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Wakeham review slams STFC operations

The Science and Technologies Facilities Council should clearly separate funding for particle physics and astronomy research from the cash it sets aside for running facilities, the Wakeham review of physics has concluded.

The council should also reconsider its management structure in order to better communicate with its scientists and make a clearer distinction between facilities run for physicists and those for other disciplines.

The much anticipated report, commissioned by Research Councils UK at the behest of John Denham, secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills, details several areas of concern for physics. These include a shortage of students, the closure of departments, and a funding rate that has failed to keep pace with the overall science budget.

But the main concern of the report panel is of the STFC membership and the way it handles its business. "The panel were very concerned at the make-up of the STFC Council, both in terms of the over representation of the executive and the lack of representation of the community it serves, in comparison with other research councils," the review states.

"It is understood that this structure was deliberately adopted to deal with the distinct features of STFC that arose because of its multiple missions. However, this has not best served the scientific community in some branches of science whose input was at one level below the council. This is in sharp distinction to the practice of other research councils."

The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills has now announced that it will recruit two extra members for the STFC Council from the science community in direct response to this criticism.

The group also calls on the government to restate the terms of the Haldane principle governing the independent decision making powers of the research councils. While it believes the principle is working effectively, there is some concern that the government has not been clear about how its regional policies affect the work of the councils. This issue was also raised by the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee during their inquiry into the 2007 science budget allocations, which resulted in dramatic funding cuts for particle physics and astronomy.

Echoing other ideas put forward by the committee, Wakeham's panel agrees that funding for solar terrestrial physics should become the responsibility of the Natural Environment Research Council rather than the Science and Technologies Facilities Council.

The group also calls for RCUK to conduct an in depth review of nuclear physics in order to develop a firm plan of action for the future of the sub-discipline. RCUK has accepted this recommendation and asked the STFC and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council to review their portfolios over the next 12 months.

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