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Australian Time Allocation Committee Policies and Procedures

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Astronomy Australia Limited

ATAC Policies and Procedures

Preface

This document defines the Australian Time Allocation Committee's (ATAC) policies and procedures for time allocation on telescopes available to the Australian astronomical community. These telescopes include the Anglo-Australian Telescope (AAT) at Siding Spring Observatory (SSO), and other optical telescopes as directed by Astronomy Australia Limited (AAL) from time to time. It is designed to assist ATAC members and observatory staff.

The ATAC policies and procedures were originally developed by the Australian Astronomical Observatory (AAO) but are now maintained by AAL. From 1 July 2018, ATAC has operated as an AAL committee.

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1 Background

- 1.1 The Commonwealth of Australia and the European Southern Observatory agreed a strategic partnership for 2018–2027. The Commonwealth subsequently repealed the Australian Astronomical Observatory Act 2010¹ (the Act) and disestablished the AAO, effective 1 July 2018.
- 1.2 From 1 July 2018, an AAT Consortium manages AAT funding, operations and access, where:
 - a) the Consortium is an unincorporated collaborative joint venture, comprising AAL and several Australian universities;
 - b) AAL is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, whose members comprise Australian universities and research organisations with a significant astronomical research capability;
 - c) the Consortium is governed by an AAT Council comprising Consortium member representatives;
 - d) the Consortium is managed by AAL on their behalf;
 - e) the Australian National University (ANU) operates the AAT for the Consortium, under a service agreement with AAL.
- 1.3 Also from 1 July 2018, the time allocation functions described by Section 11 of the Act [items 11(2)(d) and 11(2)(k)], namely facilitating access to optical astronomy facilities and implementing Australia’s international obligations in relation to optical astronomy, become the responsibility of AAL’s non-advisory Australian Time Allocation Committee (hereafter, ATAC).
- 1.4 ATAC manages time allocation for the following telescopes:
 - a) the AAT, governed by the AAT Council on behalf of the AAT Consortium;
 - b) other optical telescopes for which national access agreements for Australian astronomers exist and are governed by AAL (as of 1 July 2018, this includes the Blanco Telescope).
- 1.5 AAL will solicit nominations for ATAC as and when required, and may seek the advice of the AAT Council or an AAL advisory committee (as appropriate) in making new appointments to ATAC.
- 1.6 ATAC ranks all proposals for observing time on the basis of scientific merit and assigns each one an appropriate number of nights or hours.

2 Types of Telescope Time

- 2.1 Each telescope for which ATAC allocates time may have specified fractions of open time, paid time, and Director's time, which will be set by the governing entity for the telescope (as listed above at §1.4). These fractions will be advertised in the Call for Proposals for each telescope.

¹ Itself preceded by the repealed *Anglo-Australian Telescope Agreement Act 1970*.

- 2.2 Open time is available to Australian proposals – that is, proposals with more than half the proposers and the lead proposer at an Australian research institution.
- 2.3 Paid time is available to both Australian and non-Australian proposals: Australian proposals may choose to apply for either open or paid time (this choice needs to be made at the time the proposal is submitted); all other proposals may only apply for paid time.
- 2.4 The relevant governing entity determines the terms and conditions for paid time, including the nightly or hourly rate. These terms and conditions (or the contact for negotiating them) will be advertised in the Call for Proposals for each telescope. Note that paid time may include time obtained in exchange for either cash or some other consideration (such as time on another telescope or access to a visiting instrument), at the discretion of the relevant governing entity.
- 2.5 Director’s time is used for a variety of purposes determined by the governing entity for each telescope, but typically includes telescope maintenance, mirror aluminising, compensation of time lost due to technical issues, instrument commissioning, technology development, and exceptional time-critical observing programs.
- 2.6 Service time may be offered on a telescope under terms and conditions specified by the governing entity. Service time is typically made available for short-duration proposals where observations are carried out on behalf of the proposers and may be either open time or paid time.
- 2.7 From semester 2018B, the amounts of Director’s, open and paid time on each of the telescopes allocated by ATAC are as follows:

Period	Telescope	Director’s Nights	Open Nights	Paid Nights	Paid Rate	Service Time?
2018B	AAT 3.9m	15	≥ 119	≤ 50	On inquiry*	Yes
≥ 2019A	'''	'''	'''	'''	'''	No

* Enquires regarding the price of paid time should be directed to AAL.

3 ATAC Membership

- 3.1 ATAC has 7 members, including at least 1 international member. A substitute member will also be appointed by AAL in the event of an ATAC member being unavailable for a meeting of the committee.
- 3.2 ATAC appointments are usually 3-year terms. Appointments may be for staggered terms to ensure a steady turnover in membership.
- 3.3 AAL will appoint ATAC members. New members will be drawn from a nominee pool AAL solicits via an open call to the community. AAL will seek committee representation encompassing a broad spread of specialisation, seniority, gender and institutional diversity. In particular, from 2019B onwards, ATAC should be comprised of at least 40% female and 40% male members.
- 3.4 AAL will appoint a Chair and Deputy Chair from among the committee members.

- 3.5 AAL will appoint a Technical Secretary. The Technical Secretary is not a member of the committee.
- 3.6 AAL will appoint a Secretary to provide secretarial support to ATAC. The Secretary is not a member of the committee.

4 ATAC Meetings

- 4.1 Observing time is allocated by semester, namely:
 - A. February – July (the 'A' semester), with nominal proposal deadlines of 5pm AEST on 15 September (AAT) and 30 September (Blanco); and
 - B. August – January (the 'B' semester) with nominal proposal deadlines of 5pm ADST on 15 March (AAT) and 31 March (Blanco).
- 4.2 The committee meets twice each year, usually in the first or second weeks of May and November, to assess and rank proposals for the following semester.
- 4.3 Prior to accessing the submitted proposals, each semester the committee will meet for approximately 30 minutes via videoconference to discuss the topic of unconscious bias in the review process, including reviewing the gender-based application and success statistics for ATAC-allocated facilities.
- 4.4 Four members constitute a quorum. At the meeting the Chair (or in their absence, the Deputy Chair) presides.
- 4.5 Allocations are made by a grading system (described below) carried out by the members present.
- 4.6 ATAC members may be required to vote on procedural or allocation matters. In the event of an equality of votes, the Chair (or Deputy Chair, if presiding) has a casting as well as a deliberative vote.
- 4.7 ATAC will normally meet in person in Australia. Members unable to attend in person are expected to participate via videoconference.
- 4.8 The following are guidelines for managing issues related to remote participation:
 - a) Remote participants must provide the ATAC Secretary with their pre-grades at least 24 hours in advance of the ATAC meeting.
 - b) Remote participants should aim to secure a backup option to connect to the meeting. If needed, AAL will support reasonable expenses for a high-bandwidth and reliable internet connection and its backup.
 - c) The first two times a remote member is disconnected within any approximately 2-hour window, the panel will wait up to five minutes before resuming the live discussion without the remote member.
 - d) For any additional disconnections within this window, at the Chair's discretion the panel will not suspend the discussion.
 - e) Remote members whose participation in a proposal discussion has been affected by connectivity issues will not provide a grade for the proposal being discussed, unless participation of the remote member was judged adequate by the Chair.

- f) For any proposal affected by connectivity issues, and for which the remote participant is lead reviewer, every attempt will be made to consider the proposal in full later in the meeting when the lead reviewer has re-connected. If that is not possible, the proposal will be considered by the remaining members, and the lead reviewer's pre-grade will be included in the final ATAC grade.

5 Time Allocation Process

ATAC's fundamental role is to rank proposals by scientific merit. For each telescope where time is allocated by ATAC, the following process will apply:

- 5.1 Committee members should grade each proposal based on scientific merit, using the following scale:

- 5 = outstanding proposal;
- 4 = above average proposal;
- 3 = good proposal (i.e. average standard);
- 2 = below average proposal;
- 1 = technically or scientifically defective proposal.

- 5.2 ATAC can reject proposals not meeting an acceptable threshold of scientific merit and technical feasibility. Using the grading scale defined above, this means proposals with an ATAC-average grade ≤ 2.0 . In practice, if paid time proposals request fewer than the available number of paid nights, then ATAC may choose to only check that all paid time proposals meet this minimum threshold.

- 5.3 If demand for merited and feasible paid time exceeds the available paid time, ATAC will rank paid time proposals. The highest ranked paid time proposals will be allocated paid time. Any remaining non-Australian paid time proposals will be rejected. Any remaining Australian paid time proposals will be converted to open time proposals.

- 5.4 Proposals for observing time will only be accepted via the relevant online proposal form/tool and must be submitted before the announced deadline. Applications received after the deadline will only be considered by ATAC if the Chair and Deputy Chair judge that there are sufficient extenuating circumstances.

- 5.5 No applicant or institution will receive special consideration by ATAC. For proposals near the cut-off for scheduling however, some priority may be given to those deemed essential for completion of a student's PhD thesis, if such a case has been made in the proposal.

- 5.6 Any Director's time is taken off the top of the total available time.

- 5.7 For the AAT, if service time is offered, the number of nights set aside for service observations will be based on the number of active proposals in each instrument's service queue, with the goal of maintaining approximately the same level of over-subscription as for regular AAT proposals.

- 5.8 Proposals are circulated to committee members as soon as possible after each telescope's deadline. Proposal materials are distributed electronically, although at the request of ATAC members, hard copies may be provided. Each proposal is allocated to

a specific committee member ('lead reviewer') by the Chair, for more careful consideration and for presentation at the meeting. The lead reviewer presenting the proposal cannot be one of the investigators on that proposal, and whenever possible, should not be from the same institution as the lead proposer.

- 5.9 Proposals are distributed to the Technical Secretary to assess the technical feasibility of the observations. The Technical Secretary may delegate this task to suitable technical assessors, who will remain anonymous. Technical assessments should not include any comments regarding the scientific merit of proposals. Assessors should not make guesses if the necessary information is not clear from the application. Technical assessments are circulated to ATAC members about one week prior to the meeting, along with a response from the lead proposer if the Technical Secretary judges that there is a serious technical problem. The Technical Secretary will have the final say on whether a proposal is feasible and indicate an appropriate number of nights to be allocated if the proposal is awarded time (where for technical reasons this differs from the submitted request).
- 5.10 In general, ATAC will review proposals without recourse to external referees. However, the ATAC Chair has the discretion to call for referee reports where appropriate (e.g. for Large Programs, or for highly specialised or contentious proposals). The Technical Secretary and ATAC Chair will be responsible for soliciting up to 3 referees per proposal, with each referee typically asked to review 2 or 3 such proposals. Lead proposers will have the right of reply to matters raised by the referees, but the referee's identity should remain anonymous (except to the Technical Secretary and ATAC Chair).
- 5.11 In order to save time at the meeting, each panel member does a full science pre-grading of all the proposals beforehand, abstaining for those proposals in which they are taking part or are otherwise conflicted. These pre-grades are submitted to the ATAC Secretary before the meeting. Panel members are free to change their votes at the meeting, as subsequent discussions may change opinions.
- 5.12 At the meeting, a number of proposals with the lowest pre-grades may be omitted from further discussion unless there is a sufficient dispersion in the pre-grades to warrant more investigation. For each remaining proposal:
 - a) the proposal's lead reviewer gives a brief summary of it, concluding with their scientific opinion of the application;
 - b) the committee discusses the proposal;
 - c) each ATAC member submits their final grade to the Technical Secretary;
 - d) fractional grades are permitted;
 - e) the Technical Secretary calculates the final average grade.
- 5.13 When a committee member is included in the list of applicants on a proposal, or otherwise feels they may have a conflict of interest, they must excuse themselves from the meeting during discussion and voting on that proposal.
- 5.14 Grades should be given on the scientific merit of the proposal, irrespective of whether dark, grey, or bright time is requested.

- 5.15 Proposals are graded scientifically for the maximum number of nights/hours requested, unless panel members feel the goals can be met in less time. In such cases, voting may be conducted on the minimum request specified in the proposal, and this will be folded into the overall ranking.
- 5.16 The grades for each application are indicative only, and are just one of several considerations in the allocation of time. They are strictly confidential and should not be circulated outside the meeting.
- 5.17 Allocations made at the meeting are provisional only, and strictly confidential. The Scheduler undertakes to construct draft telescope schedules within one week of the ATAC meeting. After approval by the ATAC Chair, the Scheduler or ATAC Secretary will e-mail the lead proposer on all successful proposals with details of their scheduling and guidelines for observing.
- 5.18 Immediately before or in conjunction with the release of the telescope schedules, the ATAC Secretary e-mails all applicants giving the committee's reasons for the non-allocation of time, or for the number of allocated nights, and general feedback. The feedback can indicate the relative position of the application in relation to the others, but should not reveal the grade given by ATAC to the proposal.
- 5.19 The process for allocating Australia's exchange time on the CTIO Blanco 4m telescope (nominally 5 nights per semester) is essentially the same as that described for the AAT. ATAC's priority list of CTIO programs they wish to allocate will be forwarded to NOAO/CTIO for scheduling. NOAO AAT allocations are received by the Technical Secretary and forwarded to the Scheduler, who will make best efforts to accommodate NOAO's recommendations.

6 Responsibilities – ATAC Members

Each ATAC member is expected to:

- 6.1 Declare any conflict of interest that may affect their objective assessment of proposals.
- 6.2 Strictly respect the confidentiality and intellectual property of proposal contents, including any unpublished research and/or proprietary information, and to not disclose it in any form to any third party (including to any persons or party of their employer, including research colleagues, graduate students, postdoctoral or research associates) without prior written consent from the lead proposer.
- 6.3 Keep confidential all discussions within ATAC regarding proposals.
- 6.4 Assess and grade each proposal prior to the meeting.
- 6.5 Prepare a summary of the proposals allocated for presentation at the meeting.
- 6.6 Prepare a brief feedback statement for each proposal, based on discussion during the meeting.
- 6.7 Provide a point of contact for telescope users to communicate general issues with ATAC, although any potential matter of dispute arising from the meeting should be directed to the Chair.
- 6.8 Undertake other tasks as directed by the ATAC Chair.

7 Responsibilities – ATAC Chair

In addition, the ATAC Chair (or in their absence, the Deputy Chair) is expected to:

- 7.1 Ensure the operation of ATAC under the policies described in this document.
- 7.2 Oversee policy matters relating to ATAC.
- 7.3 Allocate lead reviewers to each proposal, avoiding known conflicts of interest
- 7.4 Conduct the business at each meeting.
- 7.5 Coordinate the allocation process at the meeting.
- 7.6 Liaise with the ATAC Secretary and Technical Secretary on any matters arising or on development of new policies.
- 7.7 After the meeting, oversee the dispatch of feedback to all applicants with assistance from the Technical Secretary.
- 7.8 Liaise with the Scheduler and Technical Secretary in the event of a scheduling conflict.
- 7.9 Provide a point of contact for the SSO Director, AAT Council, and AAL for issues pertaining to ATAC operations and responsibilities.
- 7.10 Approve the telescope schedule.

8 Responsibilities – ATAC Technical Secretary

The Technical Secretary is responsible for:

- 8.1 Providing the user community with an updated list of available instruments on each telescope in advance of the application deadline.
- 8.2 Supervising the receipt of ATAC applications via the online proposal form.
- 8.3 Coordination of technical assessments by suitably qualified astronomers.
- 8.4 Liaison with lead proposers prior to the meeting where there may be a serious technical problem with a proposal. An extract from the technical assessment should be forwarded to the lead proposer, edited for clarification if necessary. This is intended to be a one-pass process and lengthy e-mail correspondence should not be entered into.
- 8.5 Providing a report to ATAC through the ATAC Chair on oversubscription history, telescope usage and updates on instrumentation status.
- 8.6 Sending out final feedback to proposers on all proposals.
- 8.7 Any other matters as directed by the ATAC Chair, AAL or AAT Council.
- 8.8 The Technical Secretary may not comment on scientific issues, unless invited to do so by the ATAC Chair. The Technical Secretary, or a suitable substitute, should attend policy and scientific sessions of the ATAC meeting or at the very least be available for technical comment during the meeting.
- 8.9 All information accessible to the Technical Secretary remains confidential.

9 Responsibilities – ATAC Secretary

The ATAC Secretary is responsible for:

- 9.1 Providing general secretarial support for ATAC, as directed by the ATAC Chair.
- 9.2 Arranging ATAC members' travel.
- 9.3 Managing ATAC members' proposal pre-grades.
- 9.4 Managing applicant requests for long-term observer status.
- 9.5 Informing proposers, in coordination with the Scheduler, of proposal results, feedback, applicable scheduling details and observing guidelines.

10 Responsibilities – External Roles

The SSO Director, though not part of the ATAC, is responsible for:

- 10.1 Managing telescope activities allocated to Director's time.
- 10.2 Confirming to ATAC that Large Program proposals can be implemented by the Operator.
- 10.3 Confirming that Override Program proposals can be implemented by the Operator.
- 10.4 Approving individual Override Program triggers.
- 10.5 Reporting to ATAC on the impacts and outcomes of Override programs

The Scheduler, though not part of the ATAC, is responsible for:

- 10.6 Developing telescope schedules, including integrating proposals submitted under agreed time exchange programs with international partners.
- 10.7 Managing scheduling conflicts.
- 10.8 Informing proposers, in coordination with the ATAC Secretary, of proposal results, feedback applicable scheduling details and observing guidelines.

11 Scheduling Observing Time

- 11.1 The scheduling procedure starts from ATAC's ranking and recommended time allocation for each proposal. Scheduling is subject to a wide variety of practical constraints (instrument availability, lunar phase, accessibility of targets, and so on) – it is to be understood that the scheduling procedure described below works within the limits imposed by these practical constraints.
- 11.2 Director's time and service observing time are taken off the top of the available nights, as are prior commitments to Large and Long Term Programs.
- 11.3 Paid time proposals are allocated time in order of scientific merit until all available paid nights are exhausted (unless there are fewer paid nights meeting the acceptable threshold than the available number of paid nights, in which case all paid nights are allocated). Any paid nights that are not used are added to the available open nights.

- 11.4 Open time proposals (including any Australian paid time proposals that have not been allocated paid time) are then allocated time in order of scientific merit until all remaining available nights are exhausted.
- 11.5 The Scheduler will, with guidance from the ATAC Chair, make minor adjustments to the allocations to allow for practical matters such as dark time, scheduled instrument blocks, Director's time and so on.

12 AAT Long Term Programs and Large Programs

- 12.1 AAT programs requiring time in more than one semester, and particularly those that will be spread over three or more semesters or requiring substantial amounts of telescope time, may seek Long Term status for their proposal. If successful, the proposal will gain an award of time for the coming semester and a provisional award for future semesters (subject to reports on the progress of the project), relieving applicants of the need to continually apply for time for the same project. A proposal is deemed a Large Program if the total requested telescope time exceeds 50 nights.
- 12.2 If a proposal is unsuccessful in obtaining Long Term status, it may still be considered for a normal award for the upcoming semester. Applicants should justify the total time request carefully and indicate both the number of nights in the upcoming semester and the total number of nights (i.e. the sum of the time requested in the upcoming and all future semesters combined) on the application form.
- 12.3 Applicants seeking Long Term status may be allowed to submit a longer proposal (up to a strict 5-page limit for the science case) with prior permission from ATAC; such requests should be via the ATAC Secretary.
- 12.4 Large Program proposals are normally submitted in response to a Large Program Call for Proposals. Large Programs will require large allocations, and will usually extend over more than one semester. Applicants submitting a Large Program proposal must demonstrate a major, compelling and feasible science program, a well-designed observing strategy, a sound management plan, and a credible project timeline. Prospective applicants are strongly encouraged to discuss their plans with the SSO Director and ATAC Chair prior to submission. Large Programs proposals will normally have a strict 10-page limit. Large Programs are usually refereed by up to three referees external to ATAC.

13 Proprietary Rights for AAT Data

- 13.1 AAT data will be available through the AAT archive after an initial proprietary period. Data taken prior to 1 August 2006 had a proprietary period of 24 months, while data taken on or after that date have a proprietary period of 18 months.
- 13.2 ATAC and/or the AAT Council may choose to extend or shorten this proprietary period for any particular program (or a subset of the data).

14 AAT Service Observing

- 14.1 Service observing may be suspended or reactivated for any given observing semester, at the discretion of the AAT Council.

- 14.2 Applications for AAT service observing can be made for programs requiring up to 6 hours of telescope time. Service mode proposals will be accepted at any time. Service proposals expire 18 months after submission but may be re-submitted for re-assessment at any time.
- 14.3 Service observing applications are assessed by the Service subcommittee of ATAC according to their scientific merit, feasibility and timeliness. The Service subcommittee will normally be comprised of three members of ATAC.
- 14.4 Submitting the same proposal both for scheduled time and service time is permitted if the lead proposer makes a case why time should be awarded both ways.

15 AAT Override Policy

- 15.1 Applications for overrides should be submitted in the same way as other scheduled applications and will be assessed on scientific merit in the normal way.
- 15.2 The most obvious override is a target of opportunity (ToO) request. This is defined as any observation where the notice given to the telescope operator and the scheduled observers is likely to be short. Applications for such projects should be submitted in the usual way, explaining why the science can only be done in this fashion. However, any other short observation requiring less than half a night may also be treated by the ATAC as an override (e.g. a scheduled observation requiring two hours after twilight for three consecutive nights is also treated as an override). In this case though, the scheduled observers will know in advance, and compensation is normally given for the time lost.
- 15.3 The following rules apply to all ToO overrides:
 - a) There are two types of ToO override - rapid (immediate interrupt) and standard. A rapid ToO (immediate interrupt) means that the current observation is halted. This is done manually by the instrument operator and is not automatic. A standard ToO can be done at any time within the time limits specified in the request.
 - b) The ToO override type must be specified in the proposal. A justification for the type must be included in the proposal.
 - c) Overrides can be submitted for the following instruments:

2dF+AAOmega, 2dF+HERMES and KOALA.
 - d) Instrument changes are not allowed. Setup changes are allowed in the following cases: the central wavelengths of the AAOmega gratings, and the reconfiguration of the 2dF positioner.
 - e) Up to 2 hours of time is allowed per override (including set-up time, overheads, and time spent on calibrations).
 - f) To limit the disruption to scheduled programs, normally at most 20 hours of time is available per ToO program per semester. However, if more time is required for a ToO program, contact the Technical Secretary in advance to discuss the potential scheduling impact of your request.
 - g) An override can consist of multiple targets and multiple fields, as long as the 2-hour limit is respected.

- h) Nights during which an override can be sent are noted in the schedule. Overrides can be sent during service nights and technical nights.
- i) No more than 10% of the time of a single observing run can be overridden.
- j) Programs affected by ToO overrides will be compensated if the amount of time lost to the override is larger than 0.5 nights per semester. In most cases, the compensation will occur in subsequent observing semesters.
- k) The override will be deemed to have been completed regardless of poor weather or any other obstacle that might affect observations. Consider checking the weather before calling for the override; the current weather conditions at the AAT are available online.
- l) Override programs do not need to include the 1.5 scale factor for time lost to poor observing conditions.
- m) Override programs will only be executed after a complete observing checklist, full contact details, and template observing sequences (where appropriate) have been provided by the lead proposer to the satisfaction of the SSO Director.
- n) Within 2 days of the conclusion of an override observation, the lead proposer is obliged to contact the SSO Director with the details and the outcome of the observations.