

Brazil poised to join Europe's astronomy club

Brazil is set to become the first non-European member of the European Southern Observatory (ESO). As part of its membership package, Brazil will pay about €250m over the next 10 years, and in return will get access to ESO's telescopes in nearby Chile. Astronomers in Brazil have welcomed the move, saying that it will boost Brazil's small but growing astronomy programme.

Brazilian astronomers first expressed an interest in joining ESO several years ago, so that they could gain access to large astronomical facilities such as the planned European Extremely Large Telescope (E-ELT) and the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope. They made a formal recommendation to the Brazilian government in May 2010, which succeeded partly because the country was keen to improve the quality of its science by joining large international projects. The Brazilian congress is expected to ratify the deal in the first half of this year.

"I am extremely positive about this collaboration," says Tim de Zeeuw, ESO general director, who signed the



Access all areas

Brazil's membership of the European Southern Observatory will see it gain access to telescopes such as the planned European Extremely Large Telescope.

deal with Brazil's former minister of science and technology, Sergio Machado Rezende, in Brasilia on 29 December 2010. Albert Bruch, director of Brazil's National Astrophysics Laboratory and a member of the committee that negotiated the deal, says the challenge will be to take advantage of these new opportunities in the best way. "It's going to take some time for the scientific community to adapt and learn how to apply successfully for telescope time at the ESO observatories and writing scientific propo-

sals that aim to make the best use of the instrument's capabilities," he says.

Under the agreement, Brazil will pay an entrance fee of €130m over 10 years, as well as paying an annual contribution, which is normally proportional to a member state's gross domestic product (GDP). But since Brazil has a relatively low GDP per capita, ESO has decided to gradually increase the country's annual payments so that in 2012 Brazil will pay 25% of the value based on its GDP, rising to 100% by 2021.

ESO's convention has always allowed non-European countries to join the organization, but the current policy recommends no more than a quarter of member states should be from outside Europe. De Zeeuw adds that ESO is happy to bring in other new members – Brazil will be the 15th – even though it will mean increased competition for time to use ESO's telescopes. However, Brazil's entry should also help in the construction of the E-ELT, which ESO is aiming to begin this year.

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