South African SALT Task Team Report
SALT Board Meeting, November 2015

Darragh O'Donoghue

The South African Astronomy community is deeply saddened by the loss of Dr Darragh O'Donoghue who was, as Prof Ted Williams Director of SAAO put it, 'the heart and soul of SALT'. It is impossible to completely fill Darragh's shoes, but we collectively must try to address the many gaps that Darragh's passing has left us with. We must re-dedicate ourselves to the success of SALT in the memory of Darragh. He was a great scientist, a great humanist and a great friend. We miss him dearly.

The SA SALT Task Team brought forward its scheduled meeting by more than a month to discuss the impact that Darragh's passing is having on SALT.

- The vacancy created by the passing of Darragh O'Donoghue should be urgently filled by the SALT Board, preferably by an optical designer/instrumentation scientist.
- The guider for RSS, the collimator for NIR and the new DoD spectrograph funded by NRF are only some of the projects that need to be continued with. Darragh had a lot of creative ideas for future instrumentation needs for SALT, such as Adaptive Optics, that we must continue to give consideration to.
- There are a number of Board responsibilities that Darragh carried out, such as Chair of the Risk Committee, which need to be addressed by the Board.
- NRF proposes Dr Lisa Crause to fill Darragh's vacancy on the SALT Board, subject to approval of the SALT Board.
- The NRF Astronomy sub-Agency is in the process of establishing the Darragh O'Donoghue SALT Research Chair, which will be filled by a senior scientist located at a South African university and SAAO, and whose primary responsibility will be to drive South African research outputs in SALT.

Operational Levy Shortfalls

- The Task Team anticipates that up to 5% p.a. of observing time could become available over the coming three years due to operational levy shortfalls. The NRF does not approve that the operational levy shortfall be divided out amongst the paying partners. Instead, the Board must find a buyer of this 'slack time' or cut the operational budget accordingly. It should be noted that the SALT Board has linked annual operational levy increases to South African inflation.

- The NRF is in engagements with DST on strengthening South African participation in SALT by purchasing 'slack time' on SALT rather than on purchasing new shares in SALT. These discussions are on-going and there are no commitments from DST at this stage.
- DST has been requested to help secure a new major partner in SALT with a shareholding of 10% or greater. NRF/DST have been in discussions with Mexico, China and India on these matters. These discussions are on-going.

Development Fund

- South Africa initially contributed R25m to the Development Fund and the remaining partners were given until May 2016 to contribute their respective share to this fund. The Funds are to be used for several major upgrades such as the Mirror Alignment System and the Tracker upgrade.
- The majority of SALT partners have thus far not contributed to the Development Fund with the exception of India (>R2.3m, 50% of its share). The American partial contribution to the DF through a US$2m NSF grant will only be credited once the NIR is fully commissioned; it is anticipated that this will happen in 2017/18 at the earliest. Wisconsin, who is building the NIR, will be fully credited once the NIR is fully commissioned. It is therefore unlikely that all the partners will meet the May 2016 deadline for their full contributions. The one year VAT refund of partners which has been transferred to the Fund is a relatively small contribution. Some partners converted their VAT refunds to operational levies.
- The Task Team proposed, and the NRF Exec accepted, that the deadline for contributions to the Development Fund be extended to May 2017 as this will allow for the results of the 2016 SALT Review to be fully discussed by the Principals in terms of providing a firm commitment for future contributions both for capital development and annual levies. A roadshow to partners by the SALT Board Chair and DST is proposed by the Task Team.
- Any surplus contributions from South Africa in the Development Fund beyond May 2017 arising from non-contributions by partners, should be converted to additional observing time over a period of 3-5 years, depending on the final value of the surplus.
- The Task Team further resolved that beyond 2017, partners should contribute to an annual levy which could include both operations costs and asset renewal costs; the methodology for this to be agreed by the SALT Board, for example using the annual depreciation charge for assets, % of operations costs etc.

Other matters

- The SALT Science Conference was a great success. NRF secured a grant of R0.5m from DST for this conference. This was an excellent means to showcase SALT. The opening session, which was attended by the Minister of Science and Technology, was excellent in communicating the success of SALT.

- We need to significantly step up the public communication of SALT to all relevant stakeholders, especially to the SALT Principals. The Annual Report is an important means of achieving this.
- The action items from the SALT Risk Register should be systematically addressed to ensure the sustainability of SALT.
- The SALT Astronomers need to be more strongly engaged with the TACS to ensure more optimal use of SALT for quality research outputs.
- We strongly encourage more collaborations amongst the SALT partners; Key Science Projects for high impact science should be pursued.
- NRF and SAAO continue to engage with the matter of emergency stabilization and evacuation from Sutherland.
- The Minister of Science and Technology has approved the *National Strategy for Multiwavelength Astronomy* which will be presented to the Cabinet. The strategy will become a public document after this step.
- The NRF Astronomy sub-Agency has been requested to develop an *Implementation Plan* for the Strategy. This is work in progress. South African participation in SALT is included in the Implementation Plan.
- NC has been appointed chair of the BRICS Working Group on Astronomy. The first meeting of the WG will take place in South Africa in December. It is my intention to place SALT on this agenda.
- It is very encouraging that a number of MeerKAT-related projects are being studied using SALT. From the point of view of strengthening multiwavelength cooperation in South Africa, this development should be strongly supported.

Nithaya Chetty
Chair South African SALT Task Team