

## Action to tackle 'science deserts'

**James Meikle**  
Education correspondent

Urgent checks to ensure regions are not turning into "science deserts" because of the closure of university chemistry and physics departments are to be made by higher education funding chiefs.

The drive to concentrate research in fewer universities is putting extra strain on undergraduate courses in parts of England even though interest in maths and chemistry degrees seems to be rising after years of recruitment problems.

But physics and engineering are still struggling despite the huge expansion in student numbers generally. Collaborations between universities in Bristol, Bath and Exeter have managed to increase the number of chemistry students in south-west England despite the closure of Exeter's department. Similar efforts are being made for science courses in the south-east. But increasing numbers of students are living at home and there is mounting

concern that some may be put off if they have to travel long distances. University science provision is also seen as vital to regional economies.

Bill Rammell, the higher education minister, has made it clear that the government will not direct universities to keep science courses on offer. The government and science bodies instead yesterday announced £18m worth of initiatives to stoke further demand from school pupils, especially young women and those from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Caribbean communities.

The Institute of Physics is also launching integrated science degrees at London South Bank University and East Anglia, Leicester and Surrey universities, designed to attract students who do not have both physics and maths A levels. The programmes, designed to attract more "all round scientists", could include, for instance, core physics such as optics and quantum mechanics, with courses on climate change, nanoscale science and ecology.

