

29 Aug 2012
Daily Dispatch
By DAVID MACGREGOR
Port Alfred Bureau

High praise for SKA team from Pandor

SA won eye in sky bid but Australia ‘threw toys out cot’

THE stars of South Africa’s winning bid to host the Square Kilometre Array (SKA) radio telescope have been praised by Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor.



Picture: DAVID MACGREGOR **THE SKA IS THE LIMIT: Science and Technology minister Naledi Pandor is welcomed to Rhodes University by research and development deputy vicechancellor Dr**

Peter Clayton while academic and student affairs deputy vice-chancellor Dr Sizwe Mabizela and Professor Makaiko Chitambo look on

At a Rhodes University celebration on Monday night, Pandor said the nine-year slog by South Africa's top academics more than paid off when the country beat Australia and secured the right to host what will be the world's biggest eye into space.

She predicted South Africa and the continent's global scientific research output – now half a percent – would dramatically improve thanks to SKA.

Pandor described winning the bid as "one of the most memorable moments in the scientific development of our country and continent".

Rhodes University's contribution – led by Professor Justin Jonas, the associate director of science and engineering at SKA, site manager Dr Adrian Tiplady and several other top graduates were key to the win.

The celebration was attended by the top brains behind the winning SKA bid – including director Dr Bernie Fanaroff and science and technology director Dr Phil Mjwara.

It also served to introduce recently appointed Rhodes University Centre for Radio Astronomy Techniques and Technologies head and SKA chairman Prof Oleg Smirnov.

Although South Africa won the SKA bid, the goal posts were shifted when – according to Fanaroff – the Aussies threw their toys out the cot and were hastily included in the project.

Pandor drew chuckles when she said: "The scrum with the Aussies is where we share the ball and not push and pull against each other."

Instead of tourists flocking to South Africa to see the Big Five and buy wine, platinum and diamonds, Pandor predicted a new wave of scientific visitors would descend on Carnarvon for astronomy research.

She praised Jonas for his role before quipping: "He allowed me to pretend I know a lot about science."

According to Fanaroff the project would have far reaching economic and scientific benefits that would result in cutting-edge frontier science discoveries.

"If we don't win Nobel Prizes I will be extremely disappointed," he said before quipping no bonuses would be paid if this did not happen.

Fanaroff said South Africa's brain drain had been reversed by winning SKA to such an extent scientists the world over now wanted to come work here.

Deputy vice-chancellor Dr Sizwe Mabizela praised Pandor as a dedicated champion of science and technology who had formed a dream team of experts to help South Africa win the SKA bid.

“We won the bigger chunk of the SKA, and it is now imperative that we encourage and support academically talented learners to choose maths, science and IT so that they can drive the generation and dissemination of knowledge.”

National SKA bursary and scholarship programme manager Daphne Lekgwathi said 425 students, postdoctoral fellows and university academics had benefited since the programme started in 2005.

SKA research chairs had been awarded to Rhodes and four other South African universities.

“The quality of research of our postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows is regarded as excellent by our international peers and in some cases better than students and fellows from the top universities around the world.”

She said while 71 students from partner African countries were being supported at masters and doctrate degree levels, the number of black South Africans doing postgraduate research needed to improve.