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MEDIA RELEASE

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Project to tackle skills shortages and grow jobs in Ballarat

A major project aimed at eliminating skills shortages and delivering more job opportunities across business and industry has been established in Ballarat.

The Workplace Participation and Skills Project is a joint initiative of the City of Ballarat's Economic Development Unit and the Committee for Ballarat, with the assistance of the University of Ballarat.

It will be managed through a Committee for Ballarat task group chaired by City Council CEO Richard Hancock.

The task group includes representatives of the employment, education, training, employer and economic development sectors across Ballarat and the region.

Mr Hancock said that although Ballarat was experiencing sustained growth in workforce participation, it was important to address unemployment issues in Ballarat for all current job seekers.

"There have been 6,370 people enter the Ballarat workforce since March 2005, representing a increase in workforce participation of 15.6%, which is a very positive employment indicator," Mr Hancock said.

"However, we recognise that the fundamental issue of unemployment is best addressed through a co-ordinated and structured approach.

"It is important that we correctly identify current and future notable skills gaps and shortages within business and industry.

"The project will look at the development of strategies to improve the match between the needs of business and our skills base and provide employment opportunities for the Ballarat region." Mr Hancock said.

The project aims to:

- Understand the key issues relating to workplace participation and skills based on an environmental scan and audit of all relevant business, training, government and community activities;
- Develop and implement strategies (short, medium and long term) to address these key issues;
- Establish an appropriate structure to implement the plan, including the provision of adequate resources; and
- Create a means to monitor progress to ensure the required outcomes are being achieved.

With the co-operation of the University of Ballarat, Scott Hebbard, from the School of Information Technology and Mathematical Sciences has been appointed as interim executive officer for the project.

Mr Hebbard, a University Council member, is also a member of the Committee for Ballarat's Leadership, Ballarat and Western Region group.

For the past three years, Mr Hebbard has been responsible for the "Earn As You Learn Degree", that is offered in conjunction with IBM. This degree ensures that graduates from the School of Information Technology and Mathematical Sciences are "work ready" at the completion of their studies. Students work part time at IBM during their four year degree, culminating in six months full time employment in their final year. This program is an example of collaboration between the University and Industry which has been very successful.

The Committee for Ballarat's 2006 business plan identified workplace participation and skills as the two most important challenges facing the region, while the City of Ballarat's Blueprint Strategy and the draft 2006 Economic Development Strategy also highlighted the need for a long-term approach to workforce development.

"The establishment of a skills development group was highlighted in the draft Economic Development Strategy as a priority initiative and we have moved forward very quickly on this issue to ensure ongoing economic sustainability for our community" Mr Hancock said.

Vice Chancellor of the University of Ballarat, Professor Kwong Lee Dow, said it was appropriate that the university be associated with the workforce participation and skills project.

"This is a fundamental challenge facing the city, a positive and constructive approach to it and one the university fully supports," he said.

The first phase of the project including a survey of relevant stakeholders and audit of all available information is now underway.

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