

The funding black hole

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Two physics students at the University of Bristol have organised a petition against the recently-announced funding cut of £80 million by the body that funds physics research in the UK, the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

This follows the condemnation of the cuts by many of the UK's most senior scientists, such as Professor Stephen Hawking. Over 600 UK physics students have now signed the petition.

James Jackson, studying for a PhD in particle physics at the University of Bristol, works on the high-profile Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN, which is about to go 'live' after 15 years in development.

Jackson said: "I was at CERN when the cuts were announced. The reaction amongst my colleagues to the sweeping and sudden decision was one of tremendous shock. Last month, fundamental physics seemed to be a field with a dazzling future. This month a whole generation of young scientists is completely demoralised."

Rosie Walton, also a PhD student at Bristol, who helped Jackson with the petition added: "What prospects are there now for those of us hoping to progress in our careers? And this comes at a time when the Government is trying to encourage more young people into science."

Particle physics looks at the fundamental building blocks of the Universe and seeks to discover 'why we are here'. To do this, particle physicists have to build enormous experiments, such as the LHC at CERN, which

will attempt to recreate the Big Bang, just nano-seconds after it happened.

Also affected by the cuts will be astrophysics at Bristol University, which is the branch of astronomy that looks at the physics of black holes, stars, galaxies, and other aspects of the Universe.

Professor Nick Brook, head of the particle physics group at Bristol University, said, “We estimate that over 50 percent of our applications to study physics at Bristol mention particle physics or astrophysics as the reason they want to study physics. These cuts send completely the wrong message for the recruitment of physics students.”

Accompanying the petition was a letter from the students to the Secretary of State, John Denman, asking him to look at the decision before long-term damage is done to the UK physics community. The reply, from Ian Pearson, Minister of State for Science, acknowledged that the cuts “may entail a reduction in research grants for universities”.

Already some of the laboratories funded by STFC have been asked for voluntary redundancies, and universities involved in accelerator research and development have been asked to come up with a plan to deal with cuts in this area of research. Many scientists at Bristol University will be affected due to reduced grant funding and lack of further developments of facilities.

Jackson added finally: “2008 is the year when one of the greatest experiments in history, the LHC, begins. It is a tragedy that this has happened now – the UK’s international reputation in this field will be seriously damaged.”

Source: University of Bristol

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