

Observing Support at the SOC

With the SOC now the default observing location for ATCA observers, Robin Wark, and the DA support role, have been relocated to Marsfield. An interim DA roster has been put in place until 5 Jan 2015 while the SOC observing support is reviewed.

Robin led the preparation of a discussion paper on models for ATCA observing support, and considered (1) continuing the existing DA scheme, (2) adopting the Project Expert scheme now used at Parkes, (3) moving to support on a project-by-project basis (as opposed to week-at-a-time support provided by the DA), (4) an intensive initial training period for first time observers with no requirement for annual requalification, (5) the use of operators or service observing. These models were discussed with the CASS Astro group and input sought from both their perspective as users, and as observing support. While there was some support for project-by-project support, there was stronger support for continuing the existing DA scheme. We propose below to continue the DA scheme but strengthen the existing “Friend” scheme to provide project-by-project support.

The separate question of how often observers need to come to the SOC to requalify was also considered. Current policy is that all observers need to revisit after 12 months in order to requalify, independent of how much remote observing they have done in the meantime. We propose below a modified scheme to allow the 12-month period to be extended to 2 years for regular, competent users.

Proposed observing support model

The existing Duty Astronomer scheme continues as is for the ATCA. The relocation of the DA role to Sydney provides CASS staff and post-docs with greater flexibility in fulfilling this role. The DA must be contactable at all times, but does not need to be on-site if the observers are not at the SOC, or the observers are competent and have declared they do not require the presence of a DA on-site. Co-supervised students, or others, are able to stay at the Marsfield Lodge for the week they are DA. There was a preference in the Astro group to sign up for a week at a time and commit to that week (rather than more piecemeal project-by-project support), and this also ensures the DA can be on top of any issues affecting the ATCA at the time. All Astro staff and postdocs are expected to be DA for two weeks each year. ATNF co-supervised students are expected to be DA after the first year of their PhD (during which time they are expected to have obtained some observing experience).

Proposers already have the option of requesting a “Friend” both at the proposal stage, and also when submitting their booking form (at which time the member of the team who will do the observing has been identified). In the past the Friend has provided advice (normally to first-time or inexperienced users) on planning and creating schedule files, but has not been involved with the observing or data reduction. With first-time observers now at the SOC, there is scope to expand the Friend role to include data reduction support. We propose that every observer who comes to the SOC (first-time observers for ATCA and Parkes, observers seeking to

requalify for remote observing, and those who elect to observe from the SOC) is assigned a Friend from among the Astro (or, occasionally, Ops) group at the time they make their booking. If an Astro or Ops staff member is a co-I on the project, this role will default to them (unless they are away from site). The DA (with the support of Ops staff) will be responsible for showing ATCA observers how to observe; for Parkes the project-specific observing mode will be given by the allocated Friend. Support from Friends is during week-day work-hours only. For Parkes, an introduction to the telescope and facilities is additionally provided for first-time observers and re-qualifying observers, usually by John Sarkissian over the video link. The present Parkes SOC Astronomer role will be discontinued, but Parkes projects must still nominate a Project Expert to be the first point of contact for after-hours matters. Projects without an Expert are expected to send observer(s) several days in advance of their observations so they can be trained to become an Expert.

Observer requalification

It is widely recognized that the current annual visit to the SOC for requalification does not ensure competency for infrequent remote observers, and can be an inconvenience for regular (and, more likely, competent) remote observers.

Parkes pulsar observers, in particular, often observe each month, and so stay “current”. On the other hand, we still believe that the opportunity for operations staff, observers, and Astro staff to interact to mutual benefit argues strongly for requiring observers to visit after a clearly defined period. We also recognize that overseas observers are sometimes constrained to one observing trip per year.

We propose:

- to improve the training tools available to remote observers through checklists and training videos as reminders for infrequent observers.
- to continue to require observers to revisit the SOC if more than a year has elapsed since their last visit, and they have not remote observed on more than four separate occasions (at least twice per semester) in that time
- if an observer has observed at least twice in a semester at intervals separated by at least a month, their remote qualification period is extended by 6 months.
- to require observers to revisit the SOC if more than two years has elapsed since their last visit (no matter how much remote observing they have done in the interim).
- to require observers who demonstrate they do not possess a reasonable understanding of observing procedures to revisit to SOC for their next run
- to strongly encourage observers using significantly different observing modes/backends/strategies to come to the SOC to observe

We welcome input from ATUC on these proposals, and will encourage feedback from observers once the new model is enacted. We will review the progress after provide a report at the next ATUC meeting.