

**view from the top** john womersley

# STFC: budget cuts were necessary and no discipline was singled out

The Science and Technology Facilities Council completed its science prioritisation exercise in December 2009 and is now focusing on implementing a five-year £2.4 billion investment strategy in multi-disciplinary science and technology.

The process started with our advisory panels consulting their communities, feeding up to the Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear Physics Committee and the Physical and Life Sciences Committee and finally to the Science Board. The process required tough decisions. Some choices were unpalatable, but necessary for us to live within our finite budget. Inevitably some stakeholders were disappointed. However, I believe the process was fair, consultative, transparent and rigorous—and I believe this view is shared by the majority of the scientific community and other observers.

We will, however, constantly work to improve and adjust our advisory and peer review systems to ensure our decisions are based on fair and transparent advice of the highest quality. We have now published on our website the advice from PPAN and PALS to the Science Board, making it possible to trace the progress of the prioritisation exercise and understand its rationale.

The outcome for some communities is challenging, but I reject any assertion that areas were “targeted” or treated unfairly. In the case of nuclear physics, we invited advice from a Nuclear Physics Advisory Panel. It was treated in the same way as the input from the other advisory panels in particle physics, astronomy and space. PPAN and the Science Board each had a nuclear physicist member and all decisions were reached by consensus.

We are very careful to manage conflicts of interest; individuals with project or personal conflicts were not involved in discussions or decisions on their own project. PPAN and Science Board members are not appointed to act as

representatives of their own particular specialism, but to take a broad view across the programme. All the projects we considered were assessed against the same criteria. A member of the STFC council attended the December Science Board meeting to give Council additional assurance on the process.

Some have been frustrated by phrases like ‘managed withdrawal’, concerned that we were dragging out their period of uncertainty. I regret the stress this places on university and project teams (and indeed on STFC

staff) but we have made a commitment to implement our prioritisation in a managed way, in discussion with the affected groups, to ensure the best outcome for science. A number of steps have been taken since December.

- We have formally confirmed our withdrawal from the Gemini Observatory at the end of 2012.
- We have issued the 2010 astronomy rolling grants and are now processing the particle physics rolling grants.
- We cancelled the 2010 post-doctoral fellowship round—and I personally apologise to all those who had applied before it was stopped. Instead, the funding will support studentships (235 new studentships have just been awarded) and 12 advanced fellowships. The Education, Training and Careers Committee will hold a short consultation with the community to discuss the optimum balance between these three areas of support for early-career researchers.
- Grants for some projects marked for managed withdrawal, such as the Cassini and Cluster space missions, were due to expire in March. We have agreed some bridging funding to allow these teams to agree new funding arrangements with international partners.

Finally, on 4 March, science minister Paul Drayson announced the outcome of his review of the STFC. It spelled out new arrangements to allow us to plan with greater predictability and financial confidence, while providing our community with more stability.

In times of fiscal constraint and uncertainty over future funding, it is imperative that we now all get behind the delivery of excellent science. We must speak with one voice about its importance and its socio-economic benefits to the UK. Anything less would jeopardise the future of UK science and indeed harm the country as a whole.

The task facing our advisory panels and Science Board has not been easy. Undoubtedly the prioritisation exercise required tough choices affecting the entire community. Nevertheless, I am confident our 2010-15 programme is of the highest scientific excellence, is world-leading, and will deliver for the UK in terms of scientific and technical advances, inspiration, commercial benefits and skilled people. To do this will require changes for all of us. The challenge now is to unite in making this programme a reality we can all be proud of.

The time for retrospective analysis and criticism is over—we need to make the case, powerfully and together, that science deserves strong support even in uncertain times.

*More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

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