

ESO's Scientific Visitor Programme in Garching

Michael Hilker¹
Harald Kuntschner¹

¹ ESO

The ESO-Garching Scientific Visitor Programme invites astronomers and researchers from around the world to visit ESO in Garching for collaborative scientific activities. Open to scientists actively engaged in research, the programme promotes scientific interaction, innovation, and ESO's role as a hub of astronomical excellence. Visitors receive logistical and financial support, engage in ESO's vibrant scientific life, and contribute to its projects. Applications are reviewed by the Scientific Visitor Selection Committee. This programme aligns with ESO's mission to foster international collaboration in astronomy and its vision to work with and for the astronomy community.

Programme scope and objectives

The Scientific Visitor Programme at Garching¹ supports long-term visits by accomplished young and senior scientists, enabling close collaboration with ESO staff, fellows, and students. These visits, ranging from one month to a year (one to four months for Early Career Scientists²),

provide researchers with the opportunity to engage with ESO's cutting-edge science, science operations and technology while contributing their expertise to foster innovation, promote scientific interaction and advance ESO's projects and goals.

Eligibility criteria

Eligible applicants for the regular visitor programme include scientists with a PhD in astronomy or related disciplines actively engaged in astronomical research. Early-career researchers (PhD students and postdocs up to three years post-PhD) are encouraged to apply via the Early-Career Visitor Programme². All applicants must have an active affiliation and job contract during the visit.

While the programme is open to researchers of all nationalities, preference is given to citizens of ESO Member States, the host state Chile and ESO's strategic partner Australia. ESO is committed to diversity and inclusion, ensuring equal opportunities regardless of gender, age, disability, ethnicity or other factors.

Application process

Scientists interested in applying should complete the application form (available through the Visitor Programme web page)

and submit it via email to the Visitor Selection Committee (VSC) Chairperson at vsc-chair@eso.org.

Applicants are encouraged to coordinate with an ESO staff member or Fellow before applying so as to align their visit with specific projects. Applications should be submitted at least four months prior to the planned visit to allow for practical arrangements. The programme's schedule tends to be busiest during the summer months (June–August), so visits outside this period are encouraged when possible.

Evaluation and selection

The VSC, comprising ESO Faculty members and Fellow representatives with diverse expertise, evaluates applications based on 1) scientific excellence, and 2) potential contribution to ESO's scientific projects. The committee meets about every two months to review applications and recommend candidates to the Head of the Office for Science.

Support and responsibilities of visitors

Approved visitors receive a monthly allowance for living expenses and family support, if applicable, reimbursement of travel costs, and accommodation in fully furnished ESO apartments, if available. They

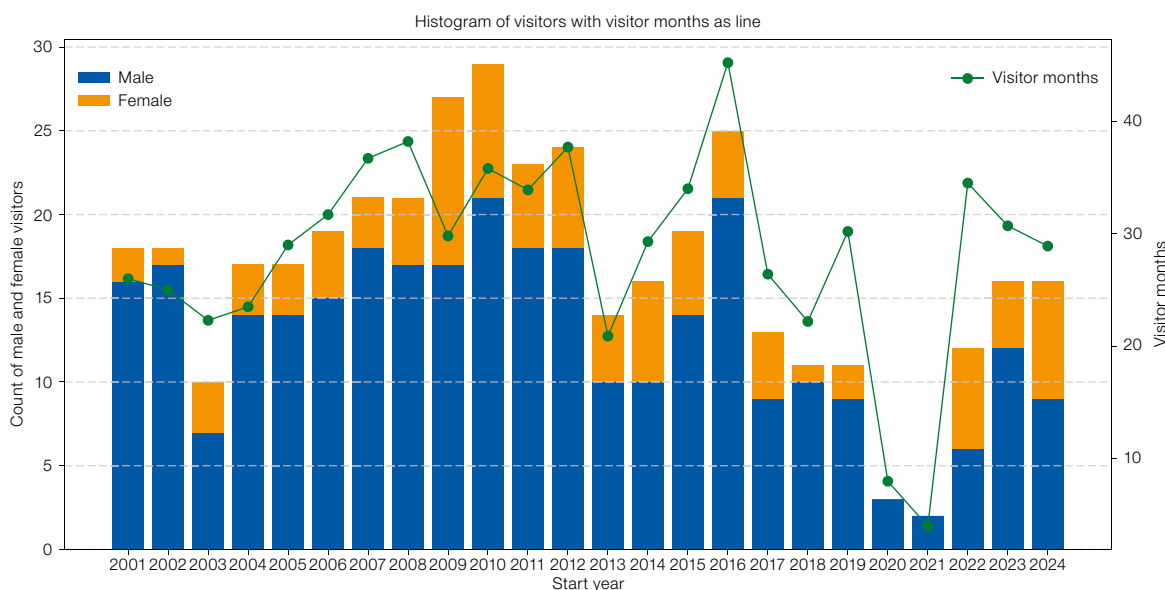


Figure 1. Number of male and female scientific visitors since 2001. The green line gives the number of visitor months accepted for each year (y-axis on the right). The effect of the pandemic in 2020/21 is clearly visible.

Percentage contribution by country

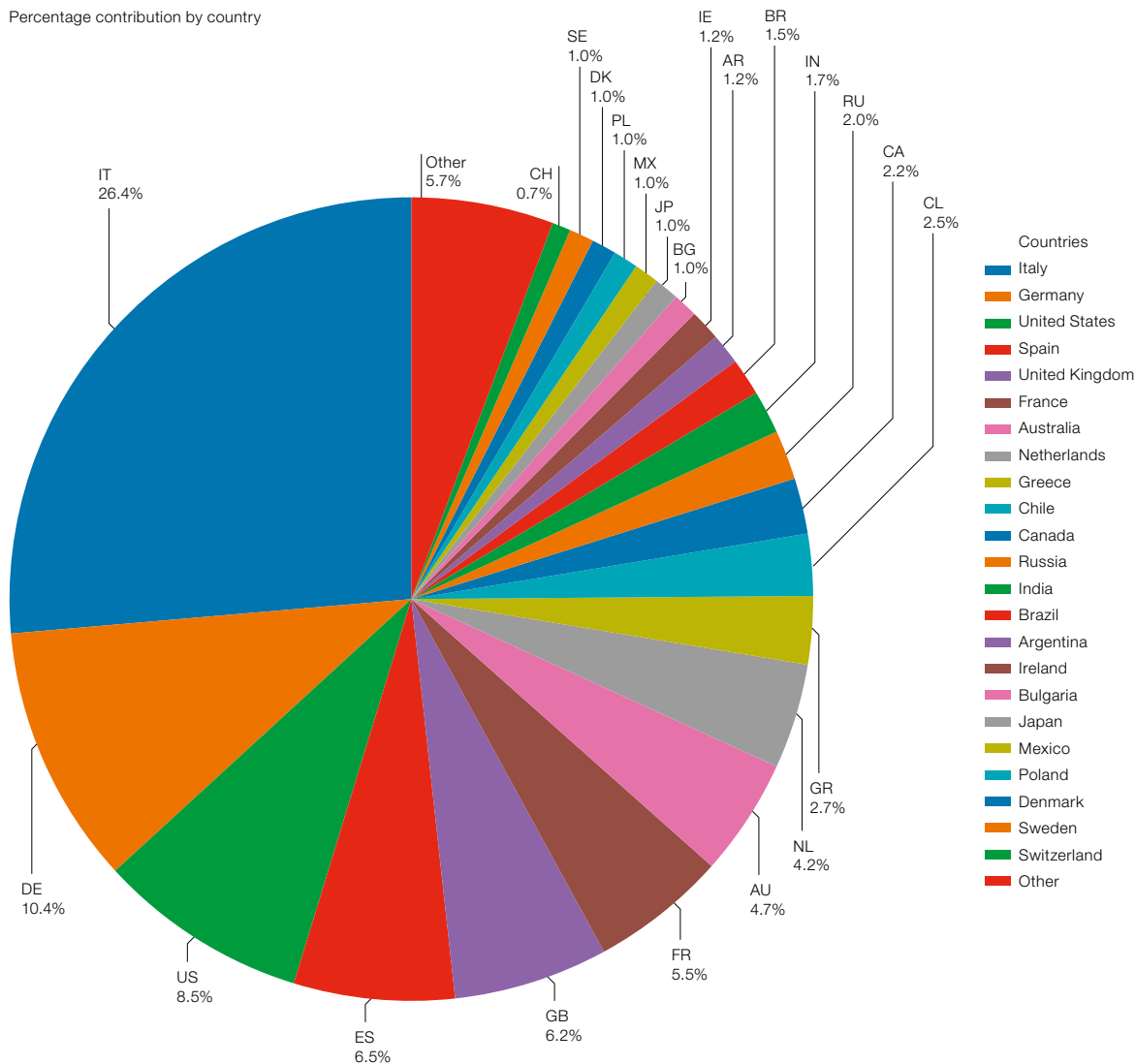


Figure 2. Pie chart showing the percentage contributions of visitors by country, with countries contributing less than 0.5% grouped into Others. More than a quarter of all visitors between 2001 and 2024 have Italian nationality.

are provided with office space, a computer terminal, and administrative support.

During their stay, visitors are expected to deliver a seminar or informal discussion, engage with ESO's scientific activities and adhere to the ESO Code of Conduct.

Some statistics on past visitors

For more than 30 years, ESO has been running a scientific visitor programme (see ESO, 1993). During this time, the Office for Science in Garching has hosted hundreds of visitors, comprising a mix of experienced, high-profile astronomers and early-career scientists. All have made significant contributions to ESO's scientific activities.

They have delivered lecture series, talks and seminars, worked on white papers, and inspired ESO's young fellows and students. These interactions have sparked collaborations leading to successful observing proposals and refereed articles.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the demographics of scientific visitors since 2001. Over this period, the Office for Science in Garching has hosted 402 visitors, with annual numbers ranging from 10 to 29, except during the COVID-19 pandemic years. Visit durations have spanned the full range supported by the programme, with an average length of 1.7 months. On average, about 30 visitor months are approved each year, meaning that nearly three visitors are present at ESO at any given time.

Historically the proportion of female visitors was low (21.6% before 2022) but has improved in the past three years, reaching 38.6% thanks to increased awareness and training of the VSC and offered support.

References

ESO 1993, The Messenger, 72, 7

Links

- 1 ESO's Scientific Visitor Programme: <https://www.eso.org/sci/activities/garching/personnelvisitors.html>
- 2 Early-Career Scientific Visitor Programme: https://www.eso.org/sci/activities/garching/personnelvisitors/Policy_Early-Career_Scientific_Visitors_Garching.html