Dear South African Astronomical Community

Target Readership And Purpose Of This Email

This email is intended primarily for those who proposed for SALT time in the call which closed in mid July. It is, however, being sent to everyone on the email list: saastronomers@list.saao.ac.za , so that everyone will know how the time allocation went. If you are not interested in using SALT or knowing how its first time allocation went, don't bother to read any further.

The email gives a general description of the process we followed. SALT Astronomy Operations will be contacting each PI shortly to inform them of the outcome of their proposal. For those of you who are co-Is on a proposal with a foreign PI, feel free to send this email to them (or indeed anyone who might be interested).

Who Did The Allocation?

It was done by SASTAC (the South African SALT Time Allocation Committee) comprising Renee Kraan-Korteweg, Michael Feast, Kavilan Moodley, David Buckley and Darragh O'Donoghue (Chair).

What Needed To Be Done?

Consider 89 Phase I proposals asking for at least some time from the SA share of SALT time. Time was to be allocated into priorities 0, 1, 2 and 3.

How Much Time?

The 89 proposals asked for 1097.3 hours of time. The amount of time available is 292.6 hours. This means that only 26.67 per cent of the time requested is available. *It is then clear that roughly 73 per cent of the community will be disappointed, either because their proposal was rejected or because the amount of time allocated was drastically smaller than what they had requested.*

Did Min Useful Time Help?

It did a bit but the sum of the min useful times we received was about 50 per cent of the time requested so we had to chop on average by another factor of 2.

How Did We Do The Job?

The process was divided into 3 stages, given that it was impossible for any one person to read carefully all 89 proposals. (i) Everyone was assigned roughly 35 each, which meant that there were two "primary reviewers" of each proposal. After having read their 35 proposals, they compared notes with the other person reading that proposal and came to a consensus view; (ii) The entire committee met and considered each one of the 89 proposals (except their own - see next comment) which allowed comment from other members. This sometimes led to a change of view, including by one or other primary reviewer. A consensus view of the committee was reached; (iii) Finally, the statistics of each sub-field of astronomy in the proposals was considered to see if moderation within a sub-field or across sub-fields was needed (in general, this made a minor difference).

Did SASTAC Enjoy Unfair Advantage?

Not as far as we could see. No primary reviewer considered his/her own proposal, whether as PI or co-I. Every time any proposal was discussed in the full committee, anyone on the committee who was co-I or PI on the proposal was asked to leave the room to allow the others on the committee complete freedom to criticise. For all proposals, the maximum number of PIs or co-Is on any specific one was two, leaving the other three to assess it.

Approach

We favoured:

o Scientific merit above everything else but not overwhelmingly so. No proposal lacking scientific merit received time.

o Proposals leading to observations which would be used in a SA student's MSc or PhD project

o Proposals which were smaller and would lead to publishable results on a short time scale (but this was a minor bias - lots of larger programs were not worse off because of this)

o Proposals which were led by South Africans (by which we mean people affiliated to a SA institution)

o Proposals which took advantage of the strengths of the telescope

We were less favourably disposed towards:

o Proposals in which a large amount of SA time was asked for with a proportionately smaller representation in the proposing team. In this regard, we definitely want to encourage SA scientists to participate in international collaborations. However, if the end result is simply appearing on the proposal and as a co-author on resulting papers without having played any observational / scientific role, such proposals are then simply conduits for SA time going abroad with little benefit for the development of our scientists. So we were looking for signs of more than participation "on paper" from SA scientists.

o Proposals in which the efficiency of the observing program is low. Many proposals entirely ignored the 900 sec "setup" time for every new pointing of the telescope. While this number is way too high and will certainly go down in the future, it is a very real overhead at the moment. Its neglect often halved the amount of telescope time which was being requested compared to what was actually needed. On top of this, targets were then observed with exposures of only a small fraction of 900 sec. These proposals were viewed less favourably and in some cases led to rejection of the proposal.

o Proposals which could be done on one of the SAAO small telescopes.

How Did The Numbers Work Out?

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We could have rejected 73 per cent of all proposals and given the remainder everything they asked. Or we could have rejected none and reduced all the observing time by 73 per cent. We decided that for this first round of proposals we would try and include as broad a range of the community as possible. We thus leaned away from rejecting and instead leaned towards reducing time. In the end 15 proposals were rejected and received no time. A handful were moved to commissioning time mainly due to their asking for capability which is not commissioned yet.

For those proposals which merited getting time, it was of course unavoidable to cut down drastically, for the "average proposal", on the time requested. Even the minimum useful times could not be granted (on average). Some small proposals (an hour or so) did receive all they asked; most proposals and all the large proposals were cut down with the result that a much smaller number of targets can be observed.

More statistics will be forthcoming once they are worked out.

We also noted that in many cases, the moon phase was inappropriately specified and so we changed this. Occasionally we gave specific guidance on which of the targets was to be observed with the
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amount of time available.

How Did It Go?
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Really very hard work - the Chair worked on this task pretty much 100 per cent for 3 weeks. We held about 6 meetings altogether (by Skype with Renee and Kavi), including three 4-hr meetings last week. And knowing that we would disappoint 73 per cent before we even began did not make it easier. This is why we were several days late with the assessments.

Darragh O'Donoghue

On behalf of SASTAC
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