

Home

Search

• Current edition **S**→

Latest news

Jobs

Courses & conferences

Archive **S**→

Funding opportunities **S**→

Statistics **S**→

Common room

Links

Newsletters

Subscribe

Bookshop

Site information

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Bristol centre poised to unlock gateway to China

Chris Johnston

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Bristol University is bucking a national trend by setting up a new teaching and research centre for East Asian studies.

The university believes that the interdisciplinary centre will play a major role in unlocking gateways to China, which experts predict will become the dominant world economy within 30 years.

An advertisement appears in today's *Times Higher* seeking applicants for the centre's first director. Two senior lecturers will also be recruited. An international conference is planned for spring to launch the centre, which will open its doors to students in October 2005.

Bristol's optimism contrasts with the decline of East Asian studies at universities across the country. One-third of institutions that conduct research in Asian studies have closed or merged their departments in recent years. The threat was brought home late last year when Durham University announced it was closing its East Asian studies department.

The centre would differ from other East Asian departments because of its focus on postgraduates and people who want to work in China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore, said Ray Forrest, its co-director and head of Bristol's School for Policy Studies.

It will offer a research MSc that is expected to evolve into a taught doctorate. It is hoped that the centre will grow into a distinct department.

Agreements with universities in East Asia, such as Nanjing in China, should foster research collaborations, language training and staff and student exchanges.

Professor Forrest said the centre would bring together academics with an interest in East Asia in various departments of the university.

"It was felt that a world-class university should have a serious engagement with China. We cannot do it half-heartedly," he said.

Paul Waley, co-editor of the *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, welcomed Bristol's decision to establish the centre. He said universities were wrong to link the fate of area studies departments to a region's economic fortunes.

"It is a bit cyclical - there were many centres and departments set up focusing on Japan in the 1980s and China in the 1990s, but they have been too closely tied to the economic fortunes of the countries concerned. It's a bit odd for institutions to close them after spending so much on opening them," he said.