

Organic Process Research & Development

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Editorial

Chemistry Crisis in UK Universities

As an industrial organic chemist, I am well aware of how much industry owes to the work that is done by our academic friends, and published freely. We can take this work and use it—since the work is rarely patented—without obligation to the originator and generate profits for the company. We also can recruit excellent chemists who have been trained in the basics of chemistry—and more—whilst carrying out studies toward a Bachelor of Science degree, work toward a PhD, and postdoctoral work. Strong university chemistry departments are therefore vital for the continued profitability of the chemical and pharmaceutical industry.

It was therefore sad to find out that my local university, the University of Sussex, where I am a visiting professor, is planning to close its chemistry department. The department has an outstanding history since it started in the 1960s, and in 40 years has housed three Nobel Prize winners and eight Fellows of the Royal Society. It is judged, for the purposes of funding, as a grade 5 department, i.e., internationally recognised, one of only 19 such departments in the United Kingdom.

The department is also highly rated for teaching, with an excellent staff–student ratio and was ranked second in the UK by the *Guardian* newspaper and sixth by the *Times Good University Guides*. Applications to study chemistry are well up on previous years.

So why is the department closing? A change in the way chemistry is allocated funds in recent times means that most chemistry departments are running at a loss—no allowance is made in the funding structure for the fact that chemistry is an expensive subject and requires more facilities than

nonsciences in the same manner as medicine (which does get more funds!). At Sussex it is disputed whether the department is running at a loss, since money from other sources (patent income and the like) may not have been included in the equation.

The crisis has reached the stage where it has already been discussed in the House of Commons at a Select Committee. MPs are worried that, if Sussex closes, then other prestigious institutions may follow suit, leaving chemistry in crisis in the UK. Exeter University and Kings College, London, have already closed their chemistry departments.

Accordingly, there is a plan to try to save the department from closure, and further information on this can be obtained from me (trevor@scientificupdate.co.uk). The issue of Sussex closing has already been highlighted in *Chemical & Engineering News* (**2006**, *84*(13), 11), and the web edition has more information (<http://pubs.acs.org/cen/news/84/i13/8413Sussex.html>). This potential closure is not only bad for the university but also for industry and the UK in general. If Sussex, with its impeccable pedigree closes, then no other UK chemistry department is safe. If the chemical community can work together to save Sussex, it will send a strong message that practicing chemists recognize the importance of continuity and high standards in chemical training and education.

Trevor Laird

Editor

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