Guidelines for writing OPC feedback comments

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Intention: The aim of this document is to provide OPC members and panelists, in particular novices to the task, with some guidelines and criteria for writing up the comments to be transmitted back to the proposers. *This is not an ESO document.* Suggestions concerning this document should be directed to the OPC chair.

Some considerations about OPC feedback

Until some years ago, the recommendations issued by the OPC and its panels were transformed into bald scheduling or rejection verdicts without further explanations. (Proposers could however request additional information from the responsible panel chair - many will remember that that was a rather unsatisfactory arrangement.) After multiple requests and repeated urging by the ESO Users Committee and others, since 2000, each proposal is provided with a brief comment that is sent back with the scheduling information.

- The OPC grades and ranks proposals, while ESO does the scheduling afterwards from a cross-panel merged list. The OPC can reject a proposal by giving it a grade ≥ 3. On the other hand, even for a highly ranked proposal the OPC can never say for certain whether that program in the end gets time. This needs to be reflected in the comments.

- Many proposers do not know the OPC process very well, sometimes to the extent that they identify the OPC and ESO together as a big anonymous machine. Good comments help to clarify that the OPC is a scientific advisory body of scientists from the community.

- In each semester there are a certain number of proposers that complain about the outcome of the OPC. While this is probably unavoidable, it is also undoubtedly true that a poor comment issued by the OPC can provoke such a complaint; badly conceived comments can also feed general feelings of unhappiness about the OPC.

- The character of a comment has to be consistent with the final rank and the grade of a proposal. An enthusiastic appraisal of a proposal that is not in the top ranks is as unhelpful '*If it is so great, why wasn't it scheduled?*' as is a rather critical report about a proposal that has a high rank '*I know it was good, but this incompetent OPC didn't see it ...*'.

- It is true that writing the comments means additional work for each panelist. But the total number of comments to write for any individual referee is moderate, typically of the order of ~15; it should be feasible to provide reasonably detailed comments if this is done while memory about the OPC

discussion is still fresh. **Thus, comments should be drafted as soon as possible, ideally on the same day as the discussion in the OPC.**

Some recommendations I: What should be transmitted?

The detailed structure of a comment is in the responsibility of each OPC panelist. The following suggestions should be seen as a list of criteria that characterise good feedback comments.

An assessment of strengths and weaknesses: Many proposals have good and bad points about them, and it will always be fair if both aspects are mentioned. This is also important because it will help avoid the impression that a single minor negative point has led the OPC to trash a proposal.

Qualitative ranking information: This is really important, because it gives the clearest impression of how the OPC works. There are always lots of reasonably good proposals that nevertheless end up only in the middle ranks simply because of the stiff competition. At the end of each meeting, each panel member should get the ranked list per telescope (within her/his subpanel). The comments need to be consistent with this relative ranking, not only with the absolute grade.

From P79 onward ESO will also automatically provide *quartile information* directly to the proposers via the webletters. Thus, everybody will know whether her/his proposal ended up in the top, second, third, or bottom quartile. This statistic will be computed *per telescope*, i.e. for the cross-panel merged list of proposals, and small-number effects should therefore be unimportant.

Please note: Never give exact ranks or grades!

Rejection: If the panel grade is ≥ 3.0, the proposal is formally rejected and will not be scheduled. The fact that a proposal is rejected by the panel has to be referred to in the comment (again, without naming any grade). The comment should also clearly explain the reasons for the panel to arrive at that decision.

Suggestions how to improve a proposal: Very often proposals are found to be scientifically interesting, but suffering from one or a few flaws. It will be much appreciated by the proposers if the responsible referee could refer to such flaws in terms of suggested improvements for future resubmissions, rather than just as reasons for downgrading. Obviously, no promises for more favourable reviews in the future should be connected to such suggestions.

Some recommendations II: What should not be contained in the comments

- Offensive remarks, or anything that can be taken as offensive.
- Grades or precise rank of a proposal within the panel.

- Feasibility concerns, as these will be supplied by ESO. If a panel member has doubts about feasibility, these should be articulated to ESO during the OPC meeting.
- Avoid the impression that a minor mistake has lead to rejection. This quite often is a (mostly unintended) source for unsatisfactory comments. For middle-ranked proposals, identifying clear strengths and weaknesses may sometimes not be easy, and one may involuntarily stick to small things. There is a special danger that this may happen if the comments are compiled several days after the OPC meeting, possibly exploiting the written *pre-grading comments* more than the actual discussion in the panel.

Reviewing the comments

There will always be dispersion in the quality of feedback comments that ~60 panelists write up after the OPC meeting. In order to guarantee that certain standards are maintained, all comments should be screened by other members of the same panel. Starting in P79, the following procedure was adopted: As a first step, each panelist sends her/his comments to the rest of the panel, by email. Everybody can then spot problems and make suggestions to everybody else. Then the comments are entered into the ESO WOT system, and panel chairs receive them for a final sanity check before they are released. The panel chairs cannot change any comment by themselves, but they can request changes if that is still required. Angry complaints can often be avoided if unsuited comments are spotted and revised before release.