

Public Statement on the status of the SKA Project

28 April 2020

Dear friends and colleagues,

I hope that all of you and your families are safe and healthy in this crisis that has gripped the world. It is heartening to see the way that our fellow citizens across the globe have risen to the challenges imposed by the pandemic, especially the way in which the world's health professionals have stepped up, often at risk to themselves. I salute them all.

It is now nearly six weeks since the SKA HQ building was shut down as a response to the coronavirus pandemic. It is my expectation that the shutdown will continue for some weeks yet. Within the senior leadership of the SKA Organisation we are planning the eventual return to the office but will be following the advice of the UK government in making any decisions. Any and all decisions on a physical return will be taken ensuring the health and well-being of our staff and their families above all else.

Thanks to some careful planning, an efficient IT team, robust technology and a digitally-savvy workforce, SKA staff have managed to rapidly settle into the new working environments and establish new working practices. As I am sure is the case all over the world, this has not come without issues, as our colleagues cope with families at home and isolation for those who live alone. We have had, for many years, a flexible work culture and this has come to the fore during the past few weeks. Our Human Resources team have been in contact with all lone workers to ensure they are managing, and we have set up systems whereby they can meet and socialise with their colleagues via videoconferencing.

Some of our staff returned to their home countries prior to the shutdown to be with their families; they continue to work remotely, and we will work with them to plan their eventual return to SKA HQ.

In the weeks since the lockdown commenced, we have had 7 new starters at SKAO. All have been inducted remotely and are fully incorporated in all SKA activities within their new teams. We look forward to the time when we can meet them in person and welcome them with a NAMASTE, the replacement for a handshake.

On the project side, we continue to progress well. We have had several positive milestones over the last four weeks and have been maintaining the strong momentum that was evident across all aspects of the project before the pandemic hit. Those key milestones are:

- The System Critical Design Review, the meeting for which took place in December last year, was completed in early April, with all actions closed off except those few which, with the full agreement of the panel, require continued technical investigation of prototype systems. This has been a huge effort by all involved, both within the office and across our global partnership.
- The external review of the SKA Operations Plan took place by video on 23-25 March; the panel's very positive report was received shortly thereafter. We have accepted and are implementing all of their recommendations. There are no major issues, but some wise advice was provided in areas of budgetary contingency, lean staff levels in one or two areas, the complexity of managing an operation

across three continents and the relationships with the proposed SKA Regional Centres.

- The Cost Audit of the SKA1 construction plans was completed a week or so ago. This was conducted by Arup, a global engineering company. Again, the report was very positive with a range of extremely useful recommendations. These mainly focused on issues of detailed process and did not turn up any major concerns with regard to the cost estimates or the contingency estimation process.
- On Monday 20th April, EPFL (the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne) joined the SKA Organisation, representing Switzerland; they are SKA's 14th member. Our Swiss colleagues have, over the past 4 years, become increasingly engaged in SKA activities and we welcome them into the project.
- On 21st April, we were pleased to hear that the legislation to progress the UK's ratification of the SKA Observatory Convention was laid before the UK Parliament; this will now progress through the UK processes over the coming weeks.

In addition to supporting these milestones, the SKAO staff are focusing on several areas, namely: developing the draft Construction Proposal, which will be ready for internal review shortly; further development of the procurement strategy; updating the Operations Plan and developing the broader 10-year plan for the Establishment and Delivery of the Observatory; engaging in the newly-established SRC working groups; drafting the business plan for 2021; preparing for the review of business-enabling functions; working on several different aspects related to the transition from the SKA Organisation to the SKA Observatory; working on the second Data Challenge; drafting the next version of Contact, developing the thinking around the future SKA Observatory brand and much more.

I also would like to say that I am impressed at how the SKA community around the world has stepped up to assist during the Covid-19 crisis; from our colleagues in South Africa taking the lead on provision of ventilators at their government's request; to work on contact tracing apps in Australia; supporting super-computing work on the virus and vaccines in many partners; and the provision of online educational resources by colleagues in India, Italy, the UK and elsewhere. I'm sure there are many more examples. These actions demonstrate the skillsets and experience such teams can bring to the table to assist at these critical times.

As we look to the future, we are, with the full support of the Board and the SKA Observatory Council Preparatory Task Force (CPTF), the body preparing for the new governance structure under the treaty, planning for the establishment of the Observatory later this year and for the commencement of SKA1 construction activities as early in 2021 as possible. As is natural, we are undertaking planning for a range of possible scenarios with the intent of being able to respond appropriately and rapidly as the world emerges from this crisis. None of us can predict what the coming months will bring but, as one of the world's major scientific endeavours, we hope to push forwards bringing employment, innovation and scientific exploration to benefit our partner countries.

Philip Diamond
SKA Director-General