

EDITORIAL

Plain English?



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Editor

It makes a welcome change to have a clear concise summary of

the background and key issues in the STFC funding saga spelt out in clear, common-sense language, courtesy of the IUSS Select Committee report. They have done a splendid job in clarifying what happened when, and admitting that the consequences are bad for UK science. This is not what people in general expect from politicians, who generally languish at the bottom of tables of the trustworthy professions. Yet here they have trumped our own research council in setting out the unpalatable truth: STFC was ill-thought-out in the first place, set up at the wrong time, poorly led, no good at consulting and communicating with the community it is supposed to serve, and remains in a position to do further damage.

The problem remains: what can we do? More money looks unlikely; the possibility of waiting for the outcome of the Wakeham Review has been dismissed. What might help would be if the STFC could take a leaf from the IUSS Select Committee book and start to talk and listen to their research community, and be clear about the facts. However gloomy the prospects for large swathes of UK astronomical research, it would be better to know what is happening, rather than to have to unravel contradictory information dispensed from on high. And, given the number of researchers who raised the problem of potential legacy costs before the formation of STFC, for example, perhaps the new council could have done something about it, rather than denying that there would be a problem. Genuine, common-sense, two-way communication, influencing opinions on both sides, seems a very distant prospect at the moment.

Government report highlights management and communication failures at STFC

The report of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee sets out in robust, plain language, a damning summary of the Science and Technology Facilities Council's handling of its funding problems over the past few months, highlighting "a poorly conceived delivery plan, lamentable communication and poor leadership, as well as major senior management misjudgements".

The IUSS Select Committee exists to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. In this report, the committee, chaired by Phil Willis MP, considered the recent funding decisions made by the STFC (within research funding as a whole). Their report and published evidence are informative, not least in making clear the extent and origin of the problems. The report acknowledges that the timing of the merger of PPARC and CCLRC to form STFC left little time for the new research council to prepare for the comprehensive spending review of 2007, but the committee is clear that a lot of the problems come from the merger itself, described as "untimely and ill-thought-out". More particularly, the committee has established that, although the CCLRC was not carrying a debt, it had not budgeted properly for certain facilities: STFC has been left with a bill for the operating costs of Diamond and ISIS that is £75 m (across the CSR period at 2006/07 prices) above the sum allocated in its budget after the merger. In other words:

"One research community has been saddled with the debt of another, despite assurances from the government that STFC would be formed without legacy issues."

The report's admirably clear style also highlights the STFC's role in turning "the government's PR fanfare into a PR disaster". The effects of supporting universities through full economic costing and the high level of international commitments to subscriptions mean that STFC's money available to spend ("near cash" in the jargon) is essentially unchanged year on year, equivalent to annual cuts with inflation – a very different position to the other research councils.

The clarity that this committee has brought to the issues that inflamed the astronomical community over the past few months is most welcome, not least in bringing common sense to bear on convoluted and confused arguments and their effects:

"The ongoing saga over Gemini

raises questions about the competence of STFC's communications."

The rationale for the decision to cease support for ground-based solar–terrestrial physics is also questioned in the bluntest of terms:

"We find Professor Mason's explanation for the withdrawal of funding from ... to be inaccurate, unconvincing and unacceptable. PPARC ... intended to maintain a reduced capacity in this field. We urge STFC to suspend its decision on ground-based STP so that the issue can be revisited with proper peer review and in full consultation with the community, including NERC."

The committee also recognized a point made forcefully by many in the astronomical community, that the indecision and uncertainty has damaged UK science abroad:

"We are concerned that ... indecision over Gemini and the withdrawal of funding for ground-based STP facilities while the UK is engaged in a long-term commitment to EISCAT has made the UK look like an incompetent international partner."

Much of the trenchant criticism of this process has been directed at the STFC, although the unrealistic expectations of government for the merger of PPARC and CCLRC are noted. But STFC management structure and the behaviour of key officers, CEO Keith Mason in particular, have been found wanting:

"The events of the past few months have exposed serious deficiencies within STFC's senior management, whose misjudgements could still significantly damage Britain's research reputation in this area, both at home and abroad."

The committee also stressed the significance of the proposed cuts for:

"Given the anxiety that grant

cuts are causing to the physics and astronomy community, we are dismayed that STFC has been attempting to play down the effects of the cuts on the grounds that reductions in future grants are not problematic. We consider cuts to grants that had already been promised a major problem."

Overall, the committee echoes the suggestion that cuts are reconsidered in the light of the Wakeham Review of Physics currently underway and expected to report in the autumn – and that STFC uses the time between now and then in consulting its stakeholders. They also recommend:

"substantial and urgent changes ... to the way in which the Council is run in order to restore confidence and to give the Council the leadership it desperately needs."

The Select Committee Report has been broadly welcomed by community organizations. The RAS Council feels that the report "encapsulates well the criticisms we have been making of STFC and its management of the allocation ... we urge that no irreversible decisions are taken prior to the Wakeham report". RAS Council will continue to press STFC to improve communications and consultation, as well as seeking ways to mitigate these severe cuts.

The MIST Council, representing researchers in the magnetosphere, ionosphere and solar–terrestrial physics field, feels that the report chimes well with the considerable concerns of their community, and welcomes its proposal that STFC reconsider. Prof. Betty Lanchester of the Space Environment Physics group at the University of Southampton said: "This report provides hope that common sense can prevail, and the UK will not simply throw away its world lead in this area; however, it cannot prevent the loss of talented young scientists that has already begun."

'Substantial and urgent changes are needed'

The conclusions of the IUSS Committee Fourth Report 2007–08: Science Budget Allocation:

STFC's problems have their roots in the size of the CSR07 settlement and the legacy of bringing CCLRC and PPARC together, but they have been exacerbated by a poorly conceived delivery plan, lamentable communication and poor leadership, as well as major senior management misjudgements. Substantial and urgent changes are now needed in the way in which the Council is run in order to restore confidence and to give it the leadership it desperately needs and has so far failed properly to receive. This raises serious questions about the role and performance of the Chief Executive, especially his ability to retain the confidence of the scientific community as well as to carry through the necessary changes outlined here. The full report and the evidence presented can be read at:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmdius.htm>