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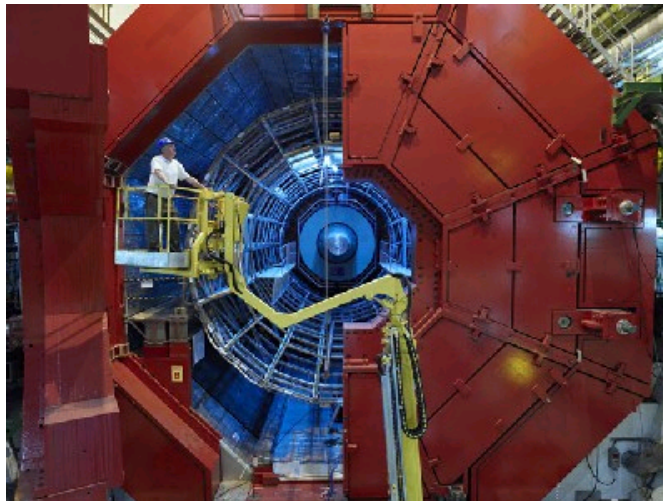
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UK physics hit by savage cuts

Dec 16, 2009 [8 comments](#)**Closing doors** The ALICE experiment at CERN is among the cuts

Savage cuts have been made to the UK's physics research programme that will see the country withdraw from over 25 leading international projects in astronomy, nuclear physics, particle physics and space science. The cuts were announced today by the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), which is facing a £40m shortfall in funding. The cash crisis will see the UK pull out of the ALICE experiment at CERN, axe funding for the Boulby Mine in Yorkshire, which is searching for dark matter, and withdraw from the European X-ray Free Electron Laser project at the DESY lab in Hamburg.

The STFC released details of the cuts, which will kick in over the next five years, in a document entitled *Investing in the Future 2010–15*. Michael Sterling, chair of the STFC, says that the programme is "affordable, robust and sustainable" but admits that it is the result of "tough choices" and represented a "major reorganization" that would involve what the council dubs "a managed withdrawal from some areas". The STFC now intends to hold discussions over the next few months with national and international partners, including universities, departments and project teams, on how to implement the cuts.

Projects in danger

In astronomy, the STFC will stop supporting Auger, Inverse Square Law, ROSA, the Liverpool Telescope and the UK Infra-Red Telescope. It will also close the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array regional centre and cancel funding for the Joint Institute for Very Long Baseline Interferometry in Europe. These cuts are expected to save the STFC £29m.

Nine projects in particle physics will face a loss of support from the STFC, which will save the council a total of £32m. These are the Boulby mine, the UK's contribution to the CDF and D0 experiments at Fermilab, eEDM, Low Mass, Main Injector Neutrino Oscillation Search (MINOS), Particle Calorimeter, Spider and plans for a UK neutrino factory.

The STFC will phase out its support for three projects in nuclear physics: the AGATA and PANDA experiments at the GSI heavy-ion lab in Darmstadt, and ALICE at CERN, saving the council a total of

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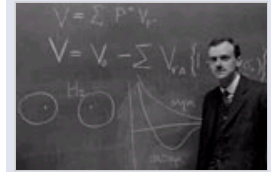
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£12m. The only experiment in nuclear physics that will be supported is NUSTAR at the GSI.

The UK will pull out of five different space missions – Cassini, Cluster, the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory, Venus Express and XMM-Newton – saving the STFC £42m over five years.

The STFC also announced that it will cut the number of studentships and fellowships that it funds by 25% over the next five years. It currently funds around 250 students per year. The STFC will also reduce support for "future exploitation grants" by 10%.

Real tensions

The origin of the cuts can be traced back to December 2007 when the STFC – which was formed earlier that year from a merger between two separate research councils – announced that it had an £80m budget deficit for the UK government's current spending round that lasts from 2008 to 2011. For the last two years, the STFC has lowered the deficit by cutting research programmes, reducing grants for scientists as well as taking loans from the Department of Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS). However, over £40m still remained to be cut in the final year of the spending round.

"It has become clear to me that there are real tensions in having international science projects, large scientific facilities, and UK grant-giving roles within a single research council", says Lord Drayson, the UK's science minister. "It leads to grants being squeezed by increases in costs of the large international projects which are not solely within their control." He says he now will "work urgently" with Michael Stirling, chair of the STFC's council, to "find a better solution by the end of February 2010".

More to follow.

About the author

Michael Banks is news editor of *Physics World*

8 comments

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1 **nick.evanson** I think it might be prudent to reconsider some of the wording of this article - to the uninitiated it easily reads that the likes of Liverpool Telescope is to be axed. The STFC provided additional funds to JMU to ensure that UK astronomers had good access to the 'scope; the loss of the funding will simply mean that the UK teams will gain less access as JMU will open it out more to foreign teams (and their money). In short, the 'project' hasn't been axed at all - only STFC's extra funds have dried up.

Dec 16, 2009 7:53 PM
United Kingdom

This may or may not be the case for the others (the LT is the only one I really know about) but on face value, the article reads as if it's a wholesale slaughter of UK physics research and facilities.

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2 **Matin Durrani** The article has been changed to make clear that the affected projects are those that will face a loss in support from the STFC. Researchers in those projects may be able to obtain fresh support from other sources although it is not clear how easy that would be.

Dec 16, 2009 11:06 PM
Bristol, United Kingdom

Matin Durrani
Editor, Physics World

Edited by Matin Durrani on Dec 16, 2009 11:38 PM.

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3 **Oliver K. Manuel** **Unfortunately, it's all over . . .**
. . . for much more than Clover!

Dec 16, 2009 8:48 PM
United States

physicsworld.com...38547

With kind regards,
Oliver K. Manuel

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4 **nunoalex** the crisis is over

5

John Duffield
Dec 17, 2009 12:02 AM
United Kingdom

I've got a real sense of foreboding about all this. What really gets to me is that the IOP seems so enthusiastic about climbing aboard the climate change bandwagon where costs v benefits are unclear and there's a significant "bloodletting" threat to our economic well-being, and yet it still doesn't seem to see any connection with the ever-tightening purse strings for physics. Money is thrown at offshore windmills, Gordon Brown promises hundreds of millions extra to make himself look like a world statesman, and yet the fundamental science that might solve our problems can go to hell in a handcart. It feels like turkeys getting excited about this thing they've heard about: called Christmas. I would urge people to make the connection and join the dots whilst they've still got a job in physics.

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6

sorinis
Dec 17, 2009 3:28 AM
United States

I am not the kind of guy who likes to say "I told you so" . . . who am I kidding. I am that guy. I predicted this last year when Austria was backing out of the LHC. Oliver here remembers. These programs are not real science. Just lofty goals based on "maybe" with no direction and no application in real life.

I believe these cuts are good for science. Necessity is the mother of invention. Maybe the increased competition resulting from smaller budgets will filter out the worthless career phd types and give a chance to the real passionate types to shine.

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7

John Duffield
Dec 17, 2009 9:47 AM
United Kingdom

The sort of stuff that's getting cut is where the breakthrough might come from, sorinis. It isn't good for science, not at all. It's bad for science. And yet I see The Times dedicates a mighty 60 words to this on page 16. Sigh.

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8

nick.evanson
Dec 17, 2009 10:17 AM
United Kingdom

It is indeed bad for science - take the Liverpool Telescope, as an example. It provides school children unprecedented access to a professional observatory: not simply just looking at the images it produces but actually using the telescope. Will JMU be able to continue to provide the same level of access for free, or will it be forced to reduce the availability (or, worse still, initiate a registration/access fee)?

Much will obviously depend on how much of the LT's funds were provided by the STFC but given that the facility has already stated ([link](#)) that "*access to the facility by UK astronomers in the longer term will obviously be reduced*", I would find it hard to believe that JMU could maintain the same level of access for schools, when UK astronomers are to be restricted.

These cuts have nothing to do with "real science" or "lofty goals"; it's ultimately about the STFC and the UK government. *Some* cuts were inevitable (although still unnecessary, in my opinion), given the nature of politics, but when the UK banks were given £850 billion of taxpayer's money and the STFC were short of just £80 million (£0.08 billion - 0.009% of the bank bailout), one does have to wonder just how the STFC/government can have let this happen.

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