Capital cuts could ‘erode’ the UK’s competitiveness

The head of the UK’s main research council for particle physics and astronomy has warned that cuts to capital spending over the next few years could “erode” the country’s international competitiveness. Keith Mason, chief executive of the UK’s Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), told a committee of MPs last month that the UK physics community will now “have to work hard” to compensate for the reduction in spending and that the next few years will represent a “challenge” for UK physicists.

In December the UK government allocated the science budget for the next four years to the UK’s seven research councils – including the STFC and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). Although the government agreed not to cut the overall science budget following an intense lobbying campaign by the UK science community, an increase in funding for medical research means that the STFC’s budget will fall from £469m to £449m by 2014-2015, while EPSRC’s budget will be cut from £817m to £780m over the same period. The savings will be made by reducing capital spending, with grants for researchers remaining relatively unscathed. The STFC has already said that it will do this by reducing beamtime at the ISIS neutron-scattering centre in Oxfordshire and at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory’s Central Laser Facility.

But the biggest single area hit in the science budget is the Large Facilities Capital Fund (LFCF), which is used by all seven research councils to fund new infrastructure. Currently standing at £115m, its budget will fall to £48m by 2013-2014 before rising again in 2014-2015 to £128m. “In the context of new capital facilities, we are going to be proceeding at a rate that is slower than we would have liked,” Mason told MPs last month at a meeting of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee.

Physicists, however, have breathed a sigh of relief that big grant cuts have not materialized and that the UK will not have to pull out of membership of major organizations such as the European Southern Observatory or the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in Grenoble, France. “Things could have been a lot worse than they are now,” says astronomer Paul Crowther from Sheffield University. “We are not dancing around the streets, but thankfully our initial fears have not surfaced.”

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