

STFC comes full circle on Gemini : Research Fortnight : Feb 29

The Gemini Observatory yesterday welcomed the UK's reinstatement as a full member of its international partnership after the Science and Technology Facilities Council withdrew its threat to leave the group. UK astronomers now have continued access to two of the world's largest optical telescopes.

This latest twist in the three-month saga follows uncertainty from the STFC on whether or not the UK would withdraw early from the Gemini partnership. The UK's involvement in Gemini is now the same as it was in November before the STFC stated its intention of scaling down UK involvement in the partnership to fill a £80m hole in the UK's physics and astronomy budget.

The STFC said that it will instead attempt to recoup some money by selling UK time on the telescopes either to other Gemini partners, or to other countries.

Astronomers have expressed relief at the news, although say a lot of trouble could have been avoided if the STFC had consulted the scientific community before making decisions in the first place. "This is a very big deal," said Paul Crowther, professor of astronomy at the University of Sheffield.

"Astronomers who have been expecting to use the telescopes and those who are involved in instrumentation will be extremely happy about this announcement."

STFC initially announced its desire to cancel the UK's subscription to the Southern Observatory because of budget difficulties. This proposal was rejected by Gemini and, in January, the UK was ejected from the partnership. Astronomers' time on the telescope was cancelled with immediate effect. Earlier this month, the UK's membership was restored on a temporary basis while the STFC negotiated terms and conditions.

Now, the UK has been reinstated as a full member, with subscriptions on both the North and South telescopes until 2012. In a statement issued yesterday, the STFC said: "The Science and Technology Facilities Council has reaffirmed the UK's position as a full member of the Partnership under the terms of the current Gemini Agreement. The Gemini Board welcomes this statement.

"The Board acknowledges the STFC's need to address its budgetary constraints and notes that, under the terms of the Agreement, the UK is entitled to seek to sell some of its telescope time both within the partnership and, subject to the approval of the Board, outside the current partnership."

The STFC's change of direction followed a month of fierce criticism from the astronomy and physics communities. Some astronomers suggest that the STFC may also have come under pressure from government to reverse its Gemini decision.

In a letter of 31 January to John Denham, the secretary of state for innovation, universities and skills, a group of vice chancellors from the 1994 Group of smaller, research-intensive universities, asked the government to avert the course of the funding crisis unfolding at the STFC. According to the Haldane Principle, it is British government policy not to interfere with

research council decisions about what to spend funds on. However, an exception can be made in the case where a particular decision would lead to the UK being viewed as an unreliable international research partner, such as early withdrawal from Gemini may have done.

Questions are now being raised over where the STFC will recover the money that would have been saved by withdrawing from Gemini. The council is expected to announce its new budget position at a meeting with scientists on 3 March.