



EUROPEAN SOUTHERN OBSERVATORY

Organisation Européenne pour des Recherches Astronomiques dans l'Hémisphère Austral
Europäische Organisation für astronomische Forschung in der südlichen Hemisphäre

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Very Large Telescope Paranal Science Operations VLT User Manual

Doc. No. VLT-MAN-ESO-15000-4552

Issue 111.0, Date 22/08/2022

Prepared X. Haubois
Date Signature

Approved
Date Signature

Released S. Mieske
Date Signature

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Change Record

Issue	Date	Section/Parag. affected	Remarks
84.0	25/02/2009	All	Release for P84 Phase-1
84.1	22/06/2009	All	Release for P84 Phase-2
85.0	30/08/2009	All	Release for P85 Phase-1
86.0	26/02/2010	MACAO and FINITO part	Release for P86 Phase-1
87.0	28/08/2010	FINITO + AT Baselines	Release for P87 Phase-1
87.1	25/01/2011	FINITO limiting magnitude	Release for P87 Phase-2
88.0	05/03/2011		Release for P88 Phase-1
90.0	20/02/2012		Release for P90 Phase-1
91.0	20/08/2012		Release for P91 Phase-1
92.0	12/03/2013	FINITO limiting magnitude	Release for P92 Phase-1
96.0	17/02/2015	ATs; MIDI removed; PIONIER added	Release for P96 Phase-1
97.0	20/08/2015		Release for P97 Phase-1
98.0	27/02/2016	GRAVITY; AT- and UT-STs	Release for P98 Phase-1
99.0	12/09/2016	GRAVITY single/dual feed restrictions on AT baselines	Release for P99 Phase-1
100.0	03/02/2017	Precision on GRAVITY single/dual feed restrictions on AT baselines	Release for P100 Phase-1
101.0	16/08/2017	Astrometric AT baseline offered, CIAO-off axis offered for GRAVITY+UT, introducing NAOMI for ATs	Release for P101 Phase-1
102.0	25/02/2018	AMBER and FINITO are decommissioned, clarification of the off-axis coude guiding distances	Release for P102 Phase-1
103.0	31/08/2018	MATISSE is introduced, further clarification of the off-axis coude guiding distances for mixed N/S configurations.	Release for P103 Phase-1
104.0	28/02/2019	CIAO on-axis is introduced, NAOMI is further described, the new nomenclature for the configurations is presented	Release for P104 Phase-1
105.0	28/08/2019	imaging programmes descriptions was modified	Release for P105 Phase-1
106.0	28/02/2020	CIAO on-axis is no longer offered, MACAO magnitudes are revised	Release for P106 Phase-1
108.0	28/02/2021	Introduction of the imaging slots (ISLs)	Release for P108 Phase-1
110.0	24/02/2022	Modified STS sections and added section 6 including a description of GRAVITY-wide optical layout	Release for P110 Phase-1
111.0	22/08/2022	Clarification on time-series programmes and CIAO bright-end limiting magnitude.	Release for P110 Phase-1
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Contents

1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.1	Scope	1
1.2	Contacts	1
2	A FEW WORDS ON INTERFEROMETRY	2
2.1	Introduction	2
2.2	Interest of interferometry	2
2.3	How an interferometer works	2
2.4	Interferometric observables	3
3	OVERVIEW OF THE VLTI	4
4	THE TELESCOPES FOR THE VLTI	4
4.1	The Unit Telescopes	5
4.1.1	Description	5
4.1.2	Star Separators (STS)	6
4.1.3	MACAO	6
4.1.4	CIAOs	8
4.1.5	MACAO or CIAO off-axis?	9
4.2	The Auxiliary Telescopes	10
4.2.1	NAOMI	11
4.2.2	AT Star Separators (STS)	12
5	THE BASELINES OF THE VLTI	13
5.1	Introduction	13
5.2	The delay-lines	14
5.3	UT Baselines	14
5.4	AT baselines	15
6	THE VLTI LABORATORY	17
7	VLTI STABILIZATION	19
7.1	Introduction	19
7.2	IRIS	19
7.3	Pupil alignment	20
8	ORGANIZATION OF THE VLTI OBSERVATIONS	22
8.1	General	22
8.2	Observation types	22
8.3	The Imaging scheme	22
8.4	Calibration	23

8.5	Preparation of the VLTI observations	24
8.6	Baselines and LST constraints	24
8.7	Calibrator selection	24
8.8	Moon constraints	24
8.9	Instrument-specific constraints	25
8.10	Target coordinates and magnitude	25
9	APPENDICES	26
9.1	Feasibility matrices	26
9.1.1	Observations with the UTs and MACAO	26
9.1.2	Observations with the UTs and CIAO	26
9.1.3	Observations with the ATs	27
9.2	Sky Coverage	27

List of Figures

1	Basic principle of ground-based long-baseline optical interferometry. The sample of \hat{O} for the given projected baseline and wavelength is given by the small circle (the graphical representation of \hat{O} is fictive).	3
2	The optical path in the VLTI (when two telescopes are used).	4
3	The optical layout of the lower part of the Coudé train and the relay optics . .	5
4	The circle above represents the area where a star can be chosen for an off-target Coudé guiding. The current use of the STSs imposes that the science object should be located +10 arcseconds in RA (to the East) away from the optical axis. This constrains the guide star distance for the off-target Coudé guiding. This means in particular that no Coudé-guiding will be possible if the guide star is more than +47.5 arcseconds away (in pure RA) from the science target.	7
5	MACAO Strehl ratio (SR) in K-band as a function of V magnitude.	8
6	SR loss due to anisoplanatism as a function of the separation between the natural guide star (NGS) and the center of the VLTI field of view. An anisoplanetic angle of $\Theta_0(500\text{nm}) = 2.6$ arcsec was assumed here as an average value for Paranal.	9
7	CIAO Strehl ratio in K-band as a function of the m_K apparent magnitude. The off-axis SR measurement has been corrected for the Eta factor.	10
8	Optical layout of an AT with the telescope optics and NAOMI.	11
9	A unit telescope (left) and an auxiliary telescope (right).	12
10	Layout of VLTI telescope locations.	15
11	VLTI lab: Top: drawing showing the main sub-systems. Right: Picture of the same elements taken next to the GRAVITY feeding optics.	18
12	Optical layout in the VLTI laboratory when the GRAVITY-wide mode is used. Black beams represent the fringe tracker beams and blue ones the science channel beams.	19
13	Difference of magnitude between V and H bands, depending on the spectral type.	20

14	UT sky coverage	27
15	AT sky coverage, small configuration	28
16	AT sky coverage, medium configuration	28
17	AT sky coverage, large configuration	29
18	AT sky coverage, astrometric configuration	29
19	Geometry of the STS configuration when on a mixed North/South baselines (medium and large configurations). In this case, the field of view available for a guide star (darker blue area) is the intersection of the 2 individual STS fields of view. Yellow stars mark the position of potential guide stars. In pure RA, the guide star should not be further than 47.5 arcsec away from the science object (red star).	30

List of Abbreviations

AGB	Asymptotic Giant Branch
AGN	Active Galaxy Nucleus
AMBER	Astronomical Multi-BEam Recombiner
AT	Auxiliary Telescope
CIAO	Coudé Infrared Adaptive Optics
DDL	Differential Delay Lines
ESO	European Southern Observatory
FINITO	FrInge-tracker (designed by) NIce and TOrino observatories
FOV	Field Of View
GRAVITY	General Relativity Analysis via VLT InTerferometrY
IRIS	Infra-Red Image Sensor
LST	Local Sidereal Time
MACAO	Multi-Application Curvature sensing Adaptive Optics
MATISSE	Multi-AperTure mid-Infrared SpectroScopic Experiment
MIDI	MID-infrared Interferometric instrument
NAOMI	New Adaptive Optics Module for Interferometry
OB	Observation Block
OPC	Observation Program Committee
OPD	Optical Path Difference
PIONIER	Precision Integrated-Optics Near-infrared Imaging ExpeRiment
PRIMA	Phase-Referencing Imaging and Micro-arcsecond Astrometry
SM	Service Mode
SNR	Signal-to-Noise Ratio
SR	Strehl Ratio
STRAP	System for Tip-tit Removal with Avalanche Photodiodes
STS	Start Separator
TCCD	Technical Charge-Coupled Device
USD	User Support Department
UT	Unit Telescope
VCM	Variable Curvature Mirror
VLT	Very Large Telescope
VLTI	Very Large Telescope Interferometer
VM	Visitor Mode
YSO	Young Stellar Object

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Scope

This document summarizes the characteristics and performances of the Very Large Telescope Interferometer (VLTI), as it will be offered to astronomers for the six-month ESO observation period P111 (running from 1 April 2023 to 30 September 2023). This document is a mandatory complement to the user manuals of the VLTI instruments, since it contains very important information to prepare the proposals for PIONIER, GRAVITY. and MATISSE. In particular, the requirements by the VLTI sub-systems for the feasibility of an observation are listed at the end of this manual.

The **bold** font is used in the paragraphs of this document to put emphasis on the important facts regarding VLTI in P111. Minor corrections were also done over the document.

1.2 Contacts

The authors hope that this manual will help the users to get acquainted with the VLTI before writing proposals for interferometric observations. This manual is continually evolving and needs to be improved according to the needs of observers. If you have any question or suggestion, please contact the ESO User Support Department (email:usd-help@eso.org).

2 A FEW WORDS ON INTERFEROMETRY

2.1 Introduction

This section gives a short summary and a reminder of the principles of interferometry. Astronomers interested in using the VLTI, but who are not familiar with interferometry yet, can get tutorials from the following links:

- <http://olbin.jpl.nasa.gov/intro/index.html> (Optical Long Baseline Interferometry News tutorials).
- <http://www.eso.org/sci/facilities/paranal/telescopes/vlti/index.html> (VLTI general description and tutorials).
- <http://www.mariotti.fr/obsvlti/obsvlti-book.html> (proceedings of EuroWinter school “Observing with the VLTI”).
- <http://www.vlti.org> (List of other available schools and tutorials.)

2.2 Interest of interferometry

Long-baseline interferometry is a high-angular resolution technique in astronomy. It is useful to obtain information about details at the milli-arcsecond (mas) level, such as:

- Diameters of stars, intensity profiles across stellar disks, morphology of circumstellar environments and stellar surface features.
- Diameters and chemical composition of dusty shells and disks around YSOs and AGB stars.
- Inner structures of AGNi.
- Parameters of the orbits of close binary stars.

2.3 How an interferometer works

An optical interferometer samples the wave-fronts of the light emitted by a remote target. Sampling is performed at two or more separate locations. The interferometer recombines the sampled wave-fronts to produce interference fringes.

Two telescopes are separated on the ground by a “baseline” vector. The wave-fronts add constructively or destructively, depending on the path difference between the wave-fronts, and produce a fringe pattern that appears as bright and dark bands, with the bright bands being brighter than the sum of intensities in the two separate wave-fronts. A path-length change in one arm of the interferometer by a fraction of a wavelength causes the fringes to move. If the beams from the telescopes are combined at a (small) angle, the fringes consist of a spatially modulated pattern on the detector.

The angular resolution that the interferometer can achieve depends on the wavelength of observation, and on the length of the projected baseline (the projected baseline vector is the projection of the on-ground baseline vector onto a plane perpendicular to the line-of-sight. The

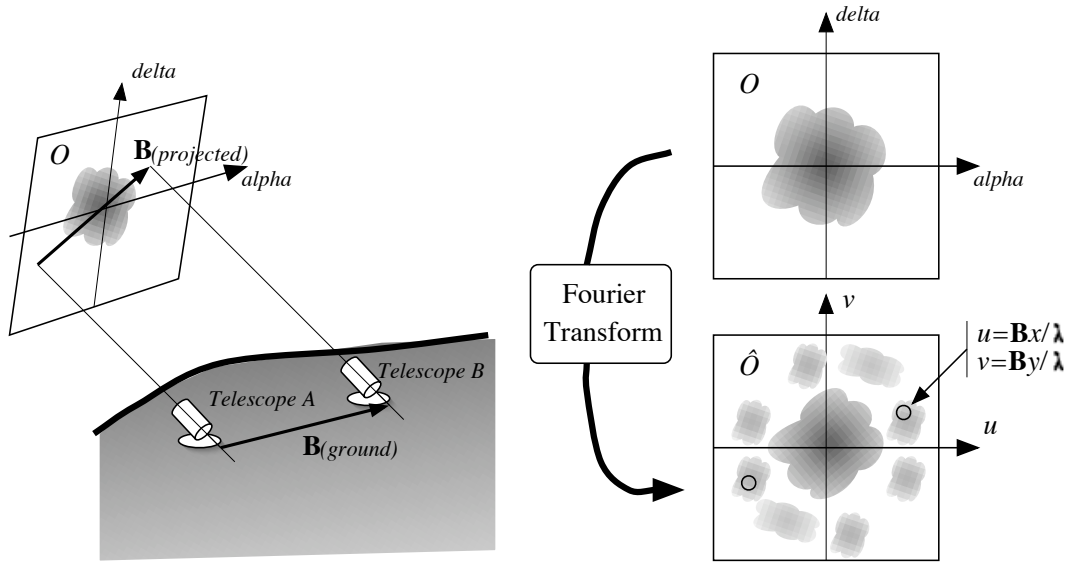


Figure 1: Basic principle of ground-based long-baseline optical interferometry. The sample of \hat{O} for the given projected baseline and wavelength is given by the small circle (the graphical representation of \hat{O} is fictive).

projected baseline changes over the night because of Earth rotation). The smallest angular scale that can be resolved is of the order of λ/B , where λ is the wavelength of the observation and B is the projected baseline of the interferometer. This is equivalent to the expression for diffraction-limited spatial resolution in single telescope observations, where B would be the telescope diameter. In the case of optical interferometry, the actual resolution depends on the accuracy at which the fringes' contrast is measured. Hence, the smallest angular scale can actually be smaller than λ/B .

2.4 Interferometric observables

An interferometer measures the coherence between the interfering light beams. The primary observable, at a given wavelength λ , is the complex visibility $\Gamma = V \exp(i\phi) = \hat{O}(u, v)$. In this expression, $\hat{O}(u, v)$ is the Fourier transform of the object brightness angular distribution $O(x, y)$. The sampled point in the Fourier plane is $(u = B_x/\lambda, v = B_y/\lambda)$. (B_x, B_y) are the coordinates of the projected baseline (see Fig. 1).

A two-telescope interferometer cannot allow to retrieve ϕ because of the atmospheric turbulence and the lack of absolute reference. Only the squared amplitude, or visibility (V^2) and differential (as function of wavelength) visibility and phase, are accessible. With more than two telescopes, e.g. with PIONIER, summing the phases that are measured in all the baselines leads to a quantity called “closure phase” which is free of atmospheric corruption.

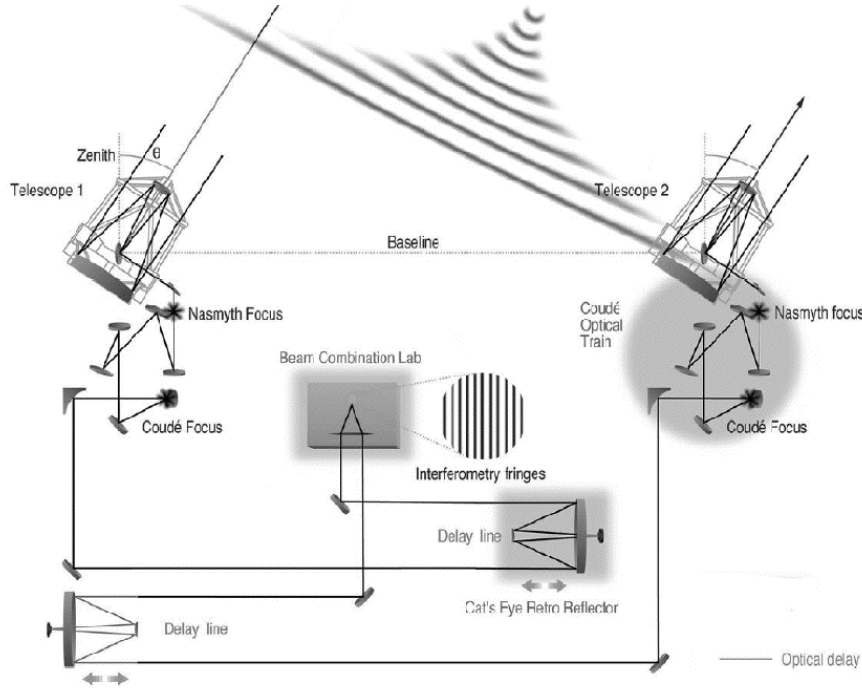


Figure 2: The optical path in the VLTI (when two telescopes are used).

3 OVERVIEW OF THE VLTI

The VLTI is located on the top of Cerro Paranal (latitude: $24^{\circ}40'$ S ; longitude: $70^{\circ}25'$ W.). There are two main operation modes for the VLTI: the mode using the 8-m unit telescopes (UTs) of the VLT (which are mostly used in stand-alone for non-interferometric observations with instruments attached to their Cassegrain and Nasmyth foci), and the mode using the 1.8-m auxiliary telescopes (ATs) forming the VLT Interferometer Small Array (VISA). These telescopes are not used for stand-alone operation. The difference are in terms of sensitivity and (u, v) regions that can be “explored”. The involved VLTI-specific sub-systems are also the same in both modes:

- An optical system of mirrors to transport the beams.
- A system of delay-lines.
- A set of stabilization devices (IRIS, pupil imager...).

These systems are detailed in this manual.

The optical train of the VLTI is illustrated in Fig. 2: the beam from each telescope is transferred by optical reflections through a first tunnel called “light-duct” and then through the delay-line tunnel (perpendicular to the light-ducts, see Fig. 6), up to the VLTI laboratory.

4 THE TELESCOPES FOR THE VLTI

The available telescopes for the VLTI observations in P111 are the fixed 8-m Unit Telescopes —UTs— of the VLT and the movable 1.8-m Auxiliary Telescopes —ATs— (for all VLTI

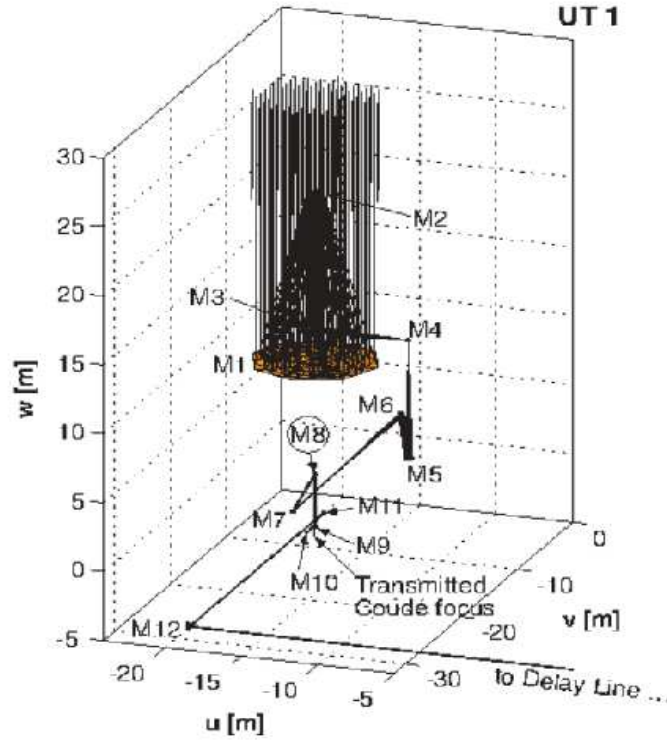


Figure 3: The optical layout of the lower part of the Coudé train and the relay optics

instruments).

4.1 The Unit Telescopes

4.1.1 Description

The VLTI can be attached to the Coudé foci of each UT (located underneath the azimuth platform of the telescope) to bring the stellar light from the Nasmyth focus to the entrance of a VLTI “light-duct”. The optical layout of the UT Coudé train is presented in Fig. 3. As for VLT observations, the telescope is tracking in “field-stabilization” mode: the Nasmyth guide probe camera tracks on a selected guide star (observable within the ≈ 30 arcmin FOV of the Nasmyth focus which is centered on the target observed by the VLTI) by applying tip-tilt correction to the M2 mirror of the telescope.

4.1.2 Star Separators (STS)

Since 2016, all 4 UTs are equipped with Star-Separators in the Coudé rooms below the UTs. The goal of the UT-STs is to create two fields A and B. These are the main use cases:

- with MACAO only beam A is used for the VLTI instrument axis (GRAVITY, MATISSE or PIONIER),
- with CIAO, beam B is used by the y CIAO infrared wavefront sensors (WFS) located in Coudé, beam A is sent to the VLTI instruments
- from P110 with the GRAVITY-wide mode, beam A and beam B are both sent to the VLTI tunnel and lab for wide-separation (up to 30") fringe tracking. This mode is compatible with MACAO only (since CIAO would block beam B).

4.1.3 MACAO

Each UT Coudé is equipped with an adaptive optics system called MACAO. It consists of a Roddier wavefront curvature sensor which has an array of 60 avalanche photo-diodes. This analyzer applies a correction to the shape the deformable mirror (DM) of the UT Coudé. The DM is mounted on a tip-tilt correction stage onto which the tip-tilt measured by MACAO is offloaded when the DM is at the limit. When the tip-tilt mount is at the limit, it is offloaded by offsetting the Nasmyth guide probe position, and therefore by offsetting the M2.

Due to aging and before for the completion of a recovery plan, the offered magnitudes for MACAO were redefined. In good conditions (seeing < 0.6 arcsec and coherence time > 5 ms), MACAO can be used with a star as faint as $V = 15$. On the bright end, the MACAO sensitive APDs start to be over-illuminated for $V = 2$ which is the bright limiting magnitude. Figure 5 presents expected Strehl ratio as a function of the target V-magnitude.

If the target is fainter than $V = 15$ it is possible to perform “off-target Coudé guiding” if a guide star can be found within a radius of 57.5 arcseconds whose center is -10 arcseconds in RA w.r.t the science star (see Fig.4 below). The guide star must be brighter than $V = 15$ but if V is too close to this limiting magnitude, there is still a risk that the Coudé guiding could fail depending on the off-axis distance and sky conditions (seeing, τ_0).

In case of extended objects, users are expected to take into account the magnitude of the core of the objects resolved by a UT.

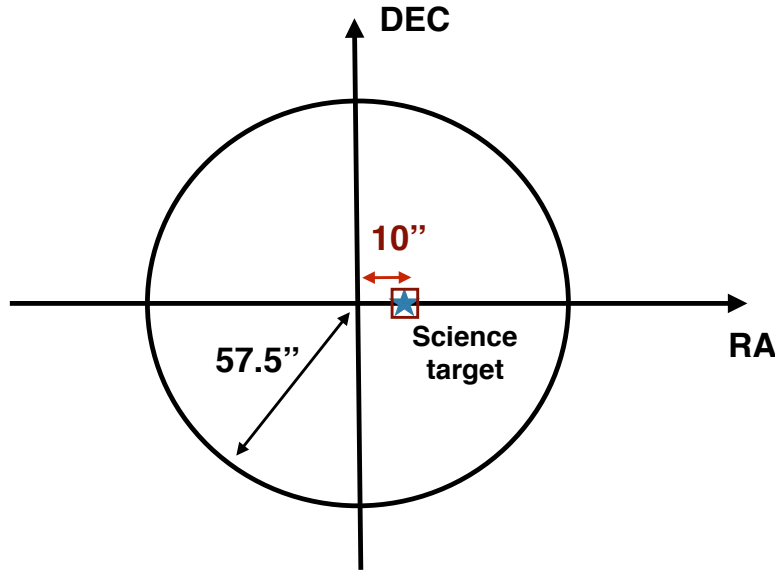


Figure 4: The circle above represents the area where a star can be chosen for an off-target Coudé guiding. The current use of the STSs imposes that the science object should be located +10 arcseconds in RA (to the East) away from the optical axis. This constrains the guide star distance for the off-target Coudé guiding. This means in particular that no Coudé-guiding will be possible if the guide star is more than +47.5 arcseconds away (in pure RA) from the science target.

We guarantee that the MACAO loop is closed, under the following conditions:

- Seeing (500nm) less than 1.5 arcsec.
- Coherence time (500 nm) τ_0 larger than 2.0ms.
- Airmass less than 2.0.
- Distance from the optical axis less than 57.5 arcsec, see Fig. 4.

Similarly to the NAOMI case below, it was identified the Gaia G filter is actually closer to the MACAO transmission profile than the Johnson V-band filter, with which all performances and reports were established, including the limiting magnitudes showed in the present document. Users are then encouraged to use guide-star magnitudes obtained in this G filter when possible. If nor G nor R magnitude are available, V-band magnitude is also possible but color effects are to be expected.

MACAO can be used only if the sky conditions are better than THICK. Rapid changes of flux due to thick clouds passing would degrade the performances of the MACAO and even endanger the APDs.

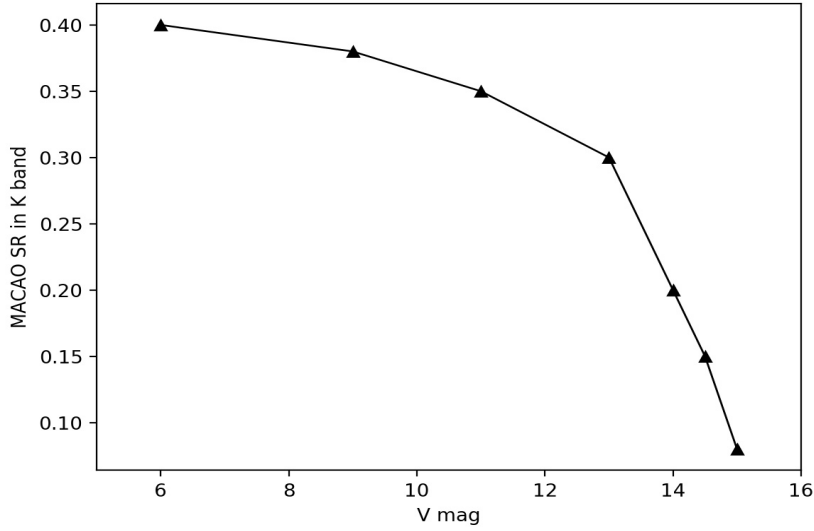


Figure 5: MACAO Strehl ratio (SR) in K-band as a function of V magnitude.

MACAO isoplanatism When a guide-star other than the scientific target is used, the quality of the correction of the image of the target depends on the angular distance θ between both objects. The isoplanatic angle is defined as the angular distance over which the variance of the phase is 1 radian squared. It depends on the Fried parameter r_0 , the mean altitude of the turbulence layer $\langle h \rangle$ and the zenith angle z as follows:

$$\theta_0 = 0.31 \times \frac{r_0}{\langle h \rangle},$$

The mean wavefront error is given by:

$$\langle \phi^2 \rangle = (\theta/\theta_0)^2$$

Because of a limited number of observations in the past with off-axis guiding, it is difficult to give figures based on actual measurements, but we definitively recommend to observe with a seeing better than 0.8 arcsec. When the seeing is 0.8 arcsec, the isoplanatic is in general such that an attenuation of 1 K-magnitude per 15 arcsec of separation between the target and the guide-star is expected. The theoretical SR loss due to anisoplanatism is presented in Fig. 6.

4.1.4 CIAOs

CIAO systems analyze the wavefront in the infrared (H and K bands) and command the M8s deformable mirrors to increase fiber coupling and instrument sensitivity. In P111CIAO (Coudé Infrared Adaptive Optics) infrared wavefront sensors are offered only in the off-axis mode and with GRAVITY. The on-axis mode of CIAO cannot be offered for the time being due to critical problems that were identified during its commissioning.

In the off-axis mode, CIAOs use the second field of the STS, getting 100% of the infrared light. The 4 CIAOs are composed of 9x9 Shack-Hartmann wavefront sensors equipped with SAPHIRA detectors recording frames at 100-500Hz. We guarantee the CIAO loops to be closed for the following conditions:

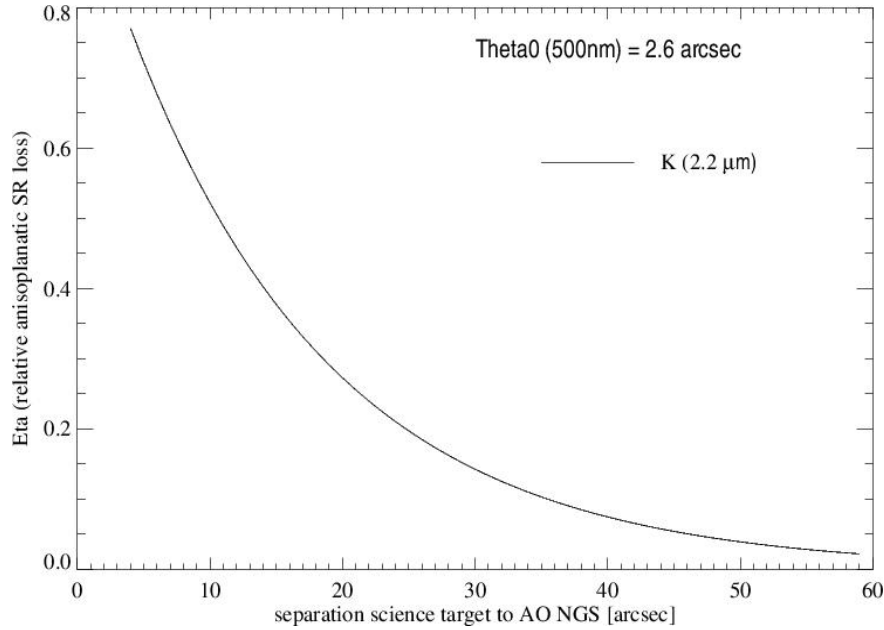


Figure 6: SR loss due to anisoplanatism as a function of the separation between the natural guide star (NGS) and the center of the VLTI field of view. An anisoplanetic angle of $\Theta_0(500\text{nm}) = 2.6$ arcsec was assumed here as an average value for Paranal.

- Point source with $K \leq 10$ mag for CIAO off-axis.
- Seeing (500nm) ≤ 1.1 arcsec
- Coherence time (500nm) > 1.5 ms
- Airmass ≤ 2.0
- in the off-axis case, the separation between AO source (NGS) and scientific target must be higher than 4 arcseconds and smaller than 57.5 arcseconds (Fig.4). Strehl ratio performances decrease with separation as shown on Fig. 6.

Typical performances during commissioning are reported on Fig. 7. Note that if $m_K > 8$ and $m_V < 13$, it is advised to choose MACAO on-axis, If the SR achieved on-axis is not satisfying and if there are potential off-axis stars in the field: decide between MACAO or CIAO off-axis following the instructions presented in the next section.

CIAO is equipped with neutral density filters to avoid saturation on the detector. Using these, observations of Alpha Centauri A ($H=-1.4\text{mag}$, $K_s=-1.5\text{mag}$) were demonstrated during commissioning. This corresponds to the current limiting magnitude of the bright-end capabilities.

4.1.5 MACAO or CIAO off-axis?

The CIAO H+K band wavefront sensor offers the opportunity to find Natural Guide Stars (NGS) in deeply embedded or extincted regions, where it was previously not possible to do adaptive optics (due to the lack of visual NGS). In general, the use of CIAO systems is therefore recommended for red AO reference sources with $m_V - m_K \geq 5$ mag.

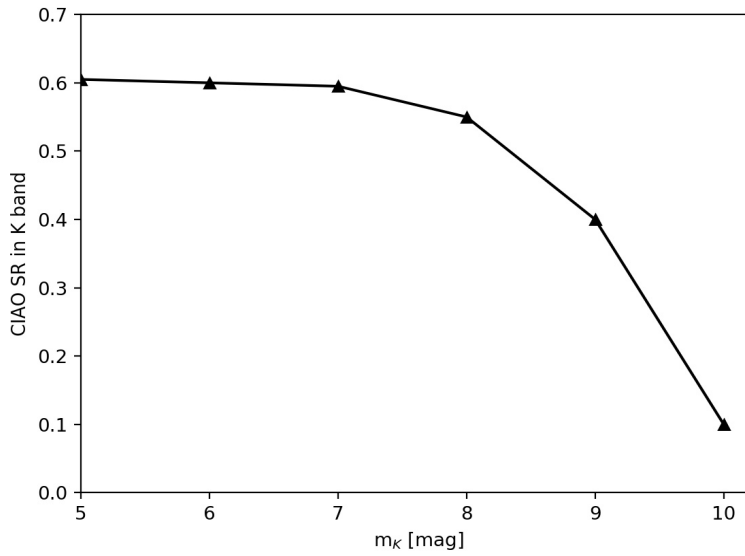


Figure 7: CIAO Strehl ratio in K-band as a function of the m_K apparent magnitude. The off-axis SR measurement has been corrected for the Eta factor.

To decide between MACAO and CIAO adaptive optics systems, and identify the best NGS, do the following:

- For each potential NGS within 57.5 arcsec of the science target, derive the on-axis Strehl ratio SR_{MACAO} and the off-axis SR_{CIAO} from Fig. 5 and 7 .
- Estimate the attenuation of the Strehl ratio, Eta, due to anisoplanatism, presented in Fig. 6.
- Multiply both numbers (i.e. $\text{Eta} * SR_{MACAO}$ and $\text{Eta} * SR_{CIAO}$) to get the Strehl ratio on the science target, and select the combination of NGS and AO system, which provides the highest SR on the science target.

4.2 The Auxiliary Telescopes

The VLTI features four auxiliary telescopes (ATs) that are now used simultaneously for scientific observations. Their locations on the VLTI platform (hence the baselines they define) are defined in the Paranal schedule which is released before the observation period starts. They are usually used several days in a row on the same locations. Relocation of the AT to a new station can only be done during the day. A maximum of 2 ATs can be moved in a single day. Any relocation of ATs is followed by a relocation night that will be used by Science Operations to verify the system before starting normal operations (VM or SM). Following a vast intervention of mirror exchanges and recoating of the ATs' Coudé train that ended in July 2018, the AT transmission increased by about 65% in the near-infrared.

Like the UTs, the light from the ATs use a Coudé train to bring the stellar light to the delay-line. A drawing of the Optical layout of the AT is presented in Fig. 8.

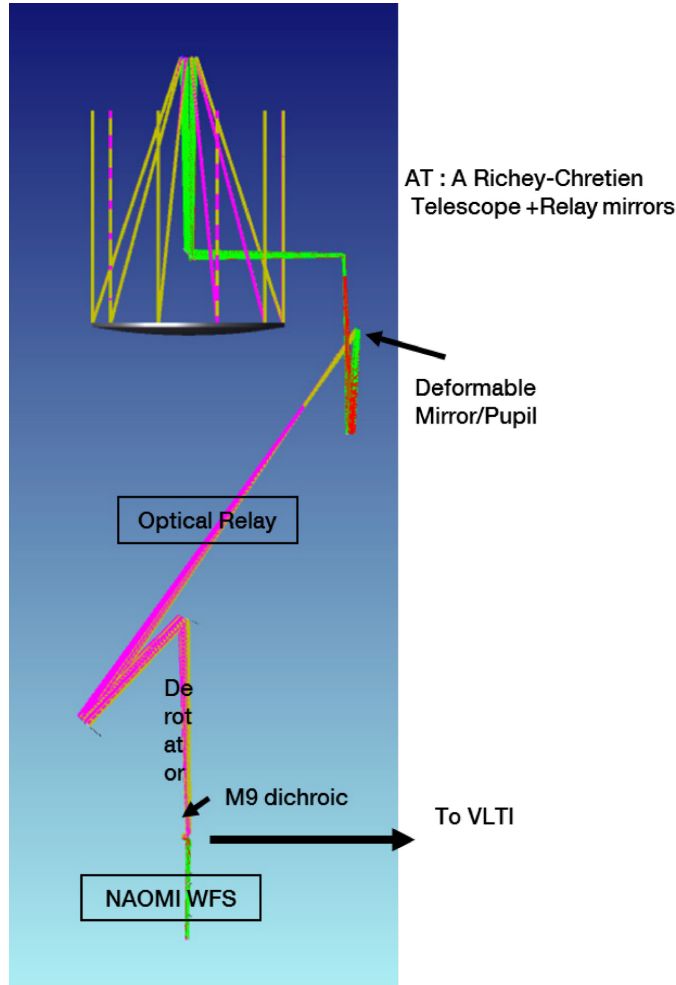


Figure 8: Optical layout of an AT with the telescope optics and NAOMI.

4.2.1 NAOMI

Since November 2018, the four ATs at VLTI are equipped with the adaptive optics NAOMI (New Adaptive Optics Module for Interferometry) systems. By delivering a higher and more stable Strehl ratio during turbulent conditions, the NAOMI systems allow a more robust fiber coupling in the VLTI instruments which will translate into a higher sensitivity and precision in the interferometric data. NAOMI can also provide chopping capabilities up to 4 Hz to subtract the thermal background seen by MATISSE.

Saturation effects stops the loop from closing for $R < -3$. The sensitivity of NAOMI on the ATs is $R = 12.5$ in service mode, leading to a Strehl ratio in H-band varying between ~ 40 -60 % depending on the conditions. For fainter guide stars, whose observing is allowed only in visitor mode, the Strehl delivered by NAOMI degrades to $\sim 10\%$ for $R = 15$ in median seeing conditions.

If the science target is not suitable for guiding with NAOMI, it is possible to perform “off-target Coudé guiding”, provided a suitable guide-star exists. This guide-star must be brighter than $R = 12.5$ and within a radius of 57.5 arcseconds whose center is ± 10 arcseconds in RA w.r.t the science object: by default the scientific star is put $+10$ arcsec in RA from the center of the field when the telescope is located at a North station (same as for the MACAO off-target



Figure 9: A unit telescope (left) and an auxiliary telescope (right).

Coudé Guiding, Fig.4) and -10 arcsec when the telescope is located at a South station. Users who want to perform off-axis guiding with a mixed North/South configuration (e.g. medium or large configurations) should pay particular attention to the fact that the guiding star should be close enough to the center of the field for both North and South ATs (basically in a 47.5 arcsec radius from the science object, see Fig 19 at the end of the document. If $R > 12.5$, there is a risk that Coudé guiding cannot be performed, depending on the off-axis distance and the on-sky conditions (seeing, τ_0). Note that the Gaia G filter is actually closer to the NAOMI transmission profile than the Johnson R-band filter. Users are therefore encouraged to use guide-star magnitudes obtained in this G filter when possible. If nor G nor R magnitude are available, V-band magnitude is also possible but color effects are to be expected.

During the NAOMI commissioning, the AO loop closure was tested against different guide star brightnesses and separations to the moon while it was almost fully illuminated. The following restrictions due to the moon on the ATs' guiding with NAOMI were derived:

- If the FLI is $\geq 95\%$, and the guide star is **fainter** than 9th magnitude in the R-band, guiding is not possible for distances to the moon lower than 5 degrees.
- If the FLI is $\geq 95\%$, and the guide star is **brighter** than 9th magnitude in the R-band, guiding is not possible for distances to the moon lower than 3 degrees.

Note that, unlike the UTs, the ATs have no possibility of guiding if they cannot guide with the Coudé. Therefore, it is mandatory to use a suitable Coudé guide star (either the target itself or an off-axis guide star).

More details about NAOMI can be found in [Willez et al. 2019 \(A&A\)](#).

4.2.2 AT Star Separators (STS)

The Star separators (STS) were introduced originally for the PRIMA project in order to enable the VLTI to acquire simultaneously 2 stars. The STS have replaced the "single star" relay optics since 2015, directly below the telescope. VLTI-AT now uses the STS for the following reasons:

- The DL VCM pressure will always be below 2 bars, leading to more stable pupil relay.
- The larger field of view: $\geq 4''$ in diameter as opposed to $\leq 2''$ for single feed.
- Ability to stir and guide the pupil thanks the tip-tilt mounted VCM in the STS.

The STS have better optical properties, in particular the pupil relay and field of view. The old SF ROS suffered from poor pupil steering (M10) and poor longitudinal imaging because the delay Line VCM could not be operated at pressure above 2.5 bar, which was not sufficient for good pupil relay.

The STS have their own VCM which reduces the pressure of the DL VCM and properly re-images the pupil in the middle of the tunnel. The result is that we will now operate with DL-VCM pressure always below 2 bars. The STS also offer a much larger field of view ($\geq 4''$ in diameter as opposed to $\leq 2''$ for SF), which is mandatory for GRAVITY. The uses of the AT-STs is mostly transparent to GRAVITY, MATISSE and PIONIER users. Similarly to the UTs (section 4.1.2), from P110, the GRAVITY-wide mode offers the possibility to propagate the two AT-STs beams to the VLTI tunnel and lab.

For more informations, please see *"Star separator system for the dual-field capability (PRIMA) of the VLTI"* Delplancke et al. SPIE (2004).

5 THE BASELINES OF THE VLTI

5.1 Introduction

As explained in Sect. 2.3, a baseline is the geometrical arrangements of the two telescopes used during the VLTI observations. Four telescopes are used simultaneously with PIONIER, GRAVITY or MATISSE. To "explore" the regions of interest in the (u, v) plane of a scientific target, the user has to:

1. Select one or several multiplets (i.e., the set of telescopes): 4T for PIONIER, GRAVITY and MATISSE.
2. Define the local sidereal time (LST) ranges for the observation. The LST defines, from the selected baseline, the actual "projected" baseline that will define the (u, v) region.

To help with this preparation ESO has made available a tool called VisCal¹ to compute the visibility of targets as a function of the baseline. Alternatively, one can use the ASPRO tool², developed by the JMMC. This tool is community based and developed in closed collaboration with ESO.

All the baselines, at a given time, should use the same type of telescope: it is not possible to combine an AT and a UT in the same array configuration. The various offered baselines for the current period can be found online at:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/facilities/paranal/telescopes/vlti/configuration/>

Section 5.3 and 5.4 provide also this information.

¹<http://www.eso.org/observing/etc/>

²<http://www.jmmc.fr/aspro>

5.2 The delay-lines

The delay-lines are used to compensate the OPD between the two telescopes, from the incoming stellar waveplane to the instrument entrance. Each telescope has a dedicated delay-line. Each delay-line consists of a carriage that can move along rails to adjust the optical path length. The carriage contains retro-reflecting optics. One carriage is fixed, whereas the other 3 continuously move in order to compensate the OPD for the apparent sidereal motion and slow drifts. The carriage optics is based on a cat's eye optical design. The central mirror of the system is located in an image plane and mounted on a piezo actuator for fine OPD adjustments. This mirror is the “variable curvature mirror” (VCM): its radius of curvature can be adjusted in real-time by a pneumatic device that applies a pressure on the back of the mirror. The aim of the VCM is to perform a pupil re-imaging (usually very close to the instrument in service) to a desired location, whatever the delay-line position. The advantages of transferring the pupil are:

- An optimized field of view ($\geq 4''$ with the ATs). Fringes can be obtained from any target within the FOV.
- A reduction of the thermal background related to VLTI optics.

Although the use of the VCMs is not critical for the UT operations, the VCM are used as a rule when observing with them.

To compensate OPD drifts due to uncertainty of the array geometry, as well as atmospheric piston, position offsets can be applied at high rate to the moving delay-line by the OPD controller. The OPD controller receives commands from the science instrument itself (PIONIER, GRAVITY or MATISSE). The optical delay provided by the delay-lines can be between 11 m and 111 m. Depending on the baseline, there are limitations of the sky accessibility (i.e., alt-az position of the target to be observed) due to the limitation of the delay-line range.

5.3 UT Baselines

For P111, **all the four unit telescopes are available for VLTI observations**. The following table gives the characteristics of the possible ground baselines (E is the component over the East direction and N over the North direction):

Name	E (m)	N (m)	On-ground baseline length (m)
UT1-UT2	24.8	50.8	56.5
UT1-UT3	54.8	86.5	102.4
UT1-UT4	113.2	64.3	130.2
UT2-UT3	30	35.7	46.6
UT2-UT4	88.3	13.5	89.3
UT3-UT4	58.3	-22.2	62.4

For the longest baseline (UT1-UT4 and UT1-UT3), there are limitation for the direction of pointing in the sky, related to the range of the delay-lines. The VisCalc tool (see Sect. 8.6) gives the possible limits. A quick look at the accessibility range (target declination and hour angle of the observation) can be found at the end of this document (section 9.2), as well as on the following page:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/facilities/paranal/telescopes/vlti/configuration/>

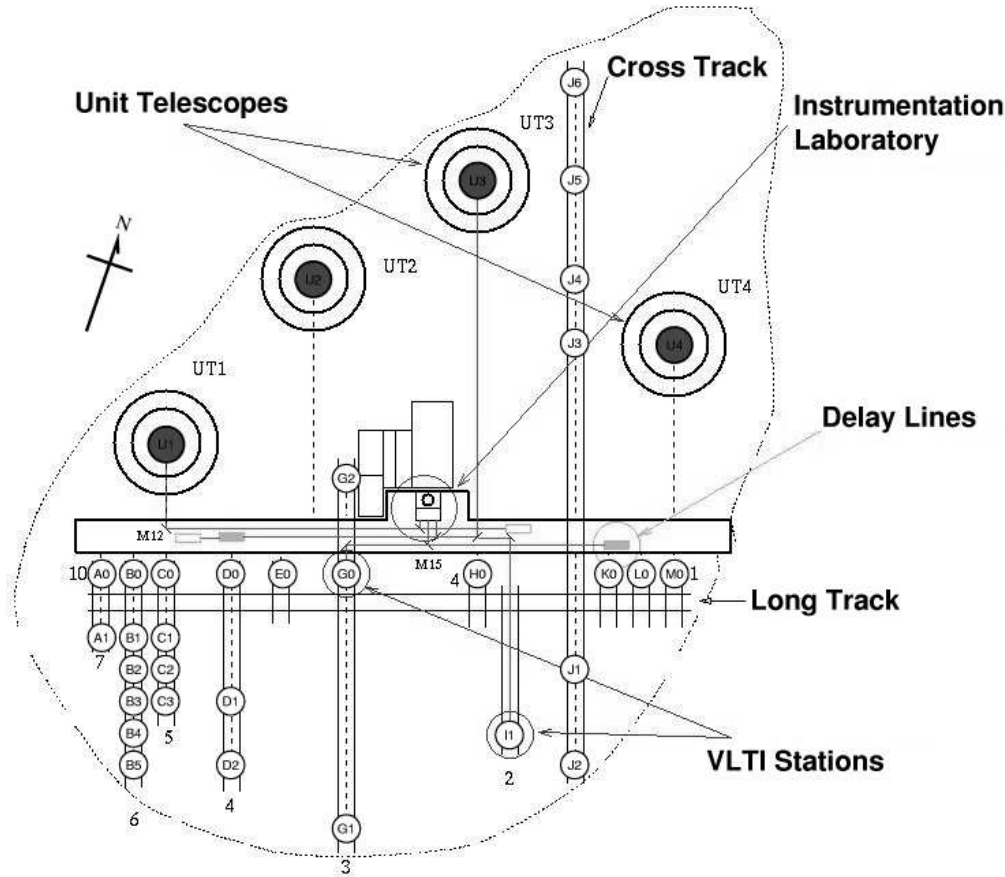


Figure 10: Layout of VLT telescope locations.

5.4 AT baselines

Auxiliary Telescopes are offered as 4 telescopes configurations. Changing quadruplets require to physically move ATs. Only 2 ATs can be moved per day, so up to 2 days are required to change quadruplet.

From P101, the [astrometric AT configuration \(A0-G1-J2-K0\)](#) is explicitly scheduled dual-feed observations are only offered on the small and astrometric configurations. The astrometric configuration, A0-G1-J2-K0, is a variation of the standard large configuration A0-G1-J2-J3. The astrometric configuration has all its telescopes south of the delay line tunnel, which is mandatory for GRAVITY dual-feed observations. In order to optimize scheduling, some single-feed observing blocks of SM runs requesting the large configuration might be executed on the astrometric configuration instead since it offers similar baseline lengths and sky coverage.

As of P104, AT configurations will be requested by generic names ("small", "medium", "large" and "astrometric") rather than explicit configurations. The standard configurations used for a given period are detailed on ESO web page and should be used for phase1 and phase2 preparation:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/facilities/paranal/telescopes/vlti/configuration>

This new scheme allows a more flexible execution of service-mode OBs. For operational reasons, observations may take place (although rarely) on "intermediate" configurations which

occur during a transition between two standard configurations. A criteria of at least 50% baseline length overlap will be used. This scheme will be primarily used for imaging programmes. The overlap in baseline length between standard and relocation configurations is detailed on the aforementioned web page.

The list of available quadruplets of telescopes offered for P111 is listed below:

AT Configurations	PIONIER, MATISSE GRAVITY single-feed	GRAVITY dual-feed and GRAVITY-wide
Small	yes	yes
Medium	yes	no
Large	yes	no
Astrometric	no	yes

At the time of Phase I, user are only requested to provide informations on which of the available quadruplets they wish to use for observations.

-

For a requested quadruplet, the pointing restrictions (depending on the target declination and on the hour angle of the observation), due to delay-line range and/or vignetting by the neighboring telescope enclosures, can be found at the end of this document (section 9.2), as well as on the following page:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/facilities/paranal/telescopes/vlti/configuration/>

6 THE VLTI LABORATORY

After compensation for geometrical optical delay with the delay lines, the beams are sent to the VLTI laboratory that hosts the VLTI instruments as well as alignment and stabilization opto-mechanical systems. Figure 11 shows a drawing and a picture of the main VLTI Lab systems and instruments.

We can list:

1. The beam compressors: they allow to resize the 8 pupil beams from 80 mm to 18mm.
2. MARCEL: it is an internal coherent light source in the laboratory
3. the Differential Delay Lines: (DDLs) inherited from the PRIMA project, they are now used for the GRAVITY wide mode to compensate the optical path differences between the fringe tracking object and the object observed on the science channel.
4. the switchyard: it is a series of mirrors that can redirect the 8 input beams to the proper systems (beam compressor, DDLs, or direct propagations to the instruments), they also include periscopes for the GRAVITY wide mode.

Except for the GRAVITY-wide mode, the input beams follow the same path. They go through the beam compressors and then are redirected by the switchyard to the instrument feeding optics. In the GRAVITY-wide mode, the 2 types of STS beams (fringe tracker, FT, and science channel ones, SC) go directly through the switchyard to be compressed. Then the switchyard redirects the FT beams to GRAVITY while the SC ones are sent to the DDLs then redirected to GRAVITY via periscopes. See Fig. 12.

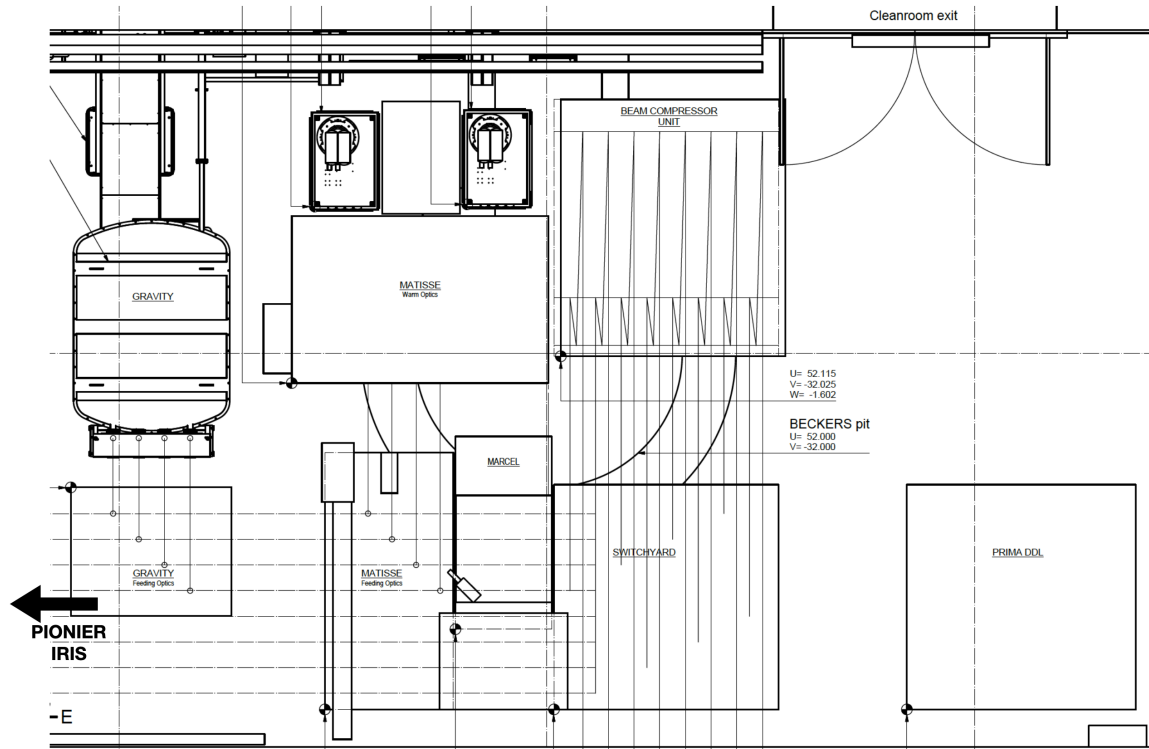


Figure 11: VLT lab: Top: drawing showing the main sub-systems. Right: Picture of the same elements taken next to the GRAVITY feeding optics.

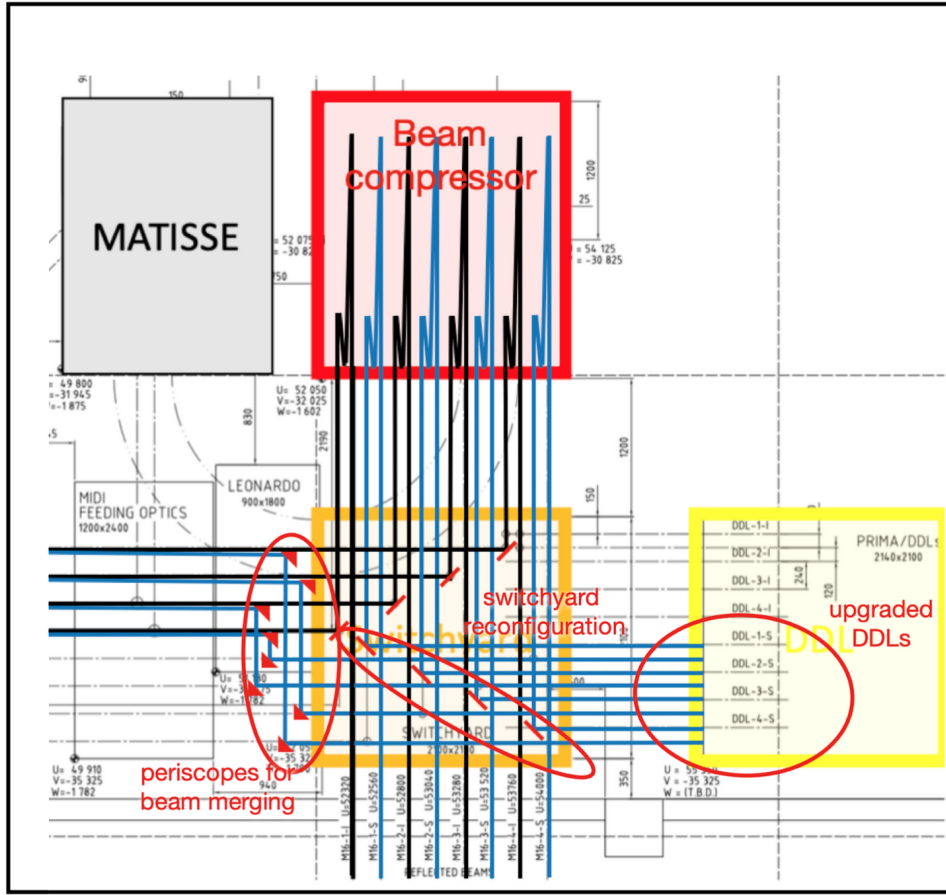


Figure 12: Optical layout in the VLTI laboratory when the GRAVITY-wide mode is used. Black beams represent the fringe tracker beams and blue ones the science channel beams.

7 VLTI STABILIZATION

7.1 Introduction

In this section, we describe the sub-systems of the VLTI that are used for “non-blind tracking”: each of these sub-systems consists of a sensor retro-feeding one or several mechanical actuators. The aim of these systems is to provide stable beams to the instrument by correcting the effects of the atmospheric turbulence, or of the mechanical defects (vibrations, roll/pitch/yaw, etc...). As many of these sub-systems use the stellar light as input signals, it is important to know their performances to assess the feasibility of the observation proposals.

7.2 IRIS

IRIS is the infrared field-stabilizer of the VLTI. It consists of a fast infrared (K-band) camera onto which the images from each beam are projected (1 image per detector quadrant). The photocenters of each beam are measured in real-time. Its purpose is to perform field-stabilization on the telescopes by measuring the low-frequency tip-tilt from the VLTI laboratory. IRIS guarantees, therefore, the correct alignment of the beam during the observations. Only the slow-guiding mode is used for PIONIER and MATISSE (no IRIS guiding for GRAV-

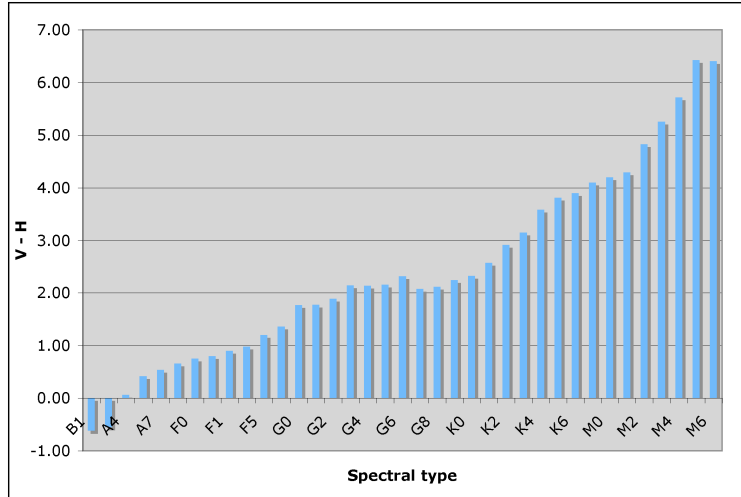


Figure 13: Difference of magnitude between V and H bands, depending on the spectral type.

ITY). In slow-guiding, the tip-tilt corrections are sent to XY-tables of the telescope to correct the pointing of the telescopes. The frequency of the correction is around 1 s.

Although the users are requested to give the H-magnitude in the instrument OBs, this value can be used as an approximation of the K-magnitude for IRIS, and allows IRIS to work at its best performances, thanks to an adaptive integration time algorithm. An approximation of the H-magnitude can be found from the V-magnitude and the spectral type of the target, using the plot on Fig. 13.

The limiting magnitudes in K-band for IRIS are (in slow-guiding):

- $K = 8.0$ with the ATs.
- $K = 11.5$ with the UTs.

7.3 Pupil alignment

Due to a random slight warp of the delay-line rails, the transverse location of the pupil for each beam in the VLTI laboratory may vary with the position of the delay-line carriage of the beam. A re-alignment of the tip-tilt of the M10 mirrors (located in an image plane) of the telescopes is needed to re-center the pupil of the beams. The pupil position is measured by IRIS in the VLTI laboratory and corrected.

The limiting magnitudes in the visible which allow the pupil alignment are:

- $K = 5.0$, with the ATs.
- $K = 8.5$, with the UTs.

For most of the calibrator stars, the pupil can be aligned. For scientific targets that are too faint in the visible to allow the pupil alignment, one has to rely on the quality of the delay-line rails: the experience shows that, if the pupil has been previously aligned for the calibrator, the delay-line carriages are usually not moved far away when observing the scientific target, so the pupil shift (measured when the target pupil can be seen) is often negligible. For this

reason (but not only), the angular distance between both objects has to be taken into account when one is selecting a calibrator. Anyway, the pupil alignment will usually be performed on the scientific target whenever it is bright enough.

8 ORGANIZATION OF THE VLTI OBSERVATIONS

8.1 General

For P111, VLTI observations can be performed either in service mode or in visitor mode (for PIONIER, GRAVITY and MATISSE). For the phase-1 of a period, the unique contact point at ESO for the user is the User Support Department (see Sect. 1.2). For the phase-2, USD is still the contact point for service mode, and the Paranal Science Operation department is the contact point for visitor mode: see <http://www.eso.org/sci/observing/phase2/VMGuidelines.html>. The visitor mode is more likely to be offered for proposals requiring non-standard observation procedures. The OPC will decide whether a proposal should be observed in SM or VM. As for any other instrument, ESO reserves the right to transfer visitor programs to service and *vice-versa*.

For VLTI users needing assistance to prepare their VLTI proposals, the community-supported VLTI Expertise Centres - distributed throughout Europe - can offer in-depth support. They also offer support for observation preparation, advanced data reduction and interpretation: see the [VLTI Expertise Centres website](#).

8.2 Observation types

From P104, PIs need to select one or more of the following types of interferometric observations:

- snapshot: standalone concatenations (CAL-SCI, CAL-SCI-CAL or CAL-SCI-CAL-SCI-CAL, depending on the instrument) without further links to other observations in terms of time links or filling the uv plane
- **time series of concatenations that are repeated once or more often over the period ; a cadence of typically 1 week on a given configuration is not realistic given the need to cycle through several configurations in the AT schedule. As a guideline, possible cadences are either a few days in a row or not more than about once per month per AT configuration**
- imaging: a set of concatenations with different baseline configurations to fill the uv plane for the purpose of image reconstruction. In this case special care is taken by ESO at execution to fill uniformly the uv plane.
- astrometry: GRAVITY dual-feed observations with the purpose of extracting astrometric information

For each observing run, one or more of these categories shall be specified in the instrument mode section of the proposal that best describe the proposed observations.

8.3 The Imaging scheme

In P111, ESO will continue a scheme to optimise operations for aperture synthesis with the VLTI. This scheme only applies to service mode proposals using ATs with PIONIER, GRAVITY and MATISSE. It requires that proposals aiming at image reconstruction using any of the VLTI instruments with the ATs are marked as such using the "imaging" observation type (see previous section). In addition, such proposals should request time corresponding to a minimum

number of concatenations (CAL-SCI for GRAVITY or MATISSE, or CAL-SCI-CAL-SCI-CAL for PIONIER) per object and per AT configuration, on at least two configurations. The reason for this is to ensure a minimum reliability and dynamic of the reconstructed image. Depending on the object declination, the observability might be reduced. PIs should request a number of concatenations accordingly and by respecting the Imaging programme instructions presented at the following webpage:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/facilities/paranal/telescopes/vlti/configuration/>

PIs should also specify the maximum period over which data can be collected, based on the expected evolution time scale of the target, with a minimum of ten days due to operational constraints. The minimum/maximum time interval between AT configurations can be specified using the Special Remark section.

As of P108, ESO introduces the so-called imaging slots (ISLs) in the VLTI-AT telescope schedule in order to further improve the efficiency of VLTI imaging observations. ISLs are periods of about 2 weeks of un-interrupted service mode time with flexibility on the exact dates of changing configurations within this slot. This means that certain times are reserved for ISLs: two weeks are set aside centred on new moon in November, February, May, and August of every year. PIs of GTO, Large Programmes, programmes requiring Visitor Mode are requested to adhere to this restriction for their planning. ISLs are primarily intended to support imaging observations, but they are not restricted to this type of VLTI observations. ISLs are regular SM time, and OBs are executed according to their priority. Likewise, imaging observations are not restricted to ISLs, but can be completed in SM time outside of the ISLs. PIs of VLTI imaging programmes can request to repeat all observations of a time-critical imaging campaign if it was not finished within the requested time under the following conditions:

- The run is A-ranked.
- The time interval during which the image needs to be completed (Imaging Time) is specified in the P1 proposal.
- The Imaging Time is not shorter than 1 month (length of an ISL plus margin).
- The guarantee concerns not more than the ESO-recommended number of uv points for imaging (currently 15 concatenations per target). Possible additional points are taken on a best-effort basis, and expire outside the Imaging Time interval.

8.4 Calibration

The raw visibility μ measured on a target by an interferometer is always lower than the theoretical expected visibility V . The transfer function of an interferometer is given by $T = \mu/V$. In order to determine T , the method is to observe a star with a stable and known angular diameter called a “calibrator” for which the expected visibility V_0 is known. Measuring its raw visibility μ_0 gives an estimate of T that can be used to calibrate the visibility on a scientific target.

For each scientific target observed, a calibrator has to be observed right after or before. It is up to the user to select the calibrator of the scientific target. The criterion to select a calibrator may include.

- Stable angular diameter known with a good precision, or unresolved ($V_0 \approx 1.0$) object for baseline and wavelength of the observation.

- Proximity in the sky to the scientific target.
- Magnitude comparable to the scientific target

Calibrators can be selected using the CalVin tool (see Sect. 8.7). Alternatively, the JMMC tool named [SearchCal](#) can be used.

8.5 Preparation of the VLTI observations

To assess the feasibility of an observation (mostly in term of limiting magnitudes in different spectral bands), the following tools need to be used:

- This manual.
- The instrument manual (PIONIER, GRAVITY or MATISSE).
- The “VisCalc” tool.
- The “CalVin” tool.

Other software packages exists. In particular, one can consult the Jean-Marie Mariotti Center [Proposal Preparation page](#).

8.6 Baselines and LST constraints

The VisCalc webtool is available from:

<http://www.eso.org/observing/etc/>.

Giving as input the target parameters (theoretical geometry and declination), the instrument, the baseline configuration, and the observation time interval, VisCalc computes important information, like the observability range (considering the telescope pointing limits, the vignetting by the enclosures, the delay-line limits), and the expected visibility over the observation interval.

8.7 Calibrator selection

The CalVin webtool is available from:

<http://www.eso.org/observing/etc/>.

For a given target coordinates, instrument, and baseline configuration, CalVin returns a list of the possible calibrators. The list can be filtered by applying constraints to the possible calibrators like magnitude, angular distance from the target, spectral type, etc...

8.8 Moon constraints

Because the VLTI instruments work all in the infrared and have very small field of view, Moon constraints (angular distance to the target, Moon illumination) do not limit the interferometric observations themselves. However, if the Moon is too close to the target, the scattered moonlight may prevent MACAO (for the UTs) or STRAP/NAOMI (for the ATs) from working correctly. Please refer to section 4.2 for the limitations on Moon distance for the ATs.

For the UTs, VLTI runs occur usually close to the full moon ($FLI \sim 1$), hence we recommend that the guide star is more than 20 degrees away from the Moon.

The VLTI night astronomers make sure that the OBs in service mode are executed when the Moon is far enough from the targets. In visitor mode, users should carefully schedule their night-time using Moon ephemeris to avoid problems of scattered moonlight.

8.9 Instrument-specific constraints

Observations in SM can be performed with extra constraints (e.g. seeing) which depends on the instrument. Please read the PIONIER, GRAVITY and MATISSE user manuals and [P2 documentation](#) for details.

8.10 Target coordinates and magnitude

For both ATs and UTs, the telescope pointing models are done with the Hipparcos - FK6 reference frame. The coordinates of any object (scientific target, calibrator, guide star) to be observed by the VLTI should be given, if possible, in this system. If the star has proper motion, the correct values should be given in order for the system to work properly both at the telescopes and delay line level. References magnitudes for the guiding should be properly entered. In particular the visible magnitude should be correctly given for the use of MACAO or NAOMI. H and K Band magnitude should be given properly for the use of IRIS.

9 APPENDICES

9.1 Feasibility matrices

The following tables summarize the characteristics of the scientific target (magnitudes in different bands, visibility....) that are required to use the VLTI sub-systems for the observations in different instrument modes. These tables should be used along with the instrument manuals, since the limiting magnitudes of the instrument are not in the scope of this manual. Mandatory requirements are framed by boxes. If the target does not fulfill a requirement that is not in a box, the observation remains possible, but the data quality may be affected.

The values correspond to nominal conditions of observation: seeing between 0.7 and 1.4 arcsec, $\tau_0 > 2.0$ ms, sky transparency “photometric” or “clear”, airmass lower than 2.0.

9.1.1 Observations with the UTs and MACAO

	MACAO guide star	
On-axis Coudé guiding	$2 < V_g < 15$	
Off-axis Coudé guiding	$2 < V_g < 15$	target - guide: see Fig. 4
IRIS guiding	$K < 11.5$	
Pupil alignment	$K < 8.5$	

Notes:

1. V_g = V-magnitude of the guide-star.

9.1.2 Observations with the UTs and CIAO

For observations with GRAVITY and CIAOs, the reader is referred to section 4.1.4 and 4.1.5.

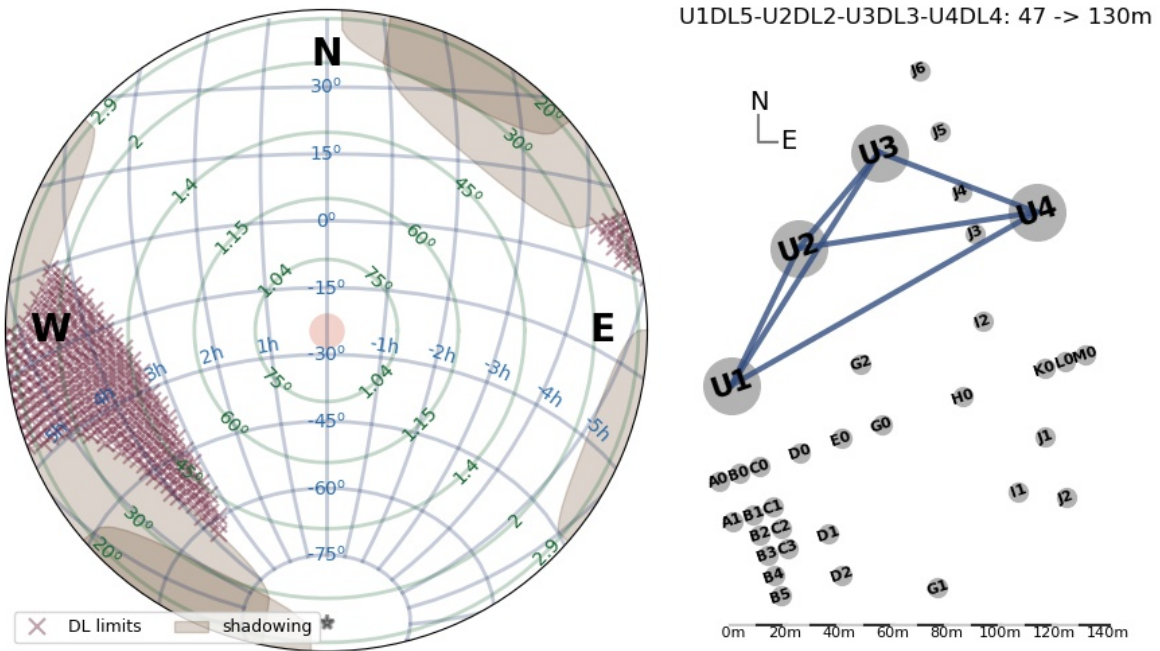


Figure 14: UT sky coverage

9.1.3 Observations with the ATs

	PIONIER, MATISSE	GRAVITY
On-axis Coudé guiding	$-3 < R < 12.5$	$-3 < R < 12.5$ airmass ≤ 1.6
Off-axis Coudé guiding	$R_g < 12.5$ target - guide: see Fig. 4	$R_g < 12.5$ target - guide: see Fig. 4 airmass ≤ 1.6
IRIS guiding	$K < 8.0$	N/A
IRIS Pupil alignment	$K < 5.0$	N/A

9.2 Sky Coverage

We plot here the various sky coverage of all the standard offered quadruplets. Sky coverage is limited by the UT dome shadowing, as well as delay line limits. Note that both ATs and UTs have a zenithal avoidance area with a 3 degree radius.

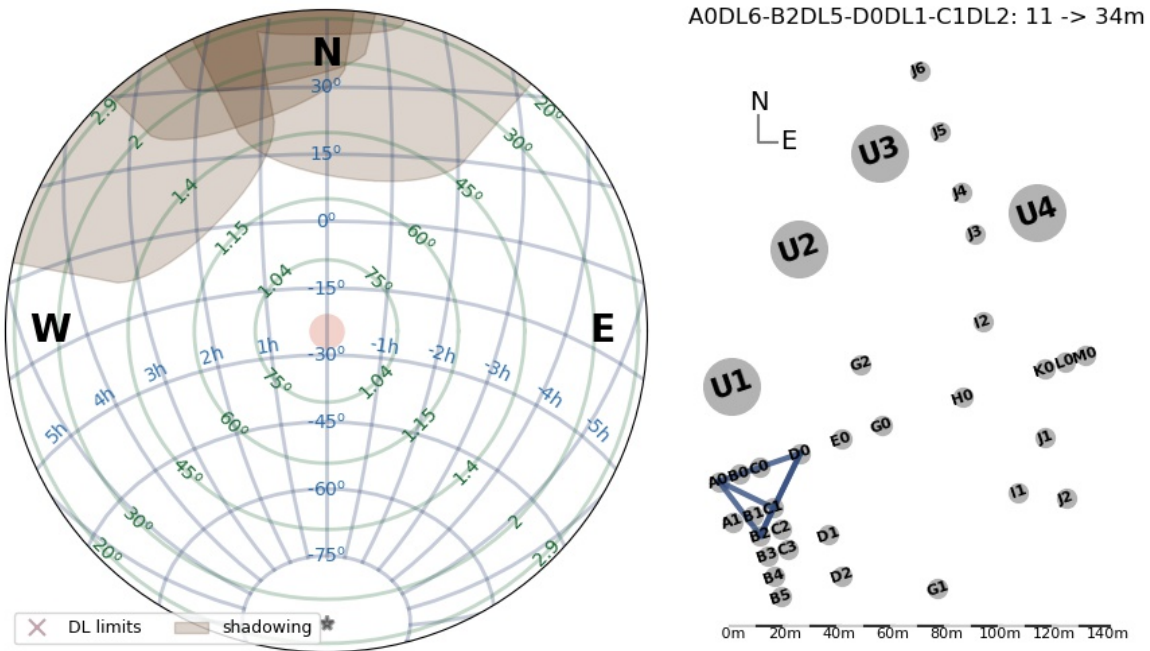


Figure 15: AT sky coverage, small configuration

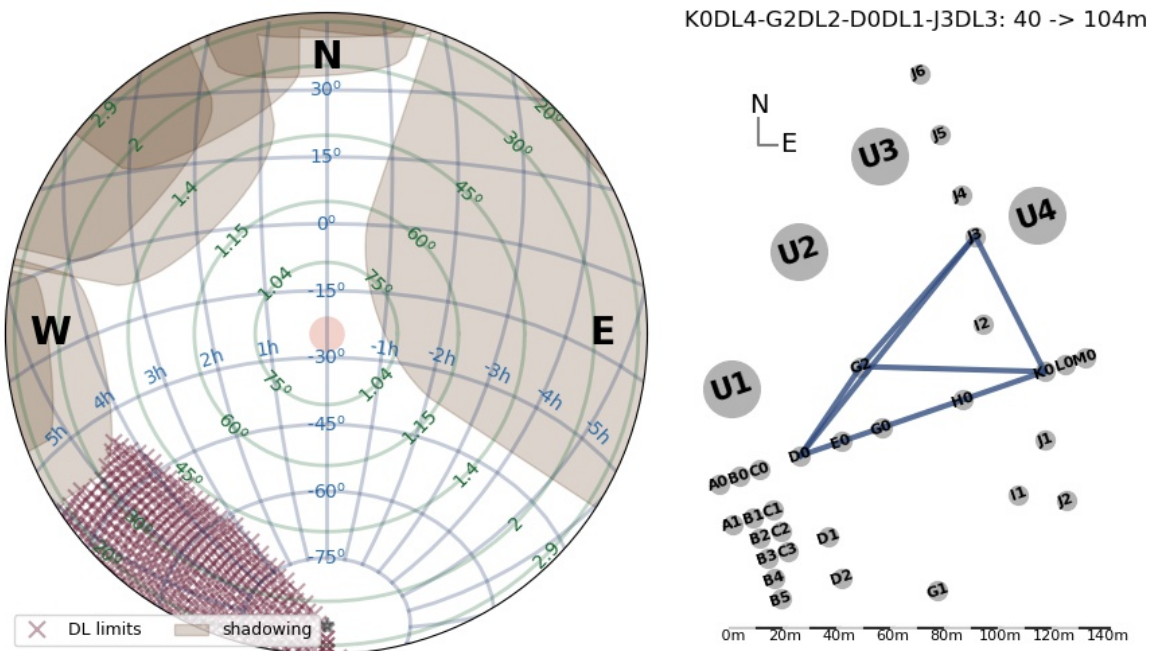


Figure 16: AT sky coverage, medium configuration

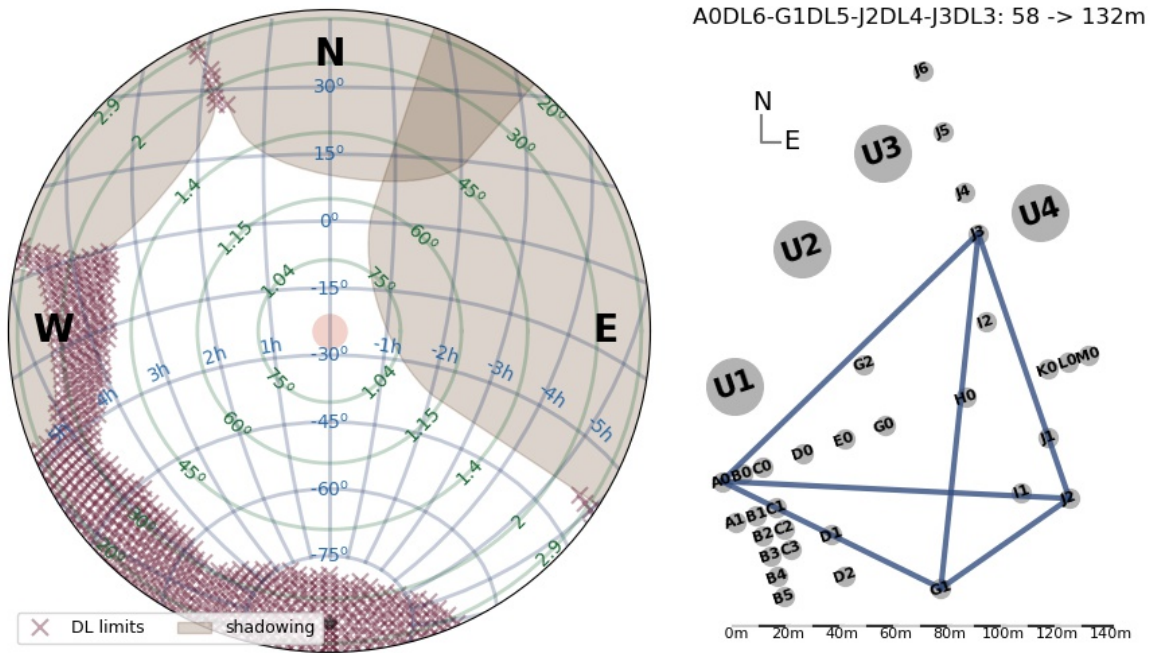


Figure 17: AT sky coverage, large configuration

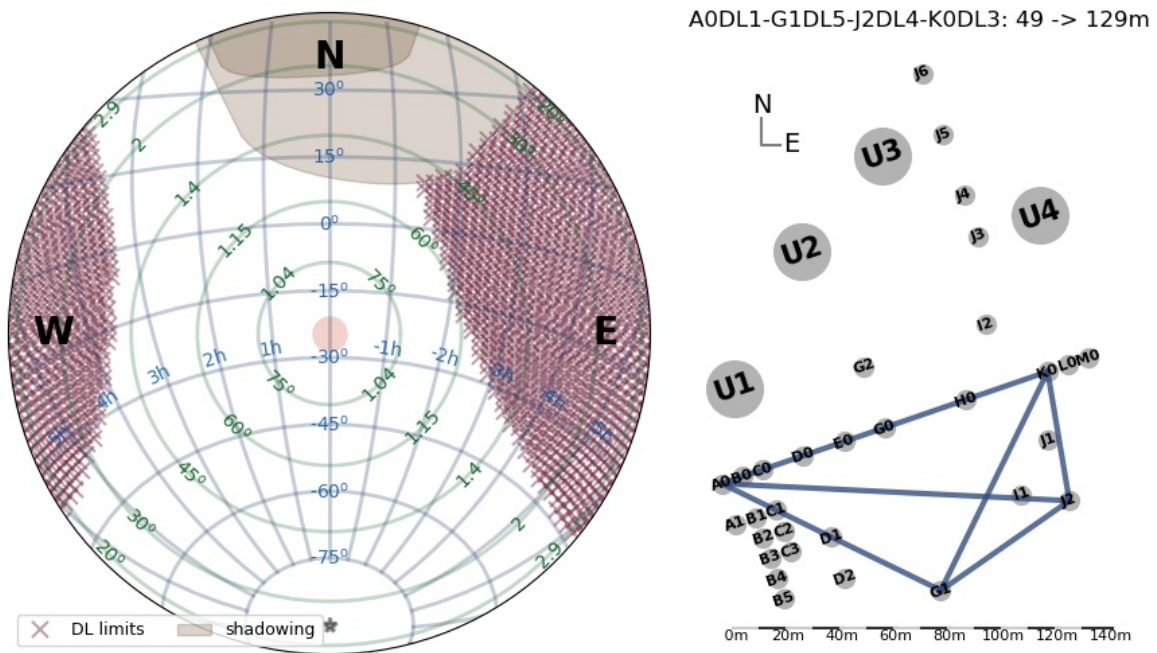


Figure 18: AT sky coverage, astrometric configuration

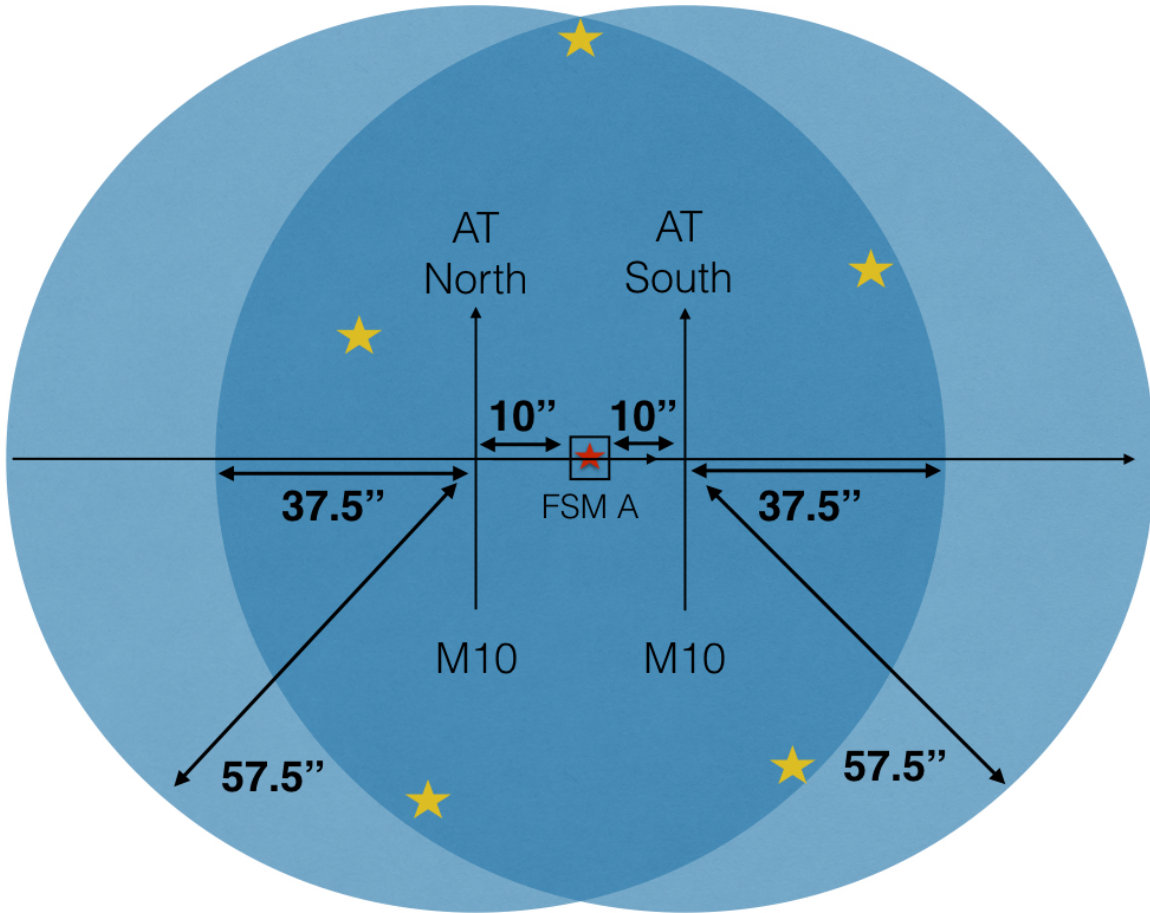


Figure 19: Geometry of the STS configuration when on a mixed North/South baselines (medium and large configurations). In this case, the field of view available for a guide star (darker blue area) is the intersection of the 2 individual STS fields of view. Yellow stars mark the position of potential guide stars. In pure RA, the guide star should not be further than 47.5 arcsec away from the science object (red star).

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