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Unified, in theory

The Organisational Review of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, completed last month by a panel chaired by David Grant, the vice-chancellor of Cardiff University (*see News, page X*), provides an admirably robust assessment of the council's current predicament.

Few of its fifteen recommendations will surprise chief executive Keith Mason and his management team; the STFC had already identified most of the problems in a detailed self-assessment published last August. Taken together, the two are a pointed summary of how the council has to change to regain the confidence of the research community and the public.

To recap, briefly. The self-assessment and external review came about in response to the public-relations fiasco that engulfed the council shortly after the release of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review at the end of 2007. Faced with intense budget pressures, the council announced the possible relinquishment of several high-profile scientific missions, as well as grant provisions, angering two vocal academic communities, particle physics and astronomy. The decision-making process behind these choices then unravelled under public scrutiny, leaving the council exposed to criticism from all quarters—and undefended by the leadership of the scientific community that it serves.

It's highly unusual for a British research agency to find itself in such a deep hole. And despite the mitigating circumstances, the Grant review confirms that much of damage was self-inflicted. It highlights, in particular, failings in three areas—communications, governance and leadership—that the STFC must now seek to address.

The review calls, first, for "communications activity based on clear, compelling and simple messages" and for communications to be "owned and delivered by the whole top management team". There is some concern that the STFC will interpret this as a call for more money to be spent on corporate PR fluff. But what the council needs is the opposite: it is time, as Grant suggests, for its senior management to stop hiding and engage directly with the scientific community, the public and the press.

On the governance issue, the key problem identified by the Grant panel is the presence of three senior STFC executives on its governing council. At other research councils, the chief executive is the only hired manager to sit on councils made up of eminent outsiders, usually scientists. The STFC was an exception, apparently, because of its responsibility for expensive facilities. But this gave Mason's team a dominating influence, which freed it from effective outside oversight and aggravated problems.

On leadership, the Grant panel calls for various reinforcement mechanisms, including the hiring of an outside consultant to mentor the top management team, and the appointment of a programme director to oversee change at the agency.

Prompt action on several fronts will clearly be necessary in order to convert the STFC into an effective and prestigious research agency. It may not be sufficient, however. The Grant panel wasn't asked to address the big question lurking in the background: the creation of the STFC in the first place. That has left particle physics and astronomy uneasily appended to the politically fraught and financially unpredictable task of building and operating facilities. Even a reformed STFC may find such competing interests awkward. *See View, page 17.*

elsewhere

"No one would be my lab partner at school because all my experiments went wrong. Maybe I'm a bad choice for this job."

Marcus du Sautoy, the University of Oxford's professor for the public understanding of science, explains why he prefers the precision of maths to the unreliability of science. The Times, 11/1/09.

"I would like to have been informed as early as possible, because I would have retired earlier and written more books."

Tom Whiston, a former researcher in the University of Manchester's Rutherford building, says he wishes the university had warned him earlier of the risks of radiation exposure. He is the third researcher to be diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer after working in the building. The Guardian, 13/1/09.

"It's Scotland's shame because one in 10 of Europe's experiments on primates is conducted here. They feel pain and are more sensitive than any other group of animals and I just think it's wrong morally to use them in experiments."

Scottish Labour MEP David Martin is campaigning for scientific research on all monkey species to be banned. BBC News Online, 7/1/09.

"Over the longer term the global downturn may well affect Oxford's other sources of income, such as external research funding."

The University of Oxford announces that the value of its endowment fell by 14 per cent, to £592.5 million, between July 2007 and October 2008, and the financial crisis could still hit its other income streams. Financial Times, 13/1/09.

decade

"Great care needs to be taken when interpreting the proportion of staff submitted. In nearly 1 in 3 cases, it will not reflect department structures but rather a grouping created for the RAE."

Andy Boddington, director of Evaluation Associates, warns against setting a minimum proportion of researchers to be submitted before a department can be awarded a 5 or 5 rating.*

Research Fortnight, 27 January 1999