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£3m is chipped in for computer unit

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THE creation of a cutting edge computer research centre in the Capital has moved a step closer thanks to a £3 million funding boost.

The Wolfson Foundation, a charitable foundation which advances the sciences and the arts, has pledged £2m towards a Wolfson Centre for Informatics and the Life Sciences.

The centre would be part of the Informatics Forum, a new £40m facility bringing together Edinburgh University's researchers in computer science, artificial intelligence and cognitive science.

The foundation's award coincides with a separate pledge of £1m over six years from the Edinburgh-based chip developer Wolfson Microelectronics.

The hi-tech company started life as a research project at the university and now makes chips for Apple iPods and the Microsoft X-Box games console.

It has donated the money to fund research fellowships in informatics and microelectronics for PhD students.

Professor Michael Fourman, head of the university's School of Informatics, said the funding brought the completion of the site closer.

He said: "I am absolutely delighted at this announcement and it has taken us a step closer to creating this facility.

"Its importance is not only bringing together the various elements of the informatics school - its location will put us right at the heart of the university and we will be able to interact with departments as varied as linguistics and neurosciences."

The forum will be sited in a 12,000sq m building at the centre of the university's main campus.

The university is still working to bring together the necessary funding, but it hopes to start work on the new building next year and complete the centre by 2007.

Informatics school administrator Gordon Duckett believes bringing the three sciences together under one roof will prove highly beneficial. He said: "Informatics really is like a new science, bringing together computing, cognition and comprehension.

"At the moment these schools are based on five different sites across the city. One of the most common ways that science is advanced, however, is through the interaction of different departments and the discussion of ideas. Someone in one department could be stuck with a problem they can't see a way out of, but it could be a commonplace task for people in another department, so by getting these people together it helps everyone."

The School of Informatics, including the world's first artificial intelligence research centre, is currently one of the best in Europe and ranks with such world leaders as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Carnegie Mellon and Stanford University.

It brings together cutting edge research in computer science, cognitive science, computational linguistics and artificial intelligence.

Edinburgh's informatics research achieved the highest rating possible in the last research assessment exercise and the school is the largest computing department of its kind in the UK.

The informatics school lost a large proportion of its working space in the Cowgate fire in 2002, although the building is not seen as a replacement.

"It is something we always wanted to do, although it will restore a lot of the working space we lost in the fire," said Mr Duckett.

"The money from the foundation and Wolfson Microelectronics will allow us to work closely with the life sciences, which is sure to be beneficial for the other departments. It will also provide scholarships which will help us continue to bring some of the best students in the world to the university."

The centre is part of a massive redevelopment of the university.

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