What were the big successes and the big challenges of the year?

Topping the national research quality rankings for the second consecutive time set the tone for a successful year at the University. Other milestones include the launch of an ambitious plan to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2030, the refresh of the University’s Strategic Plan, and the announcement of our philanthropic campaign ‘What if...’. Connecting with and contributing to our communities was a theme of the year—through our research and commentary, our partnerships and volunteering by students and staff. Although the University is in a sound financial position, we operate in an increasingly challenging environment with limited fee increases under the fee maxima regime and continued pressure on limited government funding. As such, we must continue to grow income to fund investment in critical people and infrastructure resources to ensure we efficiently and effectively realise our Strategic Plan. One aspect of meeting this challenge is our focus on improving our international reputation and distinctiveness, which this year included a refresh of our visual identity to emphasise our location in, and connection to, Wellington and our new Māori name, Te Herenga Waka.

What were some notable research highlights in 2019?

Confirmation that we have the largest proportion of academics conducting high-quality research out of all universities in New Zealand was a highlight of the year. In addition, we have had excellent results in external research funding—from investment through the Government’s Marsden Fund and the Health Research Council of New Zealand to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment’s Endeavour Fund. Many of our staff have also been honoured with awards and accolades, including three of our researchers receiving Royal Society Research Honours.

How is the University focusing on employability and work-integrated learning?

Our focus on employability is at the core of our teaching and our efforts to ensure an outstanding student experience. Our degrees provide scope for exploration and emphasise creativity, critical thinking, and being a globally confident citizen, which equips our students for a future in which many of the jobs they will do have not yet been thought of. We also offer a wealth of opportunities to have work experience, through industry placements and internships, programmes such as our ‘Alumni as Mentors’ scheme, and the micro-credentials to better prepare students for the future of work.

What was done to support Māori and Pasifika achievement?

Māori and Pasifika student enrolments continue to grow as do our University-wide teams that provide culturally responsive support and enhance the retention and achievement of both groups of students. Other initiatives include building a comprehensive database of Māori alumni who can play an active role in university life and developing a Pasifika Staff Success Plan. The mātauranga Māori research space gathered momentum during the year with the inaugural Mātauranga Māori Research Fund round. Nearly half the applications to the Fund came from Māori academics. Our Taihonoa partnerships programme continued to evolve with a high number of Māori student internships and Summer Scholarships at places as diverse as GNS Science, Stats NZ, the State Services Commission, and Tuia Group.

What were the key actions in the area of student support and pastoral care in 2019?

Our partnership with students strengthened during the year with plans in place to create a forum where student leaders from across the University can meet regularly to discuss matters affecting students. We also partnered with students in the development of a new Sexual Harassment Response Policy, offered bystander and professional boundary training, ran a Piki Pilot for improved counselling services, launched ‘YOU. The Student Wellbeing Survey’, and held our first digital exams. The University increased its investment in pastoral care in its accommodation offerings to boost staffing levels and ensure residents have access to student support coordinators who are registered health professionals. In our first-year halls, we focused on providing targeted pastoral care that responds to the unique demands of managing a new shared living and academic environment.

Any final words?

Our people have continued to put an enormous effort into their work, ensuring the best possible outcomes for students and contributing at all levels to Wellington, New Zealand, and the Asia-Pacific region. I have been extremely proud of how our community came together during the year and demonstrated its inclusiveness and its values, most notably after the terrorist attacks of 15 March in Christchurch and during the School Strike for Climate in September, when we all marched together under a University banner. I want to thank everyone who is part of our community—staff, students, Council members, partners, stakeholders, alumni, and donors—for everything they do for our University.