imaging with ISAAC in star-forming regions down to sensitivities of planetary masses for free-floating objects (F. Comerón), as well as photometric transit and microlensing searches which are currently pursued or planned (D. Minitti).

Searches for faint companions, mostly done with adaptive optics in the NIR, also reach sensitivities below the hydrogen burning limit (S. Hubrig). However, the brown dwarf companion frequency inferred from such observations appears to be low, and the so-called “brown dwarf desert”, already well-known from radial velocity surveys, likely extends over a broader distance range (M. Sterzik). The promises of adaptive optics for planetary science studies in general was also highlighted at the meeting (F. Marchis).

Among other predicted observable signatures of planets are e.g. their interaction with circumstellar disks. This will be visible with future high-sensitivity, high-resolution IR imaging techniques (O. Schuetz). Atmospheric signatures, especially OH features, can eventually be identified with the next-generation high-resolution VLT interferometer (Harpke, M. Schoeller, M. Wittkowski).

In conclusion, we should expect in the coming years very exciting discoveries in this area of research, thanks to performing and inventive new instruments. The quest for extra-solar planets has just started to bring us beautiful results. There is no doubt that this success will continue and unveil at some point the awaited Earth-like planets.

The ESO Users Committee

L. WISOTZKI, Chairperson of the UC

Founded as an advisory body to the Director General, the Users Committee mainly works at the interface between ‘common users’ and ESO representatives. This article describes the role of the UC, highlights some of its recent activities, and outlines some areas where the communication between ESO and its users can be improved.

ESO’s status as an international organisation requires that its member states are appropriately represented in the shaping of decisions and policies. As part of this principle, several panels were created where delegates from the ESO member countries participate to define various aspects of ESO policies. Among these, the Observing Programmes Committee (OPC) with its biannual verdicts on the submitted proposals is probably most prominently present in the daily life of many astronomers. Other important institutions are the Scientific Technical Committee (STC), the Finance Committee, and ultimately the ESO Council. Wait – there’s something else: the Users Committee (UC). Maybe less central in high ESO politics, it nevertheless fulfils an important function: representation of the ‘common user’ towards ESO, and support of the communication between ESO and its users. This article is meant to give a little background information on tasks and challenges of the UC and its members.

Suppose you have been granted observing time and enjoyed the trip to Chile (or alternatively, enjoyed preparing your Observing Blocks at home). If the weather is good, you’ll get a lot of data and can start doing science. Usually, that’s all there is to be said, most users are quite satisfied with the way their needs are taken care of, with the support on the mountains, and with the quality of their data. But nothing is perfect, and ESO is no exception to this rule – instruments might not work properly, there might be conflicts with staff members, or certain things might just run somewhat below optimum. Now what are you – as an ESO user – supposed to do if you run into troubles that cannot be solved on the spot? For such cases, a number of options exist:

• Don’t do anything at all. Or, to make it worse, tell your colleagues at the next conference that ESO is a lost case. This method has the virtue of being at least partly self-fulfilling, in that you certainly don’t accomplish a lot.

• Complain to your ESO friend, ideally to the person highest up within the ESO hierarchy you can get hold of. Works sometimes, but this route is clearly not always open.

• Fill in a detailed comment in your end-of-mission questionnaire. Actually, that’s what these forms are for, and ESO does react on them. Unfortunately, not too many people make use of this option, see below.

• Talk to the User Support Group. It is their task (among others) to take com-

Contact your representative in the Users Committee

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<td>University of Bristol (Observer)</td>
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This list is updated every year. Check at http://www.eso.org/gen-fac/commit/uc/
pleasants serious and to communicate them to the appropriate places.
• Inform your national representative in the Users Committee and ask her or him to discuss the case with ESO officials, especially if you feel you need support with your problem.

Tasks of the UC

Officially, the ESO Users Committee ‘advises the ESO Director General on matters concerning the use of ESO telescopes, instruments, computers, etc.’ Its members are appointed by the Director General as representatives of the user community, one from each ESO member country plus Chile, with a (not immediately renewable) tenure of four years. The current composition of the UC is listed in Table 1. In its annual spring meetings, the UC works down a densely packed agenda: Presenting problem reports collected from the user community over the year; discussing specific aspects of performance and user friendliness of ESO facilities; receiving briefings from ESO to communicate things back to the users; recommending improvements; and last not least, helping to collect user expertise as input for the shaping of future policies. Let me expand and comment on these tasks in more detail.

Problem reporting

Dealing with problem reports is the most traditional function of the UC, perhaps the one with which most users associate the UC. There are two types of issues between ESO and its users:
• Individual problems, typically related to some not-quite-average request, or to a mistake that has been made by either side. Most of these cases (at least, of those that I heard of) have in fact been sorted out and solved directly between the user and ESO.
• General problems, most commonly originating in some sort of incompatibility between user requests (concerning scheduling, operation, documentation, etc.), and ESO’s ability to implement such requests.

Although the UC is usually not needed for addressing this first kind of problems, several similar, seemingly isolated cases make a general one. General problems may sometimes be hard to solve, but in order to tackle them, it is important to recognise them as general problems. This is where the UC and its national representatives come in: as an instance to bundle problem reports and requests, giving them additional weight by demonstrating that the community as a whole is affected.

For this reason, the UC members greatly appreciate if users could keep them informed about any kind of problems between them and ESO, even if they have already been sorted out. Just send a brief summary of the case to your national representative, or forward e-mails exchanged on that topic. (Since mid-2000, problems mentioned in the end-of-mission questionnaires will be reviewed by the UC anyway.)

Monitoring performance

A substantial fraction of each UC meeting is dedicated to a certain ‘special topic’, which usually means that one specific aspect of using ESO facilities comes under close scrutiny. This year, we chose the topic ‘service observing and user support’, received briefings from ESO representatives and discussed about aspects that in our experience were unclear or not well treated. While the UC meeting is a very good forum to present our questions, criticism, and suggestions to ESO officials, it is slightly less obvious how the results of that meeting should be communicated back to the users. In case of the above-mentioned special topic of 2001, the UC thought it was so important that the responsible people at ESO were asked to publicise the subject, with special emphasis on describing the service mode scheduling process. This has already generated a response: Please take a look at Dave Silva’s helpful and detailed article on service observing which appeared in the September 2001 issue of The Messenger.

User polls

One important activity of the UC in 1998/1999 was to conduct a survey (“La Silla 2000+”) within the ESO community, by means of an electronic questionnaire, giving the community a platform to express their ideas for the future of the La Silla observatory. The results of this survey have greatly helped shape the recommendations of a corresponding ESO working group. These recommendations are public and can be found at ESO’s web site under http://www.eso.org/gen-fac/commit/ls2000pl1.html.

It should be noted that nearly all of the top priority recommendations as well as a number of second-priority items have already been implemented or brought on their way.

The wide acceptance of the survey, as quantified by the high return rate (256 filled questionnaires), demonstrates that the users take an active interest in these policy issues. This case also further illustrates the role of the UC: it is not a ‘policy-making’ panel – these are the tasks of the STC and ultimately of Council –, but the UC takes responsibility that also the community of ‘normal users’ receives attention.

Recommendations

As an advisory body, the UC cannot make ‘decisions’ that are binding to ESO. However, each year the UC issues recommendations and action items in order to improve the use of ESO facilities and/or the communication between ESO and the users (mostly as a consequence of a significant number of corresponding complaints from the community). ESO is expected to at least react on these items, either by following the recommendations, or else by stating very clearly why a certain issue cannot be resolved as desired. Note that since the 2000 meeting, UC recommendations and action items are accessible via the web under http://www.eso.org/gen-fac/commit/, as part of the minutes of the UC meetings.

To our great satisfaction, in many cases ESO has been able to follow the UC recommendations, demonstrating that user opinion is of substantial value. Sometimes it takes a bit to convince the people in charge, in which case action items may reappear in subsequent years. One illuminating example: For a long time, users had been annoyed that observing proposals rejected by the OPC did not get feedback comments by default, despite the generally acknowledged usefulness of such comments and despite the fact that most other time allocation committees provide them. The UC repeatedly criticised this attitude and asked to alter it, until ESO announced last year to change its policy and return comments. After a bit over one year of experience, it is probably fair to say that the new OPC procedure has been very well received by the community.

Another case, slightly more subtle but important in ‘daily life’, are the headers of FITS files distributed by ESO: these contain non-standard ‘hierarchy keywords’ which are not understood by (sometimes even screwing up) non-ESO data-processing packages – a continued source of embarrassment for quite a few users. Pleading to solve this incompatibility was almost one of the ‘running items’ at past UC meetings. But not in vain: ESO now provides a small ‘Stand-Alone FITS Tool’ (saft) which converts the hierarchy keywords into standard FITS keywords. This tool is quite new and we have not yet obtained a lot of feedback as to its usefulness, but the example clearly shows that such things can be changed for the better.

Improving Feedback

With all these proceedings going on within the UC and during the annual UC meetings, it is clearly an important task to make the results public and available to the community. In the past, this task
has been handled by the representa-
tives independently, each for his/her
national users community. This was not
ideal: Apart from the fact that some will
do this more thoroughly than others, it
always means that much of the work
(compiling information, writing reports,
etc.) is done redundantly. It would be
much better if the same information
were available to all users, regardless of
nationality or affiliation. Last year we
implemented some important changes
in this direction:
- The official minutes of the annual UC meetings are public and available over the web, including the approved
recommendations and action items. Visit http://www.eso.org/gen-fac/commit/ to see the available docu-
ments.
- For the first time, we have drafted an informal feedback report to the users community as a whole. This re-
port has been published by e-mail and
is available at the author's homepage under http://www.astro.physik.uni-
potsdam.de/~lutz/eso-uc.html

An additional valuable source of in-
formation would be the presentation
material given by ESO staff during the
UC meetings. We hope that in the near
future this can also routinely be placed
in a public web area.

Improving User Input

One of the problems of the UC in the
past has been that only a relatively lim-
ited group of users reported regularly to
their UC representatives; as a result, the
problem reports collected by the UC
were not really representative. Addition-
al insight is now provided by the end-of-
mission reports, but the use of these re-
ports is limited. First, there are still too
many ‘silent users’ who do not even fill
in the end-of-mission reports (only
roughly 50% do so). Second, among
those who do, there are many who just
mark everything as ‘excellent’. No
doubt, this proves that indeed the users
are highly satisfied with the way ESO is
operated, but does it really mean that
everything is perfect? It is great for
ESO staff members to hear that they
are on the right track, but they also
need to know where remaining prob-
loms are. In my opinion – especially in
the current atmosphere of mutual satis-
faction –, users should feel encouraged
to come up with constructive criticism.
Furthermore, the end-of-mission
questionnaires clearly do not cover the
full range of user/ESO interactions.
Most significantly, nothing comparable
is available to Service Mode observers,
and hence not much is known about the
general level of satisfaction among
those. ESO has stated in the last UC
meeting that they are working on im-
plementing a scheme similar to the
end-of-mission reports, but so far we
are faced with more than two years of
Service observing and very little, if any,
systematic feedback from the users.

On an even longer time scale, the ul-
timate figure of merit is the user satis-
faction with the scientific data ob-
tained. This is often known only when
the data are fully reduced and ana-
ysed, i.e. typically at least one year af-
after the observations. Only then is it pos-
sible to recognise, e.g., inadequate cal-
bration facilities, or scattered light ef-
facts not obvious in the raw data, just to
give a few examples. However, learn-
ing about end-product data quality in a
systematic way is certainly not easy.
ESO has started with VLT instrument
performance review sessions (organ-
ised by the STC), but from the UC point
of view it would be desirable to also
draw upon the enormous resources of
the general users’ experience. I sug-
gest that we seriously consider some
sort of new user poll with respect to in-
strument performance and data quality.

We all acknowledge that ESO staff is
highly committed to excellent technical
and scientific performance, and user-
friendliness is one important aspect. It is
probably fair to say that ESO is already
one of the most user-friendly observa-
tories in the world. In those (presum-
ably rare) cases where things do not
appear as you would like them to be,
there’s only one way to change that: Say
something! Being critical means that you
care, not that you are obnoxious (it’s al-
ways a matter of how to say things, of
course). In this sense, achieving good
performance is to some extent also a
responsibility of the users; it is the role
of the UC to help in this process.

ESO Presentation in Brussels

Following the events in Bern and
Porto, ESO continued its series of high-
level presentations in the member
states on November 20 with a meeting
in the Belgian capital. The event in
Brussels coincides with the Belgian
Presidency of the European Union (and
thus of the European Research Coun-
cil), a fact that was reflected by partici-
pants to the meeting, which included
members of the Belgian Senate, the
Belgian Federal Government Commis-
sioner for Science Policy, Yvan Ylieff,
the Secretary General of the Federal
Office for Scientific, Technical and
Cultural Affairs, Eric Beka, the Euro-
pean Commissioner for Research,
Philippe Busquin, and other high offi-
cials from the Directorate General for
Research of the European Commiss-
ion. All in all about 100 invited guests
representing politics, public administra-
tion, the Belgian astronomical research
community, industry and media listened
to speeches by the ESO Director
General, Commissioners Busquin and
Ylieff. After the showing of the ESO
video ‘Astronomy to the Power of Four’,
Maarten Baes (PhD, University of
Ghent) and Jean-Pierre Chisogne,
commercial manager of A.M.O.S.,
Liège, presented impressive examples
of Belgian participation in ESO, both in
science and technology. The event,
which took place at the Planetarium on
the Heysel, was organised jointly by the
Belgian Federal Office for Scientific,
Technical and Cultural Affairs, the
Belgian Royal Observatory and ESO.

C. MADSEN, ESO

The ESO Director General in conversation with the European Commissioner for Research,
Philippe Busquin, and Prof. Paul Pâquet, Director of the Belgian Royal Observatory, Uccle.