optimal instrument and the optimal observing strategy for their future observing proposal.

The one poll result and one EoM report are no good for statistics, but I have also gathered some comments and opinions from private discussions with Finnish astronomers, and here is a summary of the main points.

- There is relatively wide interest in using the VLT among the Finnish community. Some astronomers have not yet submitted proposals because they are aware of the large oversubscription of the instruments and prefer to take time writing good proposals (e.g., learn more about the instruments and ESO observing policy as well as about the proposal preparation before actually submitting). At least one person was considering a smaller project using the La Silla facilities first before submitting a VLT proposal.
- Many Finnish astronomers are very much looking forward to using ALMA (and in the meantime, also APEX). This probably is related to the relatively strong role of radio astronomy in Finland, and naturally also to the experience gained from using the SEST. Less interest was expressed in the potential use of the VLTI.
- ESO documentation was considered to be good to adequate. There were some complaints about not being able to find enough information about the current developments of APEX and ALMA. Their web pages are outdated, not having been updated for over a year. This is especially a problem concerning APEX, because it was expected to be available "any day now".

The role of the UC was seen as potentially useful. I will personally try to improve the communication of the ESO-related matters to the Finnish community (and from the community to the UC) and also will try to update my e-mail list of the Finnish users to include more names; the current list is certainly not a very complete one.

Fact Sheet by Dr. Uffe Gråe Jørgensen (Denmark)

I have received written comments from 5 observers for the 2004 period, and "in-official comments" from some more.

In general everybody I have been in contact with, are very pleased with the support from ESO, and mention in particular satisfaction with the speed and quality of the help one gets from the ESO staff.

Several people commented that they are unhappy with not having access to their service mode data quickly enough. In particular they would like to have immediate access to the raw data. This seems to be a general problem. Can something be improved here?

One group who had ToO time both a VLT and La Silla during the period, remarks that at La Silla it is necessary to activate the ToO no later than 4pm in order to have the observations taken during the following night, which has lead them to use their VLT ToO time where they could as well had used La Silla instruments if it was not for this restriction. Is this an efficient use of the resources for ESO, or can the 4pm deadline be made more flexible?

There are mixed feelings about the dogs at La Silla. Some feels it is charming and find it nice that the dogs keep the donkeys away, while in the other end of the scale some observers are afraid of dogs, and have big problems when having to pass the dogs when entering the canteen. Maybe the owner of the dogs could teach them not to be in the hotel/canteen area, or as a minimum to stay somewhere else than where one has to pass when entering the canteen (and some times walking into them in the darkness).

One observer writes:

During observations at La Silla, I could have benefited from inspection of the all-sky camera images, but on many instances, the camera was 'down'. It appears that the similar Paranal camera cannot be accessed from outside ESO. I wonder why. The pictures could be useful when deciding to issue a Target-of-Opportunity request or not. In general, I feel that all-sky imagery could be better presented.

One observer writes:

It would be nice with food fitting to the observers night-life: Just a simple breakfast at 17 and a small warm dish at 7am. For us young people, it could be nice if a few mountain bikes were available for use during daytime.

One observer writes:

For ToO: would it be possibly to have present status about instruments at the RRM-mode page for the coming night's service mode; specifically, it happened that an instrument we had requested was unavailable due to repair, and had we known, then we could had taken the observations with another instrument, but now we lost it.

Fact Sheet

As usual, I experienced very little interaction with the community. In a few cases, I was contacted with simple requests of information or suggestions.

To have some feedback from the Italian community, for the third consecutive year I proposed the compilation of a WEB-form soliciting an overall rating of ESO services and proposing a few provocative questions (and answers). Users could also insert additional comments. I received 54 replies, compared with 41 of last year and 48 of 2003.¹

The results are reported in the next pages. In the following, I briefly summarize my reading of these results also in comparison with the statistics of previous years.

1. The overall ranking of the services offered by ESO remains very high. In particular, the instrumentation offer is unanimously appreciated. The tools for proposal preparation and submission (this item was not included in previous polls) were also ranked positively.
2. There is one important exception which concerns the tools for data reduction. One out of three users considers insufficient what is offered by ESO. This severe concern of many users is confirmed by the answers to other questions.
3. Many users still look at La Silla telescopes for their scientific programs. There appears to be good expectations for ALMA, whereas VLTI remains a niche for a small number of users.
4. Public surveys are seen with some suspicion, also in view of the controversial opinions on previous experiences. Most users would prefer that a good fraction of the time of survey telescopes is allocated through the standard process.
5. The need for somewhat strict rules in service observing programs is recognized by most users. There is room for some adjustment, eg. to relax the maximum length of the observing block for some instrument or observing mode.
6. There is a fair appreciation of the limited but positive role of the UC.

¹ This year, the mailing list I had available included only staff astronomers (hence excluding student, PhD and post-doc) .

Poll 2005.

1 - What is your ranking of the services offered by ESO concerning:

	insufficient	acceptable	good	excellent	none
- Information	1	20	31	1	1
- Instrumentation	0	6	21	25	2
- Tools for proposal preparation and submission	0	13	32	8	1
- Tools for data reduction	18	21	12	2	1
- Archive	1	10	31	9	3

2 - Which facility is most important for your scientific programs ?

	Today	Tomorrow	Never
La Silla	41	1	3
VLT (including 2 nd generation)	41	12	0
VLTI (including 2 nd generation)	1	17	19
ALMA	15	23	0

NdA: The user could make multiple choices for the facilities, but a given facility could not be selected both for today AND tomorrow.

3 - ESO plans to devote VST and VISTA mainly to public surveys. In this context:

a - What is your evaluation of previous experiences of ESO public surveys (EIS)

very useful =9 partly useful =20 useless =16 detrimental = 3 None = 6

b - This time ESO is asking the community to plan and manage the surveys. You think this is.

right=16 wrong=3 to be closely monitored =27 None =7

c - What is the fraction of ESO VST and VISTA time that should be reserved to public surveys?

100%	75%	50%	25%	0%	None
1	11	25	14	1	2

d - What are the most important add-ons for a public survey ?

- 33 - Fast data delivery
- 45 - Accurate data reduction and calibration
- 28 - Delivery to the community of data reduction tools
- 36 - User friendly tools for data-mining
- 4 - Quick publication of the results

4 -In an observational research project, a major investment has to be made for data reduction and calibration. What should be improved to help with the latter item?

20 - The calibration plan

17 - Accurate monitoring of the observing conditions (seeing, transparency, extinction)

26 - Calibration of standards for all observing modes

32 - Improvements of data reduction pipelines

..... other: 6

5 - The quest for maximum efficiency of telescope operation in service mode causes a loss of flexibility for individual programs. Do you agree with this statement?

Efficiency has the priority - 5 Rules are too strict - 17

Current rules are a fair compromise=26 None=6

In particular, which of the following items is dealt with too strictly?

7 - Phase 2 (P2PP)

20 - Length of a single observing block.

7 - Scheduling.

14 - Real time tuning of the observing strategy

4 - Communications.

6 - What do you think of the effectiveness of the User Committee:

3 - Useless, the ESO management ignores it.

2 - Inconsistent, UC members should be more active.

35 - It has a limited but positive impact.

4 - Necessary and, in its field of responsibility, effective

10 - None

NdA: User could insert comments about each specific question. I choose to list them without any editing.

----- 3a - what is your evaluation of previous experiences of ESO public surveys (EIS)

- 1 - never used
- 2 - but: what would have been done by the community using the same obs. time ?
- 3 - I have tried a few times to figure out what it was doing and even to provide input to it with no apparent result. No observations relevant for my science has ever been done, hence, from my point of view, this is only a drain of resources in many areas (telescope, personnel, software development).
- 4 - useless for science, but detrimental because it subtracts telescope time
- 5 - no previous experience
- 6 - All data products of EIS for stellar astronomy are useless (bad photometric and astrometric calibration). The target selection is not larger nor the data of higher quality than similar proprietary programmes.
- 7 - The answer is biased since I was former member of the EIS team, and I got a lot from EIS.
- 8 - It was not useful for my research projects, but it had positive feedbacks on ESO and made it aware of the problems dealing with the reduction of mosaic data
- 9 - Many of our FLAMES targets came from EIS
- 10 - many many nights per several years and still (essentially) no data products, just images
- 11 - most useful would have been the distribution of the existing data reduction soft

----- 3b - This time, ESO is asking the community to plan and manage the surveys

- 1 - Surveys as any other Large Program should go through the OPC and be closely monitored
- 2 - Given the past experience (see above)...
- 3 - ESO should allow also relatively small groups and not only big consortia to be able to perform a survey either public or not: i.e. suitable software and tools for surveys should be made available.
- 4 - Since the feeling is that EIS was never, at least in last years, closely monitored by ESO, how can we believe that ESO monitors outside groups?
- 5 - Indeed!
- 6 - It is right but the achievement of the goals should be nevertheless monitored

----- 3d - What are the most important add-ons for a public survey ?

- 1 - Quick release to the calibrated data to the community (I am not sure whether this is what it is meant with the last item)

----- 4 - In an observational research project, a major investment has to be made for data reduction and calibration. What should be improved to help with the latter item ?

- 1 - LOOK at the calibrations when acquiring (e.g. lamps saturated, insufficient exp. time for standards, etc)
- 2 - three sky flat-fields in each filter are not really sufficient for a good data quality, in particular for imaging
- 3 - The (admittedly ambitious) goal should be the delivery of calibrated science data products to the proponents
- 4 - Why wasting so much time in "few" night calibration while a dedicated "small" telescope could take care of all of them?
- 5 - all items are of uttermost importance, I just marked the two most urgent ones in my opinion.
- 6 - standards should be treated as science frames and accordingly reduced

----- 5 - The quest for maximum efficiency of telescope operation causes a loss of flexibility for individual programs.?

- 1 - The service observers should follow more closely the prescriptions given in the P2PP

2 - the point is about the emphasis on SM itself: Gemini vs. Keck, which one is the more productive ?

3 - My experience with the VLT has been very successful in this area. This may be because I have selected which programmes to apply for Service and which for Visitor on the basis of the needs and the available constraints. Overall I think that what it is done at ESO is a fair compromise.

4 - it looks fine

5 - FLAMES with 15minutes overhead for each OB FORCES people to ask waivers for OBs longer than 1h. It must be said that the waivers I required have always been approved

6 - always observed in visitor mode

----- **6 - What do you think of the effectiveness of the User Committee:**

1 - the UC should act more effectively as an information web and discussion forum for the community

2 - Difficult to answer: I do not know the story of interaction between UC and ESO. What is happening to your recommendations? Do you receive written answers for your requests? Do you see that these are implemented, accepted, considered?

3 - don't have a way to verify what are its practical effects, but in principle it is a useful/necessary entity

4 - It has a limited impact.

5 - should have more impact on ESO policy

6 - It should meet in conjunction with the Call for Proposals (twice per year) and well BEFORE it. It should be informed on the instrument changes and on report on the community needs for them.

7 - no opinion

8 - Difficult to judge from outside.

9 - ESO management should take more notice of the points raised by UC.

----- - **Other comments**

1 - Service mode observations are too often badly made (cloudy sky, unfocused instruments) although the quality control says acceptable. There must be some problem there.

2 - I could not find anywhere in the ESO web pages why to FLAMES it has been allocated only 30 nights per semester. This has a big impact on the proposals of the stellar community. BTW, FLAMES is one of the instruments with the largest "shutter open" time (i.e. it perform remarkably well).

3 - A large fraction of approved programs in service mode are not finally carried out. One can reiterate the proposal but for some programs this iteration apparently can last 4 years! ESO overbooking of service observations is only formally "efficient" in terms of telescope time.

4 - It would be extremely useful to have a small fraction of telescope time of telescope time dedicated to very short programs (a few hours) for new experiments and/or pilot projects.

They are risky in term of result but can represent a unique opportunity for program that have great potentiality

5 - In my partial view, ESO has two goals: 1) have telescopes and instruments that works and 2) astronomers that make good science with them all. One way to ensure that the 1st goal is met is of course the commissioning of instruments and telescopes, if done well it ensures that this goal is met. Checking the second goal is more complicated, and the User committee is a way to know about it.

6 - ESO management should take more notice of the points raised by UC.

I looked at the scheduling of the Kueyen telescope and was very surprised that FLAMES is the instrument that has been allocated LESS time. Is this so because of a lack of quality proposals using FLAMES ? I do not believe it. I presume that there must have been "a priori" some decision to share equally the time on Kueyen among the three instruments. These are the numbers I deduced from the schedule:

FORS1 14.5 nights 479.2 hours

UVES 16 nights 476.1 hours

FLAMES 15.5 nights 157.5 hours

I may have done some mistake in adding up the numbers, and in fact it would be useful if ESO provided such statistics for ALL the instruments.

FLAMES is a UNIQUE instrument. So far it has no competitor, if we underused it in this manner, competing multifiber facilities will be completed and FLAMES will lose its leadership.

The placing of FORS1 on Kueyen is detrimental. FORS1 is a very standard instrument and offers no capabilities that are not available on other similar instruments. Besides it could do the same, or even better, job if it were moved to Melipal or Yepun. I very strongly advocate that FLAMES and UVES should remain the ONLY instruments on Kueyen. If one insists to keep FORS1 on Kueyen it should NOT be allocated more than 1/10 of the total available time of this telescope.

7 - There should be transparency in the management of service observations.

8 - The Time Allocation Committee for the last run at VLT has almost forgotten the

Giraffe instrumentation, is this a political attitude at ESO?

Fact sheet 2005 UC meeting, by Dr Sofia Feltzing (Sweden)

A rather small number of answers to the web-based questionnaire (6 in total, same as last year). I have here summarised the most important parts of the questionnaire.

Overall the users are happy with the performance of the information, instrumentation and tools for proposal preparation and submission. Tools for data reduction are felt to be lacking. Where it concerns the archives and public surveys the answers are less positive. Ranging from partly useful to detrimental.

Summarising from the questions and comments about the rules for observing I find that on balance people find them acceptable but some feel that e.g. the restriction on time for a single observing block is too limiting.

One of the answers believed that the new web-based form should improve the number of comments sent in – however, in my case this did not transpire as the number of answers are the same as for last year.

Sofia Feltzing

Below I include those comments submitted that I think might be of interest to the UC. The answer to question 3b I find particular relevant with respect to the special topic for this meeting.

Question: 3a - What is your evaluation of previous experiences of ESO public surveys (EIS)

1 - Previous surveys have been much less useful than the many private surveys. ESO resources were being applied to support EIS even at times when this ran counter to STC and OPC recommendations.

2 - EIS are limited to imaging whereas I am using only spectroscopic modes of ESO instruments

3 - EIS was a disappointment

Question: 3b - This time, ESO is asking the community to plan and manage the surveys

1 - The new plan has the merit of requiring resources from the interested community. All telescope use, including public surveys, should be decided on the basis of competitive peer review.

This should ensure that public surveys have some scientific focus and should also go a long way toward answering the question (c) about the fraction of VST & VISTA time to be allocated to public surveys. At present, this fraction should not be set in advance, but should be determined in proportion to proposal demand.

2 - It is worth trying

Question: 3d - What are the most important add-ons for a public survey ?

1 - Visible advertisement of what products are available

4 - In an observational research project, a major investment has to be made for data reduction and calibration. What should be improved to help with the latter item ?

1 - comment: some new instruments (e.g. FLAMES/GIRAFFE) have been released for use without any pipeline or quick-look reduction available in important modes. More resources should be devoted to the reduction and calibration pipelines from the beginning. The successful operation of pipelines should be considered part of commissioning and acceptance of an instrument.

6 - What do you think of the effectiveness of the User Committee:

1 - The impact is limited, mostly (I think) because user interest in and feedback to UC is rather poor

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Fact Sheet by Dr Pascale Jablonka (France)

A general message was sent to the French astronomers via the SF2A (French Society of Professional Astronomers), asking them to send their comments regarding the ESO facilities, WASP system, phase II-, observing- and data- reduction procedures. Observers from periods 73 and 74 were contacted personally. The questionnaire about Surveys was sent via the SF2A and the National Programs dedicated to Stars, Galaxies and Cosmology. Here are the results of these two polls:

1 Proposal Preparation

The sentence "Note that VIMOS and WFI requests for observation of targets in the $23h < RA < 5h$ interval will be approved only under exceptional circumstances." posted on the ESO Web pages has been very badly resented by the astronomers. The information was much better explained in the Call for Proposals.

2 Proposal Submission

- General satisfaction of the WASP system
- Global satisfaction of the instrument manuals but see below one exception.
- It seems that it would be useful to the astronomer to have access earlier to the Call for Proposals, so that they can prepare their proposal files in advance.

3 Phase II

The p2pp system is widely considered as not being user friendly.

4 Documentation

- NACO : A team encountered a very strong instrumental pattern in their CCD data (at the level of 3%), which was about the magnitude of the contrast they wanted to measure. They managed somehow to filter it on their images, but the spectra are hardly usable at full resolution. This effect was undocumented, and nobody at ESO seemed aware of it (it probably matters only for planetary targets). It is apparently related to a non-linearity in the old detector used at the time (the CCD was changed in April or May 2004), occurring around 1000 DN. Although the detector was replaced, the users want to stress the importance of documenting effects of this magnitude, which are difficult to detect during the observations.

5 Observations

5.1 General

- Interferometry : The community involved in HRA observations asks ESO to revise the control and optimization algorithms. They seem inherited from the VLT long exposure philosophy but are not suited in this case. They take too long (10 mn to point to an object and even longer with PRIMA) and are incompatible with high precision interferometry.

5.2 Visitor Mode

- Guesthouse : The rooms near the front desk are too noisy.

5.3 Service Mode

- Finding the location of the acquired data is still rather uneasy. It should be simplified or better documented.

6 Data Reduction

- The data reduced by the pipeline at the telescope should be archived. These products are not sufficient for science, however are well suited to assess the data quality and would fruitfully serve the same goal for the astronomers retrieving the data from the archives.
- GIRAFFE : Need of the installation of the ARGUS mode in the Data Reduction Software at the telescope.
- EMMI : The file format is not documented enough. Apparently headers could be lost.
- FORS2 : Need for a pipeline dedicated to the multi-object mode.
- A bug was found in P73 in the VIMOS/VMPPS mask preparation package. The observers have lost their observations ...

7 OPC and Scheduling

- Some programs proposed in service mode were allocated time in visitor mode (NACO). The proposers were not notified clearly of the reason and regret this situation, as they consider that ESO makes them take an unwanted risk of lower quality observing conditions.
- Long comments from the OPC are appreciated
- Some proposals requiring long term observations were cut at mid-term without clear justification. This can translate into useless incomplete set of data.
- Astronomers would appreciate a better visibility in the process from the time a proposal has been ranked by the OPC to its scheduling. In case a proposal has been well ranked but could apparently not be scheduled, the astronomers require that the OPC is informed of the situation and is involved in the decision to be taken.

8 Surveys

- The evaluation of previous experience of ESO public surveys is extremely negative. French astronomers who answered the questionnaire consider that EIS has had little scientific impact and has been detrimental to other projects which could have had time for much higher scientific return. The global feeling is that ESO did not react properly as an organization serving the community. The ESO Public Surveys Working Group was meeting at most twice a year with little quantitative results.

In the same line, it is a regret to report that users answering the Call for Public Surveys with VST have had the impression to be treated without care : no acknowledgment to responses to the Call, change of deadlines without notice. Besides, the astronomers have the feeling that ESO doesn't want to get involved in the data management, therefore they wonder what would be the gain compared to a Large Program. In any case, the French community does not seem to be thrilled by ESO records in data management.

- The French astronomers answering the questionnaire consider as positive that ESO is asking the community to plan and manage the surveys. The global feeling is that there should still be a strong implication of ESO, in particular in the data reduction and archiving.
- *What is the fraction of ESO VST and VISTA time that should be reserved to public surveys?* The mean answer is 50% and above.
- *What are the most important add-ons for a public survey ?* Fast delivery of fully reduced data to the ESO community with calibration.

Fact sheet, Griet Van de Steene (Belgium)

Also this year, the Belgian community was very pleased with ESO and the quality of the data they received both from Paranal and La Silla. The high level of support and the good-will of the available staff on the mountains and of the USG and DMD are unanimously acknowledged.

From the couple of end of run reports I further deduce that:

- not all computers in the control room on Paranal are in good shape.
- in order to be able to prepare a good and extensive back-up program some clear instructions, additional information (e.g. prevailing wind direction) and advice are needed on the ESO web pages. The back-up program procedure should be incorporated within Phase II.

The questionnaire was replaced with a brief web-based poll. I received 11 answers from the small Belgian ESO community from almost all research centers. This is just one less than last year. No other separate e-mails with specific concerns were received. Below I summarize the outcome of the poll.

- The Belgian community is generally very pleased with the information provided, the instrumentation, the tools for proposal preparation, and the archive. However the tools made available for data reduction are insufficient and barely acceptable.
- The Belgian community considers both La Silla and Paranal Observatories equally important for their current research. The VLTI is already quite important and Alma will become important in the future.
- Half of the community considers public surveys useful, the other half not. No more than 50 % of the time should be reserved for public surveys and these surveys should be very closely monitored by ESO. The most important add-on for a public survey is “accurate data reduction and calibration”, with “delivery to the communities of data reduction tools” and “user friendly tools for data-mining” almost as important.
- The Belgian community would like a major investment in the improvement of data reduction pipelines. They would also like that for all instruments the pipelines are made available to the community with a proper manual. Also the calibration plan could be improved with e.g. standard star calibrations for all observing modes.
- Although the user committee is considered useful, his effectiveness cannot always be judged due to the lack of response back to the community (e.g. in a newsletter) about how decisions made by the UC are taken care of or ignored by the ESO management.

Fact Sheet by Dr. Wolfgang Gieren (Chile)

NOT RECEIVED YET