

paul crowther **view from the top**

# Much left for newly interactive facilities council to do

This month's changes to the membership of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, made as it approaches its second birthday, are both significant and timely.

Following recommendations by the Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, the Wakeham physics review panel and the STFC's organisational review panel, the Department of Innovation Universities and Skills has increased the academic influence on the STFC Council at the expense of executive power, restoring much needed balance.

The focus on the Council follows the STFC's much publicised difficulties after the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review. There was a widely perceived view that the two UK-based academics on a council of 10 were marginalised: now, half of the councillors are independent scientists.

News of the strengthened Council comes as the STFC reaches the final stages of a community consultation on its developing strategic vision. This is in contrast with earlier, highly vocal criticisms of poor communication. The fresh engagement is both welcome and necessary for the community's trust in the council to be restored.

The STFC's wide remit makes the development of a coherent strategy more difficult than for other research councils. It has to both set the scientific agenda within astronomy, particle physics and space science, and enable effective use of national laboratories by scientists from other research councils, communities and industry. Setting relative priorities across this spectrum will be central to the role of its refreshed Council.

The consultation reveals how much work is needed before a clear vision is effectively articulated. Concerns expressed by the organisational review panel are so far largely unaddressed. Closer STFC involvement with other research councils should ensure more joined-up thinking across Research Councils UK's full portfolio.

Only last month, John Denham, secretary of state for innovation, emphasised that knowledge for knowledge's sake is a valid fundamental research outcome. The STFC should, therefore, not shy away from the wider societal impact of the scientific themes in which it takes the lead. Technology resulting from such research will undoubtedly have economic impact, although in the long term.

The STFC has also announced a broadened Science Board to offer advice to Council, plus the long overdue creation of specialist panels charged with developing roadmaps. These panels will only be able to achieve their

goals if mechanisms for top-down and bottom-up dialogue between higher committees are put in place.

Both Denham and science minister Paul Drayson have stressed that science and innovation are essential tools for leading the UK out of its present recession. The Prime Minister's Romanes Lecture, earlier this month, reiterated that government recognises the wider benefits of a broad research base. This is central to the multi-disciplinary nature of current themes, in which the physical sciences will play a key role.

UK businesses have repeatedly pointed out an acute shortage of graduates with skills in science, technology, engineering and maths. The popularity of astronomy, particle physics and space science talks to children during last week's Science and Engineering Week shows how these disciplines attract students to science, complementing other target subjects. Training the next generation of scientists is perhaps the STFC's main contribution to UK plc.

Grants supporting PhD students and post-docs provide the means of developing their scientific skills and permit exploitation of national and international facilities. Without such support, the UK would certainly not be able to remain at the top of astrophysics and space science.

Since most of the STFC's finances are committed to international subscriptions and running national facilities—where costs are increasing above inflation—a thinner slice of the cake remains for university grants. The balancing act between operating facilities and building and exploiting instruments is a difficult one, but science grants to strategically important programmes have already been cut back to inadequate levels.

Particle physics funding is largely directed—inevitably dependent upon specific central facilities. In contrast, astronomy grant funding is generally responsive. This flexibility for astronomy needs to be maintained, although the present system is hardly responsive, taking more than 12 months between application and appointment, plus risk-adverse grant panels may be reluctant to make genuine blue-skies awards.

If an Obama-style stimulus package were to target science, there are opportunities for the UK to regain its leadership in astronomy instrumentation. The downturn presents both challenges and opportunities for the STFC. As a result of better engagement with its communities, it may now be finding its feet.

*Something to Add? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

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