

Guidelines for ESO-OPC procedure with Large Programmes

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Intention: This document is intended to clarify and explain the current procedure in more detail than what is provided by the official ESO documents. **Thus, this is not an ESO document.** It describes *procedures, not rules* (although the differences may sometimes be subtle). Requests for changes in rules and formal procedure have to be addressed to ESO. Suggestions concerning this document should be directed to the OPC chair.

What is a Large Programme?

ESO has committed to dedicate *up to 30%* of the available time on the VLT to Large Programmes (LPs). By definition, a proposal has to ask for at least 100 hours of telescope time (in total) distributed over not more than 4 semesters in order to obtain LP status (see 'Call for Proposals'). It also must have '*the potential to lead to a major advance or breakthrough in the field of study*'.

Scheduling priority: LPs not only have bigger time allocations than Normal Programmes (NPs), they also are scheduled with higher priority than any NP (even above those in category A).

Minimum allocation: A proposal asking for less than 100 hours, or that is reduced by the OPC to less than 100 hours, should not be considered as LP. There have been (very few) exceptional cases where the OPC deviated; one situation might be a monitoring programme which should be executed with the highest possible priority.

In order not to encourage submission of programmes as LPs irrespective of their sizes and scopes, such exceptions should be granted only for extraordinarily strong science cases.

Conversion to a Normal Programme: This is discussed in greater detail below.

Progress review: LPs receive time allocations over up to 4 semesters, without the need to reapply during that period. Instead, they have to submit progress reports every semester, which are reviewed by the OPC. The OPC reserves the right to advise to ESO to stop - or put on hold - any LP that, for whatever reason, appears not to perform according to plan.

The path of LP proposals through the OPC

While grading and ranking of NPs is exclusively done within the topical OPC subpanels, it is the responsibility of the entire OPC to make decisions on LPs. Before that, the expertise of the topical panels is utilised.

Pregrading: All LP proposals are pregraded and commented on by *all* OPC members *and* by the members of the concerned topical panels. Since LP proposals should clearly expose their relevance to astrophysics in general, also the non-expert OPC members are requested to read the proposals carefully and to provide their comments. While experience shows that the given *pre-grades* are almost irrelevant (for the LPs, not the NPs!) at this stage, the *pregrading comments* are important because they can influence the discussion in the joint panel meeting.

OPC overview: In the first session of an OPC meeting, there should be a (very) brief overview of the newly submitted LP proposals, including e.g. a summary of which LPs agree to be potentially converted into NPs, and which do not. In the same session, the progress reports of ongoing LPs are reviewed, which has implications for the telescope time already committed. While scheduling is fundamentally the responsibility of ESO, it is nevertheless important for the OPC members to realise how much time is approximately available for new LPs.

Joint panel meetings: During the OPC meeting, there will be one session - typically on Wednesday morning - where all members of one topical panel area (currently A, B, C, D, respectively) meet to discuss the LPs submitted to their area. Starting with P79, these meetings will have a panel secretary. The session should be chaired by one of the subpanel chairs or his/her deputy; at any rate by an OPC member.

The joint panel session performs a detailed assessment of each LP proposal in the same form that the subpanels do this for NPs, only possibly taking somewhat more time for discussion. In this discussion, the *pregrading comments* provided by the OPC members from the other topical panels should be taken into account.

The outcome of the joint panel session should be:

- **panel grade** for each LP proposal (obtained by averaging or medianing over all panel members, or by consensus within the panel). These grades are important as they will provide a ranked list, but also they should reflect the overall quality differences between proposals in a quantitative way. Such information will be useful for the OPC.
- **Recommendations** to the OPC which proposals are suggested to be implemented as LPs. These recommendations may still imply some degree of oversubscription of the available time, but they should not be made totally ignoring it. In particular, there may be situations where two or more programmes compete for the same resources, in which case clear recommendations from the panels are needed. Proposals not recommended in the joint panel sessions will typically not be considered for implementation by the OPC.
- **Recommendations** to the OPC which LP proposals should, or could be converted into Normal Programmes. Such a conversion should only be recommended under very special circumstances (see below). Again, the final decision on this rests with the OPC, but the joint panel should employ its expertise to assess whether such a conversion would be scientifically highly

desirable or not. Obviously, the only proposals that should be considered are those that have agreed to a potential conversion in the proposal form.

- Note that the joint panel may recommend the same proposal both for implementation as LP and for conversion as NP, the latter only for the case the OPC does not follow their LP recommendation.

LPs in the subpanels:

Each LP proposal is assigned to a specific subpanel. This becomes important for those LP proposals that during the joint panel session were recommended for potential conversion as NPs. Each subpanel has then the task to grade and rank these proposals, obviously on reduced time allocation (see below) against the other NPs. Note again, this *may* apply also for proposals which have a recommendation for LP implementation. On the other hand, all LPs not recommended for conversion by the joint panel are of no concern to the subpanels.

Discussion of LPs in the OPC:

The next step is that all LP proposals are reviewed in an OPC session (typically on Thursday afternoon). For each proposal, the assigned first referee gives a very brief overview of aims and requests of the proposal and summarises the arguments exchanged during the joint panel discussion. (The proposals not recommended as LPs by the joint panel should be included, at least very briefly, in these presentations.) Then the proposal is discussed in the OPC, which should also include non-expert OPC members requesting clarification on certain issues.

After all proposals of one topical area have been presented and discussed, the chair of the corresponding joint subpanel session summarises the outcome and recommendations. At that point it may be helpful if ESO representatives could provide additional details on implementation and scheduling aspects.

Voting: Finally, the OPC formally votes on all proposals recommended for implementation by the joint panels. In the recent past these votes always were non-secret, but this is at the discretion of any particular OPC. The option is: either recommend implementation to ESO, or not (or abstain). Thus, the OPC at this stage does not change grades or ranks. Note that there is no binding, either by rule or by habit, for the OPC to follow the joint panel recommendation. Thus, the OPC does certainly not just rubber-stamp the joint panel outcome. However, it has been a consensus in past years that no *individual voting* takes place for those proposals that had not been recommended, unless there is a request for a particular proposal to be 'resurrected'.

The entire OPC votes on all proposals. For each proposal, there will typically many more non-experts than experts. LP proposers have to take this into account when writing their proposal. Thus, LP proposals should not only appeal to the specialists in an area, but catch also the attention of non-experts.

The OPC also will have to vote on the fate of LP proposals that were recommended for conversion into Normal Programmes. Again, this is voting in favour or against (or abstain). The Section below provides some guidelines for this decision. The outcome

of this vote determines whether such proposals will be showing up as NPs within the assigned subpanel ranked lists, or whether they will be marked as ‘rejected LP’.

It has been broad consensus that a *significant majority* is required for a proposal to be accepted as a LP. There is no formal threshold quorum, and each OPC should simply employ its best judgement in deciding when to call a majority ‘significant’.

It sometimes happens that several OPC members find it hard to decide and they prefer to abstain, which may lead to formal majority votes that are really unsatisfactory. In such cases, the chair may request a second, truly binary vote with *no abstentions allowed*.

Implementation: The OPC does not *decide* about LPs, it issues recommendations to ESO. Because availability of resources and scheduling are important factors, ESO will normally participate in the OPC discussion and provide feasibility constraints. It may also happen (at least in theory) that the OPC votes in favour of a programme which later turns out not to be feasible, or for which not enough time is available.

Conversion to a Normal Programme

All LP proposers need to consider whether they would agree to a conversion into a Normal Programme at reduced time allocation. The LP proposal form contains a corresponding entry within Box 9 (the observing time justification).

If the proposers state ‘No’ in this entry, the proposal may only be considered as LP by the OPC. If it is not recommended, it is rejected.

The Call for Proposals states that such a conversion may only happen ‘*under certain circumstances*’ (without elaborating what these circumstances might be). By default, the OPC should thus *not allow LP to NP conversion*, for two simple reasons:

The additional pages of the LP proposal template permit the proposers to present and expose their science case in greater detail than for NPs. After conversion they would directly compete with NP proposals that have less space available.

Any converted LP gets something like a second chance within the same process. If applied regularly it would give LP proposers an unfair advantage. It would then be a strategically clever move for proposers to *always* submit a programme as LP and see the NP competition as a backup.

On the other hand, for some truly outstanding proposals that for operational or other reasons are not recommended as LPs, a conversion to NP may indeed be desired by the OPC. The expertise as to when this is scientifically appropriate should be provided by the joint panel meetings.

Since Period 79, proposers also need to specify in the LP template what their requested time allocation would be in case of conversion. It is the task of the assigned subpanel to judge whether that reduced time request is well justified or not, and the subpanel of course also has the authority to further reduce the time allocation.

In summary, it is clear that successful LPs benefit from a very high gain. Most will agree that getting there should also involve a substantial risk.