AusSRC Merit Allocation Program

Guidelines for TAC Members

Version 0.1 March 2025

Scope of this document

This document details the assessment process to be followed by the AusSRC Time Allocation Committee (TAC) when considering proposals submitted for the allocation of resources within the AusSRC Merit Allocation Program (MAP). The contents of this document and the nature of the process closely follow the procedures that have been shaped by the Astronomy Data and Computing Services (ADACS) MAP over multiple years of delivery.

The following roles are involved in the assessment process:

- Secretary (an AusSRC staff member);
- Chair (appointed by the AusSRC Board);
- TAC Members (nominated by partner organisations).

A description of the roles will be provided below. The general aim is for the TAC to be composed of both scientists and software developers (or research software engineers) covering a wide range of experience.

The Proposal Process

Each proposal will have gone through the following process prior to reaching the TAC for assessment:

1. ***EoI Submission****:* the process begins with the project teams submitting an expression of interest (EoI) following a template provided by AusSRC. These are reviewed internally by AusSRC staff. In the case of significant oversubscription of limited resources, a fixed number of projects are awarded following the same assessment criteria outlined here. Any unsuccessful projects are notified and removed from the process.

2. ***Consultation Phase****:* AusSRC will then assign a staff member (from the science support, software development and management teams) to each remaining EoI to act as a consultant while generating a full proposal. This phase will include a series of meetings involving all relevant project stakeholders aimed at evaluating the scope of the proposal, estimating the resources required, and breaking the project into a series of goals/tasks following an Agile methodology. The project team and assigned AusSRC staff member will work together to create a well-informed project plan that will be included in the final proposal.

3. ***Formal Application***: following this consultation, applicants will be invited to submit a formal application to be assessed by the TAC. The submitted proposal will be a three page document following a template provided by AusSRC.

Proposal Deadline

The call for proposals closes when the Proposal Deadline is reached. At this time, the secretary will:

1. notify the committee of this fact;
2. make available to them a PDF archive of all validly submitted proposals;
3. attach a cover sheet with additional information about the project
   a. Explicitly labelling telescope(s) of interest, and outlining level of current/previous AusSRC support, for the equity purposes
   b. Tagging any identified areas of interest, such as collaboration with external institutions or projects of interest (e.g. DUG, IDIA, Data Central, CARTA), and translation to industry

and the TAC Chair will:

4. communicate a link to a form through which Conflicts of Interest (CoIs) and proposal assessments are to be submitted;
5. Schedule a TAC meeting (or meetings) to discuss the proposal assessments.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest (CoIs)

All committee members must declare any perceived conflicts of interest with any submitted proposals. They will be excused from any committee deliberations involving those proposals and will not score those proposals.

Committee members should use the same sort of CoI guidelines they may have encountered elsewhere with Australian astronomy committees; essentially: an honour system. The Australian astronomy community is too small to support a strictly rigorous approach. It is up to each committee member to look at each project and ask themselves: can I be objective for this assessment?

The declaration of CoIs is managed through the Proposal Assessment Form when TAC members submit their proposal assessments.

Proposal Assessment Form

Assessments are submitted via the Proposal Assessment Form. A link to this form will be emailed to the committee by the TAC Chair after the Proposal Deadline has passed. One submission should be made for each proposal, even for proposals for which assessors wish to declare a Conflict of Interest, for this is where those conflicts are declared. An example of the assessment form can be viewed in the Appendix below.

Independent assessment of proposals by all committee members

All proposals must be independently summarised and scored by every non-conflicted member of the TAC prior to the assessment meeting. Scores should be assessed according to the following priorities:

1. Path to the SKA (also referred to as Program Fit);

2. Scientific and technical merit; and

3. Feasibility.

After considering these priorities a score out of 10 is provided for each proposal. We now provide more guidance on each priority and the scoring scheme.

Path to the SKA:

For this component the TAC member is asked to consider whether or not the project aligns well with the scope of AusSRC responsibilities and addresses challenges on the path to the SKA. Essentially to determine if the proposal is a good fit for the program. The following considerations from the AusSRC mission statement can be factored in:

- **Fundamentally enable scientific output:** exploiting Australia's position as a SKA partner and host to provide the SKA community with the human resources, software, network and access to hardware that is necessary to fully engage with the SKA and precursor data products.
- **Lead in the international SKA Regional Centre (SRC) network effort:** playing a leading role in developing a global strategy for the creation, storage, and delivery of advanced SKA data products.
- **Produce, store, disseminate science data products:** enabling the production of advanced SKA and precursor data products and the development of analysis tools for the SKA science community. Build and contribute to a global SKA Science Archive Facility enabled by an international network of SRCs.

- **Engagement with other science and research communities:** engaging with science and research communities outside of the SKA (e.g. multi-wavelength and multi-messenger astronomy, fundamental physics, data-intensive sensor networks, and resource exploration), providing the AusSRC to new communities for a broader range of research returns.
- **Expand Australia's capacity in radio astronomy:** expanding the ability of the Australian SKA community to define forefront and large-scale science programs that are not possible within the nominal 100% SRC network, and to enhance Australia's ability to lead and innovate in radio astronomy.
- **Translation to industry:** engaging with industry on complementary projects such as the co-development of data and processing intensive innovations.

Precursor activities are those associated with ASKAP, MWA, and MeerKAT. Existing priority collaboration areas for the AusSRC include: Data Central, the Inter-University Institute for Data Intensive Astronomy (IDIA), the CARTA development team, and DUG Technology.

You may also consider whether this project has received support in the past and if that support was well utilised. Noting that the program is keen to accommodate new projects that are a good program fit.

Scientific and Technical Merit:

This component is fairly straightforward. The main consideration is whether the project represents a significant contribution to scientific endeavour and will make an impactful contribution to astronomy, with a particular focus on SKA science. The technical aspect relates to the development of novel technologies strategic for the SKA and its pathfinders, if applicable to the proposal in question. Each TAC member will lean on their academic experience to form their opinion in this area.

Feasibility

The main criteria here is to assess whether or not the project and proposed scope are feasible for corresponding AusSRC staff to undertake within a 1-12 month period. Factor in aspects such as the list of tasks, resource assessment and time estimate (where a shorter project may be considered less of a risk). However, be mindful that the resource assessment has been created in consultation with a nominated AusSRC staff member. Consideration should be given to risk & technical feasibility in the assessment, but given the detailed vetting conducted by the AusSRC through the EoI and consultation phases prior to proposal submission, deference should generally be paid to the resource assessment presented to the committee.

Grading Bands and Scoring

The proposal assessment form will take the TAC member through the process of considering the three categories identified above, as well as general thoughts on the proposal, before asking for an overall score out of 10 for the proposal.

The following system of four grading bands (A,B,C,D; with corresponding mark ranges) can be used as guidance for grading proposals to give a score out of 10 for each:

A. <u>Definitely support</u> [*marks of 8-10*]: high quality case (compelling science, technical requirements clearly articulated), high impact expected (quantifiable improvements in code, training, research made possible), benefits to the Australian SKA community explained (e.g. makes possible research otherwise not possible, use by students, sharing of data)

B. <u>Support if possible</u> [*marks of 5-7*]: warrants support but does not hit the heights of the "Definitely support" case – most committee discussion will happen around these proposals.

C. <u>Support after revision</u> [*marks of 2-4*]: does not warrant support in its current form, but a revised case that addresses shortcomings would/could be; most likely issues are technical requirements not clearly articulated, code improvements not discussed and/or properly quantified, impact and benefits not explained (or not explained well)

D. <u>Can not evaluate</u> [*mark of 1*]: something about this proposal makes it impossible to imagine supporting, even in a revised form

Time Allocation Committee (TAC) assessment meetings

Deliberations to decide the final ranked list of projects will be conducted in an online TAC assessment meeting. Typically this will be scheduled as a single meeting of approximately three hours in length but could instead be split into two two-hour meetings scheduled on consecutive days (depending on the number of proposals and availability of members).

Once the committee's assessments have been submitted (prior to the meeting), the Chair then uses these scores to rank the proposals, presenting the results early in the meeting to provide a starting point for subsequent discussion. They will also present a proposed list of Lead Assessors for each project, to be ratified by the committee (leads will have been notified beforehand).

The committee discusses each proposal in turn with a particular emphasis on reconciling the perspectives of assessors who submitted outlying assessment marks. Based on the content of this discussion, committee members may elect to amend their assessment.

This will lead to a final ranked list of projects which will be communicated by the Chair to the Secretary. The final selection of supported projects will then be made by the AusSRC Director and associated staff, taking into account:

1. the resources available and how these align with the resources requested;
2. any program considerations such as alignment with collaborators and balance of priorities.

During the discussion of each proposal, the committee should ensure that:

1. all conflicted assessors are excused;
2. a Lead Assessor is assigned, who is responsible for leading all discussions about the proposal and organising feedback to the applicant;
3. all (non-conflicted) committee members are given an opportunity to comment;
4. upon the conclusion of discussion, all committee members are given a chance to amend their assessment; and
5. finally, all excused conflicted assessors are invited to return.

Compilation of applicant feedback

After the Assessment Meeting, the TAC will be given approximately 2 weeks to compile feedback for all applications. This is an extremely important tool for the betterment of the program and should seek to enable both successful and unsuccessful applicants to prepare more effective proposals in subsequent rounds.

Initially, the Lead Assessor of each proposal should draft a response to the applicant, attempting to synthesise the (sometimes disparate) views of the committee, as discussed during the committee meeting. Comments from all other (non-conflicted) committee members should be sought before deeming this text final.

Completed feedback will be sent to the Chair and Secretary. See below for guidelines on effective assessment feedback.

Feedback should:

- Be constructive;
- Clearly articulate (even for successful proposals) any improvements that - if implemented in subsequent rounds - would likely improve the committee's assessment of the proposal; and
- For successful proposals, articulate any special directions from the TAC. For example:

- in the case of proposals receiving only partial support, which parts of the proposal should be descoped; and
- whether there are any interactions between proposals that should be kept in mind.

Release of assessment results (including feedback) to applicants

Once the deadline for feedback has passed, the Secretary will email all applicants notifying them whether their proposal was granted support (and if so, how much) or not. The TAC feedback will be included with this communication.

Assessment Retrospective

In the interest of improving the program the TAC may be asked to attend a retrospective meeting in the weeks following the conclusion of the assessment process. This will be a chance for feedback from TAC members and associated AusSRC staff members on any aspect of the process.

Appendix A: Roles and Responsibilities

TAC Member

All members of the committee are responsible for the following:
- attending meetings organised for the planning and execution of the assessment process;
- declaring and describing Conflicts of Interest (CoIs) for any proposals submitted to the program for which they do not believe - for whatever reason - that they can conduct an objective appraisal;
- ensuring that the content of all submitted proposals and TAC deliberations are kept strictly confidential;
- reading, understanding and assessing all proposals submitted to the program for which they have not declared a CoI;
- organising feedback to applicants for any proposal against which they have been nominated as Lead Assessor;
- completing any tasks assigned by the TAC Secretary or Chair.

TAC Chair

The TAC Chair inherits all responsibilities of a TAC Member, as well as the responsibility for:
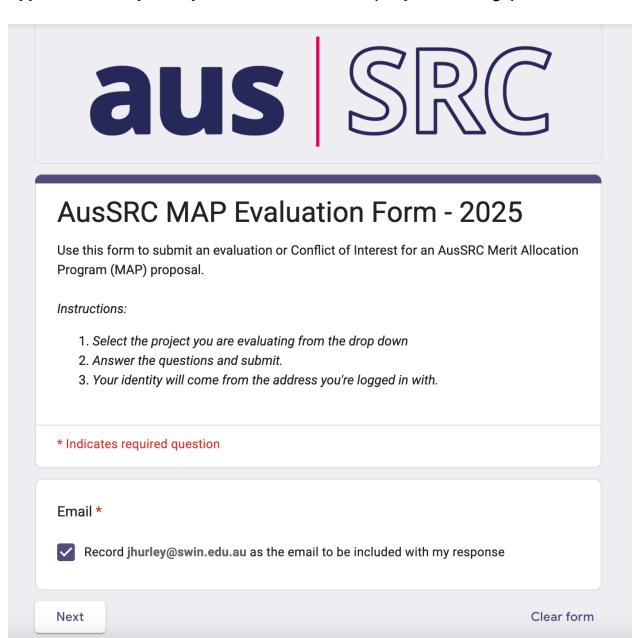
- working with the Secretary to oversee policy matters relating to the TAC;
- working with the Secretary to oversee the assembly, finalisation and communication of feedback to all applicants;
- ensuring that the rules and guidelines detailed in this document are abided by all participants;
- conducting the business of all Assessment Meetings; and
- representing the TAC and the positions of its members during communications with the AusSRC.

Secretary

The Secretary is a senior member of AusSRC team responsible for the coordination of the program. They are responsible for:

- Coordinating the EoI and consultation phases;
- resolving confusions and answering questions for the TAC during the assessment process;
- Coordinating the process for allocation of resources after the ranked list of proposals has been finalised and communicated by the TAC Chair;
- organising all program communications, including:
  - announcements of calls,
  - making submitted proposals available to the TAC as soon as possible following the proposal submission deadline,
  - assisting the TAC Chair with the organisation of TAC meetings and provisioning of resources if requested by the Chair,
  - sending results & feedback to applicants.

Appendix B: Sample Proposal Assessment Form (subject to change)

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AusSRC MAP Evaluation Form - 2025

Use this form to submit an evaluation or Conflict of Interest for an AusSRC Merit Allocation Program (MAP) proposal.

Instructions:

1. *Select the project you are evaluating from the drop down*
2. *Answer the questions and submit.*
3. *Your identity will come from the address you're logged in with.*

* Indicates required question

Email *

☑ Record **jhurley@swin.edu.au** as the email to be included with my response

Next   Clear form

aus|SRC

AusSRC MAP Evaluation Form - 2025

Your email will be recorded when you submit this form

* Indicates required question

Select proposal

Select the proposal you are submitting an assessment or conflict of Interest for: *

Choose

Making WALLABY even better - A. Person

Doing lots of MWA pipeline stuff - N. Obody

Putting great SKA things into Data Central - X. Random

Clear form

Neve

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AusSRC MAP Evaluation Form - 2025

Your email will be recorded when you submit this form

* Indicates required question

Conflict of Interest

All committee members must declare any perceived conflicts of interest (CoIs) with any submitted proposals. They will be excused from any committee deliberations involving those proposals.

Committee members should use the same sort of CoI guidelines they may have encountered elsewhere with Australian astronomy committees; essentially: an honour system. The Australian astronomy community is too small to support a strictly rigorous approach. It is up to each committee member to look at each project and ask themselves: can I be objective for this assessment?

Do you declare a conflict of interest for this proposal? *

◯ Yes

◯ No

Back   Next   Clear form

AusSRC MAP Evaluation Form - 2025

Your email will be recorded when you submit this form

* Indicates required question

Comments

Please answer the following questions to aid committee deliberations and/or to help fellow committee members to compile feedback for this proposal and to guide you in your score for the proposal.

Project Summary *

Please give a **_short description_** of the proposal as you understand it.

Your answer

Path to the SKA (aka Program Fit)   *

Indicate whether you feel the project aligns well with the scope of AusSRC responsibilities and addresses challenges on the path to the SKA (technologies, computation, data movement, post-processing, data analysis, visualisation, etc.).

You may also consider whether this project has received support in the past and if that support was well utilised. Noting that the program is keen to accommodate new projects that are a good program fit.

Choose ▼

Please add any comments relating to program fit:

Your answer

Scientific/Technical Merit   *

Indicate the extent to which you think that the project represents a significant contribution to SKA science or novel technology strategic for the SKA and its pathfinders.

Choose ▼

Please add any comments relating to scientific/technical merit:

Your answer

Feasibility *

Assess whether or not the project and proposed scope are feasible for corresponding AusSRC staff to undertake within a 1-18 month period.

Factor in aspects such as the list of tasks, resource assessment and time estimate (where a shorter project may be considered less of a risk).

Choose ⌄

Please add any comments relating directly to feasibility:

Your answer

Indicate whether you think that the project aligns with any of the following AusSRC priority areas and/or collaboration activities:

☐ ASKAP

☐ MWA

☐ MeerKAT

☐ Data Central

☐ IDIA

☐ CARTA

☐ DUG

Positive Aspects *

Please describe anything you *like* about this proposal.

Your answer

Negative Aspects/Risks/Concerns *

Please describe anything you *do not like* about this proposal, as well as any *perceived risks or concerns*.

Your answer

Other Comments

Please describe *anything else* that will shape your grade.

Your answer

Back   Next   Clear form

Grading

This program uses a system of marking bands. Please:

1. **choose the band** (and hence, a range of marks) that applies for this proposal, and then
2. **select a mark within that band** to achieve a rough relative ranking for you of proposals in that band.

The bands (and the marks corresponding to them) are as follows:

1. **Definitely support** [*marks of 8-10*]: high quality case (compelling science, technical requirements clearly articulated), high impact expected (quantifiable improvements in code, research made possible), benefits to the Australian SKA community explained (e.g. makes possible research otherwise not possible, use by students, sharing of data)
2. **Support if possible** [*marks of 5-7*]: warrants support but does not hit the heights of the "*Definitely support*" case – most committee discussion will happen around these proposals.
3. **Support after revision** [*marks of 2-4*]: does not warrant support in its current form, but a revised case that addresses shortcomings would/could be supported in a future round; most likely issues are technical requirements not clearly articulated, code improvements not discussed and/or properly quantified, impact and benefits not explained (or not explained well)
4. **Can not evaluate** [*mark of 1*]: something about this proposal makes it impossible to imagine supporting, even in a revised form

You can be guided by your responses above to program fit, merit and feasibility, where, if you scored highly for all you will likely fall within the definitely support band, for example.

Enter grade: *

Marks for each band are:

- *Definitely support*: **8, 9, 10**
- *Support if possible*: **5, 6 7**
- *Support after revision*: **2, 3, 4**
- *Can not evaluate*: **1**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Can not evaluate	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Definitely support

Back   Next   Clear form

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AusSRC MAP Evaluation Form - 2025

Your email will be recorded when you submit this form

Done

You have finished processing this proposal. **Please make sure to click 'Submit' below**.

Once submitted you will be emailed a copy. There will be a link at the top of that email which you can visit to edit your submission if necessary.

A copy of your responses will be emailed to jhurley@swin.edu.au.

Back   Submit   Clear form