

19 December 2007

Nigel Griffiths, MP
31 Minto Street
Edinburgh
EH9 2BT

Dear Nigel,

Re: Local impact of STFC funding crisis

I am writing to you as a local scientist, and as a concerned citizen. The "funding gap" that has recently become clear for the Science and Technologies Facilities Council (STFC) could have severe consequences for the University and the Royal Observatory. I am writing in a personal capacity, rather than on behalf of the University, but I will be copying this letter to other senior members of the University including the Principal.

Roughly half of the grant funding for Physics in the University of Edinburgh comes from STFC. We have been asked to consider grant cuts of 25% or 40%. The latter would mean a reduction of possibly £2M/yr, and a devastating blow to prospects from which it would be very hard to recover. STFC have not ruled out closure of existing grants (as opposed to reduction in future grants), and so we could potentially be looking at redundancies of many young scientists.

The Astronomy Technology Centre (ATC) at the Royal Observatory is an establishment of STFC; as part of the funding crisis, they have been asked to plan for a reduction in budget of almost £4M/yr within three years, reducing their size in half. This would place it close to the edge of viability, and so we may lose a key centre of high technology, and a great Scottish public icon.

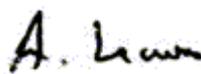
My particle physics colleagues have another reason for distress. Their plans for the long term future have been centred on the International Linear Collider (ILC), a very large world project currently in the design stage. STFC have announced, with negligible consultation, that funding of UK development work will cease. This also links to the ROE problem. The ATC had planned to diversify into particle physics technical support, and explicitly to provide ILC technical support to both Glasgow and Edinburgh University.

Local students and postdocs as well as staff have been stunned by the STFC announcements, and I hear reports of such young scientists concluding that a physics career in the UK, or even a scientific career at all, looks like a bad move. Even scientists working in areas not currently facing cuts look on nervously, as they see that science can be savagely cut almost without warning. I am sure this is not what the Government intended, but this is the perception.

I do sympathise with STFC's problems. Last year STFC was formed from a merger of CLRC with PPARC, which looked after Particle Physics and Astronomy. There were no signs of significant budget problems for PPARC. If PPARC had still existed, and if it had received a relatively poor CSR settlement - flat in real terms say - then while this would have constrained what it was possible to do next, there was no likelihood of immediate drastic cuts. Particle Physics and Astronomy have therefore been dramatically damaged by the merger with CLRC.

Many have suggested that this is because of recently realised cost over-runs in large CLRC facilities such as Diamond and ISIS, but this is not correct. Diamond and ISIS-2 were built to budget; the operating costs are much larger than originally expected, but this has been known for several years. This was not an unexpected problem. A big organisation like STFC must of course be allowed over the long term to re-balance its portfolio of activities. But a very sudden and drastic change like this is unacceptable, and the Parliamentary debates over the creation of STFC explicitly confirmed that the merger itself should not damage PPARC activities. These cuts clearly breach that assurance.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Professor Andy Lawrence