

Nobel prize chemist joins the brain drain

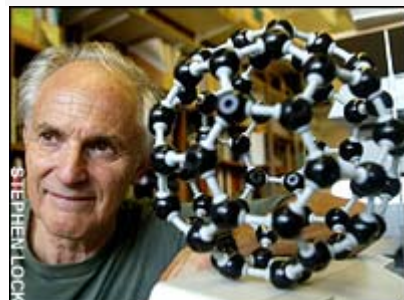
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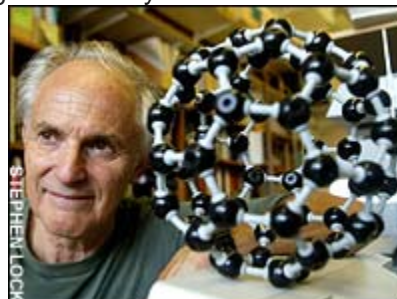
Sir Harry Kroto with a model of his buckyball molecule

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Fears that reaching retirement age will make the struggle for funds harder is forcing a leading scientist to move to US. Roger Highfield reports

A nobel prize winning chemist is leaving Britain for America because he says raising funds for his work will become increasingly difficult after he reaches retirement age later this year.

Sir Harry Kroto, who says he has grown weary of the constant struggle to raise cash, is moving from Sussex University to Florida State University, which has guaranteed money for his research. The timing of the move could not be worse: Britain will lose its most energetic advocate of chemistry when students are increasingly turning away from the sciences and university chemistry departments are closing.



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Sir Harry, who shared the Nobel prize in 1996 for discovering fullerenes, a new form of carbon, is a driving force behind the Vega Science Trust, which produces science television and web broadcasts. He said that on retirement after his 65th birthday later this year he will not be able to take on graduate students without the backing of a permanent staff member and he will lack the secretarial support needed to carry out his work. Although he said he loves Sussex University, Sir Harry decided to leave a year early and accept "an offer I could not refuse" from Florida State University in Tallahassee.

"I have still got some research I would like to do and informal chats on remaining in Britain came to nothing," said Sir Harry.

"I was headhunted. This will free me of many of the burdens of trying to find support."

Sir Harry said that over the past decade the task of finding funds for his work "has been like sitting at the bottom of the escalator of Victoria Station, cap in hand, saying 'Research group and Vega and the UK science community to support' ."

When he joins Florida in October he will be able to continue his educational projects, have a small team to carry on his research, and funds to use at his own discretion.

He will also have a secretary to cope with his mailbag, unlike at Sussex.

Florida will also back The Vega Science Trust. Sir Harry said this was "crucial" as the trust was about to launch an ambitious internet project to provide teaching resources across the planet.

"Keeping Vega going for the last 10 years has been a tremendous struggle," he said.

Sir Harry will also escape red tape. The Government has introduced a three-volume manual that instructs scientists funded by research councils to keep detailed time logs. Sir Harry, who will keep a token presence at Sussex, has been an outspoken critic of Government policies that have led to the closure of chemistry departments.

Now Sussex is under pressure. Six of his young colleagues have been headhunted by other universities.

Sir Harry expects the department to survive but believes "it will be hard". He is "very concerned" about the state of British chemistry.

"There are massive areas of chemistry opening up and the papers that I am seeing are now coming from China, Korea and India," Sir Harry said.

He recently stepped down as the president of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Last year he made 50 international trips to extol the virtues of chemistry to lay audiences ranging from the Manchester United football team to primary schoolchildren in Mexico.

Yesterday he travelled to Korea to open a conference. In a few weeks, he will lecture to an audience of 25,000 children in India.

Sir John Enderby, Vice President of the Royal Society, said: "Excellence should be supported, irrespective of age. Sir Harry's departure is not good news for UK science and for UK chemistry in particular. Harry has been terrific for chemistry."

"It does raise the very important issue of whether 65 is too young for retirement.

"It is a general point for all parts of the economy."

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