

Editorial

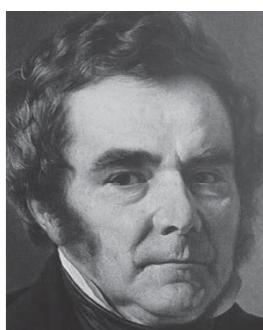
Celebrating the 550th Anniversary of the University of Basel: Centuries of Excellence in Chemistry

Research and teaching in Chemistry at the University of Basel have existed almost as long as the University itself. On the occasion of the 550th anniversary of our University the Department of Chemistry would like to take the opportunity to present an account on its present and future standing.

The history of Chemistry at our University dates back to *Paracelsus* some 483 years ago, and my colleague *Ed Constable* has reviewed the development from alchemical origins to modern chemistry of 1999 in CHIMIA^[1]



Paracelsus



P. Merian



C. F. Schönbein



J. Piccard

This overview recalls briefly the history of the Chemistry Department beginning with *Peter Merian* who established the first genuine chemical laboratory in Basel in 1820. Since that time Chairs in Chemistry have existed at this University and numerous professors have contributed to the advancement of chemistry as a basic research discipline. Prominent figures in the 19th century include *Christian Friedrich Schönbein* who discovered ozone and gun cotton and *Jules Piccard* who became well known for his research in the chemistry of dyes. At the beginning of the 20th century, chemistry was subdivided into the disciplines of inorganic, organic and physical chemistry with individual Chairs in each subject. For the development of these disciplines, very influential contributions came from *Hans Erlenmeyer* who established research in coordination chemistry, *Tadeusz Reichstein* (Nobel Prize in 1950) internationally known for his work on hormones and vitamins and *Edgar Heilbronner*, an expert on MO theory and photoelectron spectroscopy.



H. Erlenmeyer



T. Reichstein



E. Heilbronner

Since 1999,^[1] the Department has undergone considerable changes in both staff and research activities. A turning point for the Department was the decision of the University administration in 2002 to cut the budget of the Department by ca. 30%, effectively leading to a reduction of staff members from 18 to 12 professors. With the help of a newly established advisory board we faced the situation and decided i) to focus the research spectrum of the department on defined highly competitive areas

and ii) to appoint new staff only by international advertisement, thus hiring excellent people in order to complement research and teaching.

Fortunately, this initiative was generously supported from outside. The Swiss National Foundation (SNF) had created well-funded SNF-professorships – selected through a competitive procedure – and the Department has been able to appoint four excellent candidates through this foundation. Further, collaboration between physics-based nanosciences (NCCR) and chemistry led to the early appointment of a professor in nanochemistry facilitating the establishment of a curriculum in Nanosciences. And last but not least we have enjoyed the support of industrial and private foundations such as *Bachem* and more recently *A. and Dr. G. E. Grisard* sponsoring professorships in peptide chemistry and molecular bionics, respectively.

Consequently, the Department of Chemistry comprises today a rather young team of staff members, most of them working in interdisciplinary disciplines. This situation is reflected in this CHIMIA issue where the individual contributions are embedded into general themes. These research overviews provide an impression of the broad and attractive programs in the Department with strong links to life sciences, catalysis and nanoscience.

The Department ranks as one of the top two Chemistry Departments in Switzerland attracting many PhD students and postdocs from abroad; more than 200 researchers from all over the world are currently working in the Department. These activities are complemented by teaching Chemistry courses to more than 350 students per year. Hence, the Chemistry Department plays an important role in the education program of the Faculty of Science of the University of Basel.

We are grateful to the editor of CHIMIA for offering us a platform celebrating the 550th anniversary of our University.

Wolf-D. Woggon
Managing Director
Department of Chemistry
University of Basel

[1] E. C. Constable, *Chimia* **1999**, 53, 185.