

Particle physicists next in line for STFC cuts

A looming cut to the Science and Technology Facilities Council's particle physics grant line could have disastrous consequences for the UK's technical capabilities in the field and threaten the country's involvement with the Large Hadron Collider, scientists have warned.

The council has confirmed that it will cut back on the number of particle physics rolling grants, which are due to be allocated this summer. Scientists in the firing line say that these cuts are likely to reach 25 to 35 per cent and, since so much of the technical support needed to operate particle physics programmes relies on the rolling grant, the cuts seriously risk undermining the UK's future capacity in the field.

Grant applications for the three-yearly review cycle are due on 2 March. These will be considered by the Particle Physics Grants Panel, which, under normal circumstances, would then make recommendations to the Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear Physics Science Committee (PPAN) about which areas should be funded or dropped.

However, Steve Lloyd, a professor of experimental particle physics at Queen Mary University of London and head of the panel, says his group does not know how much money will be available for rolling grants, and is completely unprepared to make the kind of strategic decisions that come with such a dramatic cut. They are now waiting for some kind of guidance from the STFC management on how to proceed.

"It is going to be very difficult for the grants panel to handle cuts of this magnitude," he says. "Someone has to make strategic decisions about what we're going to cut. We're either going to have to heavily cut back our technical engineering base, and hence the capability of the UK

by Laura Hood

lhnews@ResearchResearch.com

to be involved in new construction or upgrade projects, or we're going to cut our young physicist base and seriously limit our capability to analyse data from the LHC." Lloyd is to meet with PPAN at the beginning of March to discuss how to approach the cuts but he argues that a community-wide debate is the only way to make the right choices.

Phil Allport, head of the University of Liverpool's particle physics group, says there is a misperception that the past year's controversy has gone away. "In fact, nothing substantial has changed. Over a year later, as far as we can see, nothing has really been addressed," he says.

But some researchers are hopeful they now have a more effective ally in the STFC Science Board. "The board could have been more pro-active in the past, although it was difficult to be more than re-active," says one disgruntled physicist, "but now the board is beginning to have something to show for its efforts."

The Science Board is looking at a national accelerator strategy that aims to co-ordinate the UK's resources in this area into a programme that will serve research into government priorities, such as new technologies in the fields of energy, security, medicine and the environment. "This is exciting because STFC can apply its knowledge to applications that will benefit society in a very direct way," says Jenny Thomas, the board's new chairwoman. "While we usually use accelerators as scientific instruments, we now foresee their use as tools. In addition, we are working to develop similar ideas in other areas of our expertise" The board, she adds, "is trying to envisage how the STFC can become more than the sum of its parts" (*see view, page 16*).

MDMA report stirs debate on use of science advice

MPs are to look into the independence of the panels offering science advice to government following a decision by the Home Office to disregard a recommendation that MDMA, known as ecstasy, should be reclassified as a Class B drug.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs called for a reclassification, since the majority of its members "did not recognise the harmful effects of MDMA as commensurate with those of Class A drugs". However, Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, elected to ignore this advice and keep the drug on the Class A list. This follows a decision last year to go against the same council's advice by upgrading cannabis to Class B.

The House of Commons Innovation, Universities,

by Laura Hood

lhnews@ResearchResearch.com

Science and Skills Committee now wants to meet with other scientific advisory boards to establish whether other work by scientists is being disregarded.

"Given the council's last two decisions, and particularly given the row between Jacqui Smith and David Nutt [chairman of the council], you really must ask the question, why have them? What's the point?" says Phil Willis, chairman of the IUSS committee. Willis is particularly concerned that the Home Office controls the communications of the council, a situation he describes as "totally and utterly unacceptable", and which, he suggests, seriously undermines the panel's independence.