



Science and
Technology
Facilities Council

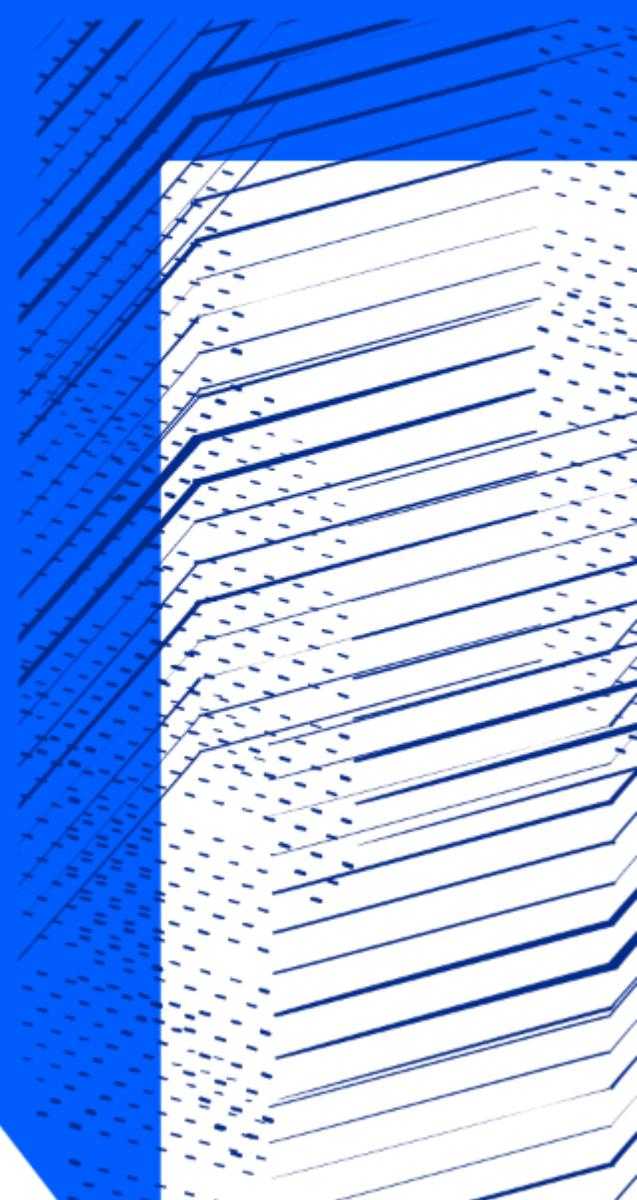
STFC Update

RAS Forum

Michele Dougherty
Executive Chair

Grahame Blair
Exec Director Programmes

30th April 2025



UKRI Executive

STFC Executive Chair

- In January, I started as STFC's Exec Chair
 - Part of UKRI's Executive Committee
 - UKRI's champion for Infrastructure and Space
 - UK representative on CERN Council and SKAO Council
- I have a 35 yr career as a Space Physicist including:
 - PI for Cassini (Saturn) and Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer (JUICE)
- In addition, I am Institute of Physics President-Elect and President from October 2025
- Former roles include:
 - Head of Department of Physics at Imperial College
 - STFC Council member



First few months

Since 02 January (my first day)

- Visit to CERN and my first CERN Council meeting
- Visit to Jodrell Bank and my first SKAO Council meeting
- Strategic meetings with local Universities including Physics department updates
 - University of Manchester
 - University of Liverpool & Liverpool City Region Mayor
 - University of Oxford
- Visit to Daresbury including the update on research into sustainable accelerators and LBNF-DUNE project
- Town halls at IoP Particle Physics and Nuclear Physics conferences



UKRI Executive

CEO UKRI

- Prof Sir Ian Chapman will start as UKRI's CEO in August 2025
- Ian is currently CEO of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) and a UKRI Board member
- He is distinguished physicist:
 - Knight Bachelor in the New Year Honours List 2023 for his services to global fusion energy
 - Fellow of the Royal Academy of Engineering and a Fellow of the Royal Society.
 - His research has been recognised with a number of international awards
- Upon appointment, he said: *“Research and innovation must be central to the prosperity of our society and our economy, so we have the great privilege of shaping the future of the country.”*



STFC Executive

Executive Director National Labs Large Scale Facilities

- Prof Roger Eccleston was appointed Executive Director with effect from 9 December 2024
- He was formerly:
 - Director of ISIS Neutron & Muon Source
 - Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at Sheffield Hallam University



Chief Operating Officer

- Keith Zimmerman has been appointed as COO and started 31 March
- He was formerly:
 - Director of a transformation programme at King's College
 - Chief Operating Officer at the University of Bath,



STFC Council Appointments

New Council members

- This month, we welcomed 4 new Council members:
 - Prof David Charlton, Poynting Professor of Physics at University of Birmingham. He is an experienced Particle Physicist and was previously on Science Board (PPAN)
 - Prof Stan Bentvelsen, Professor at University of Amsterdam and former director of Nikhef. He is a scientific lead on Einstein Telescope (Gravitational Waves)
 - Prof Jayne Lawrence, Director of University of Manchester @ Harwell. She is a long term user of STFC facilities and a former chair of Science Board
 - Prof Andrew Pontzen, Professor of Cosmology Durham University. His research interests are the interfaces of astrophysics, high energy physics, cosmology and computation
- We would like to encourage more under-represented groups to apply to all of our advisory bodies and will be issuing calls for new members of Science Board and other boards and panels later this month



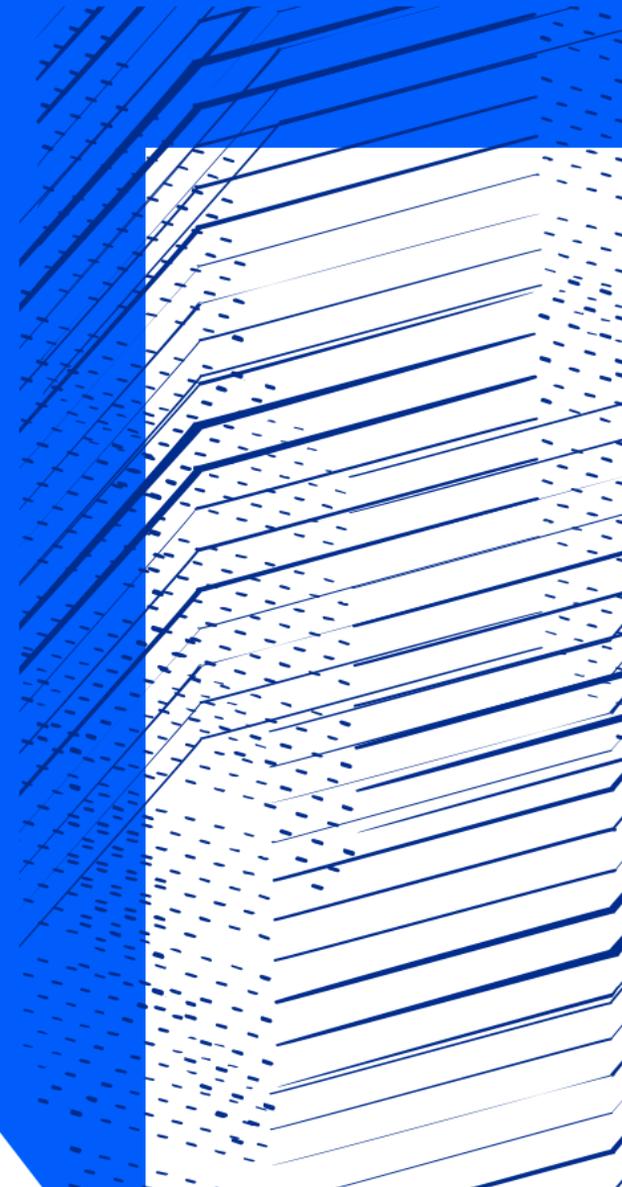
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Call for Applications to STFC Advisory Bodies and Peer Review Panels

Apply for panel membership now at

<https://www.ukri.org/about-us/stfc/how-we-are-governed/advisory-boards/call-for-applications/>

Deadline 18 May 2025





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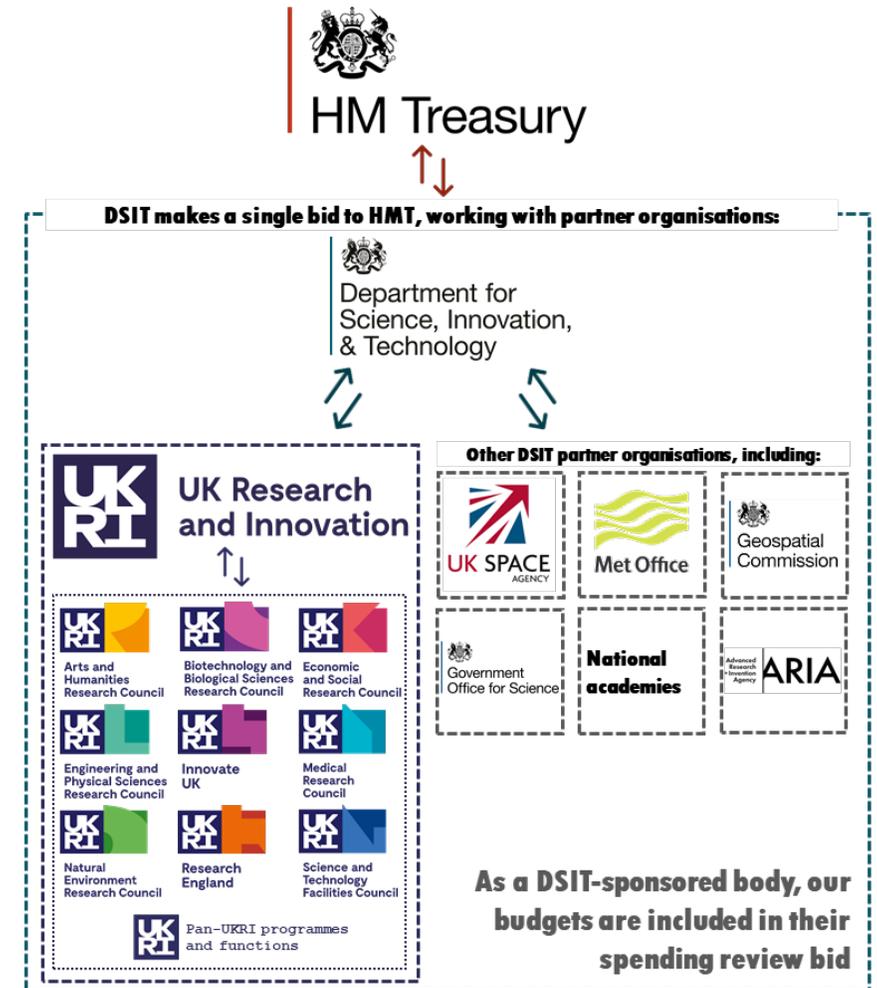
Spending Review



Spending Review

Spending Review process in a nutshell

- Spending Reviews (SRs) are led by HM Treasury
- STFC and the other research councils feed priorities into UKRI, who submits a collective bid into DSIT, along with other public bodies, e.g. the Met Office
- DSIT makes its bid into HMT, which set the department budgets and the allocation process then flows in reverse
- This Spending Review is in 2-phases:
 - Phase 1 – budgets for 2025/26
 - Phase 2 – budgets for 2026/27-2029/30



Spending Review – Phase 1

Headlines for 2025/26 :

- DSIT has announced almost £14 billion of R&D funding, with £8.8 billion budget for UKRI
- We welcome the protection of R&D budgets, particularly as the government is having to make difficult choices to prioritise its spending in the face of more challenging time with constrained budgets across the public sector
- The case for research and innovation is strong given its central role in driving economic growth and improving productivity in the economy and public services
- As we enter a period of tighter budgets, UKRI is working collectively to ensure its portfolio as a whole is balanced to deliver the best outcomes now and in the future
- There are parts of the R&D system that will be disappointed that their ambitions have not been met

Spending Review – Phase 1

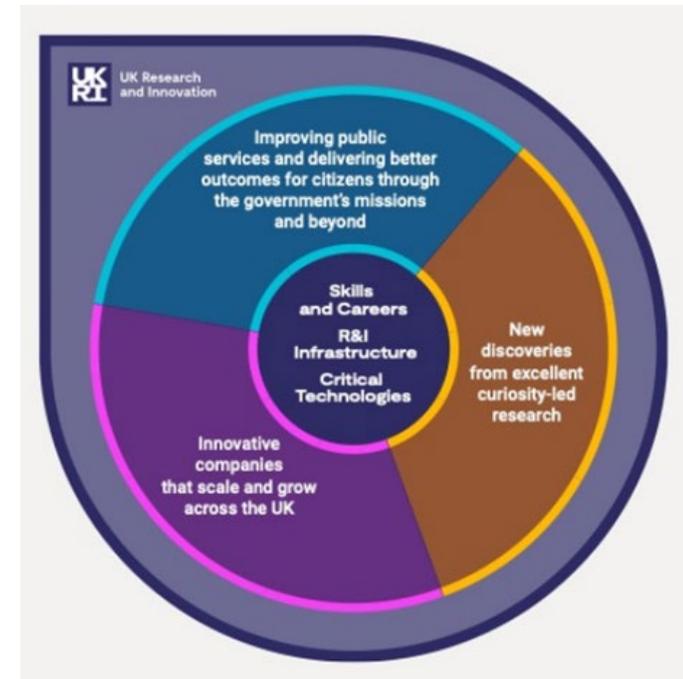
Implications for STFC Funding in 2025/26:

- There are significant pressures and calls on STFC's budget:
 - Inflation has been significant over recent years (over 10% p.a. at times), which has not been matched by increased funding for construction/lab infrastructure
 - Salaries, University overheads and student stipends have all increased
 - Delays (including Covid) and technical challenges have led to increased costs
 - STFC has long-term international commitments backed by MoUs and agreements
- We have had to make some difficult choices to reach a balanced budget:
 - Reduced % success rate for the 2024 Astronomy and Particle Physics grants rounds
 - Some projects have not been renewed or are being paused
 - We are committed to reducing STFC's fixed costs including operations national facilities at a reduced rate in 2025 and reducing staff numbers

Spending Review – Phase 2

Status:

- Phase 2 is currently underway with an initial announcement expected this summer
- Recognising the tight fiscal position across the whole of the public sector, UKRI has submitted a realistic flat-real bid, focused on 3 priority areas:
 - £17bn on new discoveries from curiosity driven research
 - £10bn on scaling and growing innovation; and
 - £9bn on citizen outcomes/public services
- However, flat-real will involve some hard choices about what to close, stop or scale back across the UKRI portfolio
 - The impacts will be felt across all Research Councils and our communities



Spending Review – Phase 2

We are committed to ensuring a sustainable future for our research communities

- We cannot continue with everything that we currently fund, but what we do fund must be at a viable level, delivering world class research and technology
- We are currently engaging our Science Boards and Council in a prioritisation exercise to assess the scientific impacts across all our portfolio:
 - Joint meeting of STFC Council & Science Board in March
 - 11 & 15 April extraordinary Science Board Prioritisation meetings
 - 14 May Council Review
 - This will feed into discussions with incoming UKRI CEO and DSIT
- The prioritisation builds upon the recent PPAN roadmap activity – a **big thank you to everyone** in the community who has contributed to this extensive process



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Astronomy and Space Science Programme Update



Astronomy and Space Science Research Grants

Grant schemes reminder:

- Small Awards – Funding for a single project
- Large Awards - Funding for large cross cutting projects

2024 Awards

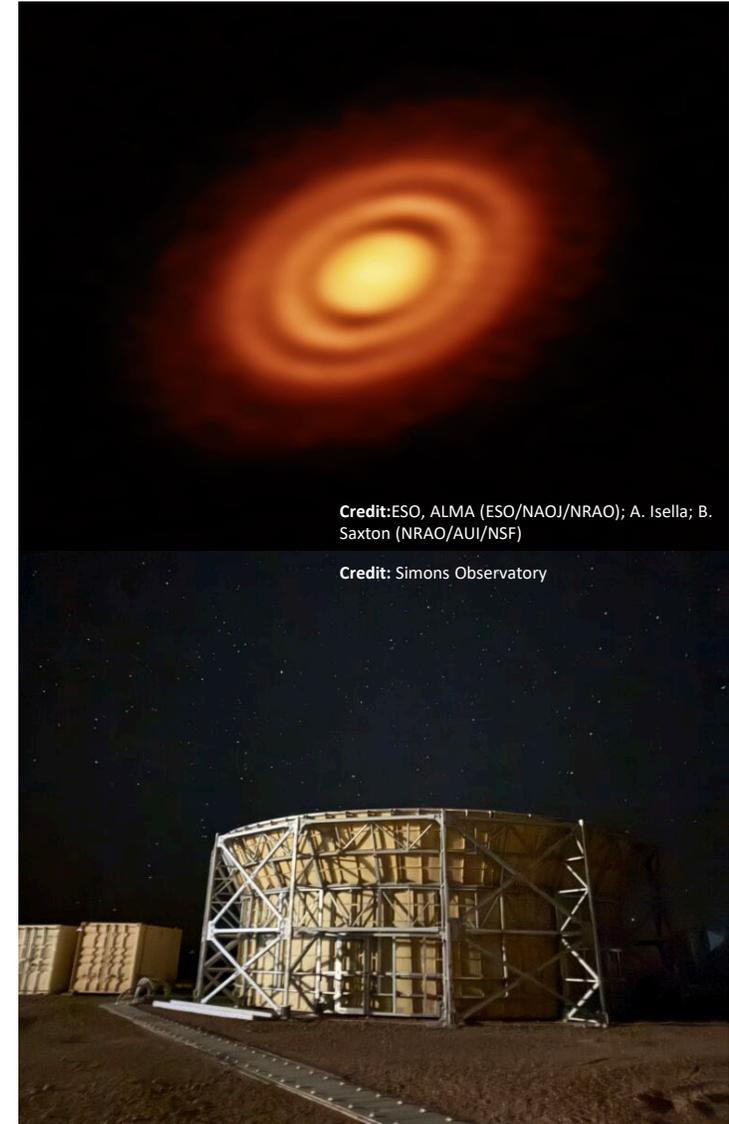
- 154 Small Awards and 11 Large Awards (selected from 39 outline proposals) were considered by the panel and underwent peer review.
- The financial situation changed significantly after the 2024 Opportunities opened. This has meant STFC had to make difficult decisions to meet the funding level.
- Careful consideration was taken to mitigate the impact to the community and additional advice has been provided by Science Board PPAN regarding the resultant outcomes:
 - 48 Small Awards, supporting 63 Applicants
 - 3 Large Awards, supporting 24 Applicants
 - Start dates slipped from 1 April 2025 to 1 July 2025

Astronomy and Space Science Research Grants

2024 Awards

STFC is supporting world-leading research using a range of space and ground-based facilities:

- Detector technology for future facilities
- Modelling the open flux of the Sun and its effect on space weather at the Earth
- Fundamental physics with the Simons Observatory
- Cosmological studies with Euclid and the Rubin Observatory
- Direct imaging of exoplanets to understand their demographics and properties
- Studies of the distant universe using gamma ray bursts
- Studying the atmospheres of the solar system's giant planets
- The origin, evolution and interactions of Planet Mercury
- The Solar Atmospheric Modelling Suite (SAMS)



Credit:ESO, ALMA (ESO/NAOJ/NRAO); A. Isella; B. Saxton (NRAO/AUI/NSF)

Credit: Simons Observatory

Astronomy and Space Science Research Grants

2025 Proposals and Future Rounds

- 2025 Schemes closed on 4th March. 241 Small applications and 9 (invited) Large applications received. Peer review is underway
- Given the financial situation we have again needed to make difficult decisions to balance the budget while trying to maintain volume of awards and breadth of programme. This aligns with changes across the PPAN programme and advice was provided by Science Board PPAN.
 - Small Awards – successful awards will start in October 2026 (rather than April 2026)
 - Large Awards – successful awards will start at the earliest in April 2027 (rather than April 2026). Confirmation of the start date is dependent on Phase 2 Spending Review.
 - Upcoming Large Awards call planned to open in summer 2025 for full proposal submission in 2026, will not happen due to change in start dates for 2025 Large Awards. We will look to reinstate the Large Awards scheme depending on the outcome of Phase 2 Spending Review.
- We hope advance notice of changes will allow applicants to plan accordingly.
- We recognise changes to start dates are unsettling and it is our intention to return to fixed start dates when the financial situation allows.

Square Kilometre Array Observatory

Headlines

- The SKAO has completed ~four years of construction activity of a projected seven year construction phase:
 - ~100 construction contracts have been awarded for a total commitment of over €770M
 - UK projected work return over £100M
- Council 14 (March 2025)
 - Members reaffirmed their commitment to delivering the Deployment Baseline (AA*)
 - UK was able to commit additional funding of £33m, meeting commitment to the additional funding ask.
- **First image**
 - From an early working version of the SKA-Low telescope, Australia
 - Using just 4 stations (1,024 antenna) of the planned 512 stations (131,072 antenna)
 - The image shows an area of sky of about 25 square degrees – equivalent to approximately 100 full Moons. In it we see around 85 of the brightest known galaxies in that region.



ESO - Extremely Large Telescope (ELT)

Headlines

- Excellent progress being made on the construction of the ELT.
- First light expected 2029.
- Instrumentation programme progressing.
- UK led HARMONI project will be led by PI Prof Jim Dunlop from 1 July 2025.
- METIS (UKATC partner) passed Final Design Review

Image from 27 April 2025

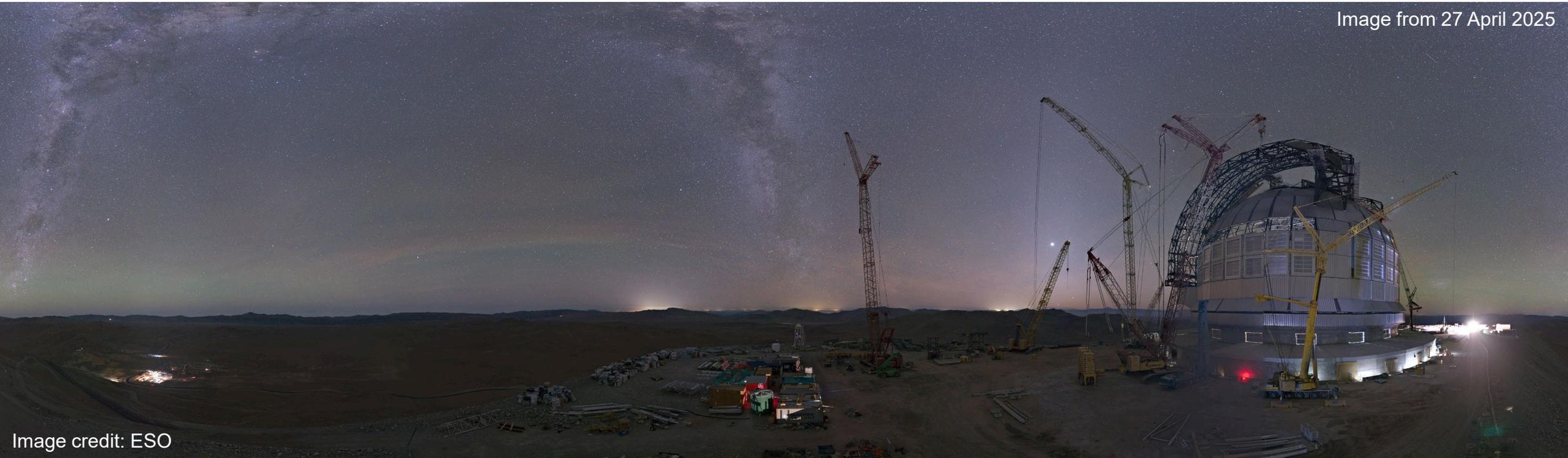


Image credit: ESO

MOONS

Multi-Object Optical and Near-IR Spectrograph for the VLT

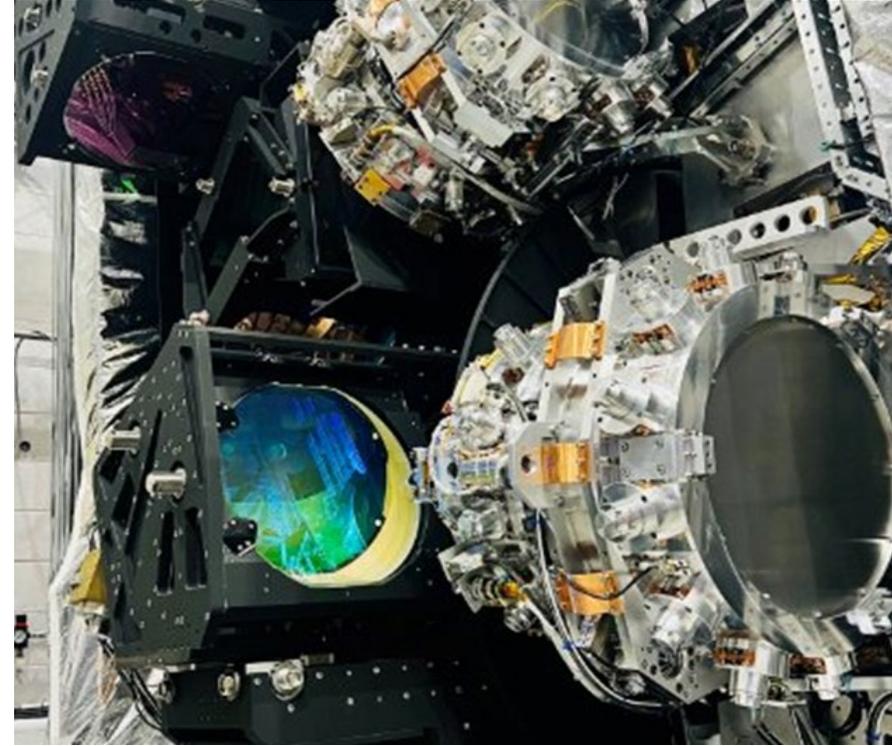
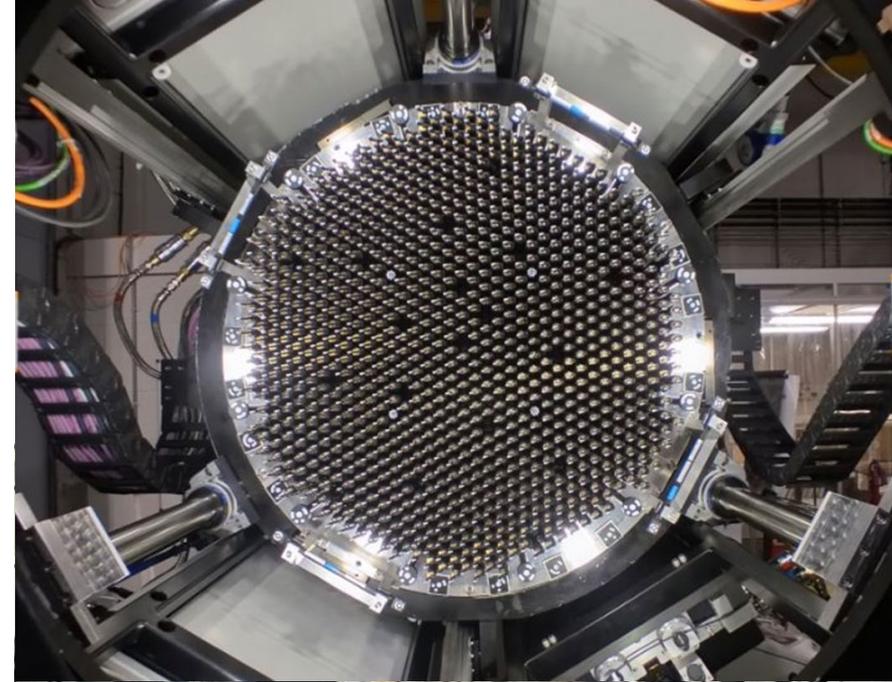
Headlines

MOONS has the largest cryostat and fastest cameras ever built for astronomy; 1000 microsystems for robotic fibre positioning; the most complex instrument ever built for ESO.

Granted Preliminary Acceptance Europe (PAE) by ESO. Due to be shipped to Chile in January 2026. Science Commissioning to begin March/April 2026.

MOONS objective is to understand galaxy formation and evolution from the Milky Way to the first galaxies.

The core capability of MOONS is spectra of ~900 galaxies/stars in a single shot, covering simultaneously from visible to near-IR wavelengths in either low or high resolving power



New Director of ING

Headlines

Dr Rubén Sánchez-Janssen has been announced as the new Director of the Isaac Newton Group of Telescopes (ING) in La Palma.

Ruben is an Astronomer and Project Scientist at the Science and Technology Facilities Council's (STFC) UK Astronomy Technology Centre (UK ATC) site in Edinburgh.

He leads the development of scientific instrumentation and facilities for ground and space-based astronomy.

Ruben takes over from Dr Marc Balcells and begins the role on 1st May 2025 and will oversee the full launch of WEAVE on the William Herschel Telescope (WHT) and the beginning of the operations of HARPS3 on the Isaac Newton Telescope (INT).



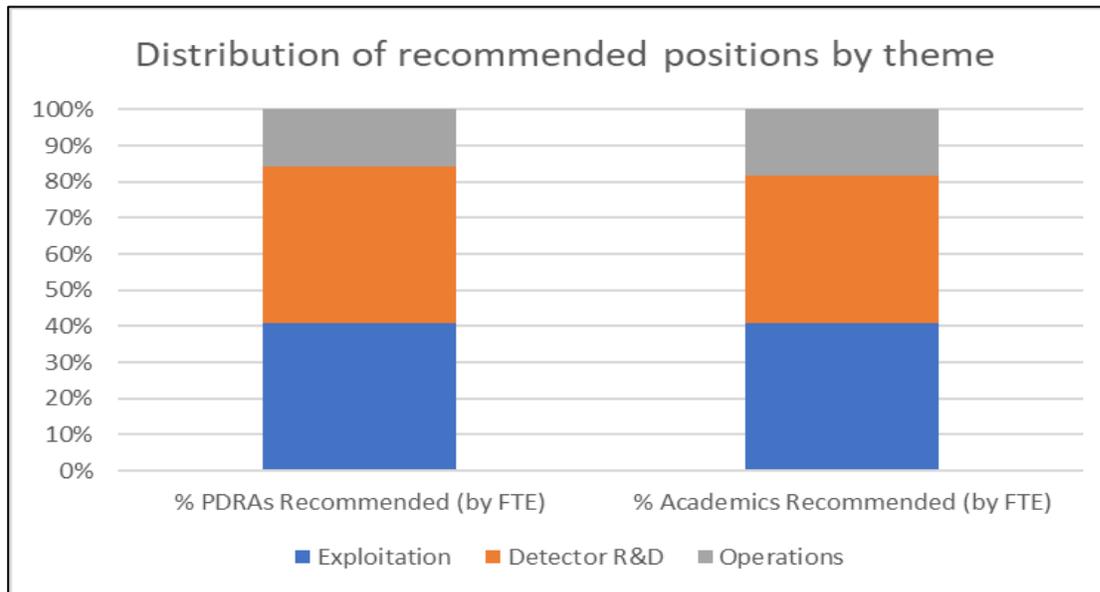
Low Frequency Array (LOFAR)

- On 26 March the UK became the 8th Member of the LOFAR ERIC
- The largest radio telescope, distributed over Europe, operating at the lowest frequencies observable from Earth
- The UK's LOFAR station is based at the Chilbolton Observatory
- Membership enables participation in LOFAR2.0 upgrade and coordinated exploitation of the LOFAR facilities.



Gravitational Waves

- The Consolidated Grant award will be awarded from Oct 2025 to Sept 2028.
- UKRI IF Preliminary Activity (PA): Next Generation Gravitational Wave detector £8m total, which ends Sept 2026.



Measure	2020 Existing Support	2024 Requested	2024 Recommended
Number of proposals	10	13	
Number of institutions	14	16	10 ¹
Number of scientific themes	27	40	21 ²
Academics – Number (Requested)	(56) 30	(60)	39
Academics – Average FTE	0.09	0.4	0.03
Academics – Total FTE per year	2.6	21.5	1.2
PDRA – Number	17	42	16
PDRA – Total FTE per year	13.5	41.1	10.5
Core Posts – Number	5	13	5
Core Posts – Total FTE per year	4	13.5	4.2
Technician – Total FTE per year	1.7	1.1	0.4
Total Number of FTE per year	21.6	74.9	16.9

¹ Including STFC Rutherford Appleton Laboratory

² Including the collective operations theme

Computing and e-Infrastructure

- **DiRAC** - DiRAC-4 science case has recently been externally peer reviewed. Resource Allocation Committee - peer review of RAC17 proposals is complete, computing allocations to start April 2025. RAC18 to be launched in due course.
- **GridPP** - funding constraints have meant restrictions on hardware procurement. We may fall below the UK pledge in future years but are working actively with the collaboration to mitigate where possible.
- **SWIFT-HEP** - supports software development for the HL-LHC era however it is not possible to support the second phase of the project going forward.
- **AIRR (AI Research Resource)** - £7.5m has been allocated from the UKRI DRI fund for the new AI Research Resource (Dawn) at Cambridge for operations from April 2024 - March 2028. Isambard-AI (£243.5m) will also be coming online line in 2025.
 - A call for expressions of interest to get access to AIRR is now open:
<https://engagementhub.ukri.org/ukri-infrastructure/airr-eoi/>
- **New Computing Advisory Panel (CAP)** - is being set up to replace the STFC e-Infrastructure Advisory Group (SEAG). The recruitment process is underway.



[Home](#) > [News](#) > AI Research Resource funding opportunity launches

AI Research Resource funding opportunity launches



24 January 2024

A funding opportunity to support new advanced supercomputers for artificial intelligence (AI) research launches today.

Quantum Technologies for Fundamental Physics (QTFP)



- A programme funded by the UKRI Strategic Priorities Fund (SPF), run jointly with EPSRC.
- Applies the latest advances in quantum science and technology to explore and answer long-standing research questions about the universe and its evolution. The first programme entailed:
 - £32m for 7 large consortia over 5 years
 - £6.3m for 17 small projects over 2 years
- Programme is currently bridged to Sept 2025 only, from STFC core funding.
- Awaiting outcome of SR Phase 2 for Quantum Technologies. If favourable a call for large consortia awards to start on 1 April 2026 will be issued.
- If no dedicated funding from SR phase 2 then, like all other programme areas, QTFP is under consideration within the prioritisation exercise.

Doctoral Studentships and Stipends

Update

- UKRI has announced uplifts to the minimum PhD stipend level, (the latest increase from October 2025 is an increase by 8% to £20,780 per year) and has updated our terms and conditions in response to the New Deal work.
- STFC response
 - STFC has maintained landscape (DTP) numbers for 2025 starts but given these increases and our overall financial position we may need to reassess our numbers going forwards.
- We are working with our ETCC advisory group to develop a new algorithm for landscape (DTP) students to allow the changes for astronomy grants to be incorporated and reduce bureaucracy

Fellowship Programmes

The main fellowship programmes for STFC community are:

- Ernest Rutherford Fellowships (STFC):
 - A large number of applications received (again) this year (168 applications). Panels took place at the end of March and interviews will take place at the end of April.
Many thanks to colleagues for their help in peer review.
- UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship
 - Round 9 applications received and sifted. Interviews will take place in May.
 - Round 10 has opened with a closing date in June.
- Discussions are taking place on a more common fellowships framework across UKRI



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Outlook



Outlook

The environment is currently uncertain on many levels but:

- The PPAN programme remains strong and world leading:
 - Strong scientific leadership across the PPAN Area.
 - Excellent community with high quality ECRs and students.
- We are well prepared to weather the current uncertainty
 - Strengthened Science Boards now up and running for over a year.
 - Over a year of background preparation in developing a prioritised Roadmap.
 - Strong input from Advisory Panels as basis of up-to-date portfolio analysis.
 - New planning tools in place based on a well-structured 10-year plan.
- Great opportunities for joint evolution of our programme, together with our international colleagues.



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Questions?