

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. Minniti).

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/MIR spectrograph CRIRES (U. Kaeuffl).

In the near future, a very powerful way to identify new brown dwarf and planetary mass companions will involve the VLT interferometer, measuring both astrometric variations in close binary systems, and also direct imaging by nulling techniques (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.

HARPS: High-Accuracy Radial-velocity Planetary Search  
 FEROS: Fiber-fed Extended Range Optical Spectrograph  
 FLAMES: VLT Fibre Large Array Multi Element Spectrograph  
 UVES: VLT UV-Visual Echelle Spectrograph  
 ISAAC: VLT Infrared Spectrometer And Array Camera  
 CRIRES: VLT Cryogenic high-resolution InfraRed Echelle Spectrograph  
 VLC: Very Long Camera (used together with the CES, Coudé Echelle Spectrometer)

## 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 ul-

timately 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-

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This list is updated every year. Check at <http://www.eso.org/gen-fac/commit/uc/>

plaints 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*

*these problems 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/ls2000p11.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 representatives 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 documents.

- For the first time, we have drafted an informal feedback report to the users community as a whole. This report has been publicised 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 information 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. Additional insight is now provided by the end-of-mission reports, but the use of these reports 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 problems are. In my opinion – especially in the current atmosphere of mutual satisfaction –, 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 implementing 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 satisfaction with the scientific data obtained. This is often known only when the data are fully reduced and analysed, i.e. typically at least one year after the observations. Only then is it possible to recognise, e.g., inadequate calibration facilities, or scattered light effects not obvious in the raw data, just to give a few examples. However, learning about end-product data quality in a systematic way is certainly not easy. ESO has started with VLT instrument performance review sessions (organised 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 suggest that we seriously consider some sort of new user poll with respect to instrument 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 observatories in the world. In those (presumably 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 always 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.

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## 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 Council), a fact that was reflected by participants to the meeting, which included members of the Belgian Senate, the Belgian Federal Government Commissioner for Science Policy, Yvan Ylieff, the Secretary General of the Federal Office for Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs, Eric Beka, the European Commissioner for Research, Philippe Busquin, and other high officials from the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission. All in all about 100 invited guests representing politics, public administration, 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.