

Comments on the Government Response to the IUS Select Committee Report

The government's response to the IUS select committee has many positive points which addresses some of the requests made by the Particle Physics community in response to the STFC delivery plan. We welcome the government's and STFC's commitment to improve communications and engagement with its stakeholders and to undertake an organisational review that will include input from a STFC independent panel. The commitment that no changes to rolling grants will be made before the Wakeham panel reports is similarly welcome but we note that Prof. Wakeham has stated the STFC funding issues are not part of the panel's remit¹.

We note however that the government continues to insist that STFC received a 13.6% [£185M] increase in its budget. While formally correct, this obscures the fact that a substantial fraction of this increase is in "non-cash", which represents past investment; the future, "near-cash", increase in the STFC budget is 8% and remains the lowest of all the research councils. The majority of this "near-cash" provision is being used to provide for the full-economic cost of research (FEC) and despite assertions to the contrary has already resulted in a net decrease in the number of astronomy post-doctoral research assistants in STFC's first rolling grant allocations of 2008. The confirmation from the government that STFC has been allowed to draw-down on the CCLRC underspend is welcome; however we note² that the areas of research previously under CCLRC's remit and now under the auspices of the PALS committee are being asked to save £38M.

We welcome the fact that STFC has listened to the community and softened its stance on the ILC from that stated in the delivery plan as one to "cease investment in the International Linear Collider"³ to a decision that "STFC has chosen not to ramp-up investment" in the ILC but that it will continue "to participate in developing global strategies for future Linear Colliders" and will "honour commitments to the common development fund".

We find it difficult to reconcile STFC's response in paragraph 89 on the internal reviews commissioned by the CEO with his evidence to the Select Committee⁴. The intention to "publish these reports in a suitably anonymised form" seems to be at odds with the statement to the select committee that the reports are "not going to be shared with my managers or staff". We note that the Select Committee's charge of "a poorly conceived delivery plan, lamentable communication and poor leadership" is answered only by comments from the STFC with the government asserting that "changes to the leadership ... at this formative stage, would only be disruptive" (paragraph 103).

The government, in asserting that people whose work has not been funded are those mainly critical of STFC (paragraph 10), has failed to appreciate that a lack of success in securing funding is an habitual fact of life for scientists. However, it rarely produces a furore as widespread as that recently engulfing STFC. To suggest that criticism was driven by self-interest is disingenuous at best and insulting at worst. Some of the most vocal criticism has come from researchers whose research has not been cut. Questions have been raised of STFC from sources both inside and outside the STFC community, notably by leading theorist Stephen Hawking⁵.

Finally we reiterate our statement⁶ of support for our colleagues on PPAN and Science Board who were asked to do an almost impossible job and who were instrumental in setting-up and participating in the consultation process. We look forward to the establishment of the advisory panels and further constructive dialogue between STFC panels and the Particle Physics community.

1. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=401893&c=1>

2. <http://www.stfc.ac.uk/About/Strat/Council/nfc300466.aspx>

3. http://www.scitech.ac.uk/About/Strat/Council/STFC_DelPlan.aspx

4. Q323: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmdius/c215-i/c21502.htm>

5. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?view&xml=/earth/2008/06/15/scihawking115.xml>

6. http://www/hep.ucl.ac.uk/~markl/pp/times_letter.html