

Statement on Microgravity

In August 2002 I set up the Microgravity Review Panel to consider the possible value of setting up a UK programme of life and physical science research using space facilities (or 'microgravity' for short).

I am grateful to Professor Wakeham, Vice-Chancellor of Southampton University, for chairing the Microgravity Review Panel and to the other members of the panel, who were Sir Richard Sykes (Rector of Imperial College of Science Technology and Medicine), Sir Peter Williams (Chairman of the Engineering and Technology Board) and Dr Steve Garwood (Director of Materials at Rolls Royce plc).

The Panel were asked to address the following questions:

- Would a national programme in life and physical sciences in space represent value for money for the UK or not?
- If so, should such a programme require membership of the ESA microgravity programme ('ELIPS') and at what level?
- Would the UK's interests be better served by some other arrangement (such as uncoordinated funding of individual experiments)?
- What level of funding would be appropriate and who should provide it?

I received a copy of their recommendations in May 2003 and I subsequently discussed the Panel's report with Professor Wakeham, BNSC and the Director General of the Research Councils.

Whilst the recommendations did not make a strong case for Government funding, the Panel concluded that, on balance, there were several areas where access to microgravity facilities would be of value to the UK. These included a range of research topics from signalling in cells, bone growth, materials and fluid behaviour, to quantum gravitation and astrobiology.

Since these topics are all concerned with fundamental research across a range of scientific disciplines, the Panel recommended that funding be provided from OST.

The Research Councils, under the auspices of RCUK – the new body which co-ordinates Research Council interests in scientific activity - considered the recommendations and the case for funding in February 2003 and again in September 2003 and concluded that on balance this was not currently a priority for them.

Having been unable to find a source of funds for this work I have, therefore, reluctantly decided that the UK government will not subscribe to the ESA ELIPS programme, nor fund a national programme of microgravity research at the present time. I note that, whilst the International Space Station is only one of many facilities of interest to microgravity researchers, its current problems reduce the opportunities for their activities.

I realise that this decision will be a disappointment to those in the research community who have an interest in this area and indeed to industrialists for whom microgravity may offer

commercial opportunities in due course. I understand that there are some opportunities starting to emerge through the EU as it increases its role in funding such research.

I have asked Colin Hicks, Director General of the British National Space Centre, to keep this area under review.

I have today put a copy of the Review Panel's recommendations in the library of the House.

Lord Sainsbury