

DIUS QUESTIONS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS – FEB 21 2008

Ann McKechin (Glasgow, North) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the future of astronomy research. [187374]

The Minister for Science and Innovation (Ian Pearson): The UK has world-leading expertise in astronomy research, including expertise at Glasgow university in gravitational wave radiation. The Government are increasing the budget of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, the main public funder of astronomy research in the UK, by 13.6 per cent. over the next three years. We have asked Research Councils UK, as part of its continuing oversight of the health of disciplines, to conduct a cross-council review of physics research, including astronomy. The review will be led by Bill Wakeham, vice-chancellor of the university of Southampton, and I expect the review panel to report to RCUK in the summer.

Ann McKechin: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments about the good record of Glasgow university, but as he will be aware, its physics department is dependent on the STFC for more than 85 per cent. of its research budget. Does he agree that, pending the outcome of the Wakeham review, it would be premature to cut programmes—by up to 25 per cent. in the case of Glasgow? Instead, and not reaching for the stars, may I ask him to consider a transitional arrangement?

Ian Pearson: I agree that a cut would be premature and it is not happening. Overall, the expected number of astronomy research grants in 2008–09 is 323, which is significantly more than the 247 that there were at the start of the comprehensive spending review period in 2005–06. In this financial year, including the impact of full economic costing, universities will have had a 67 per cent. increase in astronomy funding compared with 2005–06. That represents real investment in university research departments. I congratulate those at the university of Glasgow who undertake astronomy research. They are world class in their field.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I am disappointed to hear the Minister boasting once again about science funding and physics funding, because as a direct result of his decision on STFC funding last year, physicists are saying that there is a crisis. Astronomers, researchers and the Royal Astronomical Society also say that there is a crisis. Does he accept that there is a crisis, or does he think that they are all wrong?

Ian Pearson: I am aware of the number of representations that I have had from the astronomy community and the particle physics community as a result of the STFC's settlement, but we should look at the facts. There will be no cuts to particle physics grants in the coming financial year. The research grants to astronomy are at their highest level for many years. We have seen a doubling in the science budget. We are spending over £500 million on physics a year, and that figure will go up over the next three years. So we have a sound track record of major investment in physics. Physics is one of the great strengths of the United Kingdom, and I am sure that the Wakeham review will want to take a broad look overall at the health of the discipline.