

## Chemistry Leadership in the Age of the ‘Superschool’

June 2026

Chemistry higher education is central to achieving UK Governments’ economic, social and environmental ambitions and delivering the jobs growth potential of the chemical sciences sector, which is projected to outstrip the rest of the UK labour market by 30% by 2032<sup>1</sup>. Chemistry research in universities drives innovation in many different fields, from clean energy to improved health. Chemistry research, skills and knowledge are key to high growth sectors identified in the Industrial Strategy, particularly life sciences, defence, advanced manufacturing (including chemicals) and clean energy<sup>2</sup>.

UK higher education is facing significant financial pressures, which can result in department and programme closures, loss of staff capacity and mergers into larger interdisciplinary schools and colleges. These financial and strategic decisions are impacting all subjects, including chemistry. In the last few years, 11 universities have announced they are ceasing to offer chemistry, and others have announced reviews or mergers that risk undermining the breadth and quality of provision. Chemistry leaders are at the forefront of navigating these changes.

To examine impacts for chemistry, challenges and good practice, the Royal Society of Chemistry held two focus groups and three interviews with chemistry leaders in April and May 2026. This briefing summarises key themes and recommendations from those conversations, which shine a light on both the challenges for, and the innovations in, chemistry in UK higher education and the sector more broadly.

### Key messages and recommendations

1. Financial challenges in UK universities mean that significant changes are underway. University leaders therefore need to take informed decisions that address the immediate financial challenge without causing irreparable damage to future potential. This requires that
  - a. senior university leaders proactively seek advice by engaging at the earliest opportunity with department/subject leads
  - b. department/subject leads are empowered and supported to contribute and engage constructively
  - c. leaders at all levels are supported, for example through peer networks and development programmes.
2. Within the broader context of financial constraint, chemistry teaching and research still needs appropriate infrastructure, equipment, consumables, health and safety practices, and sufficient appropriately skilled academic and technical staffing. Government funding for higher cost subjects is vital here.
3. Merging departments and schools can be beneficial when finances and resources are pooled, and interdisciplinary collaboration is enabled. However, a clear school vision that protects disciplinary identity, with strong representation from each discipline in decision-making, is critical for success.
4. Accrediting bodies need to ensure the standards the profession requires, remain proactive as the university sector changes and review standards periodically so they reflect changes in the practice of chemistry.

5. Avoiding cold spots in local and regional provision is vital. Additionally, RSC and national narratives should champion the importance of having differentiated chemistry provision for learners and to meet different employer needs.

## Supporting high-quality chemistry teaching and research

### Investing in infrastructure, equipment, and staff

With funding per student from fees and government grants decreasing over the last decade<sup>3</sup>, flat research funding and a drop in project cost recovery<sup>4</sup>, universities are facing multiple challenges, with changes affecting jobs, livelihoods, students, research and provision. Universities are having to make significant changes to improve their financial sustainability. The challenge is to transform in a positive way, continuing to do world-leading teaching, research and innovation, contributing locally, nationally and globally, all against the backdrop of financial constraints and some public criticism of the cost of university study<sup>5</sup>. Chemistry makes important contributions to education and research in universities, through its disciplinary and interdisciplinary roles, often acting as the glue between scientific disciplines.

The recruitment of technical staff with specialist expertise, good awareness of health and safety needs in management teams and shared professional services staff, and fit-for-purpose equipment, consumables, staff and facilities, such as fume hoods, are critical for maintaining safe laboratory environments. Delivering the practical skills the future chemistry workforce needs, alongside safe research practices, requires greater financial resource and staffing than non-practical subjects. Continued financial support for the delivery of high-quality chemistry education through the Strategic Priorities Grant and equivalents is vital to ensure institutions can continue to teach the future chemistry workforce.

We heard that several universities are considering shared teaching facilities when making new investments. With the right input to design, these can work for chemistry.

### Shared laboratories at the University of Birmingham

At the University of Birmingham, investment in shared teaching laboratories has secured access to specialist equipment and facilities for chemistry, while also enabling efficient use of space and encouraging interdisciplinary exchange between students.

We heard that accreditation helps communicate what is needed to teach chemistry well for future careers within universities. However, we also heard of one or two examples of accreditation criteria in other disciplines that were considered to be 'tone deaf' to the challenging context of universities. Unrealistic accreditation expectations risk forcing institutes to divest in these disciplines. Accrediting bodies need to remain responsive to university changes, and develop standards that constructively frame what is required for a successful future career in the discipline.

## Supporting chemistry leaders at all levels

### Leadership development and support

Financial pressures are creating significant challenges for chemistry leaders, and have resulted in, for example, recruitment freezes, staff reductions, and centralisation of professional services staff. Chemistry

leaders are working hard to shape forward-looking initiatives that support institutional priorities while safeguarding chemistry's needs, such as new approaches to the sharing of laboratories and equipment, whilst also supporting their departments to recruit students, win research funding, teach and research to the highest standards and achieve strong student satisfaction and excellent academic and employment outcomes for all students.

We heard about these and other challenges, and that support for chemistry leaders is mixed. Heads of chemistry value peer networks, for example the Heads of Chemistry UK Peer-to-Peer Group, and being able to be the voice of their discipline in schools and faculties when important decisions are made. Both chemistry leaders and universities benefit from investing in leadership, through peer networks, involving leaders in key 'superschool' decision-making, and providing development opportunities. These equip discipline leaders to navigate and lead change, whilst also delivering business as usual. Equally, senior university staff value proactive engagement and constructive plans from discipline leaders that help secure the future of their university and discipline and show a 'can do attitude'.

#### **Examples where leadership development has been a useful support mechanism:**

1. Manchester Metropolitan University offers leadership development programmes for staff, including a senior leaders development programme in the Faculty of Science and Engineering for ten subject leaders and three cross-cutting thematic leaders. This is part of a broader approach to people development.
2. The handover programme for Heads of Department at University College London allows time for a structured handover from one Head of Department to the next, by appointing the new Head well before the incumbent finishes.

#### **Chemistry representation in making decisions**

The shift towards combined structures can bring key benefits for chemistry departments, including financial resilience through pooled finances and stronger cross-departmental connections, which can help to realise interdisciplinary research opportunities. Yet it can also create a distance between disciplines and decision-making. We heard that more centralised decision-making and staffing may overlook discipline-specific needs, particularly where representation on decision-making groups is largely thematic (research, education, etc.) and not all academic disciplines are included. There is particular concern that reduced chemistry-specific input into staffing and budgeting decisions might lead to a loss of support which is required to ensure laboratory health and safety, meet regulatory requirements (for example related for chemicals) and deliver high-quality education and research performance.

#### **Decision-making in Swansea University's Faculty of Science and Engineering**

Decision-making at Swansea University is devolved to the Faculty of Science and Engineering's leadership team, which includes four Heads of School. While departmental heads are not formal decision-makers, regular engagement ensures they are engaged with significant changes and discipline-specific expertise informs strategic decisions, providing a model for inclusive governance.

## Strategic clarity: chemistry's identity and strengths

### Chemistry as a central science

Chemistry identity is important to students, staff, and to understand the discipline's value. It matters to students, who can see a clear pipeline between post-16 qualifications and university degree programmes. It also matters to staff, because disciplinary identity helps to define the professional standards and attributes that underpin their teaching, support of students, and their research practices.

At the same time, there is an opportunity to build on chemistry's identity within interdisciplinary contexts. As a central science, or a form of interdisciplinary scientific glue, chemists, chemistry and chemistry departments are well placed to contribute to national missions and to collaborate with other disciplines. This underlines the indispensable role of the chemical sciences in a university's wider education and research ecosystem.

We heard examples of chemistry departments merging with various other disciplines, including biosciences, physics, earth sciences, pharmacology and chemical engineering. We heard differing views on whether there are better or less good disciplinary matches for chemistry within merged schools. In other words, it is hard to say that chemical engineering is a worse or better match for chemistry than physics, pharmacology, biosciences or earth sciences. Instead, institutions need a coherent vision for the merged school that enables it to be more than the sum of its parts, motivated by the knowledge and skills that each department offers the merged school and the university.

### Chemistry's role beyond the university

There is also an opportunity to build on chemistry's contribution to economic growth, social development and other national priorities, through meeting student and employer demand. Universities and their chemistry departments should consider their unique offers and strengths. Avoiding cold spots in local and regional provision is essential, not just for regional economies, but also to ensure equality of opportunity, with more and more commuter students finding that, notwithstanding the value of their education, the only way that they can afford to study is by living at home<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the RSC and national narratives should recognise the importance of having differentiated provision for learners and the need to meet different employer requirements, including through apprenticeships, degree apprenticeships and foundation courses.

Strategic clarity on institutional missions and strengths could also facilitate greater regional collaboration between universities and build long-term resilience through shared resources, a focus on innovation, and increased alignment with local skills and research needs. Given perceptions about the challenges competition law creates to certain collaborations, Government should provide appropriate narratives and reassurance to enable deeper regional discussions, for example to improve provision and differentiation.

#### The EaStCHEM model for collaboration

EaStCHEM combines the research activities of the Schools of Chemistry of the Universities of St Andrews and Edinburgh. Created in 2004, key benefits of the EaStCHEM collaboration include the shared investment in chemistry facilities and equipment and its breadth and critical mass in research themes, demonstrating the long-term benefits of strategic coordination.

## Contact

The Royal Society of Chemistry would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in our statement in more detail. Any questions should be directed to [policy@rsc.org](mailto:policy@rsc.org).

## About Us

With around 55,000 members and a knowledge business that spans the globe, the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) is the UK's professional body for chemical scientists, supporting and representing our members and bringing together chemical scientists from all over the world. Our members include students and researchers in universities, teachers, regulators and those working in both large multinational companies and small and medium enterprises.

## Thanks and acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> Lightcast for RSC (2023), The Future Chemistry Workforce and Educational Pathways: an Interim Report, <https://www.rsc.org/policy-and-campaigning/discovery-and-innovation/future-workforce-and-educational-pathways>

<sup>2</sup> Department for Business and Trade (June 2025), The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy-2025>

<sup>3</sup> Russell Group (July 2025), Higher Education Funding, <https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-07/Russell%20Group%20briefing%20-%20higher%20education%20funding.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> UKRI (March 2025), Research financial sustainability: insights paper 2025, <https://www.ukri.org/publications/research-financial-sustainability-insights-2025/research-financial-sustainability-insights-paper-2025/#section-improving-cost-recovery-on-research>

<sup>5</sup> BBC (June 2026), Third of people say uni degree not worth it, as student loan inquiry begins, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2e29gk73rjo>

<sup>6</sup> UCAS (December 2025), More school leavers living at home for university and college study, <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/more-school-leavers-living-at-home-for-university-and-college-study>