

Physics student numbers better than hoped, but chemistry and materials situation 'dire'

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New research shows that while higher education student numbers for physics degrees may not be falling as drastically as some reports suggest, chemistry and material based subjects are in real danger.

The study focuses on university student numbers since 1996 and shows that while there has only been a six per cent drop in the number of full time undergraduates studying physics in that time, there has been a twenty per cent decline in the number of chemistry students and a 24 per cent decline in the number of students on materials-based courses.

Dr Hywel Jones, of the Materials and Engineering Research Institute at Sheffield Hallam University and author of the study explains, "It is not only undergraduate numbers that are dropping across these three subjects. There is evidence of a decline in postgraduate numbers too, especially in Chemistry. Modest increases in postgraduate numbers in Physics and Materials-based subjects do represent a recovery and do not keep pace with the overall trend of an increase in postgraduate study"

"This puts the future of scientific research in the UK in real jeopardy, as well as affecting industry, who are struggling to recruit suitably qualified science graduates.

"The decline in materials subjects is particularly worrying as there was such a small number of these students to begin with. If numbers keep dropping then courses will not have enough students to be considered financially viable and may close altogether.

"On a positive note, while there has been serious decline in traditional materials subjects, there does appear to be growth in other materials based courses such as forensic engineering, sports materials, bio-materials and aerospace materials. However, we have yet to see if these students will go on to use their degrees in a relevant graduate job."

Source: Sheffield Hallam University

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