

Small businesses in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have the opportunity to apply for 'innovation vouchers'. Invest Northern Ireland's initiative offers up to £4,000 for Northern Ireland companies and Enterprise Ireland's scheme offers up to €5,000 for companies in the Republic of Ireland.

Vouchers can be redeemed against the cost of practical advice and expertise on specific operational projects from a range of specialist 'knowledge providers' – including the University of Ulster – across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Details of the scheme, including call dates, can be found at the Invest NI innovation vouchers website www.innovationvouchers.com or through Enterprise Ireland's site at www.innovationvouchers.ie

Problem Solved

Alta Systems (NI Ltd) Belfast, established in 2000, develops advanced online assessment and problem solving systems for education and training markets in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and the Isle of Man. The product range includes an online maths learning package for children aged between five and fourteen – 'Keys For Maths'.

Through the Invest NI innovation voucher scheme Dr Emma Fleck and Dr Andrea Reid, Ulster Business School, advised Alta Systems on how to approach and influence retail buyers to enable the 'Keys For Maths' web service to be sold through traditional retail outlets. This represented a significant challenge, as the company's existing supply chain was web-based.

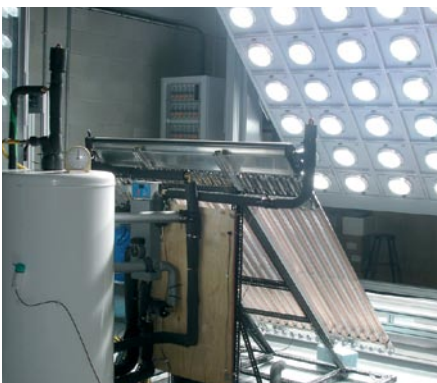


The final outcome was the development of 'process maps' to guide Alta Systems in approaching retail buyers. Dr Barry Hagan, Director, Alta Systems, said: "We are very pleased with the results of the study. The information produced by the University of Ulster team will provide us with a durable roadmap that will help widen our market opportunity."

For further details on accessing the University of Ulster's expertise through the innovation vouchers initiative, contact Kerry Thompson, Business Liaison Office, telephone (028) 9036 8603 or email k.thompson@ulster.ac.uk

Willis Turns Up the Heat

The Willis Organisation, comprising Willis Heating & Plumbing Co Ltd, Willis Underfloor Heating and Willis Renewable Energy Systems was founded in Belfast in 1887. Since then, the organisation has developed a global reputation for quality, innovation, service and performance within the mechanical services sector.



Performance testing of the Willis 'Solasyphon' at the state-of-the-art solar simulation facility at Ulster

The primary focus of the Invest NI innovation voucher project was to test a new system design for the Willis 'Solasyphon' – a simple 'bolt-on' heat exchange unit for solar water heating application, similar in concept to the Willis immersion heater.

Dr Mervyn Smyth and Dr Jayanta Deb Mondol, Centre for Sustainable Technologies, School of the Built Environment, conducted experiments under a range of operating parameters, including differing cylinder temperatures, flow rates and draw-off profiles to determine the efficiency of the system.

Gaming Solutions

TAG Gaming Ltd, a Derry-based micro enterprise in its first year of trading, provides online gaming and internet services. The Invest NI innovation voucher project aimed to provide the company with assistance in the development of a market penetration strategy – including a marketing plan, as well as expertise in new service/business development.

Through the project, the company worked alongside a consultant from the Ulster Business School to formalise a marketing plan, complete with recommendations on promoting the product line and measuring marketing effectiveness. Market research was also conducted to ascertain if there would be a demand for additional proposed services within the existing customer base.

Jarlath Malone, Director, said: "Prior to embarking on this consultancy, we openly recognised the need for external assistance and guidance. However, we did not realise how much more we could actually put into practice from a marketing perspective, in a cost-effective manner in order to increase the range of services provided and grow our business."

John Willis, Managing Director, said: "We were very impressed with the standard of the experimental study conducted by the University of Ulster team and were happy with the outcome. The investigation confirmed that the Willis 'Solasyphon' consistently outperformed existing twin coil solar cylinder technology across a range of tests."