Research base looks healthy

Unemployment in the Illawarra nudged 10% this year and remains well above the national figures. Noone would disagree that the region needs jobs, job and more jobs.

With the global financial crisis putting a dampener on business confidence and several anticipated developments, the construction of the new headquarters for the Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute (IHMRI) is well timed for jobs and local contractors. The $30 million building, due for completion next year, is jointly funded by the University of Wollongong and the NSW Government. University estimates indicate this construction is providing full-time employment for 191 people directly, with a further 210 jobs being delivered locally - a handy boost to the region’s employment during a difficult year.

There are other, longer term benefits the Institute brings to the local region and its economy. Once operational, the new facility will support an extra 40 campus-based positions, expected to grow to about 65 by the third year. Taking economic flow-on effects into account, these jobs will lead to another 72 jobs locally, meaning 137 new ongoing jobs for the region.

IHMRI’s goal is to advance the region’s health and medical research capability and to expand medical research within the university and clinical contexts. A 2008 Access Economics study reports that for every dollar invested in Australian health research and development, $2.20 in health benefits is returned to the economy. IHMRI’s research program will target conditions common in the Illawarra, maximising the economic value of health benefits felt locally.
The Illawarra’s economy has diversified over recent decades and the region is fast developing a reputation for research and innovation, especially in high-tech engineering and manufacturing applications. Nurturing health and medical R&D capability will continue to transform the region’s economy and further strengthen our reputation for innovation.

In the five years to 2008, income for health and medical research at the University has tripled to $15 million per annum. IHMRI will build on existing expertise and a healthy track record, and develop new research expertise in particular areas to set the Illawarra apart in NSW and Australia. The Institute will provide the collaborative environment and support needed for local researchers to compete for and win more grant income from government and other sources on the national and international stage. Such research income represents new money coming into our regional economy from outside, boosting gross regional product and adding to overall employment.

ABS data on research and experimental development in Australia shows that nearly half of all R&D operating expenditure is spent on people. What’s more, about 85% of the jobs supported are knowledge-based roles for researchers and technicians.

R&D enterprise is particularly good for growing jobs but it also builds intellectual capital in a community. In IHMRI’s case, clinicians and medical specialists, as well as university researchers, will be in the mix of knowledge-based jobs arising from a successful institute.

With repeated reports of a doctor shortage in the region, developing our reputation as a centre of excellence in health and medical research will not only provide more employment prospects but may also make the region more professionally attractive to experienced clinicians and specialists considering relocating here.
The potential economic benefits of our new health and medical research institute are truly exciting – improved productivity from a healthier community, knowledge-based job growth, attraction of new researchers and medical experts to the area, further diversification of the region’s economic base, and a strengthening of our reputation as a region of innovation. Clearly, medical research in the Illawarra is not only good for our health, it's good for the region as a whole.

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