

News:

Formal Spanish accession to ESO is imminent and the Czech Republic is expected to join soon.

The STC now has 3 sub-committees – covering VLTI, ALMA and the ELT. An extraordinary (but rapidly becoming usual) meeting on Nov 23 will discuss the ELT project.

Issues

The VST is being dismantled prior to shipping to Chile. An ESO engineering team will investigate the mirror support system and report. This may lead to further work before the telescope can be commissioned, but the project is now taking on momentum from ESO. The VISTA IR Camera and telescope structure are in the enclosure on Paranal, but the primary mirror polishing is going more slowly than planned.

With the commissioning of CRIRIES, the VLT 1st generation of instruments is complete, but new instruments are on the horizon with Hawk-I expected later this year and X-shooter in 2008.

A process to define a 3rd generation of VLT instruments is getting underway, with a meeting on 'VLT science in the ELT Era' scheduled for October 8-12 to be followed by a call for proposals in 2008.

The oversubscription rates on the VLT are very high (>6). The exact values are not clear because of the commitments to GT and Large programmes, but it may be that the real pressure factor is 8 or more. This is not healthy, and the STC has asked for an analysis for the next meeting.

VLTI ITF activities are making good progress in investigation the current state and limitations in the VLTI infrastructure. This is being run in parallel with 2nd generation instrument studies. A major review of the VLTI and its associated infrastructure and future instruments is planned for ~October which should result in a definition of the VLTI project. Instruments being considered are mid- and near-IR multi-beam imager/spectrometers and a high astrometric precision instrument primarily targeting the black hole in the Galactic Centre.

ALMA revised timescale now has early science starting in 2010, with full operations in 2012. This seems a much more realistic plan. The ALMA HQ will be built on the ESO site in Santiago. The ALMA development plan will start in 2008. The European ARC is now being developed, with plans for a substantial central node at ESO (~18 people) – a UK node is being proposed by a consortium led by Jodrell Bank.

The STC recommended that the ESAC should expand its remit to cover APEX, and that APEX operations should be extended to 2012.

The E-ELT project passed a major milestone with endorsement from the community at the meeting in Marseille last year.