

news

Physicists to take Wakeham's advice and cast net wider

Physics departments across the country will need to widen their horizons and reclaim ownership of their discipline if the UK is to remain strong in the field. This, scientists say, is the overriding message of the Wakeham review of physics, published on 1 October (*see views, pages 16, 17*).

Despite offering an ultimately positive diagnosis of the subject, the panel, led by Bill Wakeham, vice-chancellor of the University of Southampton, expressed concern that university departments have narrowed their priorities and that too much overlap exists in the work of separate institutions. It recommends that the physics community stakes a claim to research being conducted in other departments in a bid to strengthen its profile.

The review was commissioned in December last year by Research Councils UK at the bidding of John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills. It has concluded that physics is generally in "good health", but that several obstacles need to be overcome to ensure its future well-being.

Tom Hartquist, head of the astrophysics group at the University of Leeds, says the conclusions offer food for thought to universities. "I think that one of the main things that anyone can take out of it is that physics departments have to start addressing these global, existential issues like energy and the environment," he says. "Despite the fact that I wasn't really trained that way, I have to accept that what they're saying is the right thing." He predicts that departments will now rethink their hiring strategies as well as spreading their nets into new areas, rather than focusing on astronomy and particle physics.

Ian Halliday, former head of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council, and currently chief executive of the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance, agrees that priorities need to be expanded but adds that full responsibility for action does not necessarily lie with the physicists. "I think if Wakeham wants a real interaction between university academics in physics and the world of medicine then, I believe, the Medical Research Council is going to have to change its ways," he says. "It may spend a lot of money on medical physics but only if the medical physicists are inside a medical school. It gives comparatively little to what

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you would call standard physics departments."

Scientists, including members of the panel, have been disappointed by aspects of RCUK's response to the report. The review panel identified several specific areas for improvement at the Science and Technology Facilities Council in the wake of the furore surrounding its 2007 Science Budget settlement. These include opening up its governing council to include more members of the scientific community and considering how its executive

might make a clearer distinction between ex-PPARC funding and support for general use facilities.

Martin Barstow, head of the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Leicester and a member of the Wakeham panel said that he was dissatisfied with RCUK's promise to add two more scientists to the council. "I welcome this initial move," he told *Research Fortnight*. "But I'd have liked to have seen more than that." Nevertheless, Barstow holds out hope that more changes can be made if the STFC moves to amend its charter.

Hartquist, on the other hand, says the problem runs deeper than adding more scientists. He says it is overrepresentation of the executive on the council that is the key issue. The fact that RCUK has failed to respond to this concern, he says, could be the subject of considerable disappointment in the STFC community.

RCUK also essentially rejected the suggestion that more separation is needed between STFC's competing priorities, stating that councils need to "tension their expenditure across the whole range of their activities".

Halliday, who openly supports a return to a system more akin to the days of PPARC, says that this raises significant questions about the council's future viability. While Barstow says that the problem continues to damage the community's faith in the decision-making structures at the council, Halliday argues that the problem will eventually lead to its downfall. He says that each council should take full responsibility for its disciplines, including all the facilities used by its scientists, and predicts that the STFC can last no longer than two years with its current structure.

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