



ESO/UC-75

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**Users' Committee**  
**32<sup>nd</sup> Meeting**  
**Garching, April 14 and 15, 2008**

**Minutes**

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 Minutes of the 32<sup>nd</sup> ESO User's Committee meeting - April 14 and 15, 2008
 

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**UC Members present:**

Chairperson:	W. Jaffe	(The Netherlands)
Vice-chairperson:	J. van Loon	(United Kingdom)
	G. Van de Steene	(Belgium)
	W. Gieren	(Chile)
	J. Grygar	(Czech Republic)
	M. Tornikoski	(Finland)
	V. Hill	(France)
	J. Heidt	(Germany)
	B.M. Poggianti	(Italy)
	I. Negueruela	(Spain)
	N. Ryde	(Sweden)
F. Courbin	(Switzerland)	

Excused:	J. Fynbo	(Denmark)
	N. Santos	(Portugal)

**On behalf of ESO:**

T. de Zeeuw  
 P. Ballester  
 T. Bierwirth  
 F. Comerón  
 R. Gilmozzi  
 A. Kaufer  
 B. Leibundgut  
 G. Mathys  
 A. Moorwood  
 P. Padovani  
 M. Peron  
 F. Primas  
 M. Romaniello  
 P. Rosati  
 H. Rykaczewski  
 M. Sterzik  
 L. Tacconi-Garman  
 L. Testi

<b>ADP users:</b>	Y. Beletsky	
	H. Hildebrandt	
	S. Lilly	(via videoconference)

<b>Minutes taken by:</b>	S. Cristiani
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<b>Secretariat:</b>	S. Cristiani
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**1. OPENING OF THE MEETING AND ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA**

W. Jaffe opens the meeting and invites all participants to introduce themselves.

The agenda of the meeting is approved.

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## **2. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE 31<sup>st</sup> MEETING**

The minutes of the 31<sup>st</sup> meeting are approved.

However the UC notes that the minutes were released too late. The minutes should be available within a reasonably short time after the meeting so that the UC members can report to their communities about its outcome. The UC also wishes official versions of the presentations given at the meeting to be made publicly available.

## **3. ESO'S LONG-TERM STRATEGIES AND PRIORITIES**

The DG gives a presentation of his views about ESO's long-term strategies and priorities ([attachment 1](#)).

## **4. LA SILLA 2010+ PLAN**

A. Kaufer presents the plan prepared by ESO for continued operation of La Silla beyond 2010, as approved by the Council ([attachment 2](#)).

J. Heidt asks what is the risk involved with the planned reduction of the engineering support. A. Kaufer answers that the foreseen support is sufficient to keep the telescopes and instrument running at their nominal level. However immediate troubleshooting of problems is affected. Problems occurring at nighttime that cannot be fixed by telescope operators will be investigated the next day, but there is no guarantee that they can be fixed for the following night. As a matter of fact, no such guarantee is given at present on either La Silla or Paranal.

J. van Loon enquires about the long-term support of SOFI. A. Kaufer replies that continuity is ensured as long as the instrument performance remains stable. If and when an intervention is needed to maintain SOFI in its nominal operational state, the required effort and the resulting impact on other activities will be assessed so as to decide on a course of action.

W. Jaffe points out that the UC had requested information on the future of La Silla to be communicated to the community as soon as possible, which in his view has not been done. The DG responds that such communication could not take place before the affected staff was informed, and that this step has just been completed. B. Leibundgut further stresses that the part of the plan related to available instruments had already been presented to the UC in 2007. W. Jaffe objects that communication of the plan at the present UC meeting implies that the UC does not have the possibility to present the reaction of the community until its 2009 meeting.

A. Kaufer adds that ESO would welcome long-term dedicated programmes on the NTT.

**5. REPORT FROM THE OBSERVATORIES: LA SILLA PARANAL**

A. Kaufer presents a report on the operational highlights and the developments that have taken place at the La Silla Paranal Observatory (including APEX) since the previous UC meeting ([attachment 3](#)).

F. Courbin points out that, with the decommissioning of FORS1, the third-most requested instrument at Paranal, there remain only a few optical imagers on offer at Paranal.

**6. REPORT FROM THE OBSERVATORIES: ALMA**

H. Rykaczewski gives an overview of the status of ALMA ([attachment 4](#)).

L. Testi presents the current plans for the commissioning of ALMA, its science verification, and its science operations ([attachment 5](#)).

**7. REPORT FROM VISAS**

G. Mathys gives the report of the Visiting Astronomers Department ([attachment 6](#)).

W. Jaffe asks if enough information can be given in Short Programme proposals for proper scientific evaluation. G. Mathys reports that the OPC finds the Short Programme format useful. The ratio between the numbers of allocated and requested runs is not significantly different for Short Programmes from the ratio for Normal Programmes.

**8. REPORT ON PIPELINES**

P. Ballester gives an overview of the work conducted at ESO on the pipelines, with emphasis on the actions taken following the feedback received at the 2007 UC meeting ([attachment 7](#)).

**9. REPORT ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE USER PORTAL**

L. Tacconi-Garman reports about the launch of the ESO User Portal and about the first months of its usage ([attachment 8](#)).

**10. REPORT ON THE OPC/UC/VISAS LIAISON MEETING**

Following a recommendation made by the UC at its 2007 meeting, a first meeting between the chairpersons of the UC and of the OPC, and the Head of VISAS, took place via teleconference shortly before the 81<sup>st</sup> OPC meeting, on November 9, 2007. W. Jaffe reports that this meeting was successful as a first contact. He recalls that the UC recommends usage by the OPC of a standard statement to communicate to users that their proposal did not have any specific weak point, but that other proposals were better.

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Currently, the OPC does not follow this recommendation. W. Jaffe also indicates that while a channel exists for proposers to question the evaluation of the OPC if they feel that a real mistake was made, it is not well known and it should feature more prominently in the webletters.

Furthermore, W. Jaffe requests that all user statements about OPC feedback appearing in the UC questionnaire be communicated to the OPC chairperson. The DG would like to understand better why such a discontent exists in the community; he points out that the OPC consists of 72 astronomers, with a 1- to 2-year turnover rate, most of whom submit proposals themselves, and who are satisfied that they provide useful feedback. W. Jaffe reckons that the questionnaire samples a group of users that is different from the one that comprises the OPC.

## 11. REPORT ON E-ELT

R. Gilmozzi gives a presentation on the current status and future plans for an E-ELT ([attachment 9](#)).

J. van Loon asks when the E-ELT site will be selected. R. Gilmozzi expects a proposal to be made by the DG to the Council by end of 2009.

## 12. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The general discussion is postponed, for merging with item 14 of the agenda.

## 13. CLOSED SESSION

## 14. TOUR DE TABLE

The UC members report in turn the salient features of the feedback that they received from the users of their community.

J. van Loon asks about the possibility to include Mac OS X among the supported platforms for ESO software. M. Peron answers that investigation is in progress, both in terms of the resources to be invested and of the possible technical solutions.

J. van Loon enquires about the outcome of the workshop on "Science with the VLT in the ELT era". A. Kaufer indicates that a report has been published in the Messenger. He also states that a first discussion of this outcome has taken place at the October 2007 meeting of the STC, and that a presentation and further discussion are on the agenda of the STC meeting immediately following this UC meeting. A. Moorwood adds that besides 2<sup>nd</sup> generation VLT and VLTI instruments, upgrades of 1<sup>st</sup> generation instruments are also considered.

J. van Loon comments that users have expressed some concern about the lack of polarimetric capabilities offered at ESO, and asks whether this will improve in future. A. Moorwood replies that meetings such as the October 2007 VLT/ELT meeting are

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an important platform for users to make such wishes known, but that no strong opinions about polarimetry were expressed.

J. Heidt asks if it would be possible to carry over started rank class B Service Mode runs. G. Mathys answers that such a measure would hamper the approval of new, higher-ranked programmes and would entail a significant risk of accumulation of a growing backlog of incomplete programmes. F. Primas and M. Sterzik stress that short-term scheduling gives priority to completion of incomplete runs over starting the execution of new rank class B runs.

I. Negueruela suspects that the fairly low usage of ESO facilities by Spanish users may be due to difficulties in finding specific information. The DG points out that low demand in the first few periods from communities of new member states is not unusual: it takes some time for astronomers of these communities to realise which new opportunities become available to them. He acknowledges the existence of a problem in the ESO web structure, which is under investigation. A discussion about user information follows. A. Kaufer stresses that the Call for Proposals is a systematically organised document with direct web links that should represent a good starting point for newcomers.

J. Grygar states that the limited availability of FEROS is a concern for the Czech community, which is primarily geared towards high-resolution spectroscopy. A. Kaufer stresses that HARPS and UVES should be valid alternatives for most projects.

W. Gieren reports that ESO is better rated by Chilean observers than the other two international observatories in Chile. The main challenge for the Chilean community is data reduction, especially because of the recent creation of new groups in small institutions.

N. Ryde mentions the interest of the Swedish community for a modernisation of the Phase 1 and Phase 2 tools, as well as for a better view of the completion status of SM programmes. This is acknowledged.

F. Courbin points out that it would be useful to add the coherence time to the Phase 1 constraint set for the VLTI. A. Kaufer answers that in general, ESO wants to move towards a more physical definition of the observing constraints.

V. Hill reports that the French community is unsatisfied with the performance of AMBER, and that there is a wish for availability of longer AT baselines. A. Kaufer replies that there are requests from various parts for both the shortest and longest baselines. Queries have been emailed to frequent VLTI users with a view to finding out what the main needs are and to setting priorities accordingly.

B. Poggianti emphasises that implementation of a delegation mechanism in the User Portal is necessary. L. Tacconi-Garman answers that this development is in progress.

**15. OLD ACTION ITEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS****Recommendations:**

- a) The UC is satisfied that the presentation given by A. Kaufer at this meeting provides the necessary information about the future of La Silla. Closed.
- b) The UC reckons that the information about VLT/I second generation in the ESO web pages is up-to-date. Closed.
- c) The OPC did not follow the recommendation of the UC to adopt standard feedback phrases for non-scheduled observing proposals where there are no obvious flaws or scope for improvement of the proposal, but which simply are not as highly ranked as more compelling cases, on account that it saw more risks than potential benefits in this recommendation. The UC maintains its recommendation.
- d) A first meeting between the OPC and UC Chairs and the Head of VISAS took place successfully. Such meetings should become a feature, taking place twice per year, about a month before the OPC meetings.
- e) The minutes of the UC meeting were delivered late. This recommendation will be carried over.
- f) The existence and purpose of usd-help was advertised in the May 2007 issue of the ESO electronic newsletter. Users who contacted ESO via different channels were reminded of the proper entry point. The address usd-help also appears as first point of contact in the User Portal pages. Closed.
- g) Opening of the requested data reduction forum was delayed until a decision was reached on the platform to be used to export data reduction to the community and in order to get clarifications from the UC on the exact scope and type of the forum itself. The UC expresses the view that, in order to take advantage of the broader expertise in the community, the forum should not be restricted to ESO's platform of choice, i.e. Reflex, and should not be moderated by ESO. The information exchanged in the forum would, then, be provided "as is", with no guarantee, explicit or implied, by ESO. The item remains open.
- h) The ESO management has decided that the development of Reflex will be supported by ESO and that Reflex will become an official delivery to the community. Public release is planned for the end of 2008. Closed.
- i) Substitutes for ESO Users' Committee members who are not able to attend the UC meeting are allowed. The excused delegate should propose a replacement before the meeting for approval by the DG. Closed.
- j) Clarification from the UC is needed, so as to define better the scope of the requested data reduction workshops. The item remains open.

**Action items:**

- a) Development of pipelines is given high priority and new resources have been allocated to it. The UC feels that it needs a plan from ESO on future pipeline developments so as to be able to judge if they meet the expectations of the community. The item remains open.
- b) Data reduction cookbooks have been created for almost all instruments; work is in progress on the few missing parts. Closed.
- c) Since April 1, 2008, users can retrieve their proprietary data via the User Portal. Closed.
- d) The User Portal was opened in November 2007. Closed.
- e) The priority given to the implementation of the User Portal and to the resulting adjustments allowed only very few resources to be allocated to investigating of the possibility to implement generic target lists. As development of a new Phase 1 proposal submission system is planned in the long term, the only modifications that can be made to the current system are those that do not require investment of a large amount of resources. The item remains open.

**16. CLOSED SESSION****17. SPECIAL TOPIC: "ADVANCED DATA PRODUCTS"****17.1. INTRODUCTION BY ESO**

P. Rosati gives a presentation of the current status of Advanced Data Products at ESO ([attachment 10](#)).

F. Comerón reports about the recent restructuring of the Data Management and Operations Division ([attachment 11](#)).

**17.2. REPORTS BY "FREQUENT USERS"**

H. Hildebrandt ([attachment 12](#)) and Y. Beletsky ([attachment 13](#)) present their experience of the submission of Advanced Data Products to the ESO archive.

S. Lilly presents (via videoconference) the experience of the zCOSMOS team, with a Large Programme of around 600 hours on the VLT. Two-third of the data have been taken and one-third have been reduced. The ADPs resulting from this include catalogues with positions and redshifts, 1-D calibrated spectra, and spectrograms per slit. A prominent member of the zCOSMOS team subsequently moved to ESO Garching as a fellow, to work on the ADP team. It is unclear whether without a contact at ESO it would have been as straightforward to produce the ADPs.

**17.3. GENERAL DISCUSSION: BEYOND THE CURRENT PIPELINES**

Upon request by the UC, the scope of the general discussion of the special topic is broadened to encompass the subject of data processing beyond the current pipelines.

W. Jaffe introduces the subject by stating that the UC wants:

- tools to create science quality data;
- standardisation of the output of the telescopes in the sense of generating uniform products at a level higher than the current ones.

He reckons that this is the goal of the ADPs and, probably, of the current pipeline developments, but that this does not answer the requirement set by the UC at its 2007 meeting, of having tools to analyse the data at the deepest level.

M. Peron pointed out that ESO is developing data reduction tools that serve two purposes. The tools can run in a pipeline mode (i.e. automatic) for quality control purposes. They can also be used in an interactive mode with *gasgano* or *Reflex* as front-end interfaces. The difficult task is not to develop the modules in such a way that they can be plugged in *Reflex*. The difficult task is the implementation of algorithms that are robust and can generate science-ready products. Improvements of the algorithms for generating science-ready products are prioritized on the basis of requests that are received from the different categories of users, operation teams or external users. ESO unfortunately gets very few requests from the community even though the tools and documentation can be downloaded from the web.

W. Jaffe points out that the goal of the UC is that, at some point in the future, there are *Reflex* entry points for all first and second generation VLT/I instruments. He acknowledges that ESO has allocated additional resources to support *Reflex*. But the UC wants to see a plan.

A. Kaufer stresses that the presentations of P. Ballester (under agenda item 8) and F. Comerón included a lot of planning information. W. Jaffe replies that this information does not correspond to the expectation of the UC, as it is primarily interested in a detailed planning of the delivery of science-ready pipelines. A. Kaufer stresses that the decision to support *Reflex* was taken in December. It is too early to have a detailed plan, as department reorganisation and hiring of new people were the first steps towards implementation of the *Reflex* support. He urges the user community to increase its awareness of the existing tools and to contribute to their improvement by providing feedback. Also, *Reflex* provides a mechanism for users to upload their algorithms so as to share them with others.

F. Comerón concludes by asking the UC members to encourage the usage of *Reflex* in their communities.

**18. CLOSED SESSION**

**19. ACTION ITEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS****Data reduction issues:***Action item 1:*

The user community perceives that the lack of ESO-supported scientific quality data reduction tools (N.B. not monolithic pipelines for QC work) significantly limits the quantity and quality of the scientific work based on ESO observations. ESO should present a plan for the implementation of Reflex-based scientific data reduction tools.

*Recommendation 1:*

ESO should provide Reflex-based scientific quality data reduction tools for essentially all its instruments.

*Recommendation 2:*

There is a great deal of information on how to optimally reduce data, which is not embodied in documents and pipelines. We anticipate that it will be highly beneficial to new users of ESO instruments if ESO organized data reduction schools, teaching the essential reduction concepts and the usage of scientific quality data reduction tools for individual ESO instruments or sets of instruments.

*Recommendation 3:*

ESO should open an electronic forum with respect to data reduction issues, and ensure that it is advertised.

**Communication:***Action item 2:*

Presentations made at the UC meeting should become available within two weeks after the UC meeting, and the minutes of the Users' Committee should be approved before the following Council meeting.

*Recommendation 4:*

It would be helpful if ESO informed the UC chairperson whenever a recommendation or action item has been addressed.

*Recommendation 5:*

ESO should release the public minutes of its external committees in a timely fashion.

*Action item 3:*

ESO should consider designing an alert system to inform the users of potentially high-impact changes in the ESO documentation and instruments. In a first step, ESO may consider targeting the PIs of ongoing large programs, i.e., the ones most affected by unexpected changes in instruments/policy/documentation. Alerts may be controlled through the ESO User-Portal user-profile in order to allow users to unsubscribe when desired.

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**Data access:***Action item 4:*

ESO should develop a mechanism through which restricted access of Co-Is to specific runs can be provided, following authorization by the PI.

**Proposal submission process:***Recommendation 6:*

The current latex forms for phase I proposals are hard to handle efficiently. ESO may consider developing a new web-based form with online help.

*Action item 5:*

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

**Action items on the UC:**

- a) The UC chairperson should ask the OPC to consider the possible advantages of reducing the page limit of normal proposals.
- b) UC members should advertise widely the many usages of usd-help within their constituencies.
- c) The UC should meet by telecon half a year after the UC meeting at ESO, and the chairperson should ask ESO for updates in preparation for that meeting.

**20. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

None.

**21. CLOSING REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL**

The DG reckons that the UC represents the community and communicates to ESO what improvements are needed. However, since resources are limited, it would be helpful if the UC could also let ESO know which existing features or activities could be discontinued. The DG thanks the UC for its valuable work.