Users’ Committee

31st Meeting

Garching, April 16 and 17, 2007

Draft Minutes
1. OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

Due to W. Jaffe's delayed arrival, S. Feltzing acts as chairperson for the first part of the meeting.

The Director General welcomes the participants.

The agenda of the meeting is approved.
2. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 30th MEETING

The minutes of the 30th meeting are approved, with one minor correction.

W. Jaffe points out that the minutes of the 30th UC were delivered extremely late and G. Mathys apologizes and mentions the reasons why this happened.

A discussion follows, on the possibility of approving the minutes by e-mail, so that they can be made public before the next UC meeting. The adequacy of making the fact sheets public immediately, and of releasing the presentations, is also discussed. The UC will consider this topic in its closed sessions.

3. REPORT FROM THE OBSERVATORIES: LA SILLA PARANAL (including APEX)

O. Hainaut and A. Kaufer give presentations about the La Silla Paranal Observatory (attachments 1 and 2).

Various questions are asked by the UC about the sensitivity of AMBER after the work of the Interferometry Task Force (ITF). A. Kaufer answers that improvement of sensitivity was not one of the objectives of the ITF. Limitations to the achievable sensitivity are set by the auxiliary systems, such as IRIS. The sensitivities published in the Call for Proposals are duly updated. Although this point has not been specifically addressed, there is no indication that the actual sensitivities do not match the original specifications.

4. REPORT FROM THE OBSERVATORIES: ALMA

H. Rykaczewski presents his report on the status of ALMA (attachment 3).

J. van Loon asks if APEX will remain offered to the community until the first ALMA Call for Proposals. A. Kaufer confirms that this is indeed the case.

5. REPORT FROM VISAS

G. Mathys gives the report of VISAS (attachment 4).

I. Negueruela wonders if the greater number of proposals for OPC categories C and D implies that galactic programmes have a lower chance of getting telescope time. G. Mathys answers that time allocation for each category on each telescope is proportional to the amount of time requested on the considered telescope for this category.

Upon request by U. Jørgensen, G. Mathys repeats the rules governing the carry over of incomplete Service Mode runs to subsequent periods. F. Primas underlines the importance of receiving the OBs from PIs within a reasonable time.
W. Jaffe expresses the wish to give to the community a description of the scheduling process, as explained in the VISAS presentation. G. Mathys answers that a Messenger article on this subject is planned.

6. CLOSED SESSION

7. TOUR DE TABLE DISCUSSION

W. Jaffe presents a summary of the answers to the UC questionnaire and of the outcome of the UC closed session.

In the questionnaire, the main issue of concern was the pipelines; this topic is covered by another point of the agenda.

The questionnaire shows a lack of familiarity of the users with the ESO electronic newsletter.

In the closed session, several questions about the future of La Silla arose. The UC wishes the relevant information to be communicated by ESO to the community as soon as possible. It stresses that there is still a very strong demand for usage of the La Silla telescopes, and asks if there may be new ways of using them.

J. van Loon asks when the plans for La Silla will become public. The DG answers that this may in no case happen before the June Council meeting.

B. Poggianti suggests that execution of dedicated surveys or purchase of time by certain groups for specific projects may be possible models. She mentions that there is a feeling in the community that the costs that are charged to groups who buy time on La Silla seem overestimated. A. Kaufer points out that, so far, national projects (such as the Geneva Euler telescope) benefit from the whole infrastructure of La Silla. If this support is discontinued on ESO's side, the corresponding service will have to be included in the costs. The DG mentions that, within the framework of the Opticon Access programme, it was found that the ESO costs are among the lowest of all observatories.

N. Santos asks if it could be conceivable for users to buy only a few nights when they need them, or if it would be reasonable for ESO to support small automatic telescopes. A. Kaufer takes note of the existing interest in such alternatives.

The next issue identified by the UC in its closed session is, for Service Mode observations, the time needed to get access to the data and the users' ability to track the progress of their run. It is felt that these aspects are better at other observatories. In response to this, F. Comeron indicates that limitations arise from the need to avoid frequent request for changes during the current period.

Next, W. Jaffe reports that the manuals and the on-line documentation have improved and that a fairly good degree of homogeneity has been achieved. But various tools (e.g. to create finding charts) are old-fashioned and not well integrated. S. Feltzing points out that, in this respect, comparison with other observatories is not
W. Jaffe states that in general, it is found that the OPC and time allocation processes have improved. The UC proposes to establish a semi-formal liaison between the UC and the OPC.

For the VLTI, the UC expresses its concern that the work of the ITF stopped too soon.

W. Jaffe then invites the UC members to present points of particular interest to their national community that were not discussed already as part of the common UC issues.

He suggests that ESO should organize low-level data reduction schools. J. van Loon says that it would be useful to have short cookbooks explaining how to get started on data reduction. A. Kaufer answers that such cookbooks are planned.

W. Jaffe asks if the UC members could submit a list of questions based on the feedback that they received from the users of their respective communities and expect answers within 2-3 months, so as to show to users that their input is considered. This is accepted.

I. Negueruela inquires about the status of the VST. The DG gives a brief update.

I. Negueruela asks if the software tools provided by ESO could be supported on Mac OS X. M. Peron answers that work on this is in progress.

### 8. OLD ACTION ITEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendations:**

a) ESO is in the process of releasing ESO Reflex to selected users so as to obtain their feedback. Should the conclusion be that ESO Reflex is the way to go, the definition of standards for contributed reduction software will be addressed.

b) A link has been added on all instrument web pages allowing users to report errors in manuals. Closed.

c) The end-of-mission form has been modified and now includes the possibility of making suggestions. Closed.

d) The first issue of the ESO electronic newsletter was sent out in August 2006. In total three editions have appeared by the time of this UC meeting. There are about 800 subscribers. Closed.

e) The User Portal has not been released to the community yet. ESO hopes to release it between October and December 2007.
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f) Special attention will be paid to providing information about future projects and instruments at forthcoming UC meetings. Closed.

Action items:

a) The OPC is fully aware of the need to provide good-quality feedback to the proposers; it has implemented a scheme of internal review of the comments before they are released. Yet there is a fraction of proposals for which no specific weaknesses are identified, but which merely end up ranked lower than even better proposals. Closed.

b) Scheduling notes have been added to the webletters since Period 78. Closed.

c) The terms of reference and rules of procedure of the OPC, and the rules for the OPC Nominating Committee, are publicly available on the web (from the OPC page). Closed.

d) A detailed report on the SM questionnaire, including the individual user comments, has been made available to the UC in the same way as the end-of-mission reports. Closed.

e) Individual Messenger articles are now accessible on the Web as pdf files, through links from the table of contents of each issue. This new feature was advertised to the community through the electronic newsletter. All instrument manuals are now published in dynamical pdf format, i.e. optimised for on-line browsing, searching, and with internal and external hot-links; they are suitable for quality printing. Closed.

9. CLOSED SESSION

10. REPORT ON PUBLICATIONS BASED ON OBSERVATIONS OBTAINED WITH ESO TELESCOPES

B. Leibundgut presents this report on behalf of U. Grothkopf (attachment 5).

In response to a question by J. van Loon, B. Leibundgut confirms that A&A is the journal where the ESO community publishes most of its results, followed by ApJ.

11. SPECIAL TOPIC: CURRENT PIPELINES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF DATA PROCESSING DEVELOPMENTS

M. Peron gives a presentation on "Instrument pipelines and associated tools: current status and options for future development" (attachment 6).

M. Romaniello gives a presentation entitled "Science-ready data products with current instrument pipelines?" (attachment 7).
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W. Jaffe opens the general discussion of the Special Topic by expressing his views on the reasons why the community is not satisfied with the pipeline products. On the one hand, he thinks that for some instrument, the quality of the algorithms is insufficient (this is particularly the case for IFUs). On the other hand, the QC model is not appropriate for about 50% of the data: graphical output is needed, which is not allowed by all pipelines; reduction blocks need to be split into much smaller blocks so as to be able to examine intermediate results in a more graphical way, to modify and to re-run procedures; it must be possible to take data out of the reduction stream and to re-insert them into it at a later point. The other point of concern is the improvement of feedback of users to the developers. Possible answers are usage of usd-help as a contact point, or creation of a blog where users can register their comments on any particular problem.

B. Leibundgut stresses that USD does not provide only Phase 2 support, but also more general User Support. M. Romaniello points out that it is essential that users address their feedback and questions to usd-help, not to individuals who may be temporarily unavailable. Furthermore all calls to usd-help are logged, which allows ESO to identify the most frequent issues.

B. Leibundgut emphasises the need to distinguish data reduction from pipelines. Pipelines are used for data reduction, they are not data reduction. What the users want is data reduction.

W. Jaffe states that, in his opinion, the ESO Reflex model developed by Sampo is good, but wonders if ESO has the resources to make it work in the community. M. Peron replies that, pending the review of the pilot project and the response of the community, the corresponding resources will have to be applied for at the management level. Therefore a clear statement about the priorities set by the UC is required. W. Jaffe replies that ESO has the duty to invest in the improvement of the data reduction tools, which must be available for all instruments, and that the UC supports the ESO Reflex model developed by Sampo.

N. Santos inquires about the contractual requirements set on the teams building instruments for the delivery of data reduction software. P. Ballester answers that the consortia provide all algorithms and pipeline recipes required for calibration and science reduction up to the instrument template level. M. Romaniello points out that reassembling these algorithms to suit the specific needs of an end user may not be trivial and, in general, requires appropriate resources. M. Peron indicates that ESO is encouraging the consortia to supply algorithms that can be used for scientific data reduction. S. D’Odorico mentions that for second-generation VLT instruments, the possibility of inspecting intermediate results is a requirement. M. Romaniello notes that a "glue" is still needed to make this feature usable by the users.

J. van Loon remarks that during most of the SAMPO project, the community was not aware of it. A. Kaufer answers that there was no effort to make it public. The UC actually had an exclusive demonstration at its previous meeting; it is not surprising that users could not provide feedback. J. van Loon insists that now, at the stage of decision about what should be done next, the community has had no input. W. Jaffe replies that one of the problems is that the community at large does not read the web pages. Submitting the product to a set of beta-testers is a better approach if they are selected to be representative of the community. R. Hook stresses that ESO still would like to get more feedback about the concept. M. Romaniello points out
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that ESO did not want to deliver a test version before it was reasonably stable, to avoid a negative first impression, which is always difficult to revert afterwards. S. Feltzing comments that using the UVES pipeline as a test case is a good choice, because high-resolution spectroscopists tend to be quite responsive to polls.

W. Jaffe opens a tour de table for feedback about the pipelines based on the response to the UC questionnaire.

F. Courbin reports that Swiss users want to have interactive data reduction software with built-in options for inspection of intermediate results.

B. Poggianti mentions that several Italian users liked very much the MVM package developed within the framework of EIS, and asks if ESO could support this data reduction package. P. Padovani replies that the developer of this package has left ESO. F. Comeron clarifies that this project was initiated in a very specific context to serve a very specific purpose. It is implemented in a very different way from other data reduction systems that ESO is supporting. ESO has decided not to continue to pursue two different paths as the resources are not available to do that. Furthermore, making this tool a general purpose imaging reduction system would be cumbersome.

J. van Loon reports that UK community is glad that there is an evolution towards a more structured situation at the pipeline level.

I. Negueruela explains that in Spain there are two major institutes and many small groups. The impact of a lack of standardization is much more severe for the latter. S. Feltzing concurs with this, stressing that the difficulty of reducing data depends strongly on the place where one works.

W. Gieren expresses the strong wish of the Chilean community to have pipelines for new instruments that are sufficiently similar to the existing ones, so as to avoid having to go again through a learning process. He states that in his opinion, the REFLEX concept is reasonable.

G. van de Steene wonders how, when standard reduction of FORS spectra is failing, one can think of pipelines for more complex instruments. P. Ballester replies that the shortcomings of the FORS first-generation pipeline are known, and that a new pipeline written in CPL will be released publicly soon. J. van Loon asks if ESO issues beta releases of new pipelines. P. Ballester explains that they are used in operations for 4 to 6 months before being made public. M. Romaniello indicates that one of the purposes of Science Verification of new instruments is to test the pipeline. M. Peron points out that the example of the FORS pipeline is not representative: this was the first pipeline developed by ESO, and at the time, the requirements were not entirely clear. Fixing was delayed because higher priority was given to other tasks (e.g. the development of the VIMOS pipeline). But this situation should not happen again, thanks to standardization.

12. CLOSED SESSION
13. ACTION ITEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations:

a) There is concern in the community about the future facilities on La Silla. We appreciate that ESO is considering all possibilities for these facilities. We ask ESO to inform us, the Users' Committee, as quickly as possible about proposed changes to the status of La Silla and the grounds for the proposed changes.

b) Information about the second generation VLT(I) instruments shown on the ESO instrument web-pages should be kept up to date (including status and schedule).

c) The OPC should adopt standard phrases to be added to the feedback to rejected observing proposals where there are no obvious flaws or scope for improvement of the proposal, but rather that the proposal is simply not as highly ranked as more compelling cases.

d) A liaison should be set up between the chairman of the Users' Committee, a representative from VISAS, and the chairperson of the OPC to improve the communication between the user community and the OPC. The liaison should take place once per year.

e) The minutes from the Users' Committee meeting should be approved via email and the finalization of the whole process should take no longer than three months from the date of the actual Users' Committee meeting. It would in fact be desirable to have the minutes finalized before the next Council meeting.

f) The Users' Committee strongly recommends that ESO aggressively advertises the existence and function of the usd-help@eso.org. The Users' Committee recognizes that the Committee itself also should help in bringing this to the attention of the user community.

g) ESO should open a blog with respect to data reduction issues, and ensure that it is advertised.

h) ESO Reflex, developed by Sampo, seems to be a promising approach for improving the productivity of the data reduction of ESO observations. To ensure a more comprehensive feedback we recommend that the beta releases are made available to the larger community as soon as possible.

i) ESO should allow and approve substitutes for the ESO Users' Committee members.

j) ESO should organize data reduction workshops for individual instruments or suites of instruments.
Action items:

a) The user community perceives that the lack of ESO supported scientific quality data reduction tools (N.B. not pipelines for QC work) significantly limits the quantity and quality of the scientific work based on observations taken there. The Users' Committee asks ESO to allocate adequate resources to solve this problem.

b) ESO should create concise cookbooks for data reduction for major instrument modes.

c) ESO should propose an implementation by which quick release of data from service mode observations can be achieved.

d) ESO should open the User Portal.

e) ESO should propose an implementation by which generic target lists can be included in observing proposals.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There is no point under this title.

15. CLOSING REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

In the absence of the DG, who had to be in Madrid for the formal ceremony of entry of Spain into ESO, B. Leibundgut thanks the UC for its work. He emphasizes the importance for ESO of the feedback of its users community, but stresses that the UC members also have a role to play to disseminate information about ESO in their respective communities.

W. Jaffe closes the meeting.