Women build on UOW success

By GREG ELLIS

SUE Baker-Finch and Tania Brown are continuing the tradition of women playing a significant role in the development of the University of Wollongong.

The impact the university has on the regional economy and employment cannot be underestimated.

The two women are now building on that success by taking on senior executive roles in projects that will help the university further forge ahead under vice-chancellor Professor Gerard Sutton's direction.

Prof Sutton is proud of the university's achievements and is confident he has found two new leaders who can build on its success.

"If you want success for somebody then they have got to really be the best person for that job. A good leader in business ends up appointing people better than they into key positions. So I try and appoint people better than myself," he said.

Ms Baker-Finch is the chief operating officer of the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI), a partnership between South Eastern Sydney and Illawarra Area Health Service and the university.

Its goal is to advance health and medical research in the region by integrating academic and clinical research efforts to improve health care and the health status of the community.

The first stage of the IHMRI building is under construction and will initially house up to 140 people, including researchers and visiting clinicians.

Ms Brown is the chief operating officer of the SMART Infrastructure Facility, a world-class research, training and simulation centre where up to 150 people will help address Australia's future infrastructure needs and play a key role in driving regional employment growth.

Ms Brown is responsible for the development, implementation, operational issues, stakeholder relations and attracting investment.

Prof Sutton knows the potential flow-on effects and is acutely aware of the challenge facing his new recruits but knows what their success will mean.

"The major role of a university is to make sure that its graduates are the highest quality and are comfortable operating on an international stage," he said.

"But is that what gives the reputation to the university? No. The international reputation of a university is its research output.

"The most important role is the individual coming out well qualified. (So) if that is the main role, why would you bother with the research?" he asked.

"It is because the worth of the degree lines up with the status of the institution. We sit now in the top 2 per cent of universities in the world because of our research."

Prof Sutton said the number of jobs created during construction of the facilities was up to 350, but after boosting the building sector at such a critical time, 300 permanent jobs could be created within 18 months.

"Employment is a big issue in this region. I see our role as a generator of jobs. And it is not just the high status research jobs. The breadth of jobs that come with this growth and the status of the research activities ... is really significant."

When adding multipliers the two projects should eventually create up to 700 jobs in the region and boost international and domestic business tourism.

Prof Sutton said that was why government support was so important.

"We are the bridge for the Illawarra internationally. "We are all also the engine that drives a broadening of the economic base and companies can tap in on us."

Ms Baker-Finch and Ms Brown were encouraged by Prof Sutton's employment philosophy and his confidence in them.

"Knowing you really do have a challenge ahead, that you need to deliver and that you will be held accountable is a good thing, it brings out the best in people," Ms Barker Finch said.

She is also aware how women, nationally, are still a minority in holding senior executive positions and is determined to make the most of her opportunity to make another significant contribution.

Ms Brown said construction of the SMART facility should begin this year and be completed by 2010.