

staff—the OPC knows by its evaluation that the scientific quality of all proposals obtaining observing time is high. The question is, however, still occasionally a hot item at the OPC meetings; due to the increased frequency of joint proposals by ESO staff and visitors the soundness of the present procedure becomes more and more obvious.

During 1978 and 1979 the OPC attempted to express its evaluation also in the number of nights reasonable to allot to a programme. This has now been abandoned; it is left to the Directorate to decide on the number of nights for each programme.

The number of applications for observing time has continued to grow. For the present period, No. 29, beginning on April 1, 1982, 211 applications had been submitted; for period 21, beginning on April 1, 1978, the number was 124. It has become impossible for the OPC to discuss each application in detail and a new procedure had to be developed. From period 23 on the OPC did its evaluations with two of its members reviewing each application for 3.6 m telescope time; this shortened the discussions at the meetings and was found to work so well that it is now applied to all applications.

The applications for observing time are now evaluated in the following way: The OPC members receive them listed by the ESO Visiting Astronomers Section according to subject (there are at present 10 groups covering everything from "galaxies" to "the solar system"). For each application two OPC members have been chosen as referees. Their ratings, which cover the scientific quality of the proposal and also consider its requests in the likelihood of a reduction in time, are sent to ESO well before the OPC meeting. The complete list of ratings is given to the OPC members, usually on arrival at Garching. Those applications for which the two referees have arrived at the same ratings need not be discussed much further, and the OPC can concentrate on those where discrepancies occur. The discussions may be very extensive in these cases, and they continue until a unanimous decision has been reached. Occasionally it may happen that an OPC member, who was not a referee for a particular application, disagrees with a proposed rating; then the application will be extensively discussed. This is most likely to happen in the intercomparison of

applications of similar nature within the various subject groups with the aim of reaching the highest possible degree of fairness.

Among particular questions that have been dealt with in the OPC the long-range programmes have often been on the agenda. Should special programmes be allotted observing time in advance for several observing periods? In 1971 the OPC decided not to attribute a certain percentage of time to long-range programmes in order to keep sufficient flexibility for handling short-term projects. Normally, a long-range programme once found acceptable would in principle be allocated telescope time over several observing periods; it would, however, in each period be in competition with the other applications submitted. These principles are still followed, and it may be stated that special attention is paid to all programmes that have a tendency to become long range; they have to show progress and it has to be made convincingly clear that more material is really needed. In deciding this the OPC has to rely on the information given in the completed application forms, in particular on the report over previous observations. It may be said in this connection that most applications are nowadays very well written with the scientific aim well presented and the feasibility of the observations clearly established. The importance of a superb Abstract on page 1 of the form should be emphasized.

At all its meetings the OPC discusses the activities on La Silla. Reports on the condition of telescopes and auxiliary instrumentation are presented and discussed as well as other matters of importance for the observing programmes. Thus, for instance, the OPC has recently considered the large number of change-overs of auxiliary instrumentation—in one year almost 200 change-overs had occurred, not including minor items such as changes of filters, multipliers, IR detectors, etc.—and decided to support the Technical Research Support Group on La Silla by recommending as large a reduction of change-overs as feasible without limiting the flexibility for observers unreasonably much; keeping instrumentation on the telescopes for longer periods will improve its performance.

The OPC has also at a recent meeting recommended that the limits for stoppage of observations be reviewed. It was felt that much observing time would be gained by even a very slight increase in the limits now applied for wind velocity and humidity.

The OPC recommended already in 1972 that observational material collected at La Silla and of interest to other astronomers, after analysis by visiting astronomers at their home institutes, be centralized in Europe. At that time the material under consideration consisted mainly of photographic plates. Now, with much material available in digitized form only, on magnetic tape, this question will have to be reconsidered and a new kind of storage problem faced.

As a consequence of its main function, the OPC obtains a clear picture of the progress in optical astronomical research in the ESO member countries. As the proposals frequently describe how the observations planned for La Silla are supported or supplemented by observations in other spectral ranges—X-ray, UV or radio—this picture becomes rather complete. I may conclude by saying that even if the OPC members may feel the pressure of evaluating twice a year about 60 proposals each, they also feel greatly stimulated by reading the high-quality scientific rationales and far-reaching aims that are presented nowadays. They certainly also share the gloom expressed sometimes in a "no-progress" report: "The weather was too bad", and most definitely prefer to read "Results published in . . .".

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