Guidelines for OPC panel chairs

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Intention: The purpose of this document is to guide OPC panel chairs; in particular, it addresses newcomers to the task. Everything said in this document that goes beyond the formal OPC rules provided by ESO are *suggestions*, based on several years of collective OPC experience. Thus, this document does not attempt to set any new rules. *It is also not an ESO document*. The scope of these guidelines is limited to some aspects of chairing a panel. Suggestions concerning the document should be directed to the OPC chair.

Tasks of a Panel Chair

An OPC panel (more precisely speaking: sub-panel) consists of usually six referees. One of these is appointed by ESO to chair the session; the appointed deputy steps in only when the chair is unable to act.

The basic procedure to grade and rank proposals is described in the *OPC guidelines* issued by ESO to all OPC and panel members. During a panel session, each proposal in turn is first briefly presented by the primary referee, followed by additional comments from the secondary referees, and a general discussion. Finally, everybody in the panel votes on a grade, and the votes are combined into a panel grade. The panel chair should see in the beginning of a session that the voting procedure is clear (see further comments on voting below).

- Some proposals may require more discussion than others. The overall time frame is extremely compressed (it is easy to estimate the number of minutes that on average can be spent on each proposal!). It would be unfair to the proposals discussed towards the end of the meeting if those had significantly less time for discussion. The panel chair acts as the time keeper and therefore needs to be strict in concluding any extensive discussions.

- Conflicts of interest are a sensitive issue. Most panelists handle this very responsibly, but sometimes decisions need to be taken by the panel chair, for a variety of reasons. At any rate, the panel chair has the authority to state a conflict of interest even if the concerned panelist is of a different opinion. ESO-Visas has to be informed in such a case.

- The panel is basically free to adopt a certain order by which to go through the pile of proposals. Not all ordering schemes have proven to be equally suitable. See below.

Presorting of proposals

Topical presorting: This is the recommended way to proceed. It requires some (modest) preparation effort by the panel chair, who should identify a set of sub-topics

(which may or may not be the `official' OPC subcategories) and make a list of all proposals in each subtopic. The basic rationale behind this presorting is that proposals on similar topics will be discussed within short time intervals, which makes relative ranking and grading much easier. In particular it will allow the panel to identify the weakest and the strongest proposals with relatively high efficiency.

Typically, some 8-12 proposals per subtopic are a good number that will allow everybody to remember other proposals from the same pile, but obviously that number will vary.

There is no need to do this presorting several days ahead of the OPC meeting, but the panel members will probably be grateful if the ordered list could be distributed at the beginning of the meeting.

Other orderings are conceivable, but have revealed clear disadvantages:

- **By telescope or instrument:** While this might work fine within the VLT unit telescopes which are basically equal, it has happened that a panel inadvertently tended to give systematically better grades to proposals for the small telescopes, even if the panel didn't particularly care about these proposals. Better avoid that sort of bias altogether.

- **Numerical order:** The absence of any presorting scheme puts a real strain on the memorizing capabilities of panel members. *'Didn't we have something similar like proposal 900 already yesterday?'* It is also inefficient in identifying the weak proposals and therefore in terms of time consumption. Not recommended.

Voting and grade combination

The default procedure to form a panel grade is by secret ballots: Each panel member writes her/his grade on a slip of paper, and these slips are then collected by the panel secretary.

The panel is free to abandon the secret balloting procedure if it *unanimously* decides so. There are arguments for and against secret voting, and each panel may feel differently about the best way.

How to convert six individual grades into a panel grade? Mathematically speaking this is a modest challenge: One may take the mean, or the median, or (as a kind of cross between the two) the mean after clipping the upper and lower extreme vote. Again, there are good reasons for and against any of these options.

In the beginning of the first panel session, the panel chair should allow for a brief discussion of the voting and grade combining procedure. The panel should then stick to one system throughout. There is no need, however, to harmonise the procedure with the other panels.

Making use of the Pre-OPC grading

Each proposal has to be pre-graded by three referees (the Large Proposals by many more) some 10 days before the meeting. These pregrades are fundamentally not used in the ranking process at all. Nevertheless, the panel chair may employ them to make the panel session more efficient. This works particularly well in combination with topical pre-sorting: Among the 8-12 proposal for a given sub-topic, those with the poorest pregrades are only very shortly touched on and can be voted upon almost immediately.

Note that this is a less radical version of an approach adopted by some space-based TACs, where the lowest third of all proposals, according to the pregrading, is rejected without any individual voting or discussion (unless a proposal is explicitly revived by a panel member). The ESO-OPC has not subscribed to this approach, although it may decide in the future to do so.