

Durham Physics Department reels from dramatic funding cuts to UK Particle Physics and Astronomy

In the last couple of months, the UK research council, STFC, has announced a series of funding cuts which have hit Durham hard as the Physics Department gets about 60% of its research income from STFC, amounting to almost £5 million a year. The cuts proposed by STFC will reduce the number of physics researchers in universities across the country. In addition, STFC have pulled the UK out of three major projects that Durham is heavily involved with: the Gemini telescopes, the International Linear Collider and Gamma Ray Astronomy.

Our MP, Roberta Blackman-Woods, is a member of the Innovation, Universities and Skills Select Committee which has been instructed by the government to look into this problem. On February 11th, she visited the Durham Physics Department to discuss the issue. Addressing a lecture theatre of staff and students, she said that

"No one can understand why this happened and we're not getting very clear answers ... what we're all interested in at the end of the day is stopping this happening again."

Sophy Palmer, a particle physics PhD student at Durham, said

"The reason I wanted to go into physics was because I was fascinated by the big questions: how does the Universe work, what is it made of? ... How am I - how's the community as a whole - going to encourage students to study physics to a high level if the key facilities to study these fundamentally exciting questions, such as the ILC, are already excluded from the UK science program?"

Julie Wardlow, an astronomy PhD student at Durham, commenting on the effect of these cuts on the career paths of young researchers, said

"Limited job prospects, lack of access to facilities and declining international confidence in UK science may force us to take our skills abroad - this can only have a further detrimental effect impact on UK science and economy."

For Dr. Mark Swinbank, one of the main Gemini users in Durham, the loss of access to the Gemini telescopes would be

"extremely disappointing ... Gemini North is the only 8m diameter telescope in the North that the UK has access to"

The UK has already invested a lot in surveys of the Northern hemisphere, which cannot be followed up without access to Gemini North. On 24th January, the UK was removed from the Gemini partnership and all UK time with the telescopes cancelled. However, on 11th February 2008, negotiations with Gemini reopened, with a view to looking at whether the UK could retain partial access to the telescopes. While these negotiations last, UK astronomers can continue to use the telescopes as usual.

According to Georg Weiglein, a professor at Durham and coordinator of the international ILC/LHC Study Group,

"STFC's decision to withdraw from the International Linear Collider, which is the flagship future project of particle physics, has been taken without any consultation with the scientific

community ... It has already severely damaged the reputation of the UK as a reliable international partner, and it will continue to do so as long as this decision is not reversed."

Jamie Tattersall, a PhD student at Durham told us,
"Two years of my research have been spent working on the ILC. I was distraught that Britain has now decided to pull out of this important international project - this is a view echoed throughout the whole particle physics community."

Richard Abram, Head of the Durham Physics Department, sent an email to all Durham Physics students in January urging them to encourage their friends and family to sign a petition concerning these funding issues, in which he stated,

"the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) has a serious funding problem ... These cuts will ultimately affect all physics departments, including ours. While it may not affect you while you are here, it will impact future generations of undergraduates and postgraduates and possibly those of you planning research careers in areas of physics supported by STFC. "

In a motion passed on January 30th, Durham Students' Union decided to oppose the STFC cuts. DSU President, Flo Herbert told us

"DSU has added the voice of Durham students to those already calling for the funding council to reconsider their decision. The Physics department is particularly strong at Durham and both postgraduate and undergraduate students are understandably concerned about the cuts which will affect them and their work"

Disclaimer: While we have laid this out in the format of a press release for convenience, this is not an official Durham University Press Release. All those quoted are giving their opinions as individuals, not as representatives of Durham University.