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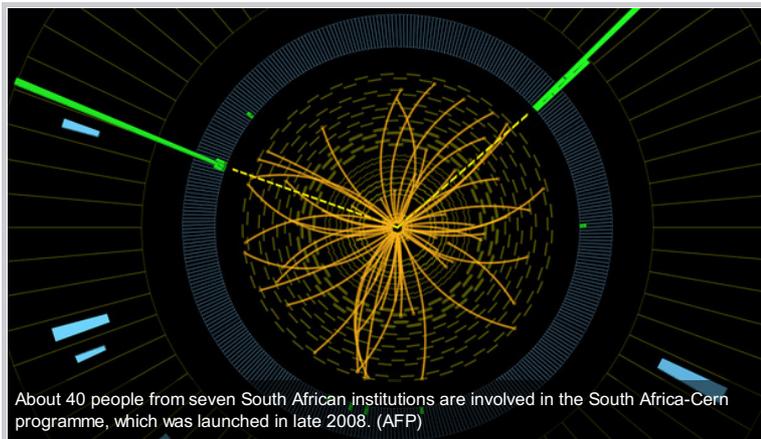
Locals join the hunt for missing link

06 JUL 2012 06:54 - FARANA'AZ PARKER

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Thousands of scientists contributed to the discovery of the Higgs boson, and among them were some of South Africa's brightest minds.



About 40 people from seven South African institutions are involved in the South Africa-Cern programme, which was launched in late 2008. (AFP)

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On Wednesday, scientists at the European Laboratory for Nuclear Research (Cern), announced that data from two separate experiments independently confirmed that a new particle had been observed. The Higgs-like boson, which is consistent with a theory put forward by physicist Peter Higgs almost 50 years ago, is believed to impart mass to other particles.

About 40 people from seven South African institutions are involved in the South Africa-Cern programme, which was launched in late 2008.

According to University of Witwatersrand physicist Trevor Vickey, South African scientists have a permanent presence in Geneva.

"We rotate our staff and students to contribute to different tasks and maintenance of our detector on site, but through the world-class technology and advanced computer systems, we can analyse our data from almost anywhere in the world."

Vickey said the South Africans at Cern were studying a wide range of scientific issues, including the search for the Higgs boson, exotic particles and black holes.

Extraordinary opportunity

Andrew Hamilton, a lecturer at the University of Cape Town, said the South Africa-Cern programme was a coup. "It's an extraordinary opportunity for South African

science, to train young people in the absolute cutting edge of world science.

"Being part of Cern gives South African students and researchers access to world-class facilities and infrastructure, without having to put the investment into paying the huge infrastructure costs, of billions of euros, which are clearly outside the realms of possibility for South African researchers to pay by ourselves," he said.

University of Johannesburg Professor Simon Connell credited the department of science and technology (DST) with the vision to back the project. "Just like the DST chose the SKA [square kilometre array] as a key large infrastructure programme, they also selected involvement in Cern," he said.

The benefits of South African involvement at Cern go beyond the training of local physicists. One of the spin-offs is technology transfer. Local scientists are already benefiting from the South African computing grid, a network of computers set up to create a virtual supercomputer, used for data processing and analysis. It is believed that experience with the grid, which was established because of South Africa's involvement with Cern, will benefit scientists involved with the SKA and other data-intensive research units.

Connell said that, between the SKA and the South Africa-Cern programme, he anticipated a new dawn for

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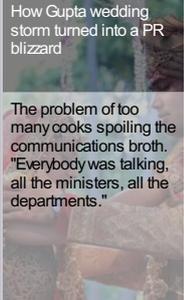
particle physics and for astronomy in the country. "There's a strong link between those two," he said.

Connell could not speculate on the potential technological spin-offs that might result from the discovery of the new particle.

"We're just at the dawn of all these discoveries. Who can predict what will happen? It's like asking someone in the 1900s to predict what life would be like today."

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