Users’ Committee

27th Meeting

Garching, April 7 and 8, 2003

Minutes
Present were the UC members
Chairman: H. van Winckel (Belgium)
Vice-Chairman: L. Kaper (The Netherlands)
M. Bremer (United Kingdom)
M. Cappellaro (Italy)
J. V. Clausen (Denmark)
Sabine Möhler (Germany)
G. Östlin (Sweden)
M. Pierre (France)
M. Rubio (Chile)

Excused were the UC members:
P. North (Switzerland)
J. Yun (Portugal)

On behalf of ESO:
J. Breysacher
C. Cesarsky
F. Comerón
J.-P. Cuby
R. Gilmozzi
B. Leibundgut
G. Mathys
J. Melnick
M. Peron
B. Pirenne
M. Romaniello

Minutes taken by:
G. Verdoes Kleijn

Secretariat:
S. Almagro García

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

Chairman Dr. van Winckel opened the 27th meeting of the Users’ Committee. The Director General Dr. Cesarsky welcomed everybody to this meeting, emphasizing the importance of the inputs from the user community for concerns, ideas and improvements of the ESO facilities. The draft agenda for the meeting was adopted unchanged. For the 26th meeting, no special topic is foreseen because of the forum on ‘VLT/I Instrumentation: Lessons Learned’ to which the UC members were also invited and which takes place immediately after the UC meeting.

2. APPROVAL OF THE 26th UC MEETING MINUTES

The minutes of the 26th UC meeting were approved and the secretariat was thanked for writing them.
3. REPORT FROM PARANAL OBSERVATORY

The presentation by Dr. Gauthier Mathys is attached to this document (Annex 1). The presentation included the status of the instruments, other hardware and human resources at Paranal, and statistics on the science operations in periods 69 and 70. As main concerns were indicated:

(i) the workload, including the intensive training of personnel,
(ii) difficulties in hiring personnel, especially people experienced in interferometric observations
(iii) length of the commissioning process and delayed arrival of new instruments,
(iv) strong increase in Target of Opportunity (ToO) observations (e.g. 80 GRB Obs were executed) and
(v) dust (and light) pollution from the Conama mine.

Dr. Mathys clarified upon request that the statistics on ‘program carry-over’ do not include Large Programs (LPs) and that ‘terminated’ programs indicate programs ended before completion either upon request from the PI or ESO. The presentation was followed by a discussion. Dr. van Winckel reported that the efficiency of the staff was praised by users. Dr. van Winckel also wanted to know why the aimed equal fraction of service mode (SM) and visitor mode (VM) programs was not reached. Dr. Breysacher explained that SM is simply requested much more than VM and in addition the OPC tends to assign SM, if this option is given in the phase 1 proposal, to increase the number of awarded programs. In answering Dr. Kaper it was confirmed that programs can be forced during the period from VM to SM, but only under special circumstances such as instrument failure. Dr. Gilmozzi remarked that un-used engineering time is transferred to time for SM.

Dr. Kaper wanted to know if there is still work being done on improvement of computer and network facilities. Dr. Mathys answered that a broader bandwidth for network connections is a long-term project, and also expressed hope to replace some unsatisfactory HP computers by LINUX boxes. Dr. Östlin inquired about the plans for improvement of the Strehl ratio for NACO. Dr. Cuby replied that 60% was obtained, while 80% was the original aim. Unfortunately, no further improvement is expected to be achieved for a long time, but 60% provides sufficient observational quality. With respect to improvement of the NACO detector, as inquired by Dr. van Winckel, Dr. Cuby indicated that this is being worked on but no firm plan exists yet. For the VLTI operation, a limited amount of baselines will be offered per semester.

4. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION AND TIME ALLOCATION FOR LA SILLA AND PARANAL

The presentation by Dr. Breysacher is attached to this document (Annex 2). 747 applications for programs were received by ESO in the last period. The Call for Proposals (CfP) did not include LPs but in May there is a special workshop on the scientific results of LPs including also an evaluation of the concept. From period 68 to period 72 the ratio of number of proposals submitted for Paranal and La Silla has risen from 0.6 to 1.6. The OPC categories in period 72 received comparable numbers of proposals. The pressure factors on ESO telescopes as a function of period were presented and range between 2 and 4.5. Dr. van Winckel asked about the suspected ‘quantum jump’ in the number of proposals due to the English participation in ESO. Dr. Breysacher replied no quantum
jump has occurred. The late communication to the users of phase 1 results was exceptional last period and the goal is to transmit the results by mid-January and mid-July.

5. REPORT FROM LA SILLA OBSERVATORY

The presentation by Dr. Melnick included the status of the instruments and other hardware and statistics on the science operations in periods 69 and 70 at La Silla. The presentation is attached to this document (Annex 3). It focused on the developments related to APEX as a key preparation for ALMA. Furthermore the current status of the SEST telescope and its decommissioning, planned for August 2003, were discussed. Downtimes were often caused by major hardware failures, which indicate that a major overhaul would have to be performed if SEST were to be operated after decommissioning by ESO. Dr. Kaper asked about the costs of such a project. Dr. Melnick replied that only a rough guess could be made at this point: EUR 0.5 million.

6. RESULTS OF THE SERVICE MODE SURVEY

Dr. Romaniello presented the results of the questionnaire sent out to the users of SM. 1/6 users returned the questionnaire. The presentation is attached to this document as Annex 4. SM is in high demand: currently the ratio of requested hours in SM and VM is 1.6. The questionnaire was aimed at measuring the satisfaction of users throughout the process - from phase 1 to the analysis of the data- for the first three years of VLT operations. The overall conclusion is that most users are quite satisfied at all stages of the SM process. The main concerns are

(i) computation of overhead time is not well-understood by users,
(ii) more preparation time is preferred for phase 2,
(iii) the skycat manual can be improved,
(iv) information on the status of a SM is difficult to find and
(v) more explanation of pipeline data reduction steps is requested.

Following up a question by Dr. van Winckel, Dr. Romaniello confirmed that the survey will be repeated in the future but the general idea would be to make in more specific with fewer questions and more room for comments. The UC advised to publish the current results in a Messenger article. Dr. Bremer asked if it would be possible to inform SM users automatically on the progress of their program. Dr. Comerón indicated that it is not straightforward to implement this in a user friendly way due to the sometimes large number of OBs. Dr. Bremer also asked if data could be delivered by ftp-instead of on hardware storage material. Dr. Comerón and Dr. Pirenne answered that this is done upon request (to either USG or archive) provided that a scientific rationale for this is presented. It is automatically done for ToO programs and it would be possible to do it for programs in general, in principle. However, a significant drawback is that it is difficult with such a system to close data retrieval accounts, because it is not clear whether the user has actually retrieved the data from the ftp-site. Dr. Östlin inquired how long the period is in between observations and arrival in the archive. Dr. Comerón and Dr. Pirenne replied that it is approximately 4.5 days for Paranal, 7-10 days for La Silla (2 weeks for WF1). However, header information of an observation is visible immediately after it has been taken.
7. **TOUR DE TABLE**

The UC members surveyed the level of satisfaction of users with ESO in the user community in their respective countries generally by means of a questionnaire. The results of the surveys are attached (Annex 5) and were discussed per country during the tour de table. For each member country the overall impression is that users are quite happy about the products and services delivered by ESO. The discussed issues per country are listed below and appeared on either one or more submitted questionnaires:

**Dr. Pierre (France)**

Quicker access to data and no limit to archive quota is preferred. Dr. Pirenne commented that quota are only set for user’s convenience and heuristically determined on a monthly basis. The quota constraint could be released, if UC requests to do so.

The lack of a FORS2 pipeline is regretted. The ESO representatives indicated that the plan is to create a pipeline, adapted from the VIMOS pipeline, by 2004.

There was a complaint on the NACO CCD and its non-standard filters. Dr. Cuby commented that ESO is of the opinion that the filters are not that exotic, but they could be changed if this turns out to be a more general complaint.

The time interval between the notification of awarded observing time and the scheduled date of observations was considered too short. Dr. Breysacher acknowledged this for the recent proposal round and indicated that this was an exceptional case due to unexpected health problems. The goal is to have notification by mid-January and mid-July. The OPC comments delivered to users should focus on pro and con of the proposal. Dr. Breysacher commented that ESO stresses that only purely scientific comments should be given by the OPC but that OPC members tend to have varying habits of commenting. The arbitrary shut-down of a LP was noted. Dr. Breysacher indicated that in this case the 2nd period was not awarded due to insufficient progress, as listed in the progress report.

There was a complaint that a PI with guaranteed time had difficulty getting ordinary time. Dr. Cesarsky commented that no such trend is noticed by ESO.

The Paranal day-time support, being in a training process, has sometimes too little experience. Dr. Mathys indicated that night-time support needs priority while at the same time the training process is necessary. It is attempted to have a good mix of experienced and less-experienced people in the day-time pool.

There is too little space for comments on instrument performance in the end-of-mission report. Dr. Mathys stated that this is being solved, but this might take time related to the outsourcing of the work.

The dormitory at Paranal was considered noisy by one user. Dr. Mathys said that it has happened on rare occasions that night time and day time sleeping quarters were mixed due to the limited space available.
Dr. Rubio (Chile)
The ISAAC wavelength calibration by the pipeline is considered poor. Dr. Cuby commented that it is only meant as a measurement to facilitate quick inspection and not as the final wavelength calibration. It is using skylines and cannot be improved as such. However, for non-quick-look off-line data reduction an improved calibration is planned by using arcs.

For VM one needs to fill out a backup program which is not judged by the OPC. What is therefore the exact status of the back-up program at the telescope? The ESO representatives replied that the backup programs are always cross-checked for conflicts of interest. This is the case both for backup programs given in phase 1 and for new backup programs submitted in phase 2, which happens frequently.

There was further discussion on the submission process of backup programs (see recommendations).

There was a complaint about the quality of the food at Paranal. Dr. Mathys commented that this issue is well appreciated, also by the ESO personnel, and is being worked on.

Dr. Moehler (Germany)
A-ranked time is gobbled up by LPs and this is thought to induce B-ranking of many normal programs. Would it therefore be possible to carry-over also B-ranked proposals? Dr. Breysacher indicated that this issue will be addressed by the upcoming STC meeting.

Could accepted ranked programs also get comments? Dr. Breysacher indicated that the limited supply of manpower to answer questions about the comments is a problem to implement this in general. However, comments are included in cases where the OPC explicitly requests this.

Could the check for duplication in phase 1 be improved by including not only the title but also the abstract in the ESO archives? Dr. Cesarsky replied that it could be attached in archive in principle, once the data are public. Would it be possible to have both names of OPC members and of all subpanel members made public to ensure equal chances for people more and less acquainted with the ESO environment.

Dr. van Winckel representing Dr. P. North and Dr. J. Yun (Switzerland and Portugal)
The late notification of the results of period 71 was criticized. Also the VM observing mode for NACO was found to be too rigid. The spectroscopic mode for NACO in the ETC should be implemented.

Dr. van Winckel (Belgium)
When will the promised EIS pipeline be released publicly? This would be helpful for WFI data. The ESO representatives replied that this is: not clear yet, because
(i) the programming is outsourced and
(ii) many parties are involved in parts of the code-writing.

Furthermore a WFI pipeline is not anticipated by ESO.
Could the option of seeing dependent slit-sizes be included in OBs? Dr. Mathys indicated that this would provide an observational improvement only in a minority of cases, and it is therefore not implemented.

**Dr. Bremer (United Kingdom)**
The British community would like to have feedback for failed proposals which indicates if a second try is sensible. More information on progress of SM programs would be appreciated while in VM there is a feeling of being too detached from the operations.

It would be nice to have a real test-submission option for the ESOFORM (in addition to latex-checks). The TIMMI/SOFI pipeline is rudimentary (in comparison to software available for UKIRT).

**Dr. Östlin (Sweden)**
Publicly available detailed drawings of instrument optics are desired in addition to the sketches provided on the web. Timely communication with users in the event of problems with the planned execution of complex programs is appreciated to ensure solutions can be found before the end of the visibility window of targets.

**Dr. Clausen (Denmark)**
A special compliment is given for the very nice manner of collaboration on the Danish 1.5m telescope at La Silla. Dr. Clausen deferred to his survey for the detailed comments, including a suggestion for an all-sky monitor at Paranal to replace Mascot.

**Dr. Kaper (The Netherlands)**
Dr. Kaper deferred to his survey for the detailed comments. One complaint was that VLTI proposals are not judged properly. Furthermore, Dr. Kaper brought to the attention that detailed comments on how to improve the FIMS-MXU software (as prepared by 3 users with LPs) were attached to his report.

**Dr. Cappellaro (Italy)**
Dr. Cappellaro constructed a web-based form on which Italian users were asked to answer specific questions, sometimes stated in a provocative manner to induce answers. This yielded 48 replies. As a side remark, Dr. Cappellaro mentioned that he planned to change his tactic from reaching users via notifying their system managers to emailing users directly; suspecting users do not always read email sent around by their system managers. The results from the poll were summarized by Dr. Cappellaro (see also Annex 5) as follows. The work performed by ESO related to telescopes and instrumentation is outstanding. Users continue to expect more services by ESO for data reduction. LPs should have more public exposure. There is some concern that ESO competes with the astronomical community on scientific projects. Rapid access to SM data is requested for many, if not all, programs. Finally, the time for phase 2 preparations is too short.
8. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The following main issues were discussed during the general discussion.

What to expect from VIMOS?
This issue was addressed by Dr. Cuby starting out by noting that the workload resulting from the current VIMOS failure rate cannot be maintained by ESO in the long-term. An intervention is planned for May 2003, after which the line of action will be decided. This might include re-engineering and/or temporary removal of the instrument from the telescope. Furthermore, the instrument is currently not fully accepted yet and there is a 2 year warranty period. However, ESO expects to perform a significant part of the work itself as well. The UC inquired if the poor reliability of VIMOS could have an impact on granted guaranteed time. Dr. Cesarsky indicated this is a possibility. Finally, the ESO representatives clarified that none of the accepted VIMOS programs were ranked A, because the observing time cannot be guaranteed given the current uncertainty over the reliability of the instrument.

Why is MIDI not offered for VLTI as was expected by the community?
ESO representatives answered that MIDI was not ready to be offered, though this was thought possible originally and thus communicated to the community at that time.

Does ESO consider a separate VLTI OPC panel?
ESO representatives indicated they did not because VLTI programs should directly compete with other programs. For this reason, ESO will ensure that persons with expertise relevant for VLTI are members of the OPC panels.

The UC considered the La Silla 2006+ an important report and endorses the conclusions unanimously. It was stressed by Dr. Clausen that it is advisable for ESO to take a decision on the implementation of the recommendations soon.
9. ACTION ITEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The actions and recommendations from last year’s meeting were discussed. Actions performed by ESO and recommendations taken into consideration by ESO were closed. Remaining items are included in this year’s list which follows below.

1. Action Items:
   a) It should be made known to the user for which observing modes, pipeline procedures are available, what the pipeline does and, if applied, what calibration accuracy can be achieved.
   b) ESO should provide more manpower and expertise for the operation and maintenance of FEROS, in order to assure that this highly demanded spectrograph is kept at its maximum capabilities.
   c) In order to improve the discussion on general problems during the yearly meeting, the UC will distill from the national users' fact sheets common issues prior to the meeting or in closed session.
   d) The EIS software for reduction of mosaic CCD cameras should be released as soon as possible.
   e) The FIMS tool should become more user-friendly to define a large number of masks. The frequent users' solution (cf. the UC fact sheets of The Netherlands of 2003) should be evaluated.
   f) To improve the direct response of the users, a name list of proposal applicants of the last 2 periods (PIs and CO-Is) should be made available to the individual UC members.

2. Recommendations:
   a) There is a clear scientific imperative for rapid release of certain pipe-line processed data to the PI, in particular SNe and GRB searches. ESO should investigate a method for achieving this, especially in the light of the 2.2m+WFI and VST/VISTA.
   b) The current phase 1 proposal handling system is conceptually outdated. In particular, the two-stage process to attach postscript figures is cumbersome and error-prone. The UC urges ESO to install a new, user-friendlier system for submitting phase 1 proposals.
   c) The UC recommends to provide for the archive data, links to the abstract of the respective proposal as well as to acquisition images, through-slit images and, if possible, also phase 2 material (OBs). A mean value of the DIMM would be helpful for a quick look.
   d) To clarify the back-up program procedure, the UC recommends to delete the item in the phase 1 proposal, but to introduce the need for a back-up program for approved
programs only in the web letter. The information on weather statistics (prevailing wind direction, seeing statistics etc.) should be transmitted to the user at that time.

e) To offer a quick overview of the available infrastructure, the UC recommends to install a 1 page per instrument synopsis on the web, both for offered and upcoming instruments.

f) The UC recommends the opening of a test e-mail account for proposal submission in order to be able to test the correct compiling of proposals, prior to official submission.

g) To simplify browsing through the ESO web-pages, the UC recommends to delete old and redundant pages and links from the web.
10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The UC expressed once again that good reliability by VIMOS is a strong concern of the general astronomical community. Dr. Cesarsky indicated that ESO is gratified with this fact and considers it as support for the idea that the level of standards that ESO requires for instruments from builders is not too high.

The UC considered it desirable to increase the attractiveness of VM, but regrets that it cannot think of practical advice in this respect. ESO representatives explained that VM is promoted for two reasons:

(i) to ease the workload for USG and
(ii) to keep contact between the observatory personnel and the users of the telescopes.

Both the ESO representatives and the UC emphasized that experience obtained during VM is very helpful to better understand the SM process.

The UC inquired how the OPC members are selected. ESO explained that it requests recommendations from the council for members. All members are then chosen carefully by ESO, paying close attention to a uniform distribution of nationality and expertise over the panels.

11. FINAL REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

Dr. Cesarsky expressed many thanks to the UC for their efforts, especially for organizing their UC questionnaires. It would be highly appreciated if the results from the questionnaires could be communicated to the community by an article in the Messenger. Special thanks are given to the departing UC members Dr. Pierre and Dr. Clausen. Dr. Cesarsky urged the UC members to attend the VLT/VLTI Instrumentation Forum: “Lessons Learned” which replaces the customary special session of this meeting and follows directly the UC meeting. Furthermore the UC is thanked for its help in constructing the La Silla 2006+ report and it is appreciated that the UC agrees with its conclusions. It might be useful to publish the results of the report in the Messenger.

Lastly, Dr. Breysacher proposed to publish the reports from this UC meeting only in digital format if possible. This proposal is accepted by the UC (but the UC asks a Unix-Linux friendly format (e.g. pdf, postscript but not .doc), after which the 27th meeting of the UC was closed.

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