

ESO Users Committee feedback on the Time Allocation Working Group report

*Prepared by the UC vice-chair (Olivier Absil),
based on the feedback of all UC members*

Scope

The report of the ESO Time Allocation Working Group (TAWG), presented to the ESO Director for Science in December 2016, has been submitted to the ESO Users Committee (UC) for feedback. The present document summarizes the consensus opinion of the UC on the propositions and recommendations described in the TAWG report.

UC feedback summary

The UC strongly supports most of the recommendations proposed by the TAWG. In particular, the UC supports the proposition to decrease the frequency of the call for proposals, and to create a fast-track channel. The need to decrease the load on the OPC panel members is acknowledged by the UC. The UC is much more reserved, and partly disagrees with the propositions to promote Large Programs and to redistribute the time balance in favour of Large Programs. In the following sections, we give more detailed feedback on some specific recommendations described in the TAWG report.

Detailed feedback

Recommendations 1 (Frequency of calls) and 2 (Fast Track Channel)

About 80% of the UC agrees with these recommendations. Some specific comments:

- The balance between the observing time reserved for the two calls (Normal and Fast Track) should make sure that a sufficient level of flexibility is maintained.
- The UC supports the idea to appoint a specific TAC for the Fast Track Channel, to lower the load on the OPC panel members.

Recommendation 3 (Proposal review procedure)

80% of the UC agrees with this recommendation. Specific comment:

- The UC supports the triage phase only if a sufficient number of panel members (at least 3) grade the proposals prior to triage. All panel members should read / grade the proposals after triage.

Recommendations 4 (LP policy) and 5 (Time balance between LP and NP)

The UC disagrees with these two recommendations (56% disagree on #4, 68% disagree on #5). Here are the main reasons for our disagreement:

- Risk to decrease scientific diversity, and to discriminate smaller communities or research domains (this risk is only partly compensated by the proposed Fast Track Channel).
- Reduced possibility of performing pilot studies (before submitting Large Programs).
- The term “scientific return” simply reflects the time before publication. There is no guarantee that these recommendations improve the quality as well.
- Possible issue for instruments that are oversubscribed: will there be any time left for smaller projects on such instruments? Shouldn't the fraction of time allocated to Large Programs be instrument- or telescope-specific?

Recommendation 6 (Fillers)

88% of the UC agrees with this recommendation. No specific comment.

Recommendation 7 (ESO-ALMA channel)

80% of the UC agrees with this recommendation. No specific comment.

Recommendation 8 (High-risk channel)

44% of the UC agrees with this recommendation, 12% disagrees, and 44% has no opinion. It is not clear to the UC why high risk / high gain proposals need to be considered separately. The UC thinks that they should be judged by their scientific qualities along other proposals, even if they ask for large amounts of time.

Recommendation 9 (Gender issues)

63% of the UC agrees with this recommendation, and the remaining 37% has no opinion. The UC underlines however that this recommendation is a bit vague. The UC would not be in favour of enforcing quotas (be it for proposals or for panel members), but appreciate ESO's effort towards gender equality in OPC panels.

Recommendation 10 (Strategic plan for ELT era)

56% of the UC agrees with this recommendation, and the remaining 45% has no opinion. Recommending on ELT proposal policies seems a bit premature to the UC.