

## **Innovation flourishes as construction gears ahead at The Innovation Hub**

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SA's first internationally accredited Science Park - [The Innovation Hub](#) - is making significant progress in delivering on its mandate of establishing a hi-tech cluster in Gauteng.

Board chairman, [Sandy Lowitt](#) of [Blue IQ Investment Holdings](#) (Pty) Ltd, says Science Parks have been proven to stimulate economic growth in regions by providing environments where innovation and entrepreneurship will flourish. "While 30% of parks were established in the 1980s and 48% in the 1990s, 18% of the approximately 270 Science Parks globally have been launched in the last three years, which is an indication that this is a growing trend that will continue. These parks have become a proven feature in stimulating economic growth and increasing the competitiveness of their regions and cities," she says.

The Innovation Hub is one of the eleven projects of the Gauteng Provincial Government's Blue IQ initiative to invest in economic infrastructure development in the province. The Hub's primary purpose is to develop infrastructure that supports the growth and globalisation of technology-led, innovative entrepreneurs and business enterprises, which will form the basis for a world-class innovation corridor in Gauteng. Blue IQ's investment in The Innovation Hub is around R300 million.

Construction of the new site, located between the CSIR and the University of Pretoria, is gearing ahead. According to site project manager, [Martin Schindler](#) of Arup SA, the main site will be completed by December 2004. The installation of bulk services has been completed and construction for the widening of the N4 bridge across the N1 highway in the vicinity of the site is progressing well.

Construction workers are currently working on the precinct's two core buildings - the R80 million Innovation Centre and Enterprise Building with common basement parking for 425 cars - and on the owner-built centre of the first anchor tenant, Sappi (Pty) Ltd. The 4 500m<sup>2</sup> Innovation Centre will provide tenants with shared facilities such as a 180-seat auditorium, conference rooms, boardrooms, video conferencing, exhibition areas, a knowledge centre, a restaurant as well as offices for professional service providers and a Business Incubator. The Coach Lab, a student leadership development programme that fast-tracks hi-tech post-graduate students into the business environment, will also be housed in the Innovation Centre.

The 8 500m<sup>2</sup> Enterprise Building is a multi-tenant building that will provide A-grade space at affordable rentals with exceptional tenant fit-out to a variety of tenants, including small and medium enterprises active in the technology-led and research-based sectors, such as information and communications technology, biosciences, electronics, advanced materials and pilot-scale manufacturing.

### **Pilot activities showing significant growth**

Since inception, the pilot activities at The Innovation Hub - that of its business incubation and Coach Lab Student Leadership Development programmes - have seen continued growth. The hi-tech start-ups participating in incubation and pre-incubation have shown a 58% growth rate since 2000, while staff at these companies have increased by 300% over the same period. To date the success rate of these businesses has been 79%, which has included the development of new products and services.

Two of the companies, Mohwiti Technologies (Pty) Ltd and TCI-Thoreb (Pty) Ltd both run by previously disadvantaged entrepreneurs, have graduated from pre-incubation to incubation,

while successes notched up by other companies have included job creation, the sale of company shares to a large corporation, a SABS Prototype Award, the launch of innovative products and concluding three international contracts.

The Coach Lab Students Leadership Development programme, in partnership with EPI-USE Systems and the University of Pretoria, has accommodated six post-graduate IT students per year since its launch in 2001. The students have completed a number of real-time industry projects. This collaborative model is being refined to expand it to other hi-tech areas for which partners are being sought.

According to Dr [Neville Comins](#), the Chief Executive Officer of The Innovation Hub Management Company (Pty) Ltd, pilot and marketing activities continue to show good growth. "Even at this early stage in its development, it is clear that The Innovation Hub's initiatives are fulfilling a need in stimulating the growth of a hi-tech, knowledge intensive cluster in the province. In learning by doing we will ensure that The Innovation Hub moves onto its site as a going concern at the end of this year," he says.

Comins added that initiatives like The Innovation Hub will help to keep talent in SA by providing an environment in which skilled people can build hi-tech businesses that can compete globally.