

Access Office 18months-Review

Report by W. Boland, M.Dennefeld, B. Gelly and R.Gredel

Conclusions and recommendations.

The overall conclusion of the Review Panel is that the Access Program is highly appreciated by the astronomers who make use of it. The general management of the AO certainly contributes to this satisfaction. The directors of the telescopes involved in the programme are pleased with the level of support delivered, the database and web are well thought of, the user feedback is positive, and reports to EU and TDF are of good quality. The quality of the effort provided by the IAC up to mid 2005 is appreciated.

However the underlying system is now in place, new staff are now introduced and trained, so the operation could be streamlined in the light of experience. Comparison with other observatories suggests that the office could be operated with much less effort.

From a detailed analysis of the fractional breakdown of tasks given in the AO report, supplemented by discussions with the AO staff, it appears that the overall activity is too staff intensive and seems to be globally overestimated. We feel that the procedures may be too complex, or the office is too generous in giving help to users over minor issues, or both.

There is a need for the TDF and project to revisit the exact scope of work and reporting structure to see if the structure originally set out in the contract is actually the most appropriate in the light of present experience.

We estimate that between 0.5 and 1 FTE/year could be saved from now on, from the 2 FTE/year in the current plan. Since the total Access budget is notionally fixed, any such saving could be translated into :

- More access within the existing network
- New tasks to add value to the Access programme that could be undertaken by the office without an increase in budget.

The panel concludes that the access office could manage the routine user support tasks with less effort during the remainder of the FP6

programme, but recognises the value of retaining a now experienced team: this can however only be justified if the spare effort is used to add value within the Access programme.

New tasks should be discussed with, and defined by, the TDF. Ideas and proposals by the AO, as presented in the last page of their report, are a first approach which is most welcome, but the AO should not commit significant efforts except on agreed activities. Immediate, possible activities of high added-value might be for example, work on a common Telescope Time Application software, or promotion of the Access Program via publicity handouts or Audio visual material. Other tasks, related to other activities within Opticon, might be envisaged too.

Overall, the panel was pleased by the quality of the achievements of the AO, their interest in a vision for the future and by the open spirit which governed the discussions. This review will hopefully help increase further the quality and the efficiency of the services provided by the Access Program in general.

1. Introduction and background.

The original OPTICON proposal contained a trans-national access programme requesting EU support for 2555 observing periods (nights/days) across 25 telescopes. It was agreed that, given their experience with a similar FP5 trans-national access programme, the FP6 access programme would be administered by a team located at the IAC as part of a distributed project office. The cost estimate provided by the IAC for this element of the proposal was 420,000 Euro.

The final award to the OPTICON consortium by the EU was 19.2 million Euro, essentially a cut of 50% from the original request, with only 3 of the 25 telescopes being removed by the EU referees. During the summer of 2004 the entire OPTICON programme was internally restructured to fit within this much smaller financial envelope. As a result, the provisional allocation for the access programme was reduced to 5.5 million Euro. It was also necessary for this sum now to include the cost of the access office, which had earlier been subsumed in the cost of the management

network. The result was the amount of access affordable dropped to 1227 observing periods, a cut of 52% , roughly in proportion to the global down-sizing of the project.

Unlike other Opticon workpackages, the Access Office is the only package which had not been scaled down by this factor of 2 in the final award. While it was understood that the cost of administering the access programme did not scale entirely with the number of observing periods, at the Chania board meeting it was agreed that the original budget would be accepted only for the initial 18 months of the programme, but that the Access Office should be the subject of a review by the telescope director's forum thereafter. Annex 1 contains the relevant extract of the board meeting minutes. [Footnote: Note that for reasons which are now unclear, the amount used in the final stages of contract negotiations assumed an access office cost of 380,000 Euro- possibly the result of global 10% cut in all network budgets at a late stage in the process.]

At its November 2004 meeting the telescope director's forum established a panel comprising M Dennefeld (chair), R Gredel and B Gelly to conduct this review. The OPTICON executive added W Boland to the panel. The terms of reference of the review are given in Annex 2.

2. Working procedure

The panel, always working with additional input from J Davies, carried out a survey of the telescope directors's opinion (the Questionnaire can be found here as Annex 3). A detailed 18-monthes report was submitted by the IAC access team. The panel (including J. Davies) then visited the IAC on August 31-Sept. 1th, to discuss these documents with the Access Office (AO) team and clarify various items prior to compiling their recommendations. This was the first detailed discussion with the AO since the beginning of the FP6 program and was considered as an excellent opportunity to review the various procedures and identify possible improvements for the remainder of the program. Discussions were friendly and conducted in a positive spirit.

The present report will first outline the answers received from the Telescope Director's to the questionnaire; then discuss the Report received from the Access Office and summarize the discussions in Tenerife. Our conclusions and recommendations are presented as an executive summary at the top of the document.

3. Answers received from Telescope Director's

As of August 30th, a total of 14 answers (out of 19 active observatories) had been received, which represents 77% of the total.

From a detailed analysis of those answers, the following points can be extracted:

-The general level of satisfaction with the service provided by the Access Office is very high. In particular the competence of Jesus Burgos is underlined and appreciated. Answers by the Office to various questions are generally coming back rapidly and clearly. Reports are informative and accurate.

-Most of the Directors indicate that they would have no problem in identifying themselves the proposals eligible for Opticon funding and deal with the corresponding observers.

It is less obvious for a few of them to pay directly the travel grants to eligible observers, because of local administrative rules (e.g. impossibility to pay non-nationals)

-The amount of reporting required is questioned, and generally not felt achievable locally without additional resources. The work required is estimated to be between a few days and one week per semester

(depending on the number of telescopes, obviously): there are mixed feelings as to whether it could or not be absorbed within the 20% of overheads. There is however a general consensus that this task is better done in a centralised office, rather than distributed locally: the fraction of "Access time" is small in each observatory, so having the specialist needed to handle the complex cases is only worthwhile in a central office, and in any case, a final shaping and merging of all the individual reporting documents will anyhow be necessary at the end.

- It is noted that the Access Office communicates only with Observatory Director's, while in some cases other people are dealing locally with those matters.

Action item on TDF: for each observatory to indicate which people, in addition to the director, should receive directly the information and questions from the Access Office.

Establishing on the Web a page about " Frequently Asked Questions" would be of much help, in avoiding repeated questions about well identified points.

-To evaluate the pressure factor on the Access Program: numbers are provided by the various observatories about "qualifying proposals", but are not yet exploitable at this stage due to ambiguities

in definitions and answers.

Action item on TDF: provide statistics on numbers of qualifying proposals (and number of requested nights) RECEIVED (which only the various directors know) before evaluation, number of proposals judged scientifically acceptable, and finally number of proposals effectively scheduled and financed through the Access programme (this ambiguity explains some answers saying that observatories do not want to duplicate the work of statistics already done by the Access Office). This is important to evaluate the real pressure factor on the Access Program.

-Finally, most of the observatories seem to be reluctant to do themselves the reporting work, which is considered a large task (but the amplitude of the task is judged only from what is produced by the Access Office).

The Panel notes that the effective work is much lower than believed: it amounts to fill in one page of data per observing run (names, addresses, dates of run, etc...), once a year, in a Microsoft Access Database, which is done in a few days if all the data are available.

4. Analysis of the 18-monthes report of the Access Office.

A- General assessment of the mid-term report

The detailed report received from the Access Office (AO) summarises the tasks and work packages carried out by the office during the first 18 month of operation.

In brief, the AO:

- created and maintains a database powered website for the whole Access programme,
- created and applies operation and management procedures for interactions with telescope operators and users
- provides support to astronomers who receive Access funded telescope time; handles their travel claims
- provides progress reports on the Access Programme on a quarterly basis
- provides annual reports submitted to the EC
- proposes and pursues new ideas concerning the Access Programme as a whole.

The creation of the database powered website and the operation and management procedures was done in a most professional way and deserves high credit by the Telescope Director's Forum (TDF). The procedures as outlined in various flow charts and templates allow semi-automatic detection of failures in the daily operation and management of the Access programmes and ensure a transparent information flow in the proposal submission - observing time allocation -observing trip - user reimbursement chain.

(It is recommended that the procedures are cleaned from acronyms such as OT, ORM, ENO which originate from previous, locally used, procedures)

The reporting concerning the impact and progress of the Access Programme has been automated and reports can be personalised by the telescope operators using the database powered webpage . The information available via that webpage can not be used, however, to generate the yearly reports required by the EC: information required for those reports need to be transferred manually into MS-datasheets provided by the EC. Work is in progress to create an interface that will allow to do so automatically in the future.

Tasks that go beyond the day-to-day management of the Access Programme include an analysis of the time allocation procedures and suggestions to increase the visibility of the programme. The AO is very much encouraged to provide feedback to the TDF and stimulate discussions to implement improvements. An analysis of the scientific impact of the Access Program has also been started, although it is not clear how meaningful this can be at this stage.

B- Detailed assessment of the human effort per activity

To perform all these tasks, the staff of the AO, as charged to the Opticon N6 activity, comprises:

- A half-time astrophysicist, employed as manager of the office
- A full-time engineer for the day-to-day operation and interaction with users and telescope operators
- A half-time secretary for administration and financial matters

This staff was hired during 2004. Part-time staff are appointed full-time at the IAC, sharing duties with other projects (most notably N2 in Opticon). In addition, J. Burgos is providing overall supervision and guidelines, and support from IAC staff (e.g. software engineering) is available when necessary.

In the initial phase, the set-up of the various tasks and programs described in the previous section were obviously requiring more staff than the routine phase which is now coming, even if largely building up on past experience with previous international arrangements in the Canary Islands observatories. The first four months of 2004 were spent to setting up the Access Office and the database powered website and the operation and management procedures .

The Review Panel felt that the level of staff at the AO was justified during the first 18 months of the Opticon FP6 program. The IAC provided in addition technical expertise to set the database and web tool infrastructure, without charging these costs to Opticon. Some inconsistencies were however found in the total estimate of manpower and cost between different documents.

From Spring 2005 onwards, the Access programme and its Office turned into routine operations. In that phase, the tasks of the AO is split as follows (details provided during the visit of the review panel): 60% of staff effort for the day-to-day tasks related with the direct management of the Access Programme (arrangements of trips, payment of grants, communication with telescope operators and users), 20% to promote the programme, and 20% for reporting. The Panel noted that direct management of the Access programme requires one day for one night/day of observing time available in the programme! In comparison to the routine services provided to the usual visitors to the telescopes, the services provided to the Access users of the telescopes are an order of magnitude more expensive, even when the increased complexity of managing different telescopes at different locations and users from different countries is taken into account.

An effort is thus made to understand the work load of the AO per activity :

during the first 18 months, a total of 94 travel grants were processed, which translates into 62 grants per year or 5 grants per month.

By comparison, other observatories run similar programmes with much less staff: e.g. ~ 100 proposals with 0.5 FTE at Calar Alto, or ~ 400 proposals with ~2.5 FTE at ESO. It is however recognised that maximum efficiency is only reached after some years of experience.

A more detailed analysis of the work power used in the various packages has also been made from the table in Section 5.2 of the AO report.

After the discussions with the AO staff it appears that much time is spent in detailed interaction with individual users (or telescope operators). It is

concluded that the work load there could be significantly reduced by clarifying the general instructions to users (including a Frequently Asked Questions page on the Web), simplifying the services to individuals (no need of an expensive travel agency), transferring the load of travel arrangements to individuals and observatories who know better the local circumstances (and have to provide similar services to most of their visiting astronomers anyway), etc...Statistics and reporting do not need to be more frequent than the periodicity of telescope time allocation, that is twice a year.

The Panel concluded that the amount of time spent in the various work packages which relate to the direct management of the Access Programme is too large by a factor of at least two, in a phase of routine operations, and that a rigorous streamlining should be implemented to manage the programme in a way similar to the one done at other observatories.

Overall, a better, and more frequent interaction with the TDF should allow to identify the priorities for the work of the AO and take advantage of accumulated experience.

C. Perspectives and future work

The AO report concludes with plans for the future which are interesting to detail. These include a better promotion of the access programme, an analysis of the various procedures to award time with scenarios for improvements, an analysis of the scientific output of the Access Program, and improvements in the management procedures.

The Panel appreciated the initiative of the AO for coming up with stimulating ideas, and moving away from the model of a “travel agency”. Such initiatives are clearly within the scope of the TDF and should be clarified and prioritised by them.

It seems obvious that a regular interaction of the AO with the TDF would generate more ideas and at the same time help to streamline the activities along the most important tasks. This panel is of the opinion that the manpower liberated by the reduction of the day-to-day load could be usefully employed in those new tasks, taking advantage of the experience and dedication of the AO team assembled at the IAC.

Annexes

Annex 1. Extract of the minutes of the Chania Board meeting (4-5 Sept. 2003)

Access Office

A centralized structure for the management of the access programme had been agreed for the proposal

Jesus Burgos presented an overview of the role and budget for this office. Under FP5, the IAC had already managed the access to telescopes. It was planned to advertise and publicize widely by the use of newsletters, direct mailing and from this set up a database of contacts. The users would have to comply with the terms and conditions of the contract and appropriate documentation would be maintained to support and justify the amount of access.

There was concern regarding the budget for the office, which was estimated by Dr Gredel as too large by a factor of two. Prof Andersen noted that the proposed budget would be for 18 months in the first instance, rebalancing could occur after this period. Any problems would be dealt with at a local level by the IAC, then to the Directors' Forum and finally to the Executive Committee if a solution could not be found. Prof Rebolo indicated that the IAC could only undertake this function if its costs were met in full, as the IAC could not subsidize the office from its internal resources. In response to a question from Dr Gredel, Prof Rebolo indicated that would be possible for another organization to fill this role if the IAC could not or did not wish to carry it out.

Dr Gredel commented that the number of nights of access agreed in the contract to be funded by the EC funds are a minimum limit on what could be made available by Telescope Operators, not a maximum.

DECISION: Directors' Forum to oversee the Access program, and to review the operation of the Access Office after 18 months.

Annex 2. Terms of reference for this Review

Background

The decision to hold a review of the Access programme office was taken at the Chania board meeting (4-5 September 2003). It was agreed to accept the budget proposed by the IAC for the operation of the office and to review the situation after 18 months, at which time some rebalancing could occur.

The review will:

Evaluate the performance of the OPTICON Access Office against the goals set for it in the OPTICON contract;

In the light of experience of the Access programme to date and of its

likely future evolution, consider the appropriate level of activities for the OPTICON Access Office for the remainder of the OPTICON contract;

Consider the level of resources appropriate for the recommended activities of the Access Office for the remainder of the OPTICON contract;

and present a report to the Executive Committee.

Annex 3. Questionnaire sent to all directors of the TDF

In order to prepare the 18-months review of the access office, we would be grateful to receive qualitative and quantitative input from you on the following items:

Quantitative overview of

- total number of qualifying proposals received for your telescope
- actually scheduled number of programmes and number of nights
- inconsistencies if any with Jesus' preliminary report distributed on April 7th, 2005
- number of service proposals if any
- number of visiting astronomers (VAs) and length of stay/journey, with national breakdown
- feedback if any from VAs concerning their satisfaction with the support received from the access office (travel, reimbursement, general questions)

More qualitatively,

- your own satisfaction with presentations and reports provided by the access office (information content, clarity in presentation), eg at the telescope directors meetings, via website, etc.
- your evaluation of the efficiency with which the access office responded to your requests
- your ie your auditors satisfaction with information provide by the access office for the 2004 audit

And finally,

- would you have found it easy to identify the qualifying runs yourselves if that had been necessary
- if, for any reason, it was not possible for the access office to pay out travel grants for your qualifying observers, could you manage this yourselves locally or via your national agency
- would you be able to collect, collate and report statistical information required by the EU (The EU requires considerable amounts of statistical information and observer reports for each infrastructure. To gauge this task, see annual report downloadable from <ftp.ast.cam.ac.uk/pub/gil/OPTICON>. There are 77 pages of access data plus a MS database file)
- how much staff effort would it require for you to do these extra tasks and could it be absorbed in the 20% overhead cost associated with your user fee? Or would you need extra resources from the central opticon budget?