

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.

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.

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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.