

Sharing the knowledge

How do universities talk to each other and how can they help students? **Jo Moulds** looks at an association that's helping students get ahead through a bit of joined-up thinking

The WestFocus Consortium is a group of seven universities in the south and west of London and the Thames Valley. It acts as a test bed to create lines of communication between universities, helping academics join forces in research and also assisting students across the consortium to find jobs and introducing them to wider industry networks. Having entered its fourth year of government funding, it is expected to run for a total of five years, and is hoping to secure the extra year's funding later in 2007.

Originally set up in 2004, the government has invested £10.6 million in the project, harnessing the research and development power of over 125,000 students and 3,500 academics. Since the project was established, over 3,000 businesses have been involved, with a total of £725 million made available in the form of grants.

Now in its second stage, students from the participating institutions – Kingston University; Brunel University; Roehampton University; Royal Holloway; St George's Hospital Medical School, University of London; Thames Valley University, and the University of Westminster – are able to tap in to the Entrepreneurship Centre of WestFocus.

Visitors to the website have the opportunity to find out more about business support for student entrepreneurial businesses. There is a regular 'Bright Ideas' competition where students pitch ideas about businesses. Judged by a team of enterprise experts, this provides an opportunity to gain business advice and grant support. Students can also be put in touch with industries of their choice thanks to Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), whereby companies identify projects that will make a critical difference to their business. A specialist academic supervises the project and a recent graduate is employed by the company to undertake it. The project can last anything from six months to three years. While the KTPs are paid for, in part, by funding (up to 60 per cent of costs for a small to

medium sized enterprise), the business gains an extra resource and the recent graduate acquires relevant industry experience.

Work experience for students who have not yet graduated can also be arranged by the WestFocus Knowledge Exchange 'University Talent', while full-time vacancies on graduation are advertised on the WestFocus website. One of the benefits for students is that talking to an adviser about career choices can mean they are put in touch with any number of specialists in that field, and because the project has now been running for a few years, the wealth of contacts is extremely broad.

Lately, WestFocus has been commended in the peer-to-peer review of 22 UK-based Centres of Knowledge Exchange (CKE). The report praised WestFocus in particular for "assisting students, staff and alumni to become entrepreneurial by understanding the needs of businesses and providing access to university resources and expertise for business".

Dr Simon Bray, Environmental Consultant and Visiting Researcher at

Kingston University, has been involved with the WestFocus Sustainability in Practice Network since its inception. He was brought in to develop a project where Surrey businesses, local authorities and academics would meet to gain knowledge about sustainability in Surrey and to discuss wider issues and good practice. Over the course of three years, the network has grown and separate working relationships have developed.

"This is exactly what the Network set out to do," says Simon. "We have brought together people who would not have otherwise met, made contacts and businesses and local authorities in Surrey now know that they can always approach any of the WestFocus universities if they have a need for particular expertise or access to students. In the sense that students can also tap into the network, we have done some of the hard work for them – identifying businesses where they may want to work and we are able to make introductions." ■

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