



# New start

CAROLINE MADDEN

Those of you who have decided to enter the Student Enterprise Awards will probably have discovered by now that transforming a clever business idea into a profitable enterprise isn't always as easy as it looks.

Perhaps your market research showed that there simply wasn't any demand for your product and you have had to go back to the drawing board. Or maybe you've hit a dead end trying to raise money or sponsorship or you're struggling with forecasts and accounts.

Even though you may have support from teachers, mentors and friends, overcoming such obstacles requires a huge amount of self-belief, determination and hard slog.

Now imagine trying to start a business in a foreign country with no friends or family to rely on for encouragement or help, while getting to grips with a new language, an unfamiliar culture and a different legal and regulatory system. The problems you may have encountered so far probably pale into insignificance by comparison.

Despite the immense challenges, a significant proportion of people who have migrated to Ireland in recent years have opted to start their own business. In fact, of the 10,000 or so enterprises started so far this year, approximately 10 per cent were set up by people from abroad.

At the launch last week of a new report, *Harnessing the Potential: Promoting Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship in Ireland*, the director of the Small Firms' Association, Patricia Callan, explained why this phenomenon wasn't that surprising.

"In moving from their native countries to Ireland, they have already demonstrated their entrepreneurial qualities: a readiness to step out of a familiar environment and into a new culture and system, a preparedness to face risk and uncertainty and a strong motivation to generate income and secure a good quality of life."

When university lecturer Dr Alvina Grosu moved to Ireland

from Moldova in 2001, she hadn't considered becoming an entrepreneur, even though she was highly qualified with a PhD in psychology. After taking some time out of her career to care for her daughter, she approached Cork City Partnership to explore options for returning to the workforce.

It was then that she discovered Emerge, which provides free training to entrepreneurs from ethnic minorities.

Grosu signed up for a pre-enterprise course delivered by the Cork city and south Cork enterprise boards and, although she had "absolutely no idea about business", she sensed an opportunity to put her expertise in psychology to good use by offering intercultural training in Ireland.

Her business plan helped to secure her an employment grant from South Cork Enterprise Board and, in July of last year, Culturewise Ireland was born.

Culturewise provides services such as diversity awareness programmes, intercultural training and workshops to help organisations overcome cultural barriers.

The company has already attracted clients such as Bank of Ireland and the Health Service Executive. Grosu's success was further underlined last month when she was chosen as one of three winners of the inaugural Emerge Ethnic Entrepreneur Business Plan Competition.

Grosu is just one of many similar success stories. Nevertheless, the failure rate of ventures started by foreign entrepreneurs is higher than average.

First Step, a company that provides microfinance in loans of up to €25,000 to entrepreneurs, says: "While ethnic minority entrepreneurs experience problems in common with most small entrepreneurs, these tend to be more severe. Access to finance, both for start-up and for growth, is typically perceived as a major problem, if not the greatest single problem by ethnic minority entrepreneurs."

Callan has called on the Government to allocate funding to

provide training to ethnic minority entrepreneurs. She points out that foreign nationals make up 10 per cent of our population and represent an "untapped pool of entrepreneurial talent".

Most of these are aged between 24 and 44, the age bracket when most people set up a business. "With only 28 per cent of Irish nationals now falling within this age bracket, foreign nationals will clearly become increasingly important in contributing to our pool of potential entrepreneurs," she says.