

'Sad day for physics' as funding is decimated

Budget cuts will mean cancellation of projects and 'significant loss of staff' in Scotland. **Melanie Newman** reports

The Science and Technology Facilities Council confirmed a package of funding cuts this week that, vice-chancellors said, raised "extreme concerns" over the future health of university departments.

The STFC, which funds research in physics, astronomy and space science, warned last month that the 13.6 per cent rise in the council's budget by 2011 would leave it with an £80 million shortfall and that withdrawal from some projects was inevitable.

Its three-year delivery plan, published this week, details the cancellation of major projects and facilities such as the International Linear Collider particle accelerator and subscription to the Gemini Observatory, which operates space telescopes.

The plan says the council would also "revisit the ongoing level" of investment in several other projects, reduce infrastructure costs, create a "more flexible workforce" and reduce spending on exploitation grants.

Among large costs faced by the STFC is a £10.5 million VAT bill in connection with Diamond Light Source in Oxfordshire, which costs £46 million a year to run. Tough choices on priorities were required, the plan warns,

and there would be "considerable disruption" over the next three years.

Universities UK said that an informal survey of its members had shown that the STFC funding shortfall would result in "significant loss of staff at all levels" and would put the UK's world-leader position on several projects at risk.

Negative publicity about the viability of physics departments would affect student recruitment, and there would be knock-on effects on chemistry, biology and engineering, it added.

A number of physicists said that the impact of the funding gap will be far greater than predicted in the STFC's delivery plan, and several told *The Times Higher* they believed the STFC had been put under pressure by Government to understate the effect of the deficit.

Ken Peach, professor of physics at Oxford University, said the plan was a "truly appalling document which gives little idea of the depth of the financial crisis caused by the underfunding of STFC".

"There is already, today, damage to physics at home, where young researchers are afraid for

their careers, and to our reputation abroad, where this abrupt change of attitude has been noticed by our international partners." The decision to cease investment in the International Linear Collider particle accelerator made neither strategic nor scientific sense, he added.

His colleague Brian Foster of Oxford said the delivery plan was "deeply disappointing". "I attempt to play down the damage that will be caused to particle physics and astronomy as well as the other disciplines that the STFC is supposed to serve. Physics departments across the country will be severely impacted by these proposals. This is a sad day for physics in the UK."

Science Minister Ian Pearson said funding arrangements would be reviewed but did not promise additional funds.

"We can only hope that the review of physics promised by the Government will be able to alleviate this desperate situation," said Professor Foster.

John Dainton, professor of physics at Liverpool University called on scientists in other disciplines to protest against the STFC's cuts.

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