Planners give permission for new campus housing

Brighton & Hove City Council has given outline planning permission for new campus residences housing hundreds of Sussex students.

The new residences at North Field (at the top end of campus, north of Lewes Court) will help to meet on-going demand from students for high-quality, en-suite accommodation.

The proposal is for 798 study-bedrooms in a rural setting adjoining the Sussex Downs.

The development is divided into 14 houses, each with clusters of six study-bedrooms. Each cluster contains its own communal living space including kitchen and dining areas and its own secure entry point and corridor.

The buildings will radiate into the landscape like fingers, with groups of two- and three-storey buildings arranged around individual courtyards.

In addition to the student accommodation, a reception building will house the site manager, launderette, mail room, larger common room, cleaners' and maintenance spaces, storage and ancillary spaces.

The development has 272 secure bicycle parking spots (one for every three residents) and eight car parking spaces, four of which are for wheelchair users.

A number of energy-efficiency measures include green roofs (which increase insulation and provide greater biodiversity), low-energy lighting, double glazing and recycling facilities.

The new development has been carefully designed to suit the location at the edge of the South Downs. Hedges will act as the field boundary to the area of ancient woodland to the north, and a dew pond and damp meadow may be included to manage water run-off.

The site is currently grassland, designated for university development in the Brighton & Hove Local Plan. It is part of the overall master plan for the campus and is the last greenfield site within the permitted development zone.

The next step is for a detailed plan, including the design of the buildings, to be submitted to Brighton & Hove City Council.

The aim is for construction to begin in 2010, with completion due in 2011.

Student surveys start dates confirmed

The National Student Survey (NSS) for 2009 will go live for Sussex students from Monday 2 February – with emails being sent that week to all undergraduate finalists by Ipsos MORI directing them to complete the survey online.

The University and the Students' Union are very keen to ensure that as many eligible students as possible complete the survey and hope to exceed Sussex's participation rate of 75% in the 2008 NSS. This ensures that there is a clearly representative view of student experience at Sussex, and that as many subjects as possible can have a publishable result.

Continuing the work carried out by academic and Professional Services staff in promoting the most recent survey to students, it has been agreed that schools and departments should again take the lead in encouraging participation. This action will be supported by central teams in the form of general mass communication and publicity.

Meanwhile, the 2009 Sussex Student Experience Survey (SSES) for second-year undergraduates goes live on Monday 19 January 2009.

The survey – which, like the NSS, is completed online – ran for the first time in spring 2008 and achieved a response rate of 28%. This year the Teaching and Learning Development Unit (TLDU), who are running the survey, are aiming for a participation rate of at least 50%.

More information about these, and other, student surveys can be found at www.sussex.ac.uk/studentsurveys

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Psychologist gives students the lowdown on size zero

Sussex academic Dr Heiga Dittmar joined other leading psychologists this week to talk to teenagers about the impact of size zero culture on body image and esteem.

The London Lectures, aimed at A-level and college students interested in psychology, were organised by the British Psychological Society and took place in Kensington Town Hall on Tuesday (9 December).

Heiga presented her studies on body dissatisfaction, and examined whether unrealistic body ideals in the media contribute to this problem, in a lecture entitled: 'Does size matter? The impact of "body perfect" media ideals on body image'.

Heiga’s research focuses on the impact of consumer society on individuals’ sense of identity and well-being. Her work on consumerism and body image is now published in Consumer Society, Identity, and Well-Being: The search for the ‘Good Life’ and the ‘Body Perfect’.

Topics covered by fellow speakers included the strategies people use to attract each other on online dating sites; how pop music affects young listeners; and boredom in the classroom. TV star and clinical psychologist Dr Tanya Byron spoke about the life of a psychologist in the media.

Research goes rural

Over 30 academics attended the first Rural Research and Strategy Partnership (RRSP) lunch last month at Sussex.

The event outlined the RRSP and the opportunities it offers the University, and was another chance for fellow researchers to meet and discuss their work. (RRSP members met for the first time with regional policymakers at a special launch event in April to debate the most pressing concerns for the region.)

Eighty per cent of the south-east is classified as rural and through different strategies, including academic research, the RRSP aims to tackle challenges facing that community. The solutions to common issues – staying healthy, affordable housing, waste disposal, enterprise – can look very different in the countryside than in the town. Managing the interface between rural and urban areas is critical to achieving economic, environmental and social sustainability.

The aim of the lunch was to identify internal interest in the partnership so that, when the RRSP is looking for collaboration and partnerships, academics can respond quickly with suitable proposals.

The partnership will give Sussex the opportunity to work with stakeholder organisations such as the National Farmers Union, English Heritage and Natural England.

RRSP funding is available for academics who would like to workshop ideas with rural stakeholders. To register your interest in the partnership, contact Debbie McGuchan on ext 3149.

There is more information about the RRSP on the Forest Research UK website: www.forestresearch.gov.uk/rrsp
Sussex learns useful lessons from REF pilot

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is replacing the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which HEFCE (the Higher Education Funding Council for England) uses to inform funding allocations.

Detailed proposals for the REF are currently being developed and HEFCE launched a pilot exercise in June 2008. Sussex was selected as just one of 22 institutions, chosen from a large number of volunteers, to take part in it.

The pilot aims to develop and test methods of assessing research excellence with 'bibliometrics', which refers to the number of published research papers by an individual academic and how often they are cited in other papers.

It is divided into two stages: summer 2008 for data collection and spring 2009 for data analysis.

The initial submission by Sussex in August identified 441 eligible members of staff. It included records for their 2,856 submitted publications, obtained by combining records from the RAE 2008 submission for the 12 selected 'Units of Assessment' in the pilot, as well as Sussex's databases of research and publications.

The second submission, in September, was based on the same number of staff but contained records for 6,605 publications, reflecting the number of publications produced throughout the RAE 2008 census period.

The process of gathering, inputting and verifying this considerable quantity of data identified a number of issues relating to the way in which publications data has been collected both for previous assessment exercises and on an ongoing basis.

The challenges that emerged, and the way in which these were managed by the team during the data-collection phase, have helped to identify a number of potential solutions that can lead Sussex into the actual REF well prepared and in a strong position.

Professor Bob Allison, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research), says: "It is clear that an up-to-date, coherent collection of data relating to current and future research and publications is essential to the success of the research agenda.

"It is also apparent that the demands of the REF will require a substantial reworking of the existing information infrastructure on campus.

"The REF pilot has given us an opportunity to lead the field in our adaptation to this new environment, and the work to date will make an excellent basis for preparation for the real REF."

But he also adds: "There are issues relating to preparation for the REF for which bibliometrics and the pilot are only part of the story."

The REF will start with selected subjects in 2010 and inform funding from 2011–12. Full implementation will take place in 2013.

To help to prepare for 2010 the University has convened an REF Strategy Group, which brings together academic faculty and Professional Services colleagues.

Get set for RAE results

Just over one year ago, as we loaded the last of the 1,200 pages of Sussex's submission for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), I thanked all those involved and said we should forget about it until the publication of the results in December 2008. Well, that time is now upon us.

Prof Bob Allison, Pro-Vice-Chancellor

On the morning of 17 December, we will find out how the RAE panels have assessed the submissions we made to 26 different Units of Assessment – based on measures of our research outputs, environment and esteem.

We will analyse the data, share them with heads of department, and then release information to all colleagues when the embargo is lifted at midnight. Results will be published in the national press on the Thursday – doubtless with the THE leading the way.

The RAE matters because it drives two important factors: the funding distributed by government for research, and the academic reputation of universities and departments within them.

Some £1.6bn nationally each year is distributed according to RAE outcomes. The way in which this is to be done will not be announced until March, but we can be sure it will again be heavily weighted towards the highest-rated institutions. And with the number of staff submitted nationally rising by 12%, there is more competition for the same amount of money.

In terms of reputation, HEFCE don't publish rankings, but compilers of league tables do. In the 2001 RAE Sussex ranked about 19th in the UK – according to the ranking methodology commonly in use. That 2001 result has remained a key ingredient in all league tables since. We can be sure that the 2008 results will now take their place.

One of the methodological changes for 2008 is that information about the number of staff not submitted is not being recorded. For universities that took a more selective approach than Sussex, this dragged down their 2001 league ranking. However, ignoring non-submitted staff, as will be the case in 2008, the comparison for Sussex would have been 28th nationally in 2001 – so we need to bear this in mind when looking at the 2008 picture.

And what will the best scores look like? There will not be a simple rating with leading departments scoring 5* The new system generates a profile – with percentages across grades 4* ("world-leading"), 3* ("internationally excellent") 2* ("recognised internationally") or 1* ("recognised nationally") and unclassified.

I suspect that any department that gets some of its research classified as 4* will make the claim that it is a 4* department, or some combination of the percentages at 4* and 3*, or some presentational route not yet dreamt up.

Needless to say we will be working hard to ensure we present the results for Sussex and for our departments in the most clear and straightforward way – so that we ourselves, our partners and our potential students understand our high-quality research.

For the future, however, neither the RAE results nor the Research Excellence Framework that is due to replace it - are an end in themselves. What really matters is looking forward to the development and strengthening of our research base – through the overall research strategy and the targets to grow our research income, and through research development plans for each new school. The new research themes, the creation of the Doctoral School and the strengthening of Professional Services support will all play their part.

But - for next week at least – we can turn our attention once more back to the RAE.
Books that smell, feel and sound good to be used for research

Winning entries for a competition to create new tactile books for visually impaired children will aid psychology research at Sussex.

Dr Frances Aldrich, Research Fellow in Psychology and vice-chair of the Tactile Book Advancement Group (TBAG), which organised the competition, received 70 entries from across the world in response to the TBAG challenge: 'Make a difference – make a tactile book'.

"Christmas came early this year!" said Frances. "We were temporarily overwhelmed as brown paper packages of all shapes and sizes arrived through the mail, bringing a fantastic range of books intended to be enjoyed primarily through touch.

Accessible: A competition to design and make a tactile book to aid visually impaired children received over 70 entries.

"Many of them are beautifully hand-crafted fabric books, with a rich variety of contrasting colours and textures, really quite luscious. Others include sounds, and even smells!"

Frances, whose research work at Sussex is investigating how blind children can gain better access to graphics through touch, said there is a dearth of good tactile books.

"Many blind children have little to do with books until they start learning to read Braille at school. They don't have the pre-school opportunities to handle and enjoy books that we take for granted with sighted children - even knowing to turn the pages from right to left is something they may not be aware of."

The organisers prepared lots of advice for entrants on how to create effective tactile books, taking into account narrative and humour, as well as tactile elements robust enough to withstand enthusiastic exploration.

"Little adjustments to the design can make an enormous difference to accessibility, and make these books something that all children can enjoy," says Frances.

The winners were announced at the Royal National Institute for the Blind’s conference ‘Tactile Graphics 2008’ in Birmingham on 5 December.

The categories included one for the best commercially published book incorporating tactile elements, which was won by This is my Monster by Sam Taplin and Stephanie Jones (published by Usborne). Judges liked the build-up of items on the page, the simplicity, amusing text and the sound button.

All competition entries will be examined as part of the research on tactile graphics at Sussex, following which the winning entries will go on display at RNIB. The organisers are currently looking for a local venue for the travelling exhibition.

A local school has already become involved. Following a visit from Frances, children at Sompting Village Primary School in West Sussex are busy making tactile books, which they hope will appeal to blind children their own age.

Book based on archive diary to be broadcast on Radio 4

Actress Imelda Staunton will be reading Nella Last’s Peace as a 'Book of the Week' on Radio 4 in the week beginning Monday (15 December).

Nella Last was a Cumbrian housewife who chronicled her life for the social-research organisation, Mass Observation.

Many other Mass Observation diaries, now held in the Mass Observation Archive in the University Library, ended with the conclusion of World War II. Nella, however, continued writing until 1966.

A first volume of her diary, Nella Last’s War, published in 1981, was turned into a successful TV adaptation by the actress and comedian Victoria Wood last year.

A newly published selection from the diary, Nella Last’s Peace – the Postwar Diaries of Housewife, 49, picks up the story in 1945 with victory over Japan, through to thoughts of emigration to Australia in 1948.

The book covers Nella’s life in Barrow-in-Furness and those of her neighbours as well as creating a picture of the austerity of life in post-war England.

The Radio 4 reading will be broadcast Monday-Friday at 9.45am and repeated each night at 11.30pm and will be available on the Radio 4 website.
Children’s art reveals new views about “home”

What makes a place a home? Why do we think of other places as away?

These were questions that University of Sussex anthropologists put to a group of British Bangladeshi children. The surprising results, expressed through artwork and diaries, will form a major exhibition, entitled ‘Home and Away,’ at the V&A Museum of Childhood in London next year.

Dr Katy Gardner and Dr Kanwal Mand worked in two east London schools with 75 year 5 children who regularly visit family relatives in Bangladesh.

Contrary to popular stereotypes that British Asian children are caught between two separate cultures in two separate places, the researchers found that the children, mostly born in the UK, regarded both locations as “home” – and both as “away”.

Kanwal says: “We used art activities in order to discover how children thought about different places. One of the tasks was to create a globe decorated with textiles to show the things they associated with the ideas of home and away.

“But it became clear that the children don’t see a difference. Their connections with Sylhet, the place in Bangladesh where their relatives lived, were as strong as their ties to here. What we didn’t realise is that the spiritual journey is so important to these children.”

The exhibition, which opens at the Museum of Childhood on 10 January and runs until 29 March, will be the first of its kind to explore the views of British Bangladeshi children born in the UK.

Katy says: “This is one of the first studies of transnational migration that focuses on children rather adults. It has brought new insight into how communities and families in Britain and Bangladesh are linked, as well as how these relationships change over time.

“What is also exciting is that we worked largely through arts-based methods, such as model making, painting and story telling, which made it a lot of fun.”

As well as artwork made by the children at Bonner Primary School and Shapla Primary School, both in Tower Hamlets, the exhibition will include a mural by internationally renowned graffiti artist Muhammed Ali.

The study was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of its £5.5 million research programme, ‘Diaspora, Migration and Identities’.

Student studies colourful past of Pavilion’s dazzling decor

There’s more to the glorious opulence of Brighton’s Royal Pavilion than meets the eye, says Sussex student Alexandra Losie, who is researching the iconic building’s exotic colour scheme.

Alexandra was awarded a five-year part-time scholarship by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to conduct doctoral research into the late 18th-century and early 19th-century interiors at the Royal Pavilion, in collaboration with Brighton Museum and Art Gallery.

Nearly one year into her research, Alexandra says: “It’s been wonderful, digging through the archives, old account books, original wallpaper fragments and working with the Pavilion’s conservation team.”

Particular pleasures have included studying Royal correspondence relating to the decor and investigating the scientific process behind creating pigments such as the magnificent chrome yellow used in one of the principal bedroom suites.

Her research focuses particularly on the influence of colour theory, which was taken up by European Romantics such as the German writer Goethe and influenced English artists such as Turner, who were fascinated by the possible effect colour has on human moods and emotions.

Alexandra says: “The Pavilion is very important in the history of colour theory, as it was the ultimate pleasure dome, designed to impress and dazzle.

“It’s a sensory experience – on entering, you are received in rooms that progress from subdued and formal creams and pale greens to strong reds, blues and yellows, the colours becoming more intense and dazzling in grand social spaces such as the banqueting hall and music room.”

The Royal Pavilion, a seaside retreat for the Prince Regent, later George IV – was developed into an Indian-style domed palace by the architect John Nash in the early 19th century. The exotic interiors, so influenced by the Orientalism of the period, were the work of interior designers John and Frederick Crace and of the elusive Robert Jones.

Alexandra says: “The Prince Regent spent a lot of time – and vast amounts of money – consulting on colours and fabrics and decorative items for his palace. He was influenced by his advisors, by fashion and by colour theory, but it also reflects his flamboyant personality. He went over the top with everything.

“Every effort and expense was made to make the surroundings glitter, glisten and sparkle – ceramics, gilt, mirrors, skylights, polished surfaces and lots of trompe l’oeil – cast-iron banisters made to look like oriental bamboo, for example. The Pavilion is a unique example of extravagant Orientalism in Britain.”

Sussex has several DPhil students holding AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Awards, which aim to encourage collaboration between universities and non-academic institutions and businesses:

- Jane Eade and Elaine Tiernay have worked on the forthcoming 2009 Baroque Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London
- Iden Gregory is working on the 15th-century archbishop’s palace at Knole, in collaboration with the National Trust; Edward Town is working on Knole’s 17th-century interiors
- Daniel Howells is researching the British Museum’s collection of Late Antique gold glass
- Claire Wintle is working on collections of material from the former British colonies, gathered by those who lived and worked there, at the Brighton Museum.

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Mammoth task of RAE panels comes to an end

For some Sussex staff, the publication on 18 December of the results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) will mark the end of a year held up in hotels from Swindon to Oxford, Manchester and Edinburgh.

The RAE is a huge exercise: panels of academics across the UK have been reviewing each others' work in a total of 67 subject areas and judging its quality.

“The results on 18 December will demonstrate the value of peer review.”

The four national funding councils will use the results to calculate funding allocations from 2009–10.

James Birckett was seconded from December 2007 to act as secretary to one of the RAE’s main panels and its four related sub-panels (Classics, Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, and History).

James' role was to manage the sub-panels' workload of assessment, to ensure that they scrupulously and consistently followed the criteria, and that they completed the task on time.

Looking back, he says: “A year sounds plenty but it is in fact a tall order, with periods of frenetic activity for everyone involved.

"My sub-panels were tasked with assessing every ‘output’ in detail and so I needed to keep track of grades for 14,000 or so outputs as well as grades for the ‘research environment’ and ‘research esteem’ components of around 200 submissions overall.”

While James’ organizational abilities were being tested as a panel secretary, seven academic faculty from Sussex were involved in the year-long assessment process as members of a sub-panel.

This involved each of them in assessing hundreds - or even thousands - of pieces of submitted research work and attendance at a number of lengthy panel meetings. Professor Adam Eyre-Walker, for example - who sat on the Biological Science sub-panel - estimates that he assessed more than 1,300 'outputs'.

In addition to Adam, the six other academics from Sussex whose expertise was recognised by their selection to sit on a sub-panel were Professors Jon Cohen (Medicine), Maurice Howard (Art History), Jim Rollo (European Economic Integration), Judy Sebba (Education), Imogen Taylor (Social Work) and Sue Thornham (Media and Film Studies).

James is confident that, if his four sub-panels are representative of all 67, the results on 18 December will demonstrate the value of peer review. "Classics, philosophers, theologians and historians all had their own rather idiosyncratic ways of going about the same task - but their dedication to getting it right was formidable," he says.

National Teaching Fellowship Scheme 2009

Nominations are now open for the individual strands of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS). Fifty awards, of £10,000 each, will be made to recognise and reward individual excellence.

Sussex currently has four National Teaching Fellows and is looking forward to continuing this record of success in 2009.

Further information is on the TLDU website at www.sussex.ac.uk/tldu/1-5-9.html

and scheme guidelines can be found on the Higher Education Academy website www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/professional/ntfs/individual

Completed nomination forms should be sent to the NTFS scheme co-ordinator, Jan Pryse, in TLDU (Arts E304) by noon on Monday 26 January 2009. E j.e.pryse@sussex.ac.uk
New web tool can help you get your message across

A social and learning networking site for Sussex staff and students has been upgraded with exciting new features, including a tool allowing users to instantly send a message to other users.

Science symposium for south-east postgraduates

Three enterprising postgraduate students from Sussex have organised a day’s events for their peers from across the south-east of England.

A bioscience symposium on Monday (15 December) will bring together 70 students from nearby universities with their Sussex counterparts.

Sarah Pannell, one of the doctoral students who organised the event, said the idea came from the success of a seminar series run on campus. She said: “As the series has expanded we have been inviting postgraduates from other local universities to speak.

“This has got more popular and an idea to have a day where postgraduates from across the region could meet and find out what’s going on at other universities was suggested.”

Students from the universities of Sussex, Brighton, Portsmouth, Reading, Southampton and Surrey, as well as the Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS), will deliver talks and poster presentations at the symposium. The best presenter will win a £50 Amazon voucher and food hamper from Brighton eatery Sussex and the City.

For more information about the Bioscience Postgraduate Symposium 2008, go to www.sussex.ac.uk/biochemistry/bpgs08

Hundreds of students get careers advice from top alumni

Former Sussex students working in the media came back to campus last month to meet over 100 current students and talk to them about their future careers, answer questions on working in the industry and share advice on how to get started.

The event was part of Alumni Careers Week, a series of events where Sussex alumni working in business and finance, media and law returned to where they studied hoping to inspire the next generation to follow in their footsteps.

Also Gill Fielding, who gave away nearly £250,000 of her £1.15 million fortune to worthy causes in the 2007 series of Channel 4’s ‘Secret Millionaire’, talked about her inspiring journey from Sussex student to successful businesswoman.

Among those speaking to students at the media event were Ashley Pharoah (writer of BBC’s ‘Life on Mars’, which received an Emmy award on 25 November for Best Drama); Helen Bouden, the director of BBC News; James Strong, director of BBC TV shows ‘Dr Who’ and ‘Torchwood’; Heather McGlone of the Daily Mail; and Simon Fanshawe, the broadcaster and writer who is also chair of Council (the University’s governing body).

At the same time, there was an event dedicated to the legal profession with talks by lawyers and barristers who studied at Sussex.

More business-minded students picked the brains of alumni working for some of the biggest names in banking and finance, including Barclays Capital.
World AIDS Day event draws crowds

About 200 students and members of staff gathered in Library Square on 1 December to mark World AIDS Day and turn on the Christmas tree lights.

The crowd was greeted by the chair of Council, Simon Fanshawe, who spoke briefly about HIV/AIDS. They also heard from representatives of UNISEX (a sexual-health service based on campus), the Students’ Union and the Stop AIDS campaign.

Meanwhile a choir sang carols and Mr Fanshawe switched on the lights on the Christmas tree, which is donated each year by the University’s grounds maintenance contractor, Wyevale.

Symbolic: Staff and students remembered those affected by HIV/AIDS by lighting candles to make the shape of a giant red ribbon – a symbol of AIDS worldwide.

Following the talks, staff and students were invited to light one of many candles arranged in glass jars to represent a giant red ribbon – the official symbol of AIDS worldwide.

Mulled wine and mince pies were served in the Meeting House following the event.

Mumbai victims remembered

A ceremony to remember the victims of the recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai was held in Library Square last Thursday (4 December).

The event was led by postgraduate student Prateek Sureka, who is from Maharashtra – the Indian state of which Mumbai is the capital. Around 80 people attended the lunchtime event, mainly Indian students studying at Sussex joined by staff and students from across the campus community.

After a short speech, the group held two minutes’ silence and then lit candles. Professor Joanne Wright, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education), and Owen Richards, Academic Registrar, both attended the event and thanked the students who organised it.