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Very Large Telescope Paranal Science Operations GRAVITY User Manual

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103.0	2018-08-30	5.1.3 & 5.2.3	time justification; added “on-axis” dual field
104.0	2019-02-15	various	limiting magnitudes; CIAO on-axis; DF separations

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1 Introduction

GRAVITY is a four-telescope beam combiner for the Very Large Telescope Interferometer (VLTI) operating in the K-band. It is equipped with various subsystems in order to precisely correct and control the incoming wavefront from the astronomical source via the telescopes to the GRAVITY beam combiner. These GRAVITY sub-systems include a fringe-tracker, an IR wavefront sensor (with the UTs only), a polarisation control system, a pupil-guide and field-guide system. These systems interact and work in harmony with the VLTI.

GRAVITY forms spectrally dispersed interference fringes of either a single astronomical source (single-field) or of two sources simultaneously (dual-field). In the latter case, the two sources are required to have a separation less than 2 arcsec when observing with the Unit Telescopes (UTs), or less than 4 arcsec with the Auxiliary Telescopes (ATs) of the VLTI. Fringes are produced in two separate channels, the fringe-tracker (FT) channel and the science (SC) channel. The science channel records the entire K-band at each of the three implemented spectral resolutions of $\mathcal{R} \sim 22$, 500 and 4000. The FT spectrometer always operates at low spectral resolution ($\mathcal{R} \sim 22$).

When observing in dual-field, one of the two sources is injected into the FT channel and its fringe pattern is analysed at a frequency of approximately a kHz. The fringe position in the FT is used in real-time to correct for the atmospheric and instrumental piston (i.e. a residual optical path difference between beams) by modulating piezo mounted mirrors within the instrument. The FT star thus allows longer detector integration times in the science channel (up to 60 seconds) without compromising the contrast of the fringe pattern. GRAVITY science observations are always assisted by FT observations, unlike other VLTI instruments like PIONIER or MATISSE. In single-field, the FT channel and SC channel receive light from the same star.

GRAVITY provides access to interferometric quantities such as absolute and differential visibility, spectral differential phase and closure phase, as well as the differential phase in dual-field between the two sources. These quantities allow reconstructing images at a spatial resolution that can reach 2 mas (depending on VLTI baseline), as well as time-resolved differential astrometry per spectral bin at the exquisite accuracy of a few tens of μas .

1.1 Scope

This document is intended for science users of GRAVITY during phase 1 (call for proposals) and phase 2 (preparation of the observations) of the ESO observation procedure. It gives an overview of the instrument and the way it can be used in pursuing certain astrophysical observations, especially those that require milli-arcsecond spatial resolution.

1.2 News section

With respect to P103, the following changes apply to GRAVITY observations from P104 on:

- The limiting magnitudes for the ATs have been increased by 1 magnitude due to the improved adaptive optics correction by NAOMI (see the [Instrument Description](#)).
- There is no longer any constraint on the magnitude difference between the SC and FT object in dual-field mode.
- GRAVITY is now also offered with CIAO on-axis adaptive optics correction.

GRAVITY can be requested with both ATs (using NAOMI) and UTs (using MACAO or CIAO) as feeding telescopes. Both Visitor and Service Mode observations are offered. The limiting magnitudes of the instrument are advertised on the [GRAVITY Instrument Description webpage](#). The

instrument can be used as spectro-imager in single- and dual-field mode in low, medium and high spectral resolution. Users are advised not to use low spectral resolution in single-field, since the FT already provides low resolution data on the science target. Although GRAVITY's astrometric mode continues to undergo commissioning, ESO invites proposals with the goal of performing astrometric measurements since P102. To request such observations, **Astrometry** must be selected as instrument configuration in the proposal (box 14). ESO is also working on a scheme to optimise operations for aperture synthesis imaging with PIONIER or GRAVITY with the ATs. More information on this scheme can be found in the [Call for Proposals](#) and the [VLTI user manual](#).

Before starting a GRAVITY proposal, users are advised to familiarise themselves with the [general aspects of the VLTI](#) as well as to consult the [ESO GRAVITY web pages](#) for any late information that could not be included in this manual.

1.3 Contents of the manual

Sect. 2 puts GRAVITY within the ESO context and addresses how GRAVITY as an astronomical instrument can be helpful for a science project. In order to give some background to users with little experience in optical interferometry, the section also presents a brief overview of its principles. Sect. 3 provides a technical but basic description of the instrument. The user is advised to read this section carefully in order to obtain a good idea of the instrument's capabilities. A reference to instrument specifics to be kept in mind while planning an observing programme is provided in Sect. 4. ESO guidelines for the preparation of a proposal for GRAVITY time is presented in Sect. 5. Sect. 6 provides the basic and ESO general information needed to prepare an observing programme. Finally, Sect. 7 presents the current calibration plan for GRAVITY observations.

1.4 Contact Information

This is a document that evolves continually, especially as the instrument is still being commissioned. The manual is updated according to changes in Paranal operations of GRAVITY or on request by the GRAVITY user community. Questions and suggestions should be channeled through the [ESO User Support Department](#) (email: usd-help@eso.org). Further information can be found on the [GRAVITY homepage](#). Any GRAVITY user should visit the instrument's home page on a regular basis in order to be informed about the current instrument status and updated developments.

2 Context

This section provides the context of the instrument from a science and ESO instrument suite point of view. It expands on the observables delivered by the instrument and how these could fit your science goals.

2.1 Is GRAVITY the right instrument for your science programme?

The instrument GRAVITY is designed to deliver high angular resolution information (on milli-arcsecond scale) on celestial sources by coherently combining the light from four telescopes. The spatial resolution is reached owing to the telescope baselines of the VLTI. The user is referred to the [VLTI Configurations Overview](#) for the offered telescope configurations, their baseline lengths and position angles. Currently, GRAVITY is offered in conjunction with either the Auxiliary Telescopes (ATs) or the Unit Telescopes (UTs).

GRAVITY has three spectral settings. For each setting it delivers interferometric quantities over exactly the same wavelength range covering the near-IR K-band. For new VLTI users, it is good to realise that interferometric instruments like GRAVITY do not return a "mirror image" of a luminous

source on the sky. Instead, such instruments combine pair-wise the light coming from individual telescopes which creates fringes between each telescope pair (see Figure 1 for an example of the fringes produced by GRAVITY). Each fringe system per baseline is characterised by fringe contrast and phase. These two quantities are directly related to the brightness distribution of the celestial object according to the Van Cittert-Zernike theorem.

GRAVITY can probably bring your science programme valuable information which any other ESO instrument cannot if your target:

- has a characteristic size in the range of 2 to 30 mas (milli-arcseconds),
- is brighter than $K = 10.0^m$, or
- is brighter than $K = 17.5^m$ and has a reference star brighter than $K = 10.5^m$ within $2''$.

The [GRAVITY public webpages](#) detail the atmospheric conditions for the limiting magnitudes mentioned above.



Figure 1: One raw GRAVITY frame of the science channel. Wavelength runs horizontally. In contrast to other beam combiners, GRAVITY does not record entire fringe packets but only four points on the central fringe (i.e. the so-called ABCD method of fringe detection). For each polarisation, each pair of telescopes yields thus 4 spectra. The fringe can be seen by comparing spectra pertaining to the same pair of telescopes. The total number of spectra is thus 24: 6 pairs of telescopes, 4 points (*viz.* A, B, C, D) per pair.

2.2 GRAVITY and other ESO instruments

An interferometric instrument like GRAVITY is sensitive to luminous structures with a size-scale corresponding to the spatial frequency λ/B , where B is the (projected) baseline, i.e. the projected separation between the two telescopes used to combine the light. A range of baselines lengths and

position angles are required to probe the geometry at different size scales and directions. The largest size-scale that can be probed is given by the shortest baseline which is limited by the smallest separation of two telescopes. Complementary spatial information at larger spatial scales by means of single dish UT observations can be obtained with other ESO facilities, like [SPHERE](#) or [SINFONI](#). These instruments deliver AO assisted diffraction-limited images in the same wavelength domain as GRAVITY. SINFONI performs integral field spectroscopy with a 0.8" x 0.8" or 8" x 8" field of view at the same spectral resolution as GRAVITY.

In addition to GRAVITY, the VLTI currently offers two other interferometric instruments that combine four beams, [PIONIER](#) and [MATISSE](#). PIONIER operates in the H-band at low spectral resolution. It provides a 30% higher spatial resolution for continuum observations at shorter wavelengths. MATISSE works at longer wavelengths in the L-, M- and N-bands, that is between 3.2 and 13.0 μm . GRAVITY, PIONIER and MATISSE are all fed by the same VLTI infrastructure. Consequently, many aspects of the observation preparation and scheduling procedures are similar. Please, visit the [instrument pages](#) that detail the capacities of the ESO suite of instruments.

2.3 Optical interferometry basics

For the users who have little background in optical interferometry and would like to use GRAVITY, a brief and basic summary is provided here of what optical interferometry does and can. For a didactic description of the basics of this technique we refer to the proceedings of the various ESO VLTI schools, for example the [EuroSummer School "Observations and Data Reduction with the VLT Interferometer"](#), [New Astronomy Reviews](#), 2007, Volume 51, Issue 8-9.

The contrast and phase of monochromatic fringes obtained on a celestial source with a telescope baseline B and light of wavelength λ yield the amplitude and phase of a Fourier transform component of the source brightness distribution at the spatial frequency $f = B/\lambda$. If the full Fourier transform is sufficiently sampled, i.e. the spatial power spectrum of the source's brightness distribution is sampled at many different spatial frequencies in the (u, v) plane (so called after the usual variables for the spatial frequencies) then an inverse Fourier transform yields a model independent reconstruction of the source brightness distribution at the wavelength λ and an angular resolution λ/B_{max} . There are three ways to collect and sample the Fourier transform of spatial information in order to assess the geometry of the source: 1) obtain data on different baselines sextuplets 2) rely of the natural "super synthesis" by earth rotation and 3) the fact that GRAVITY records data simultaneously in many spectral channels.

An interferometric observing programme does not necessarily aim for image reconstruction. It should be well argued in the phase I proposal when the science of a programme critically depends on the reconstruction of a high resolution image. The observables produced by an interferometric instrument such as GRAVITY already allow very detailed analysis of a physical phenomenon near an astronomical source, without the need to fill up the (u, v) plane to a high degree. There are different observables, which can be grouped as follows:

- The visibility amplitude is related to the projected size of an object along the projected baseline vector. The morphology of the object can therefore be retrieved through modelling of the brightness distribution.
- The absolute phase is directly measurable by GRAVITY only in dual-field mode, i.e. when simultaneously fringe tracking on a source which is not the science target. On the other hand, spectro-differential phase (phase difference between spectral channels) and closure phase (the phase of the so called bispectrum) are always measurable. The closure phase and the differential phase are powerful tools to investigate asymmetry in the source geometry. Furthermore, the absolute phase accessible in dual-field mode constitutes a very accurate measurement of the differential astrometry between the FT and SC targets.

It is important to note that the wavelength dispersion gives spatial information of two different kinds. On the one hand, there is the *spectral information* which allows to study the characteristic size of emission line regions, absorption line regions, e.g. with respect to the continuum emission. On the other hand, the wavelength plays a role because different wavelengths have different spatial resolutions: B/λ . In other words, the spectral dispersion helps to fill up the (u, v) plane. One should keep in mind these two complementary roles of the wavelength dispersion.

2.4 GRAVITY observables

The GRAVITY instrument delivers the following interferometry observables for each of the three spectral resolutions provided by the instrument, *viz.* 22, 500 and 4000, and for the full instrument wavelength range (1.99 to 2.45 μm):

- The absolute visibility in each spectral channel;
- The spectral differential visibility, i.e. the ratio between the visibility in each spectral channel and the visibility in a reference spectral channel (average of several other channels for example);
- In dual-field mode, the absolute phase (in each spectral channel) using the FT source as reference. This quantity contains the astrometry of the SC source (relative to the FT reference) and encompasses the information contained in the closure phases and the differential phases below;
- The spectral differential phase, i.e. the difference between the phase in a certain spectral channel and the phase in a reference channel;
- The closure phase, being the phase of the bispectrum computed in each spectral channel. The bispectrum is the product of three complex visibilities along a closed telescope triangle. The closure phase is therefore theoretically equal to the sum of the three phases along the three baselines. This quantity is independent from atmospheric perturbations.

2.4.1 Absolute visibility $V(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$

A single visibility measurement on a single baseline can constrain the equivalent size of a partially resolved source for an assumed morphology, e.g. a uniform disk or a ring. Visibility measurements at several spatial frequencies (obtained either through Earth rotation, at different wavelengths or by different telescope combinations) constrain strongly the equivalent size and can provide information on the geometry of the emitting structure. Visibility measurements should be carefully calibrated by means of calibrator stars (see Sect. 7).

2.4.2 Differential visibility $V(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)/V(\mathbf{f}, \lambda_0)$

Certain science programmes have an interest in variations of a source size as function of wavelength. For example, a structure which emits strongly in a certain spectral transition (a stellar wind) relative to the continuum emission of an altogether different physical structure (a star). The measurement in the spectral line can be calibrated by those of the continuum and the knowledge of the absolute visibility is not required, just the ratio between the visibility at a given wavelength and a reference channel.

Another application of the differential visibility is the study of objects with a characteristic angular size of the order $\lambda^2/B\Delta\lambda$ ($\Delta\lambda$ is the wavelength range): the visibility will vary inside the recorded band due to the super-synthesis effect. This is, for example, an appropriate tool to detect and characterize binaries with separation $a \sim \lambda^2/B\Delta\lambda$.

2.4.3 Astrometric phase $\Phi_{SC}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda) - \Phi_{FT}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$

In dual-field mode, i.e. when the FT reference star is distinct from the SC target, GRAVITY provides a direct measurement of the science target’s phase by using the FT source as a phase reference. Clearly, the nature of the FT source needs to be known. This quantity constitutes a direct measurement of the differential astrometry between the photocenters of the two targets. For this quantity to be meaningful one or several binary calibrators must be observed immediately before or after the science observations and the GRAVITY metrology must run continuously between the calibration and science observations. Alternatively, if the two targets are bright enough for fringe-tracking, the two fields should be exchanged (“swapped”) during the science observation in order to calibrate the metrology directly on the science pair. Assuming that the FT reference is point-like, then $\Phi_{FT}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$ is 0. Beware that if the FT reference contains asymmetric structure, then $\Phi_{FT}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$ is not necessarily 0 nor even constant.

2.4.4 Differential phase $\Phi(\mathbf{f}, \lambda) - \Phi(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$

Because the instrument delivers spectrally dispersed fringe information, one can measure variations of the phase with wavelength. The principle is exactly the same as in astrometry, except that the reference is the source itself. The most remarkable aspect of this phase variation is that it yields angular information on objects which can be much smaller than the interferometer resolution limit. This results from the capacity to measure phase changes much smaller than 2π (i.e. 1λ). When the object is unresolved, the phase variation $\Phi(\mathbf{f}, \lambda) - \Phi(\mathbf{f}, \lambda_0)$ yields the variation with wavelength of the object photocenter. This photocenter variation is a powerful tool to constrain the morphology and the kinematics of objects where spectral features result from large scale (relatively to the scale of the source) spatial features. Note that if this is attempted over large wavelength ranges the atmospheric effects have to be corrected in the data interpretation.

2.4.5 Closure phase $\Phi_{ijk}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$

The closure phase, the sum of the phases of the 3 baselines inside a triangle, is independent from any atmospheric and instrumental phase offsets. It is therefore a very robust quantity in terms of calibration stability. In addition, with 4 telescopes, there are a total of six phases and four closure phases (per spectral channel). Closure phase contains therefore a significant fraction of the total phase information.

2.5 Image reconstruction

By obtaining a dense (u, v) filling of an astronomical source, one can consider to invert the measured Fourier components in order to create an approximation of the object brightness distribution on the sky. In order to get a meaningful image it is important to maximise the number of spatial frequencies in the (u, v) plane. Several software packages have been specifically developed for optical interferometry to reconstruct or invert the image coping with a sparse (u, v) coverage and incomplete phase information. For now, it is the user’s initiative to pursue image reconstruction of extensive GRAVITY datasets.

2.6 GRAVITY characteristics

The main characteristics of GRAVITY are summarised in Table 1. For details on the offered modes see Sect. 4, as well as the [GRAVITY web pages](#) for latest information.

Table 1: GRAVITY characteristics

Description	Specification
Number of beams	Four
Spectral coverage	K-band (1.99 – 2.45 μm)
Spectral resolutions	$\mathcal{R} \sim 22$ $\mathcal{R} \sim 500$ $\mathcal{R} \sim 4000$
Instrument contrast	5%
Instrument throughput ¹	$\sim 20\%$
Observables:	
Visibility	$V(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$
Differential visibility	$V(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)/V(\mathbf{f}, \lambda_0)$
Phase (dual-field mode only)	$\Phi_{SC}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda) - \Phi_{FT}(\mathbf{f}, \lambda)$
Differential phase	$\Phi(\mathbf{f}, \lambda) - \Phi(\mathbf{f}, \lambda_0)$
Closure phase	$\Phi_{ijk}(\lambda)$

¹ Derived in first commissioning and corrected for VLTI transmission

2.7 GRAVITY performances

The precision of the interferometric phase and visibility amplitude in long science exposures is a function of the source brightness and the fringe-tracking residuals. For good conditions with fringe tracking residuals smaller than 300 nm, the precision of the absolute visibilities is $\sim 0.5\%$, and about 1° for the phase (see [Gravity Collaboration 2017, A&A 602, id. A94](#)).

The minimum visibility for which the instrument can still track the fringes reliably is about 5%. The science channel will reach saturation at the minimum offered DIT at $K = -1^m$ for medium spectral resolution and at a K-band magnitude of $K = -2^m$ for high spectral resolution. Observations in high spectral resolution and split polarisation up to $K = -4^m$ have been achieved and can be proposed in that set-up.

GRAVITY is offered to observe at zenith distance not over 50° for data quality reasons.

With the UTs, GRAVITY operates in conjunction with the MACAO or CIAO adaptive optics systems. MACAO (Multi-Application Curvature Adaptive Optics) is a curvature adaptive optics system working at visible wavelength and has a limiting magnitude of $V = 16^m$. Alternatively, CIAO (Coudé Infrared Adaptive Optics) is an infrared adaptive optics system. Operational limits of MACAO and CIAO for on- and off-axis guiding can be found in the [VLTI user manual](#).

With the ATs, GRAVITY operates in conjunction with the New Adaptive Optics Module for Interferometry, NAOMI. Its limiting magnitude is $V \sim 12.0^m$. Details on NAOMI can also be found in the [VLTI user manual](#).

GRAVITY is not foreseen to operate with 3 telescopes or less.

3 GRAVITY working principles

The goal of the GRAVITY design is to provide a largely self-contained instrument for precise narrow angle astrometry and phase referenced imaging of faint targets in K-band. The following figures and diagrams illustrate the GRAVITY concept for the example of observations of the Galactic Center

with the UTs (see Figs. 2 and 3). This particular example is chosen because it covers most of the operational modes of the instrument. For clarity, only two of four telescopes, i.e. one out of six baselines are shown.

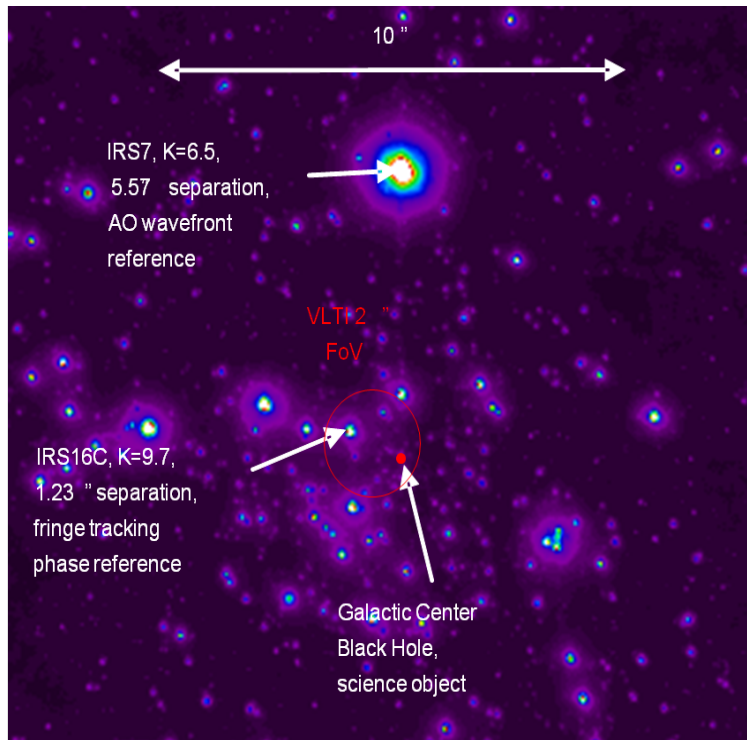


Figure 2: View of the Galactic Center illustrating the required celestial configuration for GRAVITY AO assisted observations.

A bright wave front reference star (IRS7, 5.57" separation, $K = 6.5^m$) outside the 2" FoV of the VLTI is picked up by the UT Coudé star separator (STS) and imaged onto the GRAVITY IR **wavefront sensors** (called CIAO) located in each of the UT Coudé rooms. This bright reference star thus serves as an off-axis AO reference star. The wavefront correction is applied using the MACAO deformable mirrors. GRAVITY can also be used with the generic MACAO optical wavefront sensors on the UTs. When observing with the ATs, the adaptive optics correction is performed by NAOMI.

The 2" telescopic field of view of the VLTI (UT case; 4" on the ATs) contains both the science target (Sgr A*) and the phase reference star (IRS16C, 1.23" separation, $K = 9.7^m$). Both objects are re-imaged via the main VLTI delay lines onto the GRAVITY Beam Combiner Instrument. Note that GRAVITY can operate in single-field and dual-field mode. In the single-field case, the SC target also serves as FT reference star and the light is split 50%-50% between the two channels.

Laser guiding beams are launched at the star separator and telescope spiders to trace tip-tilt and pupil motion, respectively, within the VLTI beam relay. The GRAVITY beam combiner instrument has internal sensors and actuators to analyse these beams and to apply the corresponding corrections. Longer-term drifts of the object are compensated with the help of the internal **acquisition camera** (working at H-band). This camera also analyses the signal from the pupil-guiding laser beams launched at the telescope spider.

In dual-field mode, the **fibre coupler** then splits the VLTI field containing the two stars and they are injected into two separate mono-mode fibres, one for the science channel and one for the fringe-tracker channel. A rotatable half-wave plate is used to control the linear polarisation of the light. In single-field mode, a beam splitter is used instead to inject half of the light from the same source into each mono-mode fibre. A **fibre control unit** including rotators and stretchers align the polarisation

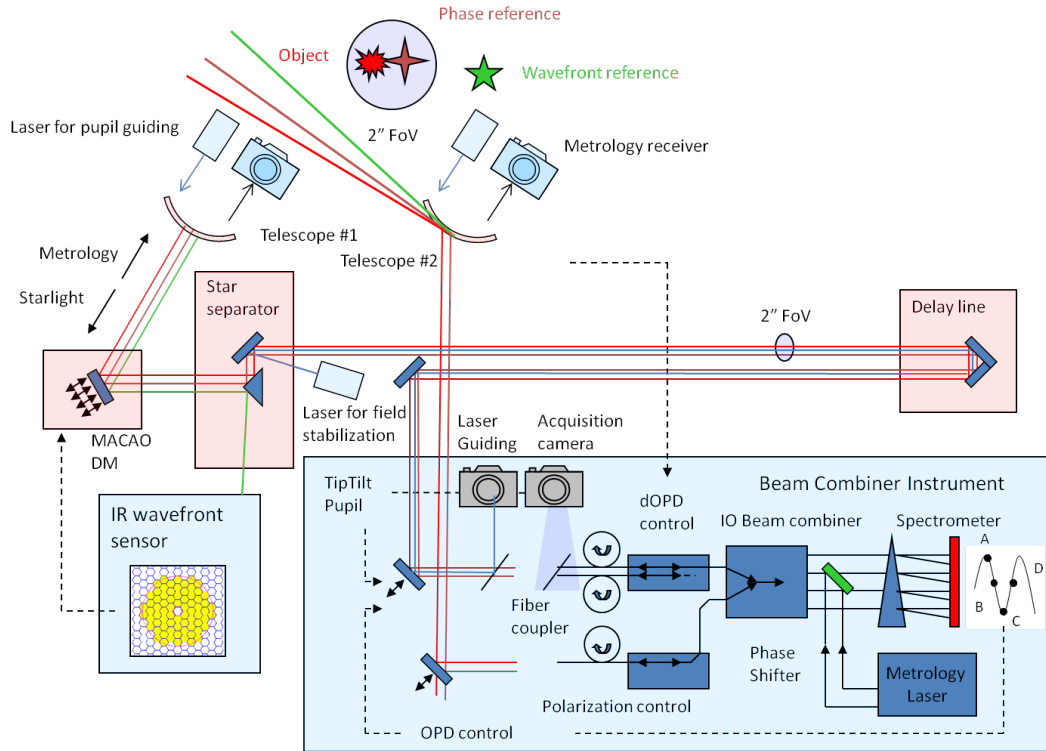


Figure 3: Working principle of GRAVITY with the UTs.

for maximum contrast, and compensate the differential OPD between the phase reference star and science object caused by the angular separation on sky. The two beam combiners are implemented in **integrated optics** chips with instantaneous fringe sampling (following the so-called ABCD method). The bright FT reference star (IRS16C, $1.23''$ separation, $K = 9.7^m$) feeds the **fringe-tracker**, which measures the phase and group delay from five spectral channels across the K-band. The OPD correction is applied to a small internal piezo-driven mirror that stabilises the fringes of both the reference star and the faint science object (S2 or Sgr A*) at high frequency. To efficiently remove any incoherent flux and possible bias of the measurements, the piezos are additionally modulated for each exposure of the science detector with a repetitive pattern of 4 or 16 exposures (for details on the fringe-tracker, see [Lacour et al. 2019, A&A 624, A99](#)).

The **science spectrometer** is optimised for longer, background limited integration times of faint objects, and offers a variety of operation modes, including broad band (ten spectral pixel) observations and low ($\mathcal{R} \sim 500$) and moderate ($\mathcal{R} \sim 4000$) resolution spectroscopy. Both fringe-tracker and science spectrometer can be used with a Wollaston prism to split and simultaneously measure two linear polarisation states. The differential OPD between the science and reference beam is measured with a **laser metrology system**. The laser light is back-propagated from the GRAVITY Beam Combiners covering the full beam up to above the telescope primary mirror. The metrology signal is encoded via phase-shifting interferometry and measured by photodiodes mounted to the telescope spider arms. GRAVITY provides simultaneously for each spectral channel the visibility of the reference and science object, and the phase difference between reference and science object.

The **calibration unit** simulates the light from two stars and four telescopes, and provides all functions to test and calibrate the beam combiner instrument. All functions of the beam combiner instrument with the exception of the calibration unit, the metrology receivers, and the guiding lasers are implemented in a cryostat for optimum stability, cleanliness, and thermal background suppression. The cryostat is installed in the VLTI interferometric laboratory. Figure 5 shows a picture of the open cryostat of the beam combiner instrument with the inside subsystems labelled.

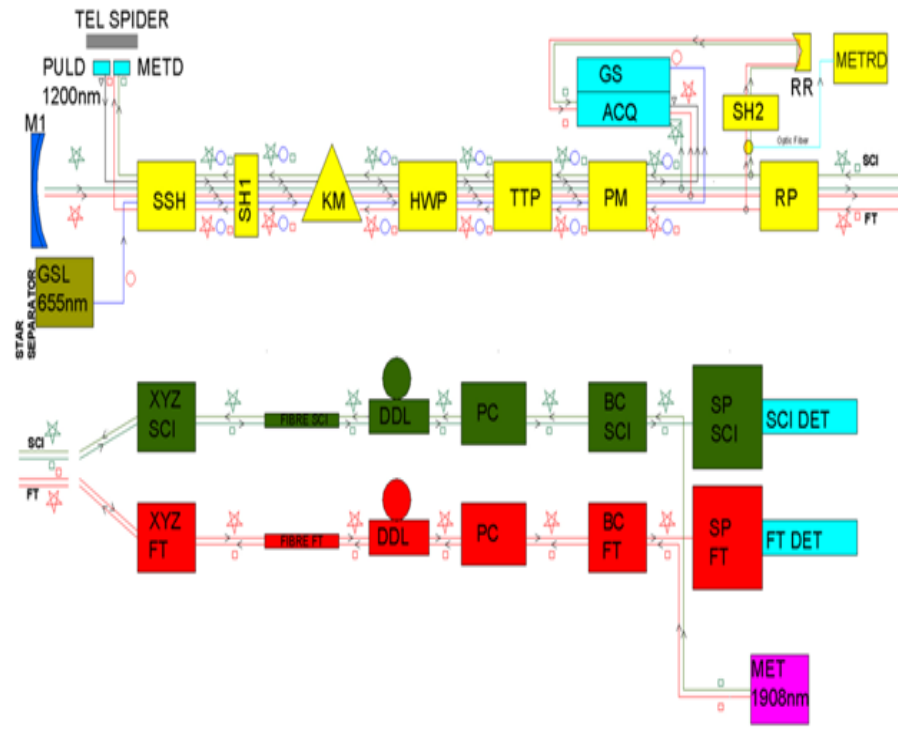


Figure 4: Block Diagram of the GRAVITY beam combiner instrument. GSL: guiding system laser, SSH: safety shutter, SH1: entrance shutter, KM: K-mirror, HWP: half wave plate, TTP: tip tilt piston mirror, PM: pupil actuator mirror, GS: guiding system sensor, ACQ: acquisition camera, RR: retro-reflector, SH2: shutter for retro-reflector, METRD: fibre coupler diode, RP: roof prism, XYZ SCI: x,y,z stage of science fibre, XYZ FT: x,y,z stage of fringe-tracker fibre, FIBRE SCI: science fibre, FIBRE FT: fringe tracking fibre, DDL: differential delay line, PC: polarisation controller, BC SCI: science beam combiner, BC FT: fringe tracking beam combiner, SP SCI: science spectrometer, SP FT: fringe tracking spectrometer, SCI DET: science detector, FT DET: fringe tracking detector, METD: metrology diode, PULD: pupil laser diode, MET: metrology laser diode.

4 Current status of GRAVITY

Since P98, GRAVITY is offered to the community in open time. GRAVITY can be used with either the UTs or the ATs and both in Visitor and Service Mode. Both single-field and dual-field observations as well as all three spectral resolutions are offered. However, users are advised not to use low spectral resolution in single-field, since the FT already provides low resolution data on the science target. Single-field, low spectral resolution setting should only be used for the calibration of dual-field low resolution observations.

4.1 Offered modes

The instrument can be used either for so-called *imaging observations*, or for *astrometric observations*. For imaging observations, GRAVITY acquires interferometric fringes in either single- or dual-field mode from which visibilities, differential phases and closure phases can be extracted. These can then be used to infer properties of the wavelength-dependent brightness distribution of the source or to reconstruct an image (see Sect. 2). For astrometric observations, on the other hand, the instrument must be used in dual-field mode in order to measure the astrometric phase between the FT source and the SC target (see Sect. 2.4.3). This absolute phase can then be used to obtain a very accurate

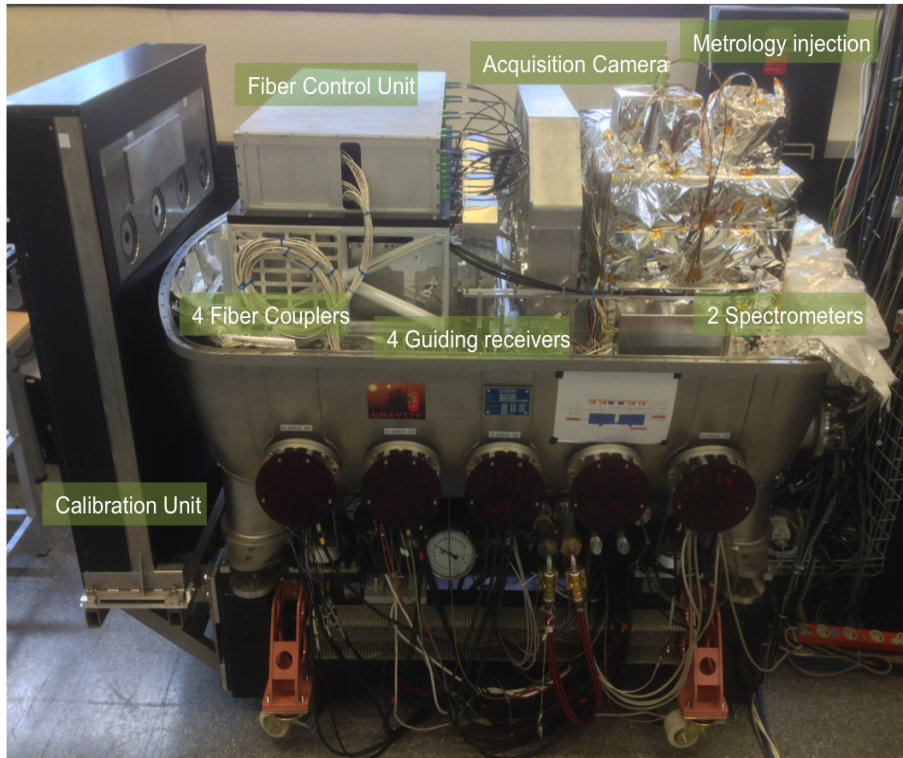


Figure 5: Overview of the beam combiner instrument cryostat and its subsystems in it.

measurement of the differential astrometry between the two targets. Although the astrometric mode of GRAVITY is still being commissioned, especially with respect to the involved systematics and biases, proposals with the goal of using and developing the astrometric capabilities of the instrument are now welcome. Note that GRAVITY always observes with four telescopes (UTs or ATs) and with fringe stabilisation by means of the GRAVITY fringe-tracker. The interferometric quantities can be obtained from the data by means of the [ESO GRAVITY pipeline](#). More details on calibrations and calibrator stars can be found in Sect. 5.1.3.

The user has the liberty in choosing the set-up of the instrument according to their science requirements. In particular the user has to choose the setting of the following instrument functions:

- **Polarisation:** both settings for the Wollaston prism are offered, i.e. the so-called split and combined. In split mode, both polarisations are recorded separately. So far, it has not been possible to detect any significant difference in visibility accuracy between the two settings. The split setting would be appropriate for bright objects for which high accuracy visibilities are requested. The combined setting is appropriate for fainter objects in order to not lose half of the precious light. If one can afford to go in split mode (i.e. enough SNR) then the split mode should be requested. The polarisation mode of the SC and FT channels will be the same during observations.
- **Field:** both settings are offered, i.e. single-field and dual-field (see also Sect. 5.2.3). In single-field, the science source is also the FT source. The K-band light is split 50%-50% between the FT and SC channels. In dual-field, there are two set-ups depending on the distance of the FT and SC objects and whether the UTs or ATs are used. For separations $< 0.27''$ with the UTs or $< 1.17''$ with the ATs, the same 50% beam-splitter as in the single-field case is used (“dual-field on-axis”). For larger distances ($> 0.27''$ with the UTs or $> 1.18''$ with the ATs), $\sim 100\%$ of the light of each source are injected into the fibres using a roof-top mirror (“dual-field off-axis”). With the UTs, the maximum separation of the two targets is $2''$ due to the field

of view of the VLTI; with the ATs, the maximum separation is 4". Otherwise the sources will be vignettted. For limiting magnitudes and magnitude difference between the two sources, we refer to the [GRAVITY instrument webpages](#). Carrying out astrometric observations implies using the dual-field mode.

- Spectroscopic settings: GRAVITY in single-field and dual-field are offered in low (22), medium (500) and high (4000) spectral resolution. Low-resolution data from the fringe-tracker is always delivered together with the science data. Therefore, users are advised not to use low spectral resolution in single-field, since the FT already provides low resolution data on the science target. The fringes of the GRAVITY fringe-tracker are reduced by the data reduction pipeline and can be used for science.

4.2 Service and Visitor Modes

GRAVITY is offered both in *Service Mode* and in *Visitor Mode*. Normal programmes should be carried out in Service Mode such that observations can be scheduled flexibly depending on the prevailing observing conditions. Visitor Mode observations should only be requested for particularly challenging observations, for non-standard observational procedures, or where real-time decisions are required. In those cases, the potential proposers should contact the the [User Support Department](#) (email: usd-help@eso.org) or directly the Instrument Scientist (email: gravity@eso.org) to clarify feasibility of the observations **before** submission of a proposal. In any case, proposers requesting Visitor Mode should carefully justify their request. The Guaranteed Time Observation (GTO) by the GRAVITY consortium are always carried out in Visitor Mode. As for any other instrument, ESO reserves the right to transfer visitor programmes to service and vice-versa.

5 Preparing the observations

Proposals should be submitted through the [Phase 1 web-based proposal submission system](#) (p1), which can be accessed from the following web address:

<https://www.eso.org/p1>

Carefully read the following information before submitting a proposal.

Considering a target which has a scientific interest, the first thing to do is to determine whether this target can be observed with GRAVITY or not and whether the capabilities of the instrument are met. Please note that the limiting magnitudes for GRAVITY observations depend on the seeing and sky transparency, and that appropriate weather conditions have to be requested during the Phase 1 proposal. The current magnitude limits for observations with GRAVITY can be found on the [GRAVITY instrument webpage](#).

Users are required to specifically address if the offered limitations are fulfilled. For example, in case the dual-field mode is requested, the separation and magnitudes of the two components have to be specified clearly during phase 1, including a reference, when setting up the observations. Proposals violating the limitations of the instrument will be rejected during feasibility assessment. For special set-ups and experiments, the instrument operating team should be contacted in advance of proposal submission.

5.1 Proposal guidelines

For general information about the VLTI facility, please refer to the [VLTI User Manual](#).

5.1.1 Guaranteed time observation objects

Check any scientific target against the list of guaranteed time observation (GTO) objects. This guaranteed time period covers the entire observing period. Also, make sure the target has not been reserved already. The list of GTO objects can be downloaded from: <http://www.eso.org/sci/observing/teles-alloc/gto.html>.

5.1.2 Time critical

For successful observations, it is very important that special scheduling constraints or other time-critical aspects are entered in the “Time Constraints” section for each observing run. See the [p1 help page](#) for details.

5.1.3 Calibration sequence and total time requested

The user should use appropriate calibrator stars in terms of target proximity, magnitude and apparent diameter. *Ideally*, the calibrator is within 10° on sky and within 0.5^m of the science object, yet during commissioning the transfer function has shown to be stable for calibrators with a difference of 1.0^m . These numbers may become less stringent with an increased understanding of the instrument. Clearly, the calibrator is required to be as small as possible, again, ideally unresolved. The calibrator stars should be provided by the user with the submission of the Phase 2 material. To help the user to select a calibrator, a tool called “CalVin” is provided by ESO, see here: <http://www.eso.org/observing/etc/>.

GRAVITY is offered in fixed slots up to 60 minutes, or 90 minutes after approval of a waiver. Each science or calibrator OB typically takes 30 minutes to execute. Depending on the science case, any sequence of science (SCI) and calibrator (CAL) observations are possible, with the different OBs being grouped in a concatenation. More specifically this means the following sequences are possible: SCI only (when no absolute calibration of the visibilities is required, e.g. astrometric measurements where the two sources are swapped instead), CAL-SCI, SCI-CAL, SCI-CAL-SCI or CAL-SCI-CAL. Both single- and dual-field will use the same length of the OB. While the dual-field mode requires a longer acquisition, it is more sensitive. Details on instrument calibration can be found in Section 7. The total time required for an observing programme depends on the number of calibrated measurements needed to reach the science goals. For a single size measurement and a known geometry of the source, one measurement slot of 1 hour may be sufficient; to fully image a complex brightness distribution of one target, 20 hours using different telescope configurations may be necessary. The requested amount of time including overheads has to be justified in box 8 of the proposal form. The justification should clearly address the question why the requested amount of time is required to reach the science goal. Especially if the proposal has the goal of imaging, the proposers are strongly advised to carry out an investigation on how many observations are required to achieve the targeted imaging fidelity. Furthermore it is advised to actually create the OBs required for the observations using the exposure times obtained with the ETC, and to use the execution times listed by the phase 2 tool to estimate the actually required time, rather than providing general estimates of the overheads.

5.1.4 Field of View

GRAVITY is a dual-field instrument, which means that the acquired field with the target source will be split inside the instrument to follow two different beams (FT and SC). The maximum separation between the SC and FT fibres is limited by the VLTI field of view in the interferometric laboratory: $2''$ on the UTs, $4''$ on the ATs. The field of view (FoV) seen by each fibre is limited to the Airy disk of each individual aperture, i.e. 250 mas for the ATs in K and 60 mas for the UTs in K-band. For most observations this will not have consequences but can be limiting the observations of objects that

consists of several components e.g. binaries, stars with disk and/or winds, etc. that have a spatial extension equal or superior than the interferometric FoV. While such observations are not impossible the observer will have to take into account this incoherent flux contribution in his data analysis.

5.1.5 Complex fields

When observing complex fields within a few arcseconds, it is necessary that the field contains a dominant, significantly brighter object for the AO or tip-tilt correction (see VLT User Manual for seeing and limiting magnitude of NAOMI, MACAO and CIAO). In this case a finding chart must always be provided with the OBs.

5.1.6 Bright objects

The science channel will reach saturation at the minimum offered DIT at $K = -1^m$ for medium spectral resolution and at a K-band magnitude of $K = -2^m$ for high spectral resolution. Observations in high spectral resolution and split polarisation up to $K = -4^m$ have been achieved and can be proposed in that set-up. The user should consult the webpages for the latest information on the bright end of the applicable magnitude limits.

5.2 Choice of the GRAVITY configuration

5.2.1 Quadruplet

GRAVITY is offered in conjunction with either the UTs or the ATs. The ATs are movable in order to achieve a better (u, v) coverage. For details on the offered VLT AT telescope configurations, baseline lengths and position angles we refer to the [VLT Configurations Overview](#) and the [VLT user manual](#). Three AT quadruplets (small, medium and large) are offered for single-field, restrictions apply for dual-field. They allow probing three ranges of spatial frequencies. Model-fitting programmes should study carefully which quadruplet is the most suitable. For complex or imaging programmes, it may be necessary to use all three AT configurations. Note however that AT reconfigurations are executed only once every few weeks. The user has to assess whether this is an issue for fast evolving objects.

5.2.2 Wavefront sensor configuration

GRAVITY on the UTs is used in conjunction with the optical AO system MACAO or the infrared AO system CIAO. GRAVITY on the ATs is used with the generic optical wavefront sensor on the ATs, NAOMI. For details on the AO systems and – in the case of the UTs – for guidelines on how to choose between MACAO and CIAO, see the [VLT user manual](#).

5.2.3 Observing modes: dual-field vs. single-field

The most important choice for the user, which defines the observing mode, is the dual-field vs. single-field choice. Most sources can only be observed in *single-field mode*, in which case a beam splitter is used by the fibre coupler to send half of the light to the fringe-tracker arm and the other half to the science channel. When a bright source is available in the VLT field of view ($< 2''$ on the UTs, $< 4''$ on the AT, see Sect. 5.1.4) in addition to the science target, it is possible to fringe-track on this second object. Depending on the distance of the two objects, two set-ups are distinguished for this *dual-field mode*:

1. For separations larger than $0.27''$ for the UTs and $1.18''$ for the ATs, the “dual-field off-axis” set-up is used, where the source is placed on a roof-top mirror which separates the light from

the science target and the fringe tracking target and injects $\sim 100\%$ of the light of each source into the respective fibres.

2. If the separation is less than $0.27''$ for the UTs and $1.17''$ for the ATs, the source is placed on the beam splitter as for the single-field mode and the light from the science and the fringe tracking targets are picked up by moving the fibres accordingly. With this set-up, arbitrary low separations between the FT and SC objects can be achieved; for a separation of $0''$ (e.g. for calibration purposes) the set-up is identical to the single-field mode. In this “dual-field on-axis” set-up, less than 50% of the light of each object are injected into the fibres only, i.e. the throughput is reduced by about a factor of 2. This loss has to be taken into account for the limiting magnitudes.

For a detailed description and the specifications of the fibre coupler we refer to [Pfuhl et al. 2014, SPIE 914623](#).

Astrometric measurements require the use of the dual-field mode. For information on the limiting magnitudes see the [ESO public web-pages on GRAVITY](#). In case the dual-field mode is requested, the separation and magnitudes of the two components have to be specified clearly during phase 1, including a reference, e.g. in Box 11 of the ESOFORM.

5.2.4 Optical set-up: spectral resolution, split or combined polarisation

The optical set-up is defined by the spectral and polarimetric configuration of the instrument. The calibrator and science targets should be observed with the very same set-up and only one set-up can be used in a given OB.

For sensitivity reasons, the GRAVITY spectrometer concentrates all the flux of a single spectral line in less than 2 pixels (~ 1.5 pixels FWHM at high resolution, 1.8 pixels FWHM at medium resolution). In other words, GRAVITY is not Nyquist-sampled. This sampling is still sufficient to retrieve the position of a single isolated line to arbitrary precision, limited only by signal-to-noise and systematic effects. However, for more complex spectral energy distributions (e.g. velocity gradients in spectrally unresolved emission lines), the radial velocity accuracy of GRAVITY should be expected to be limited to one spectral channel (0.24 nm at high spectral resolution, 2.2 nm at medium spectral resolution). In some cases, analysing GRAVITY data together with integral field or long-slit spectroscopic data at higher resolution will help.

GRAVITY can operate in two polarimetric modes: the split and combined mode. Polarising effects in the VLTI give rise to a differential phase between the two polarisation states. This is compensated for in combined mode. In split mode, the fringes of the two polarisation states are recorded independently. Note, that this optical set-up is currently not foreseen to measure the intrinsic polarisation of the source.

6 Introducing Observation Blocks (OBs)

For general VLT instruments, an **Observation Block (OB)** is a logical unit specifying the telescope, instrument and detector parameters and actions needed to obtain a **single** observation. It is the smallest schedulable entity which means that the execution of an OB is normally not interrupted as soon as the target has been acquired. An OB is executed only once; when identical observation sequences are required (e.g. repeated observations using the same instrument setting, but different targets or at different times), a series of OBs must be constructed.

Because an OB can contain only one target or set of targets (e.g. combination of fringe-tracker and science target), science and associated calibration stars (cf. Sect. 7) should be provided as two different OBs. Thus each science object OB should be accompanied by a calibrator OB. These OBs should be identical in instrument set-up, having only different target coordinates.

Moreover with single-telescope instruments, any OB can be performed during the night. In the case of interferometric instrument, the instant of observation define the location of the observation in the (u, v) plan.

6.1 Standard observation sequence

A standard observation with GRAVITY can be split in the several sub tasks:

1. Configuration: Set-up of the desired spectral resolution and polarisation mode;
2. VLTI acquisition: Slew telescopes to the target position on sky, slew the delay-lines to the expected zero-OPD position, use the STS to send the field to GRAVITY;
3. Acquire the MACAO, CIAO or NAOMI guide star. As stated in the [VLTI user manual](#), the user has the possibility to use a guide star for the Coudé systems, different from the target. Refer to that manual for the limitations of this option.
4. Depending on the separation between the FT reference and the SC target, set-up the GRAVITY fibre coupler sub-system: rotate the field, position the beam or field splitter, move the fibres on the two sources;
5. The operator may then check that the acquisition is correct using a finding chart;
6. Optimise flux injection in the FT fibre and optionally in the SC fibre;
7. Search for fringes and close the FT loop, centre the fringes on the science detector;
8. Start recording data according to DIT, NDIR and number of object exposures.
9. Move the object(s) off the SC and FT fibres (i.e. so that no light from an astrophysical source enters the fibres) and record flux to estimate the sky level.

6.2 OB continuation

It is possible to repeat the science template in the OB. In dual-field mode, this allows for rotating the field by 180° , exchanging the role of the FT and SC targets (e.g. to study both members of a binary or to calibrate the metrology for astrometric measurements), or to move the SC fibre to another target using the same FT reference (e.g. to study two or more members of a star cluster). As explained in Sect. 8.3, calibration templates can also appear in the science OB.

7 Calibration Plan

7.1 Summary

Table 3 summarizes the calibration data used by the pipeline to fully calibrate the SC data. The observatory will automatically provide the data in green, but the user is responsible for requesting the data in blue and providing the relevant OB. The user needs only to provide the OB for the mode that is used: either single-field or dual-field.

Calibration	Template	Frequency	Duration	Pipeline Output
Dark	GRAV_gen_cal_dark	Daily	1min	DARK_SC/FT
Flat	GRAV_gen_cal_calunitflat	Daily*	4min	GAIN_SC/FT BAD_SC/FT PROFILE_SC/FT
Wavelength	GRAV_gen_cal_wave	Daily*	15min	WAVE_SC/FT
P2VM	GRAV_gen_cal_p2vm	Daily	20min	GAIN_SC/FT DARK_SC/FT PROFILE_SC/FT BAD_SC/FT WAVE_SC/FT P2VM_SC/FT
Dual-field	GRAV_dual_obs_calibrator	-Required after each metrology loss -Required for visibility calibration -At will of user	30min	VIS_SC_DUAL_CAL VIS_FT_DUAL_CAL VIS_DUAL_CAL
Single-field	GRAV_single_obs_calibrator	-Required for visibility calibration -At will of user	20min	VIS_SC_SING_CAL VIS_FT_SING_CAL VIS_SING_CAL
Dispersion	GRAV_gen_cal_disp	Monthly	4h	DISP_CAL

(*) = This calibration is also included in the P2VM calibration template. It is not required if the P2VM template is used.

Blue = user responsible / Nighttime

Green = Science operations / Daytime

7.2 Calibrator Stars

The calibrators will be used to estimate both visibilities and phases. The phase referencing can be difficult since we must know the level of asymmetry of the chosen calibrator. Binary or multiple objects, or asymmetric stellar envelopes could create difficulties. The GRAVITY calibrators have been chosen as close as possible to the single, symmetric, small star paradigm, in order to have a clean reference in particular for the phase. The observation of two calibrators instead of one may be useful in order to check how well the paradigm is fulfilled. The single and symmetric conditions are required in order to have a phase reference with a well-defined behavior. The average phase of the fringes obtained on a binary or asymmetric star changes with the orientation and length of the projected baseline, and can also change with time, e.g. due to orbital motion. A symmetric and single star will have a minimal (ideally zero) and stable intrinsic phase. Moreover, a small angular size of the reference object will improve the robustness of its phase to an intrinsic asymmetry (the smaller angularly, the smaller the phase for a given asymmetry level). A small angular size also is desirable to reduce the effect of the angular extension of the calibrator on the error bars of the visibilities. For instance, let's consider the particular case of a calibrator with the same angular size as the scientific target. Its size is known a priori, as an example from surface brightness considerations, to an accuracy of 2%. Using this calibrator alone, it will be impossible to obtain the angular size of the scientific target with an accuracy better than 2%, due to the systematic nature of the a priori error on the calibrator size. Therefore, the smaller the calibrator, the smaller is the systematic calibration error.

Calibrator stars are stars with known angular diameters, yielding to the highest possible visibility, knowing that:

- fringes' SNR should be comparable between SCI and CAL.
- CAL should be as close as possible to SCI (ideally ≤ 25 deg and similar airmass).
- CAL should be observable one hour before AND one hour after the SCI target. This is to ensure that it can be observed after or before the SCI if the later has been observed at the limit of its LST constraint. In the case of bracketed observations (i.e CAL-SCI-CAL) and impossibility to find a calibrator observable before and after a second calibrator should be used.

Considering that the choice of calibrator can be tailored to the actual specificities of the scientific goal, the users are responsible for the choice of their calibrators, and the creation of the subsequent OBs. ESO offers the CalVin tool¹ to chose the calibrator stars.

The observation of calibrator stars are used to measure the transfer function of the instrument, namely:

- visibility transfer function: $V_{\text{inst}}^2 = (V_{\text{measured}}^2 / V_{\text{expected}}^2)_{\text{CAL}}$ the calibrated visibility is estimated by: $V^2 = (V_{\text{measured}}^2)_{\text{SCI}} / V_{\text{inst}}^2$.
- phase closure transfer function: $CP_{\text{inst}} = (CP_{\text{measured}} - CP_{\text{expected}})_{\text{CAL}}$ the calibrated phase closure is estimated by: $CP = (CP_{\text{measured}}) - CP_{\text{inst}}$.

Other quantities can be calibrated, for example the chromatic phase dispersion. The chromatic phase dispersion is a function of the air path between each pair of telescopes. With many CAL at different DL stroke, one can compute a polynomial fit to the differential phase and extrapolate the polynomials coefficients as a function of air path difference.

All calibrator stars observation (DPR.CATG='CAL') are made public by ESO, so users can retrieve all calibrators taken in a given night in order to refine their estimation of the transfer function.

Sequence CAL-SCI-CAL should be used if absolute products will be used: this is the most common case. Some particular programmes only require differential interpretation: users should use the SCI-CAL sequence for this special programmes.

¹<http://www.eso.org/observing/etc/>

8 Bibliography

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9 Glossary

Constraint Set (CS): List of requirements for the conditions of the observation that is given inside an OB. OBs are only executed under this set of minimum conditions.

Dual-Field Mode: GRAVITY mode of operation when the FT reference and the SC target are distinct from each other. In this mode, the SC target may be fainter than the FT limiting magnitude, and astrometric phase information can be retrieved. The maximum separation between the two targets is 2'' on UTs and 4'' on ATs.

fringe-tracker (FT): One sub-system central to the design of GRAVITY is its fringe-tracker, which analyses the fringes of a reference target in real time to estimate and correct for atmospheric and instrumental piston. This allows integrating longer on the science channel to obtain high signal-to-noise spectra at high resolution. The FT also provides for a natural phase reference in dual-field mode to detect fringes on a faint nearby object and to obtain differential astrometry between the FT and SC channels.

Observation Block (OB): An Observation Block is the smallest schedulable entity for the VLT. It consists of a sequence of templates. Usually, a GRAVITY Observation Block includes

one target acquisition and one exposure template. Especially for astrometric observations swapping the fringe tracker and science targets, however, longer sequences are common.

Observation Description (OD): A sequence of templates used to specify the observing sequences within one or more OBs.

Proposal Preparation and Submission (Phase 1): The Phase 1 begins right after the Call for Proposals (CfP) and ends at the deadline for CfP. During this period the potential users are invited to prepare and submit scientific proposals. For more information, see:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/observing/phase1.html>

Observing Preparation (Phase 2): Once proposals have been approved by the ESO Observation Program Committee (OPC), users are notified and the Phase 2 begins. In this phase, users are requested to prepare their accepted proposals in the form of OBs using the p2 web application. See:

<http://www.eso.org/sci/observing/phase2.html>

Service Mode (SM): In service mode (in contrast to “Visitor-Mode”), the observations are carried out by the ESO Paranal Science-Operation staff (PSO) alone. Observations can be done at any time during the period, depending on the CS given by the user. OBs are put into a queue schedule in OT which later sends OBs to the instrument.

Template: A template is a sequence of operations to be executed by the instrument. The observation software of an instrument dispatches commands written in templates not only to instrument modules that control its motors and the detector, but also to the telescopes and VLTI sub-systems.

Template signature file (TSF): File which contains template input parameters.

Visitor Mode (VM): The classic observation mode. The user is on-site to supervise his/her program execution, to directly analyse the data and to take real-time decisions if necessary.

10 Acronyms and Abbreviations

AO:	Adaptive optics
AT:	Auxiliary telescope (1.8m)
CfP:	Call for proposals
CIAO:	Coudé Infrared Adaptive Optics
CP:	Closure Phase
CS:	Constrain set
DIT:	Detector Integration Time
DDL:	Differential Delay line
DL:	Delay line
DRS:	Data Reduction Software
ESO:	European Southern Observatory
ETC:	Exposure Time Calculator
FT:	Fringe-Tracker
GTO:	Guaranteed time observations
IR:	Infra Red
IRIS:	InfraRed Image Stabiliser
LR:	Low Resolution
LST:	Local Sidereal Time
MACAO:	Multiple Application Curvature Adaptive Optics
MATISSE:	Multi AperTure mid-Infrared SpectroScopic Experiment (3-13 micron beam combiner)
MR:	Medium Resolution
MIR:	Mid-InfraRed [5-20 microns]
NAOMI	New Adaptive Optics Module for Interferometry
NDIT:	Number of individual Detector Integrations
NIR:	Near-InfraRed [1-5 microns]
OD:	Observation Description
OB:	Observation Block
OT:	Observation Toolkit
OPC:	Observation Program Committee
OPD:	Optical path difference
OPL:	Optical path length
Phase 1:	Proposal Preparation and Submission
Phase 2:	Observing Preparation and Submission
PIONIER:	H-band 4-beam combiner instrument at the VLTI
QC:	Quality Control
SC:	Science Channel
SM:	Service Mode
SNR:	Signal-to-noise ratio
TSF:	Template Signature File
UT:	Unit telescope (8m)
VIMA:	VLTI Main Array (array of 4 UTs)
VISA:	VLTI Sub Array (array of ATs)
VLT:	Very Large Telescope
VLTI:	Very Large Telescope Interferometer
VM:	Visitor Mode