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Pitching ideas

In the United States, sandlots are places where aspiring athletes toss baseballs. But next autumn, the idea will cross the Atlantic to the University of Bristol, UK, where sandlots will become an arena for students to pitch their ideas about translational research. The course will see postgraduates from different disciplinary backgrounds team up in an attempt to solve a series of problems centred on the gap between basic research and practical healthcare. The results will be presented to a panel of international academics, industrial researchers and scientists from the UK National Health Service for discussion and comment.

Beverley Randle, director of Bristol's Healthcare Enterprise Programme, got the idea for the course while participating in a similar 'sandpit' initiative last year (see *Nature* 427, 187; 2004). She was intrigued by the way researchers from maths, physics, chemistry and biology seemed to invent a "scientific Esperanto" to communicate across disciplines. She wondered whether "throwing students into the deep end" of problem solving would be a good way to educate scientists for an interdisciplinary world.

She hopes that the new programme will solve a few other problems, as well. First, there's a shortage of people poised to do 'bench-to-bedside' research because current systems encourage scientists to choose between patient care and clinical research. The new scheme offers an alternative, by letting students pick which parts of the clinical-research system they want to be involved with early on. And the curriculum, which makes students come up with a final project, ranging from a business plan to a research paper, addresses the issue of how to make the course relevant to the students' future. "We want to tailor this to the students' needs so they can carry this into their careers," says Randle.

The contest should be interesting to watch from the sidelines. And if it's successful, expect more universities to give the game a go.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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