



**Evidence to the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee's
hearing into the science budget allocation**

This evidence is submitted by Unite Amicus Section. Unite is the UK's largest trade union with 2 million members across the private and public sectors. The union's members work in a range of industries including manufacturing, financial services, print, media, construction, transport and local government, education, health and not for profit sectors.

Unite is the main union representing Higher Education scientific technicians and academic related staff in the UK and Republic of Ireland. It is therefore a major stakeholder in all decisions around science and technology funding especially decisions that will lead to job losses. Unite welcomes the chance to respond to this consultation and would be willing to make further written and verbal submissions about any of the issues raised.

Executive Summary

- **Physics grants are being cut across the UK at a time when Government strategy is calling for high value, highly skilled economy.**
- **This will almost certainly lead to redundancies for Unite members and also potential course closures across the country.**

- This will further denude the sector of vital technical skills and affect UK Universities at a time when international competition for students is fierce.
- These changes will also have major impacts on the future of other industrial sectors, i.e. manufacturing.
- In the light of these concerns Unite is calling for:
 - A moratorium on all cuts until adequate consultation has taken place.
 - A commitment not to penalise departments that have already had grants allocated to them.
 - A sustainable scientific strategy with long term financial commitments and effective investment in staff and capacity building in UK scientific research.

Unite Amicus Section case in detail

1. Unite recognises the big increases to science and technology funding that have been introduced over the last 10 years. Unite also supports the move to full economic costing (FEC) of projects as this should help build more sustainable funding structures and jobs in research institutions.

STFC cuts

2. Unite is however extremely concerned over the Science and Technology Facilities Council [STFC] delivery plan that aims to make £80m of cuts to physics and astronomy research grants in the coming three years. This shortfall will be compounded by the Council's insistence on a further £40m in 'headroom' savings for flexibility.

3. The plan, passed by ministers in December, will see a 25% cut in research grants given to universities nationwide. The cuts are being made from grants that had already been formally allocated based on effective University business plans. The attempt to claw back 25% of the cuts will therefore inevitably lead to redundancies.

4. There are more than half a dozen universities that depend on STFC for about 75% of their funding or more and many others with about 50% of their funding. A 20% cut in grants will therefore be a 20% cut in their income. Some universities are standing to lose about three quarters of a million pounds a year as a result of these cuts¹.

5. At the same time the extra £75 million of HEFCE funding for teaching on certain subjects including physics is due to end at the end of the next academic year.

6. The cumulative result of all these cuts is there will be major increases in redundancies in physics and potential departmental closures.

Overspend

7. The oral evidence heard by the committee on 21st January 2008 suggests a link between these cuts and overspending on the Diamond and the ISIS II projects in Oxfordshire.

8. Unite is very supportive of investment in new research projects and the importance of these new projects to national scientific objectives and jobs. However it is not acceptable to claw back grants that have already been allocated and budgeted for due to mistakes made in financial planning on these projects.

9. Departments that have done nothing wrong should not be penalised by funding shortfalls outside their control.

¹ Professor Peter Main, Director of Education and Science, Institute of Physics.
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmduis/uc215-i/uc21502.htm>

Consultation

10. These cuts have been announced with virtually no consultation - with Unite members first being made aware of potential redundancies at their institution by articles in the local press².

11. It appears from the oral evidence heard in January that other major stakeholders such as the Royal Astronomical Society, the Institute of Physics and Prospect were also not adequately consulted on the cuts³.

12. This is totally unacceptable and should not be the process for making major decisions about the UK's science strategy and scientific skills base.

13. Unite calls for a moratorium on these cuts until adequate consultation has taken place.

Currency fluctuations

14. Another issue contributing to the crisis is that the Office of Science and Innovation plans to stop compensating for variation in international subscriptions due to currency or Gross Domestic Product fluctuations in March 2008. STFC and NERC are therefore liable for first £6m per annum, which has fed into the current £80m shortfall.

15. It seems ridiculous that the amount of grant funding available to UK science should be so volatile and dependent on the strength of the pound or the level of GDP. Unite urges this system to be rethought as it is damaging science planning.

Physics capacity and skills

16. The results of the plans will do far reaching and long term damage to UK physics capacity. They will decimate important research centres in Daresbury, Edinburgh and the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL).

² *University faces losing millions in research grants*, Ben Schofield, Liverpool Daily Post, Jan 14 2008 <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/liverpool-news/regional-news/2008/01/14/university-faces-losing-millions-in-research-grants-64375-20346343/>

³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmdius/uc215-i/uc21502.htm>

Statements made about potential private sector or local authority funding do little to calm the fears of Unite members facing job losses.

17. As they currently stand these are major centres of scientific research employing hundreds of highly skilled workers and scientists. Major decisions on the future of such centres should not be cost driven. They should be made in the context of wider government scientific strategy with a full and effective consultation process and evidence on the impacts that such changes would have on the UK's wider skills base.

Technicians and support staff

18. Unite members know from bitter experience that support staff and technicians in particular are often the first to be cut. There have already been statements from senior figures in universities indicating this to be the case⁴.

19. Where departments have closed or redundancies have been made, such as in Manchester and Reading, technicians have ended up leaving the sector altogether to find jobs in other fields or the private sector.

20. Unite has long been campaigning for better investment in academic technicians especially those with specialist skills⁵.

21. Several reports in recent years have reported an accelerating skills shortage in higher education for highly skilled technicians⁶. The skills shortage has been caused by a long standing lack of formal opportunities for technicians to obtain training, poor investment and systems of career development, low comparative pay, under funding, redundancies and difficulties with staff recruitment and retention in the sector. These cuts will no doubt make this trend worse.

⁴ <http://www.liverpooldailypost.co.uk/liverpool-news/regional-news/2008/01/14/university-faces-losing-millions-in-research-grants-64375-20346343/>

⁵ Click here to read about the campaign on the Unite Amicus website.
<http://www.amicustheunion.org/Default.aspx?page=5930>

⁶ *Technical and Research Support in the Modern Laboratory*, Royal Society 1998, and *Highly skilled technicians in higher education*, HEFCE, 2004

22. It is important to highlight that technicians unlike academics do not recruit from a national or international market. When jobs are lost in these roles those jobs cannot simply be picked up at a later date. They represent a major capacity loss to an institution that can not be quickly recovered.

Implication for physics in the UK

23. Physics, astrophysics, astronomy and particle physics in the UK have an extremely high international reputation and significantly contribute to the UK's high science ratings. If you look at citations and publications these are areas with the highest international reputation and these cuts will do serious damage to that.

24. At the same time the cuts will coincide with long overdue increases in physics course applications and A-level take up after many years of decline. What kind of message is this making to people considering a career in science and technology?

Highly skilled science and technology economy

25. Unite strongly believes that physics and other science subjects need to be properly supported if the UK is to achieve its aim of being a highly skilled science and technology economy.

26. Government strategy for a high value, highly skilled economy (Lisbon strategy) is predicated on a high number of highly educated, highly skilled workers being produced in the UK. The provision of science, technology and maths course at university is the only way the UK will retain the high value manufacturing base that is crucial to the future sustainability of the UK economy. There are huge numbers of highly educated science and maths graduates being produced in China and India, the implications of any move by UK companies to facilitate the use of this highly skilled low wage labour force will impact heavily on the retention of the intellectual property and innovation in the UK. These research cuts clearly do not fit with this strategy.

Wakeham review

27. Lastly Unite is aware of the launch of the Wakeham review on physics and would strongly urge that any rash funding cuts that lead departmental closures or major job losses should not be made before seeing the Dr Wakeham's final recommendations.

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