

# Innovation vouchers a success story for firms and colleges

by Joe Dermody

FROZEN yoghurts for pets, portable sterilisers for babies' bottles, software, pharmaceuticals and chocolates are just some of the products boosted in a wave of new links created between third-level researchers and innovative Irish companies.

So far, more than 1,000 small companies have availed of the Government's €5,000 "innovation vouchers" which allow them to link up with college researchers to solve business and technical problems. Enterprise Ireland manages the innovation vouchers.

One beneficiary has been Frozen Pet-Zerts in Roscommon, whose frozen organic yoghurts in banana, blueberry, peanut butter and vanilla flavours, have been brought to market with the help of the St Angela's food research centre in Sligo.

Another is Shasta, an Athlone company that has developed a portable baby bottle steriliser. It used the vouchers

to work with Athlone Institute of Technology on the prototype of the steriliser. Shasta is now working with the Irish operation of a global manufacturing company called Nypro Ireland, based in Bray, Co Wicklow, to manufacture this product. They have a patent pending in 144 countries.

Meanwhile, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) topped the list of third level institutes availing of the vouchers, bringing research support to 144 firms in all.

Tom Corcoran, research and innovation manager at WIT-based Arclabs, said: "The €5,000 voucher is only the key. In fact, researchers working with SMEs tend to keep going until they produce something concrete. The real gain has been to show companies that colleges are not some grand seat of learning. The business people sit down with the researchers and to talk about what can be achieved.

"I give a guide that the €5,000 gives them about eight to ten days of one re-

searcher's time. In fact, these projects are often done by teams. The companies get great value for that money. These are often projects which previously simply couldn't have been done. That's the real gain."

Tom Corcoran's role is to match businesses with the best researcher for their goals — creating product prototypes, developing new markets, working on quality management systems, etc. The firms cover everything from IT, consumer goods and pharma. The brief also tends to vary considerably.

WIT has worked on quality processes for an anti-cancer drug with local pharma company Eirgen. In this case, the voucher has led on to further R&D work and deeper relations between the college and the company.

WIT has also worked on developing sales management strategies for handmade chocolate producer, Gallweys Chocolates. The company has since expanded its product range and opened two cafés.

Minister for Science, Technology and Innovation, Conor Lenihan, said that passing the milestone of 1,000 innovation vouchers suggests the scheme will continue to pay dividends for small Irish companies. He also paid tribute to WIT and presented awards to the top five knowledge providers.

"The vouchers are an important early bridge between firms and academic researchers. The scheme has helped small firms to explore how they can play their part in building the knowledge economy," Mr Lenihan said. "The vouchers have brought firms and researchers together in finding innovative ways to overcome challenges and give products a more competitive and commercial edge for the marketplace."

Small Irish firms are now working with research teams in more than 41 research institutions across the island.

WIT has completed 144 innovation voucher projects since the initiative's launch three years ago. IT Carlow has completed 70 projects; UCC, 68,



Marking the 1,000th SME to use the innovation 'vouchers' were Minister Conor Lenihan, centre, MD of Frozen Pet-Zerts, Seamus Sheeran, left, and Feargal Ó Móráin, of Enterprise Ireland.

Picture: Gary O'Neill

Athlone IT, 65 and CIT, 58. Enterprise Ireland executive director Feargal Ó Móráin said: "Enterprise Ireland is working with all the participating knowledge providers to ensure that small businesses in receipt of an inno-

vation voucher get access to first-class human resources and equipment in 41 locations around Ireland."

The next call for voucher applications will open on October 1. For more, see [innovationvouchers.ie](http://innovationvouchers.ie)