

THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN LARGE TELESCOPE: AN EXAMPLE OF A HIGH-TECH AFRICAN PROJECT

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South African Large Telescope

Construction of the Southern African Large Telescope, or SALT as it's known, was completed in 2005 and inaugurated by the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, on 10 Nov 2005. It is an example of a multi-disciplinary high-tech project that was designed and built predominantly within South Africa. The SALT Foundation, which funded its construction and operations, is a 13 partner multi-national consortium of institutions from Africa, Europe, the United States of America, New Zealand and India, with the primary aim of furthering astronomical research in the southern hemisphere and on the African continent.

This presentation will give an overview of the SALT project and the current status of the commissioning of this facility, which is the single largest optical telescope in the southern hemisphere. The telescope, with its array of instruments, will lead to many new discoveries in astronomy and, just as importantly, can act as a catalyst for S&T empowerment in the country and the region. The success of the SALT project has already had many positive spin-offs, including the spawning of the Astronomy Geographic Advantage Programme and South Africa's recent foray into modern radio astronomy, namely the Karoo Array Telescope (KAT) initiative and the ongoing bid to host the international ~\$1B Square Kilometre Array (SKA). However, SALT is not "finished" in the sense that it has still to achieve its full scientific potential and face future challenges, not the least being the growth of a vibrant research community who can fully exploit it, and the future astronomy and space science facilities.