

**Address by the Minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor MP, at the launch on the International Astronomical Union's Global Office of Astronomy for Development, SAAO, Cape Town 16 April 2011**

President and members of the Executive Committee of the International Astronomical Union;  
Programme Director;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning and welcome to you all and a special welcome to our visitors from abroad.

South African science has built up excellence in a number of fields, but two are of great importance to our celebration of the launch of what I am told is now to be called the Global Office of Astronomy for Development (GOAD) here today.

The one has to do with the question of identity and has led to world-first research into the ancestors of humankind and the origins of our species in Africa.

The other has to do with our understanding of the universe and has led to bleeding-edge research into astronomy and the cosmos.

Few things related to science capture the imagination of people more than the study of deep time. This includes the origins of life, the worlds of dinosaurs, mass extinctions, meteorite impacts, as well as the evolution of humans.

In South Africa research on hominin origins has a rich tradition and is recognized as one of our most visible and most acclaimed field of science.

The South African fossil record of hominin evolution is arguably one of the most complete and spans more than four million years.

Given the uniqueness of this heritage resource, South Africa has become a global leader in the study of the palaeoworld.

We share our research with the rest of Africa, uniting us in promoting a new awareness of life in the past through the study of the continent's rich heritage in fossils, artefacts and human genetics for the intellectual enrichment and empowerment of all Africans.

The other field also has to do with the study of deep time and has exerted a global fascination for as long as people have looked at the stars.

It has to do with – to borrow from Stuart Clark – a number of [big questions](#). How big is the universe? How old is the universe? How many things does it contain?

We don't know. It's very big out there. But it will be amazing to find out the answers in the fullness of time.

How far can we travel in the universe? Will we ever get close to strange, enormous and faraway objects, like black holes or pulsars?

We don't know. It's very dangerous out there. It would take 9 months to reach Mars.

Then there are those other questions that tie up with our identity. Is the Universe eternal? Has it always been as it is and will it always be as it is?

We don't know. We do know that the Universe is constantly changing because it is expanding.

Astronomers are busy finding out the answers to these big questions in scientific institutions around the world.

Without complex measuring instruments, we would be unable to find answers to these questions. We can make ground-based telescopes that are far larger than anything we can launch into space. We hope to be able to host another one of these complex instruments here in southern Africa in the near future.

We are not here to celebrate the launch of a complex measuring instrument.

We are here to celebrate the launch of a development office that will spread astronomy throughout the length and breadth of Africa.

It's the best place for the office to be. We have some 60 astronomers working here in South Africa (25 here at the SAAO) and they are a half of Africa's 120 astronomers.

But more than numbers, we also have the political will. We are committed to enhancing south-south relations, as our presence at the BRICS meeting in China this week has shown.

We have invested in astronomy. We have invested in complex measuring instruments. We have SALT (Southern African Large Telescope), MeerKAT (Karoo Array Telescope) and the bid to host the SKA (Square Kilometre Array).

We chose to invest heavily in science and astronomy, because of its role in development, not only within South Africa, but all across Africa. Big astronomy projects such as SALT, MeerKAT and SKA entail major

capacity development programmes in order to train the next generation of engineers and astronomers from all over Africa.

We have not stopped at investments though, and have also put in place forward-thinking legislation in the form of the Astronomy Geographic Advantage Act, for the long term protection of the excellent astronomical sites in South Africa.

In South Africa, people in the astronomy field, from those working on the ground to the highest levels of government, share the vision that astronomy will play a significant role in the development of society.

I should say, in conclusion, that over the years the SAAO has built a reputation for producing global, cost-effective research and astronomical instrumentation.

It also has a significant fraction of the SA astronomy PhD contingent on its staff, including postdoctoral researchers and SALT astronomy operations personnel.

It's part of an extensive network of international collaborations and uses its position in the global community to further the training of PhDs in Astrophysics and Space Science on the African continent.

With the commissioning of SALT, I have no doubt that the SAAO will continue to pursue exciting new areas of research that are only made possible by a 10m class telescope.

SALT is testimony to Southern Africa's competitive advantages as a venue for capital intensive 'big science' initiatives.

Thank you.