New research lab is a hive of industry

Sussex has installed the UK's only Professor of Apiculture. Professor Francis Ratnieks is a leading authority on honeybee biology, beekeeping and other social insects - the bees, wasps and ants that live in colonies with a queen and workers.

The three main areas of research are:

- how honeybees and other insects organise themselves;
- how they resolve their conflicts over who works and who lays eggs;
- improved beekeeping practices, honeybee diseases, breeding and conservation.

The study of honeybees and social insects, says Francis, offers insights into aspects of social living that could benefit man: "Humans could learn much from social insects that have lived in complex groups for tens of millions of years. Insect societies face many of the problems faced by human society, including maintaining public health, organising efficient information and transport systems, and maintaining harmony in the group."

Professor Jonathan Bacon, the Dean of Life Sciences and a recent convert to the study of honey bees and social insects, says: "This greatly expands our existing strengths in social-insect studies and makes us the UK leader in this area."

"Sussex is a great place for studying honeybees and social insects. We are located near the south coast. The weather here means that we can study bees most of the year."

"Social insect biodiversity is also high, with many species living wild on the campus or nearby. And being a campus university in the countryside, Sussex had the space for a new laboratory and the apiaries needed to keep bee hives."

The £250,000 facility, which is next to the main biology building but also on the edge of campus with a wood on one side, comprises a research lab with offices. There are special facilities for studying honeybees including space to keep ten observation bee hives, a workshop for assembling and storing bee hives, an apiary for bee hives in the land beside the lab, plus additional apiaries on campus.

The launch should also be welcome news for UK beekeepers concerned about the lack of government investment in bee research. They see research as vital to the continued success of commercial beekeeping, which is important to the economy and the environment but threatened by factors such as disease, pests and environmental degradation.

Honeybees are the major pollinators of agricultural and wild plants, pollinating around £1.65bn worth of crops in the UK annually. They also produce honey and wax, but their importance to scientists doesn't end there.

Francis says: "The honeybee is the gateway to biology - a huge range of important questions in biology, from agriculture to genetics, can be studied in this one species."

Fascinating facts about bees

The queen bee is the mother and chief egg layer. All other females are called workers. They care for the queen's offspring, collect nectar and maintain and defend the hive. Worker bees are not sterile - they can lay eggs but these are killed by other workers.

Male bees, called 'drones', don't do any work; they seek out young queen bees on their mating flights.

There are 17,000 known species of bee.

Honey was the most important sweetener for food and alcoholic drinks in ancient times.

The names Deborah and Melissa both mean "bees", in Hebrew and Greek respectively.

A queen bee can lay up to 2,000 eggs a day.

Inside

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Nearly 3,800 prospective students visit campus open day.

2 Fun science

Sussex chemistry camps give teenagers a taste of lab life.

3 Ambition

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4 Outstanding

Psychology lecturer wins award for her DPhil dissertation.

News in brief

Sussex climbs national sports league table

Sussex sports teams are celebrating after being ranked 50th in a new league table - one of their best ever results. The British Universities Sports Association (BUSA) end-of-season rankings show that Sussex has pushed into the top third of the 152 competing institutions. Head of Sussexsport, Karen Crefield, said: "Congratulations must go to all the students who competed and those who have worked so hard to support them this year."

Free English classes

International students and their families are being offered free language tuition by trained teachers on the TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language) course. The two-hour sessions will run every afternoon in Arts A7.1 between Monday 30 June and Wednesday 23 July, and again between Monday 28 July and Wednesday 20 August. For more information, contact Mike Donelan (Sussex Language Institute): T (87) 3234; E ef@sussex.ac.uk

Campus fruit and veg

Think Fresh - who run the fruit and vegetable market outside Falmer House - are currently on campus on a Thursday rather than a Tuesday.

Thanks from Margaret Fenner

Margaret Fenner, who had worked in the Undergraduate Office since 1997, would like to thank all colleagues who contributed towards her leaving present and who signed her card. She says: "I have met some lovely people and made really great friends."
Open day draws crowds

The campus was a busy place on this month’s open day, as nearly 3,800 prospective students and their families enjoyed a wide range of activities including talks; department tours and accommodation drop-ins.

More than 160 academics and support staff, alongside student helpers, worked together to make the event on 14 June – organised by Student Recruitment Services – an effective showcase for all that the University has to offer.

80% of 100 students surveyed on the day said they are now more likely to apply to Sussex.

One prospective student said: "(I am) very impressed and happy. I think I want to come here! It’s amazing and I can see myself doing very well."

Comments from open day visitors

"It looked really good, and somewhere I could imagine myself being. The courses looked interesting and enjoyable."

"It feels organised and a happy place. I loved it and would happily think of my child here."

"A really nice place with high standards and quality but without pressure."

"Enthusiastic talks and students as well as a really nice feel to the campus."

"Everybody’s happy!"

"Sussex University is an inviting place that is keen to get everyone involved in all that they offer."

"It looks like a nice place to go, with a friendly bubbly atmosphere with great opportunities."

Teenagers explore the fun of chemistry

More than 100 15-year-olds were on campus this week to find out what makes fireflies glow, create their own sample of paracetamol, and learn how to heat up coffee anywhere.

Students from all over the UK attended the two three-day residential camps, which focused on pharmaceutical chemistry.

But it wasn’t all lab work. There was a varied social programme for the campers, including tenpin bowling and a fun quiz.

The Salter’s Chemistry Camps were sponsored by the Salter’s Institute; GlaxoSmithKline; the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI); the Institute of Chemical Engineers (IChemE); the Royal Society; the Royal Society of Chemistry; and the University of Sussex.
Organisational structures for growth

Proposals for the University's future academic structure and management of the transitional process were endorsed by Senate at its meeting on 20 June. This followed earlier discussion of the plans at a meeting on 27 May.

Subject to Council's approval at its meeting on 4 July, work will move ahead to create the new structures, and processes to support them, in readiness for 2009-10.

A project-management structure is being established, with a representative board including academic and Professional Services staff and students, and a professionally staffed project-management office.

Professor Paul Layzell, who will chair the project board, said: "This is part of a major agenda of change, which is designed to help ensure we are in the best place to deliver our ambitious plans for growth."

"I welcome the community engagement that the project board and the proposed reference groups provide, working through a properly planned and managed process of transition."

As one part of that process, meetings with support staff in schools are being organised in the coming weeks with school administrative managers, technical services managers and the Registrar to provide an update on plans and to continue to involve staff as the process moves ahead.

Copies of the plans can be seen at www.sussex.ac.uk/vc/structures

Strategic plan passes through Senate

A draft strategic plan has been published following nine months of discussion, consultation and development.

Senate at its meeting on 20 June discussed the draft, which sets out an ambitious vision across research, teaching and learning, and engagement with business and the community.

Presenting the plan to Senate, the Vice-Chancellor said it represents a clear and positive expression of Sussex’s ambition to develop and grow in the years ahead.

“This plan builds on the founding values of Sussex in a 21st-century setting, and the growth agenda provides us with the opportunity to shape our own destiny in a competitive HE world,” said Professor Michael Farthing.

Discussion at Senate ranged across both the big picture of strategy and the fine detail. The framework laid out has been shaped by and populated with ideas from the Sussex community and Senators wanted to be sure that this continues to be the case for future development.

Comments are invited on the draft text – which is available at www.sussex.ac.uk/vc/ambition – by early July.

The draft plan will be discussed at Council on 4 July, and work will be done over the summer on the final version before it is published in the autumn.

Professor Paul Layzell, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, has led much of the detailed work from the executive team. He made clear that the plan is a framework to guide the University over the years ahead – and that contributions from staff and students continue to be vital.

"Making this plan a reality is the work of the whole University – not something delivered by a small group of people. Every year as the University moves forward, we will be developing the detail of annual plans within this overall framework."

Plans for teaching and learning

Our new strategic plan provides a clear and unambiguous focus on both teaching and learning and the wider student experience.

The draft plan, discussed last week at Senate, marks a significant development for Sussex, setting priorities for teaching and learning alongside the research agenda.

As I arrived at Sussex in September 2006, we embarked on this as a start, not of a teaching and learning strategy, already bearing fruit in areas such as improved library services and established standards for academic support.

That strategy has informed the goals that have been set out in the strategic plan. They draw on ideas and contributions from across the University community – from our staff and our students – and from beyond campus, as we respond to changing demand and needs from society and communities.

Three important strands are now set out in the strategic plan to shape Sussex teaching and learning through to 2015.

First, there is the development of our curriculum. This has been a genuinely bottom-up process, with ideas generated from within the academic community in areas of Sussex strength and where we can see real future opportunities. This is leading to a range of proposals for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across areas such as business and management, digital media, biomedical sciences, and so on.

However, this is not a once-for-all process. We do not reform the curriculum and then stop. Across all subject areas, academic colleagues will be reflecting on and responding to what is needed by students, businesses and communities.

What we offer for 2015 cannot be the same as what we offered in 2008. So I see this as the start, not the finish, of a process of ongoing renewal.

While programmes such as these will help us to grow student numbers and attract additional students from home and overseas to achieve the goals for growth that are being set, it would be a distraction if we thought that these new programmes alone will transform what Sussex does.

Our existing successful programmes will continue to draw in and attract excellent students. The second strand of our strategy is to continue to improve their experience at Sussex.

Part of that improvement will be around the direct academic experience – strengthening academic support, advice and feedback, and making the most of technology. And part will be around the wider experience – developing our formal and informal teaching and learning space, including planned new academic buildings, and improving campus services such as catering.

Our student survey scores, and the leagues tables that build off these results, show we still have much more to do to ensure that the whole experience matches the quality of our academic expertise. For example, if our NSS (National Student Survey) scores matched the best in the sector, we would immediately leap 15 places into the top 20 within league tables, a truer reflection of the strength of Sussex's academic standing and wider potential.

Third, but by no means least, is a focus on students' skills development. Employability skills will always need to be developed through the academic programmes we offer, and can be enhanced through closer connection with the world of work.

The opportunity for wider social engagement and for community involvement is already a valued and distinctive part of what Sussex offers to its students, through work such as Project V, mentoring in schools, or fostering entrepreneurial skills. The new Sussex Plus scheme builds on this, providing a strong platform for ensuring our undergraduates can develop and document their skills – complementing the distinct 'ProFolio' skills programme already in place for our research students.

I look forward to working with colleagues through 2008-09 to help support the exciting improvements and developments that this plan sets in train.
Small ads ↓

**FIRST CLASS ↓**

The Developmental Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association has awarded its 2008 Outstanding Dissertation Award to Dr Jessica Horst for her doctoral dissertation, 'Turning novel names into known names: Understanding reference selection and retention in 24-month-old children and neural network'. The award committee described Jessica’s thesis as "a report of ground-breaking research on a problem of critical importance for our understanding of young children's cognitive development". The committee members said she had "selected an important problem in word learning and approached it with an unusual combination of empirical rigor, computational modeling skill, and theoretical sophistication".

Google Europe has awarded an Anita Borg Memorial Scholarship worth 5,000 Euros to Katy Howland, a DPhil student in the Informatics department’s IDEAs Lab. These scholarships are aimed at young female computer scientists of great promise.

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