

WHEN BALLARAT'S IBM IT SERVICES CENTRE WAS OPENED BY VICTORIAN PREMIER JOHN BRUMBY IN DECEMBER LAST YEAR, IT MARKED THE LATEST DEVELOPMENT IN A LONGSTANDING REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN IBM AND THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT.

By Randall Straw

Located in the Ballarat Technology Park, IBM was the first tenant in a groundbreaking partnership between the University of Ballarat, the City of Ballarat and the Victorian state government.

"The Victorian Government is investing in ICT," Brumby said at the opening of IBM's new centre. "And this park is genuinely one of Australia's leading technology hubs."

The University of Ballarat Technology Park was established in 1995 and provides its tenants with high-quality fibre optics and network facilities specifically designed to support ICT companies and the ICT functions of major corporations. Set on a 29 hectare site adjacent to the University of Ballarat's Mt Helen Campus, the park contains 25,000 square metres of floor area across nine buildings.

The park is home to 30 businesses and employs 1400 people across a range of industries. As well as IBM, tenants include the Victorian State Revenue Office, the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority, Ambulance Victoria and a range of small and mediumsized companies.

Regardless of their size, the park's tenants all enjoy the benefits of state-of-the-art IT infrastructure and lower operating costs compared to metropolitan centres. And, with so many likeminded organisations clustered together, the technology park presents excellent opportunities for knowledge-sharing and commercial relationships between tenants.

"We've benefited not just in terms of lowering labour costs through using a partly undergraduate workforce but also in generating an ongoing pipeline of talent for the IBM IT services centre," John Harvey, Investment executive at IBM Australia, said.

"IBM's investment in Ballarat builds on our long-standing relationship with the University of Ballarat, and with the Victorian Government. We currently employ around 800 people here and over the next few years we expect the IBM IT services centre to expand by around 200 employees, with growth expected in software development, IT consulting services and technical support areas, as the IBM IT services centre continues to support our clients across Australia, Europe, Asia Pacific and the US."

Regional development

The new Service Centre represents \$10.8 million worth of investment in the Technology Park. The Victorian Government contributed \$5.0 million for infrastructure through its Regional Infrastructure Development Fund, while the remaining funding came from IBM and the University of Ballarat.

For the Victorian Government, the investment in the Services Centre provided an opportunity to strengthen its commitment towards two key government priorities: regional development, and supporting Victoria's \$26.2 billion ICT sector.

Victorian Treasurer and Minister for Information and Communication Technology John Lenders said the project is an exceptional success story, showcasing the benefits of an industry, government and university collaborative model.

"IBM at the Technology Park is not just good for the state, it is also good for Ballarat, the economy and our state's skills pool," he said. "This is a model that the Victorian Government promotes throughout the state and to international investors."

Lenders noted that the ICT industry in Ballarat continued to prosper, combining a mix of its skills, infrastructure and local innovation offerings which attracted IBM to the region in the first place.

"Ballarat has established itself as a centre of ICT excellence through the Ballarat Technology Park and through the University of Ballarat's reputation for delivering highly-skilled graduates."

Victorian Minister for Regional and Rural Development, Jacinta Allan, acknowledged the important role industry collaboration has played in the success of the Technology Park.

"What's been achieved here through the IBM and University of Ballarat partnership sets an excellent example for Victoria in general," Allan said. "In Victoria, we are delivering a new skills and training system to give us the workforces we will need for the 21st century but in order to do this as effectively as possible, we need stronger links between industry and training and education bodies."

Opportunities for graduates

Ballarat boasts a proud history and enviable lifestyle opportunities but, as with many other regional centres, the former gold rush town faces a constant challenge in ensuring it can offer attractive career opportunities for its young people. City of Ballarat Mayor Judy Verlin is quick to point out the regional development benefits of the park, and IBM's role in the park's success.

"IBM has been very important in attracting and retaining young people within Ballarat, which is crucial to the ongoing vitality of the region," she said.

"The council was pleased to provide significant support to the project, confident the employment and training opportunities it would create for young university graduates, school leavers and job seekers, would be ample reward for our investment. Ballarat Technology Park director Mal Vallance agrees with the Mayor, saying "approximately 80 percent of the University of Ballarat's ICT graduates now stay within the Ballarat region after graduating".

"IBM and the University of Ballarat have been working together since 1993 and at least half of IBM's current workforce in Ballarat is made up of either graduates or current students of the university," he said.

The close association between IBM and the university's ICT students begins well before they graduate. Since 2001, the University of Ballarat has been running the 'Earn as You Learn' program, which allows students to combine their ICT studies with practical work experience with IBM.

Students of the program receive a scholarship from IBM and attend courses on industry awareness and industry application, which are delivered in association with IBM staff.

"IBM has been critical to the growth our Graduate School of IT and Mathematical Sciences. The school has grown into one of the largest in Australia and it's unlikely that this would have occurred without IBM's presence. The University of Ballarat is very focused on the growth and development of this very important alliance," Vallance said.

Randall Straw is Deputy Secretary, Innovation and Technology, with the Victorian Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development.