What are the Council’s top priorities?
Throughout 2019, Council members spent considerable time considering the University’s strategic direction for the next five-year period. This work culminated in a new Strategic Plan we can all be proud of and a detailed roadmap to guide implementation. Ensuring the very high quality of our research and teaching is recognised in New Zealand and internationally is central to our long-term sustainability. To achieve this, the University is working hard to increase international recognition and, at home, to ensure our university is a leading choice for students. The challenge of prudently managing finances, while continuing to invest in facilities and courses we need in the future, has also been a focus.

What has been notable about 2019?
Many of our staff have been recognised through awards, accolades, and external grants/funding to support their work and ensure the University can continue to perform in our role as a civic university. Overall student numbers have increased but more slowly than we hoped due to fewer school leavers, a buoyant job market, and accommodation shortages in Wellington. The University achieved the 3% profit surplus sought by the Government despite significant, unavoidable cost pressures from issues such as insurance. We have pushed on with a significant maintenance programme and a number of visionary projects, including planning for our Living Pā and a national music centre in Wellington’s Civic Square. During the year, Council ruled a line under the name change issue, opting to refresh the branding of the University and to adopt the new Māori name of Te Herenga Waka.

What came out of the refresh of the University’s Strategic Plan?
The process to refresh the Strategic Plan was robust and rewarding, with many staff, students, and stakeholders taking the opportunity to consider our shared future. The new Strategic Plan is unreservedly ambitious, firmly linking the University to our location in Wellington and comprising strategies that span our research, teaching, and student experience. It articulates that we are a values-based, research-intensive university that works in partnership with our students, and it defines a number of attributes that matter to our staff, students, and communities. Having a roadmap to guide how and when we implement various projects is a new and positive initiative. The projects to be carried out first aim to grow and retain international and domestic students, improve research outcomes, and achieve equity and diversity goals.

What achievements stand out during 2019?
Being named the number one ranked university in New Zealand for intensity of high-quality research for the second consecutive time in the Performance-Based Research Fund process was a very proud moment. Many of our students achieved amazing things during the year, among them Council member Isabella Lenihan-Ikin who was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship and Victoria University of Wellington Students’ Association (VUWSA) President Tamatha Paul who was elected a Wellington City Councillor in October. Staff achievements were numerous, with one stand-out being Professor James Renwick receiving the Prime Minister’s Science Communication Prize for his work communicating about climate change. It was a privilege to host our Distinguished Alumni Awards event in November, and to honour six of our graduates who are making a significant contribution in their fields. It is pleasing to see sound growth in both enrolment and retention rates of Māori and Pasifika students, which is a priority for the University.

How is the University faring at present?
As we finalise this Annual Report, the world is dealing with one of the biggest crises in living memory, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in unprecedented moves to lockdown populations. It has led to the University shutting down and will significantly disrupt our work in 2020. It will also impact the University in the period ahead in terms of course delivery, campus life, and financial pressures. But now, more than ever, the critical role of universities in society is paramount in finding solutions to complex problems, producing research that makes a difference, acting as a critic and conscience, and cultivating creative, social, and intellectual capital. Our university has a proud history over 120 years. The Council, management, and staff will be doing everything possible to minimise the impact of the crisis and emerge with confidence in our future.

Who would you like to thank?
Vice-Chancellor Professor Grant Guilford, his Senior Leadership Team, management, and staff of the University work very hard and collectively do an outstanding job. I extend my sincere thanks on behalf of Council to all staff. Thanks also to the student leaders we interact with, to our alumni who engage with and support the University, and to all those who give up their time in voluntary roles on behalf of the University. I particularly acknowledge my Council colleagues who work hard to ensure the University is striving to do its best with a bright and sustainable future.

NEIL PAVIOUR-SMITH
BCA Wgtn
Chancellor