Institute of Physics

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Durrants

New boost for science city bid

SNAPSHOT

A new science degree to be pioneered at the University of East Anglia in Norwich has been welcomed by city education experts and an MP. The integrated science course would focus on physics with a new slant such as medical or acoustic physics.

Norwich's fight to join an elite group of lucrative science cities could be boosted with the launch of a new physics-based degree to be pioneered in the city.

The new "integrated sciences" degree is aimed at reviving struggling science subjects, furthering research into cancer and cardiovascular diseases and bringing the study of physics back to the region.

The course will be on offer at just four universities across the country, including the University of East Anglia, and is aimed at encouraging more students to study "physics with a new slant" such as medical physics, acoustic physics or astrophysics.

UEA closed its physics department 10 years ago because there were not enough students wanting to study the subject. However, last year the university introduced a natural sciences course which has seen lecturers starting to teach some physics once again.

The new course, which is endorsed by the Institute of Physics, will build on that foundation and will only require students to have an A at A-level in either maths or one of the sciences.

Professor Karen Heywood, of UEA's School of Environmental Sciences, said: "The idea is to offer students a way to get into physics even if they haven't done terribly well at A-level. Some schools don't offer much physics teaching so many students don't have a strong background in the subject.

"Until about a year ago there wasn't really anywhere in East Anglia, apart from Cambridge, where people could do a physics degree.

"Our take on physics is a bit unconventional — it's physics with a new slant."

A new science GCSE has been criticised for dumbing down the subject, with leading academics branding it "more suitable to the pub than the schoolroom".

The reformed curriculum has been designed to make science more relevant, but leading scientists say it now lacks the practical experiments.

Dr Tyrone Castles, head teacher of Earlham High School, who has a teaching background in science, said his pupils would benefit from the new degree and said teaching of physics was strong in schools but the subject suffered from an image problem.

He said: "The footballers and sportsmen and television stars are who children look up to. We need to celebrate scientists and scientific advancements."

The new degree is one of many schemes to be funded by a radical £18 million package to tackle the crisis in university science and technology.

Dr Ian Gibson, Norwich North MP, said he welcomed a return to scientists learning chemistry, physics and biology together rather than as separate disciplines.

He said: "Physicists who are taught chemistry and biology too are the kind of scientists who think beyond a small arena.

"We want big visionary ideas where people are confident in handling maths, physics, chemistry and biology to bring about new understanding of health problems such as cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

"This will play a major part in our fight to make Norwich a science city."

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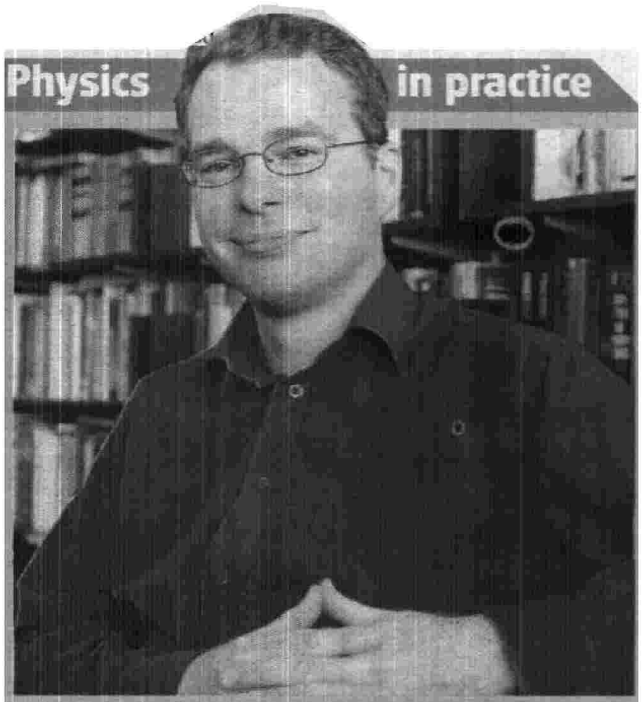
Physics in practice



An example of how physics can help medicine can be seen in some of the work already taking place at UEA.

Mark Blyth, 32, *above*, lectures in mathematics and has been using physics to look at how blood moves through veins and arteries.

He said: "Although it is theoretical, we can use mathematics to understand the physics of what's going on in the blood flow and make predictions about the forces involved. The blood rubs against the inside of the artery, rubbing more against the outer wall where there is a bend. Where it rubs least is the most dangerous place and where arterial disease is likely to develop."

Although this strand of study will not be taught on the course, the university says it is an example of how physics can be applied to further other disciplines and areas of research.