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Two into one don't go

Ken Pounds

When the Science Budget for 2008-11 was announced in November, with a 17 per cent overall increase that continued the strong commitment of successive Labour governments, ministers might have expected grateful thanks from the scientific community.

Instead, the headlines have been dominated by protests arising from the first Delivery Plan of the brand new Science and Technology Facilities Council, protests that have now spread to emergency debates in Parliament and a Commons Select Committee inquiry [see p1 via link below].

So what went wrong? Why has an increase of 13.6 per cent on the combined budgets of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council and the Council for the Central Laboratories of the Research Councils, from which the STFC was formed last April, proved so inadequate? How can serious damage to UK physics and to Britain's reputation as a reliable partner be avoided?

First, it is important to recognise that the STFC fared least well of all the research councils, with a real term increase of disposable cash (after allowance for capital depreciation and inflation) of barely 0.3 per cent over the 3 years. Such a tight funding situation is a surprise to those who believed that the controversial merger of PPARC and the CCLRC would at least be eased into life with a good initial settlement.

Obligations to cover increased running costs of the CCLRC's research facilities and to provide for redundancies have led to the STFC making deep cuts to university grants and withdrawing, with little or no consultation, from several high profile international programmes in astronomy and particle physics [see RF 19/12/07, p1 via link below].

Contradictions with three fundamental aims of the science and innovation white paper in 2006, Next Steps, make it difficult to believe that this is what government ministers intended or expected.

Next Steps identified the "need for more highly trained scientists", especially in core disciplines such as physics. Physics-based sectors of the economy provided over a million jobs in the UK and contributed £70 billion to the national wealth in 2005, reported the Institute of Physics in September. Yet we now find many of our top university physics departments facing the 'double whammy' of reduced grant income plus loss of the associated (full economic costs) overhead and, for some, the prospect of closure. And already the bad news is spreading, with evidence that prospective physics undergraduates are reconsidering their options.

Next Steps also emphasised the "building of international links" (where, incidentally, PPARC was particularly strong). It is hard to think how the STFC could have made a worse start to achieving that key objective than by its unilateral withdrawal from world-ranking projects such as the International Linear Collider, the twin Gemini Telescopes and the EISCAT polar radar. More setbacks in our international relations can be predicted as the STFC struggles to fund subscriptions to Cern, ESA and ESO without the exchange rate protection won by PPARC.

Finally, it is unclear how the Next Steps objective "to support science and innovation in the regions" will be helped by focusing 'wealth creation' on the Harwell and Daresbury Science and Innovation campuses, development of which will be an additional call on STFC resources. The anticipated announcement of a public-private partnership to run the Harwell Campus is unlikely to allay concerns that wealth creation will become more centrally directed and with a more restricted intellectual base.

I believe that the crisis enveloping the STFC became inevitable once the forced marriage between two bodies with such different agenda was not endowed by initial funding to provide for essential re-structuring consequent on the merger. The make up of the STFC Council, with a minority of scientists, would not have helped its funding bid nor, perhaps, in foreseeing how badly its first Delivery Plan would be received.

Ministers are now facing flak that might more fairly be aimed lower down the

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decision-making chain. Confidential papers obtained last week by particle physicists under Freedom of Information legislation show that officials at the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills were well aware of the STFC's difficulties last July; whether those warnings were passed to ministers remains unclear.

Assuming the government does not share the DIUS view that physics is a lower priority than the other sciences, the STFC must receive additional funding, with a budget re-structured to protect its core sciences from the costs of extraneous research facilities and exchange rate fluctuations in international subscriptions where the government is signatory. In parallel, the STFC must develop, and fully involve, an advisory structure to separately guide its core science and its campus-based activities.

Who knows, that new structure might evolve into separate bodies looking rather like PPARC and an enlarged CCLRC.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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On this site 'Wakeham can't save you, physicists told' - p.1. 'Royal Society condemns 'unacceptable' STFC cuts' - RF 293 p.1.

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