SAAO Director's Report
SALT BEC #59 July 30, 2015

As we are all aware, Darragh O'Donoghue passed away after an extended struggle with pneumonia and other infections. This is a devastating loss to all of us personally, and to SALT corporately. There is no individual who can replace Darragh's widely varied expertise or his deep commitment to SALT. We will all dedicate ourselves to following his shining example, and endeavor to make SALT everything that he wished it to be. As I said at his memorial service, we shall all strive to follow our "inner Darragh" in both our professional and our personal lives.

SALT After Darragh

We have begun to organize ourselves to pick up the tasks that Darragh was working on. SALTICAM and RSS (visible) are fully documented and the operations team has the capacity to maintain these instruments. The project to replace elements of the RSS collimator (now on hold) has progressed to a point where Darragh's optical design input has been completed and Ockert can finish the project. Eric Depagne will take over HRS acceptance procedures. Petri Vaisannen will take the lead on the priority project management. The calibration system upgrade is done and working properly. Janus Brink is taking the lead on the RSS guider upgrade project; some additional optical design is needed, but can be done by in-house SAAO/SALT talent. Jack Hughes has agreed to take over supervision of the SALT Risk Register with the assistance of Lizette Labuschagen. David Buckley will supervise the production of the SALT annual report with the collaboration of IUCAA colleagues. Jack Hughes will continue the development of the SALT strategic Plan.

Some of the biggest holes that remain to be filled are the NIR collimator design and the new spherical grating spectrograph. We hope that Wisconsin can provide support for the NIR collimator and the fiber IFU to feed it. We will explore the possibility of hiring an astronomer at SAAO with fiber experience. Lisa Crause will take the lead on continuing the STGS project, with close collaboration with Chris Clemens.

SALT Operations

The weeks following the May Board meeting were highly productive at the telescope, but recently the weather has turned worse, precluding many nights for observations. RSS polarimetry commissioning is proceeding well under the direction of Steve Potter, and will begin on-sky testing soon. There have been no major instrumentation or telescope problems.

Ismail Osman resigned his position as SALT Business Manager and Company Secretary in June, due to family matters. Lizette Labuschagne has been appointed to take over Ismail's duties, in addition to her role as SALT CFO. She is working from an office in her home in Pretoria, with regular visits to Cape Town. This arrangement is working well, and we are now preparing a contract to formalize her appointment.

Safety

There was a recent auto accident driving staff from Sutherland town to the observatory. The vehicle skidded on a patch of ice on the road, went off the pavement, and turned on its side. Of the six people aboard, fortunately only one suffered a minor knee injury, while the rest were examined and released. The injured person was booked off work for a week, while everyone else returned to work the next day. The vehicle was badly damaged. There were no indications of improper driving or vehicle malfunction. We will consider acquiring equipment and materials to deice/sand the observatory roads in winter. The Sutherland clinic could not supply crutches and a knee brace for the injured passenger, so these had to be sent from Cape Town the following day. This indicates the poor state of the clinic in town. SAAO and the NRF continue to pursue ways to upgrade emergency services at the observatory. A number of observatory staff received first aid training recently.

South African Astronomy

The SA Astronomy Advisory Council held a meeting on June 27, followed by a South African Astronomy Town Hall meeting on June 28/29. The major item at both meetings was the South African Strategic Plan for Astronomy, which has not yet been released by the Minister of Science and Technology, but which now appears to have been finalized. The Astronomy Sub-Agency is developing an implementation plan to carry out the strategy. The SALT Task Team met at SAAO on July 28, with an extended discussion on SALT after Darragh, and also discussion of financial problems due to partner defaults and underfunding of the development fund. The NRF will propose a Darragh O'Donoghue SALT Research Chair, to be located at a SA university jointly with SALT/SAAO. The NASSP Winter School was held at SAAO in June; 40 students from historically black universities attended and received an introduction to astronomy; the goal is to attract larger numbers of black students into the NASSP program and eventual astronomy careers.

Science With SALT 2015 Conference

The conference was a great success. The Minister of Science and Technology opened the event, and we have had very positive feedback about her impressions. A wide variety of SALT science was presented, demonstrating the increasing productivity and effectiveness of the telescope. Thanks to the members of the Scientific Organizing Committee and the Local Organizing Committee for their efforts to organize a first-class event.