

Statement about meeting of ad hoc astronomy group with STFC, Jan 9th 2008

At Keith Mason's request an ad hoc group of senior astronomers met with Keith Mason and Richard Wade for a consultation meeting on January 9th. The group was Martin Rees (IOA), George Efstathiou (IOA), Roger Davies (Oxford), Carlos Frenk (Durham), Andy Lawrence (Edinburgh), Jim Hough (Hertfordshire), Mike Cruise (Birmingham), Martin Barstow (Leicester), and Michael Rowan-Robinson (Imperial).

The astronomy ad hoc group recognize that the current funding situation represents a crisis for UK astronomy greater than any we have previously experienced. Keith Mason argued that the crisis arises from a combination of two factors: (1) international subscriptions (ESA+ESO) now represent a larger fraction (~60%) of our programme than in the past, (2) the STFC CSR settlement, along with those for other research councils apart from the MRC, was flat cash for 3 years, which implies cuts to the total budget in 2008-9, 2009-10, 2010-11, of 2.5%, 5% and 7.5%. Once some allowance is made for new projects starting up in the years ahead, we face by 2010-11 cuts of 25% in astronomical facilities, projects and grants. The ad hoc group remained dismayed by a cut of this size and on such a short timescale.

The group discussed what can be done to try to persuade the DIUS that this represents a very serious situation both for our science, for Physics Departments, and for the UK's international reputation. The Innovation Universities and Skills Select Committee hearing on Jan 21st offers an opportunity for RAS and IoP to speak on behalf of the astronomy and particle physics communities. On a slightly longer time-scale the Wakeham review of the health of physics is an important opportunity and it is crucial that departments and universities make the strongest possible representations to the Wakeham review of physics and that the case for astronomy is specifically put. Although the funding crisis appears to be hitting particle physics and astronomy hardest, the repercussions are likely to spread to the whole of physics as the income of Physics departments is reduced, staff morale plummets and students are deterred from studying a subject perceived to be having support withdrawn.

Recommendation 1: All astronomy groups are urged to make sure that their Vice-Chancellor submits a strong case for astronomy and space science to the Wakeham review.

The group was concerned about the very short time-scale on which the STFC Delivery Plan had to be assembled in response to the CSR announcement, driven by the start date of the CSR period on April 1st 2008. There is a real concern that the damage caused by cuts in the Delivery Plan would be exacerbated by the haste of the decisions.

The group felt that it was wrong that international subscriptions, which are essential for playing a major role in modern astrophysics and space science, are treated as if they were an optional part of our programme. Fluctuations in subscriptions, driven by changes in GDP and currency fluctuations, should not fall on the STFC programme.

Recommendation 2: DIUS should remove international subscriptions from the STFC budget line and should handle fluctuations (which may be up or down) separately.

STFC sees its main national role is one of economic impact, providing 'the economy of tomorrow'. We do face a tough challenge to make the case for fundamental science within this mission. We have to make the most of the knowledge transfer opportunities that our science offers. We have to foster and emphasize the role of astronomy and space science in drawing school-children into science and university applicants into physics, as well as the enormous economic value of our students, postgrads and postdoctoral researchers.

Recommendation 3: STFC needs to publicize the intrinsic value and indirect economic benefits of fundamental science and strengthen this element of its mission.

The ad hoc group had a vigorous discussion with Keith Mason and Richard Wade on the issue of consultation and had previously taken advice from the chairs of the Science Board and PPAN. We accept that these bodies have been fully involved in the preparation of the Delivery Plan and in the ongoing Programmatic Review. However the absence of any advisory structure below PPAN meant that the community felt no involvement in or ownership of the programme.

Recommendation 4: PPAN should without delay set up an advisory structure below it, so that a wider cross-section of community experts can be involved in discussions of the programme.

Finally, we have to look ahead to the next Comprehensive Spending Review, submissions for which will begin in 18 months time. We have to define the programme and the arguments which will enable STFC to be the Council that secures the best settlement next time around.

Prof Michael Rowan-Robinson (Convenor)