Consultation on Advisory Panels

Institute of Physics response to a STFC consultation

A full list of the Institute’s submissions to consultations and inquiries can be viewed at www.iop.org

14 October 2011
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IOP Institute of Physics

Dear Sir/Madam,

Consultation on Advisory Panels

The Institute of Physics is a leading scientific society promoting physics and bringing physicists together for the benefit of all. It has a worldwide membership of around 40,000 comprising physicists from all sectors, as well as those with an interest in physics. It works to advance physics research, application and education; and engages with policy makers and the public to develop awareness and understanding of physics. Its publishing company, IOP Publishing, is a world leader in professional scientific communications.

The Institute welcomes the opportunity to respond to the STFC consultation on its advisory panels and has provided comments in the attached document.

If you need any further information on the points raised, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Professor Peter Main
Director, Education and Science
Consultation on Advisory Panels

Advisory panels reporting to Science Board

1. We welcome the announcement from STFC that its strategic advisory structure is to be revised and simplified, which we believe will lead to improvements in its ability to solicit advice from the various communities it supports. In particular, we welcome the continuation of the advisory panels, which were a good innovation in the first place, and hope that under the new structure they will continue to play a prominent role in the STFC’s strategic activities; this will be important in light of the merger of PPAN and PALS into the Science Board.

2. However, we urge STFC to consider carefully how the advisory panels feed into the Science Board and to ensure that their views are well-represented at Science Board meetings. The nature of the STFC means that effective community consultation is only possible through the advisory panels and, therefore, it is vital that the chairs of the advisory panels are co-opted onto the Science Board as non-core members.

Membership of the advisory panels

3. An issue with the single advisory panels is that in order to manage the breadth of the designated research areas, they would need to have a large membership, otherwise they may lack specific knowledge and could put decisions concerning large tracts of a research area in the hands of relatively few individuals. Furthermore, great care needs to be taken to ensure proper representation across the research areas of the advisory panels (e.g. theoretical aspects of particle physics), and there is a need to ensure that interdisciplinary areas (e.g. particle cosmology which cuts across astronomy and particle physics) are suitably covered.

Prioritisation decisions

4. There is insufficient clarity on how the balance is struck between community views on the scientific merits of different programmes and community views on funding given the constraints imposed by the financial situation. The idea of making prioritisation decisions without any financial information is far from ideal. Smaller projects with narrower physics goals can be excellent value for money, but the current system is poor at reflecting this or in allowing a research programme to be developed to fit within a given budget. This is something that should be undertaken by the advisory panels.

Advice relating to facilities

5. It is essential that STFC receives independent ‘grass roots’ input into the programmes carried out at the Diamond Light Source, the ISIS pulsed neutron and muon source, and the Central Laser Facility. This is particularly important with the
imminent arrival of the new facilities funding model. The process for identifying future research councils’ requirements is not obvious, and the research councils have stated that they will seek input from users. STFC is providing the facilities for the entire UK science community and needs to ensure that the user community is engaged with it, not only through the use of the facilities, but also in helping to shape the programme.

6. In addition, whilst the revised arrangements may deliver improved quality and efficiency of advice over many research areas, it is unclear what their impact will be on accelerator science and technology activities. There is an opportunity for STFC to strengthen its structures on accelerator related matters, including explicit recognition of their importance, relevant both to existing and planned facilities and to new applications in health and energy areas. The only functional structure in place is the Accelerator Strategy Board and this will continue to report to the Science Board. It is not clear what status this body will have in the new structure, particularly in respect to the new advisory panels but also how its input will be considered relative to other advice regarding facilities.
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