Professor Paul Wellings has grand plans for the University of Wollongong in his new role as Vice-Chancellor. MICHELLE HOCTOR reports.

KNOWLEDGE is power, but Paul Wellings knows it takes more than academia to advance a university's standing on the world stage. 

Professor Wellings took up his new post as the University of Wollongong's vice-chancellor this week with a mission to propel the institution into the world's top 1 per cent. 

To do this he will build on the university's already strong reputation as a research and teaching facility while courting political influence to ensure financial backing. 

A mover and shaker in European university circles, Prof Wellings is no lightweight negotiator. 

In his last role as vice-chancellor of Lancaster University, he chaired Universities UK's international European policy committee, was a board member of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and was chair of the 1994 group of smaller research-intensive universities - all while guiding the university's ranking into the top 1 per cent in the world. 

The British-born academic is no stranger to Australia. He spent 14 years with the CSIRO as an entomology researcher before moving into policy with the former department of industry, science and resources in Canberra. He returned to the CSIRO in 1999 as its deputy chief executive. 

After nine years as head of Lancaster University, Prof Wellings made the decision to return to Australia in the belief that UOW was "going places". 

Both Lancaster and UOW are contemporaries with an emphasis on research and at one stage, just five years ago, were equal in the world rankings. Today, Lancaster is ranked at 153 and Wollongong at 269 of 17,000 plus universities. 

It is a gap the 58-year-old aims to close through building on UOW's world-class assets while seeking to produce "new knowledge" and ensuring the institute finds a market over the next 20 to 30 years. 

"With the University of Wollongong, there's a gear shift still to be had. You only have to look at the Innovation Campus, the SMART facility, Health and Medical Research Institute here on campus, just to name three, to see that some of the investments that have been made in the last decade are absolutely world class," Prof Wellings said.

"The attraction for me is, I think, if we could fully exploit those bits of infrastructure and put in place some other areas as well, we would indeed move forward."

He praised the work of his predecessor, Gerard Sutton, for putting such facilities in place. 

Prof Wellings believes UOW's strengths included its energy materials and the biomaterials group, which were already among the best in the world, and the engineering faculty, which is ranked in the top 50 to 100 faculties internationally. 

"Health and medicine will also
be successful here because of the distinctive needs that we need to cater to in the Illawarra,” he said. “The [UOW-owned] Sydney Business School of Commerce could be a global brand if we got ourselves organised in that space. The creative arts and digital area for servicing the digital economy for the future could be really successful. So that’s five areas without even drawing breath.

“At the moment we’ve got a number of research strengths. I think it’s a question of presenting those clearly to say which of them are really important transformative areas that we need to be investing in for the future.”

But it takes more than just the publication of research to garner success. With universities deriving most funding from the Federal Government, supportive policy was also essential, especially given a 2009 review which said Australian universities were under-funded.

Prof Wellings said a collective voice was essential.

“Individual universities aren’t necessarily going to win more resources,” he said.

“I think it’s a sector-wide debate that says given the strength of the Australian economy, how do we create a dividend for the future so that young Australians have the skills to be competitive when the economy changes and there are different circumstances? “So there has to be a dividend to build the skills of young Australians and to build new technologies for the future.”

Prof Wellings has wasted no time in making his presence felt in political circles. Following announcement of his appointment in April, he visited Australia twice, introducing himself to state, federal and local government representatives. When Federal Parliament resumes next month, he will travel to Canberra to renew old acquaintances.

“My intention will be to reintroduce myself to key ministers and senior officials ... to re-engage with the relevant departments down there,” Prof Wellings said.

As positions become available on the relevant university boards, he will jockey for an invitation to join, in the hope of influencing both national and international policy.

“World student numbers will double in the next 20 years and so the international dimension of universities isn’t going to go away,” he said.

“That’s why we have a deputy vice-chancellor for international here at Wollongong because we know we have to cater to that opportunity.”

Prof Wellings said UOW hoped to meet this world-wide demand by continuing the university’s offshore expansion through campuses in Dubai, Malaysia and Hong Kong and the memorandum of understanding with India.

Onshore, there were no plans to expand beyond the university’s present intake of international students, which accounts for 6000 of the institute’s 27,000 students.

On the homefront, Prof Wellings who has settled in the Illawarra with wife Annette, shrugged off the suggestion that his position placed him as one of the region’s most influential people, with the ability to lead a region through its present economic transition away from steel production and manufacturing.

He instead spoke of a desire to ensure increased integration with Wollongong City.
“My sense from that is the city is as ambitious for the university as I am. The real challenge is we’ve got projects like the IBIS project opening up where we put student residences in town, that some of the economic value which is derived from the university has a spill-over benefit for the retail sector and other sectors in the CBD and elsewhere in the region,” he said.

“It’s really important to understand that the economic benefits to having a world-class university actually flows to very large sectors of the economy and from that to individual citizens.”

Despite assurances that it was business as usual at the university, a message from Prof Wellings to staff and academics generated comment this week when he alluded to “modifications” that may be necessary.

He assured, however, that a major overhaul was not on the agenda.

“As a new vice-chancellor, inevitably we’ll look at our strategic plan again. Whether that means actually doing exactly what we’ve done in the past or whether it means some change will come out of the process, I cannot say,” he said. “I’m not sitting here thinking we should close half the university and start a new set of areas. That would be an unusual thing to do given how successful the university has been. But we might need to be a bit sharper in places. “If resources got squeezed, we would need to be more efficient even in continuing what we’re currently doing.

“I think that, touch wood, I’ve inherited a very tight ship here and an environment with very prudent management. I think we should be very grateful for that.”