

# INTERVIEW WITH THE CHANCELLOR



## What have been the Council's top priorities?

2020 was a year like no other. When the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, Council's immediate concern was the safety and wellbeing of our staff and students, and on how to minimise disruption to teaching and research. This required many urgent actions. The response from everyone involved under real pressure was outstanding. Not everything was perfect and that is what happens in a crisis. But the University was able to function despite the challenges of lockdowns, travel restrictions and new protocols. Council's other top priority was the need to rapidly assess the financial position of the University, given the immediate significant reduction in revenues caused by international students unable to come to New Zealand. Council, along with the Vice-Chancellor and Senior Leadership Team, strived to protect the University's public good mission by taking a careful and measured approach, with direction that decisions to address financial considerations were to be proportionate to the risks and not 'at all costs'. In a practical sense, the guiding principles communicated by Council included that decisions must be fair and reasonable, with a priority on revenue growth, efficiencies, and non-people cost savings. It inherently acknowledges that decisions made today will have intergenerational impacts on future students, staff, and governance.

## How is the University doing?

Outstanding efforts by staff—ranging from reducing annual leave balances, to salary sacrifices, to accepting voluntary redundancy—have helped ensure the University ended the year with a loss of \$9.9 million rather than the \$19 million forecast if actions were not taken. 2021 is going to be another challenging year. The Council has approved a loss for the University of \$5 million as part of a pathway back to surplus in the period ahead. To achieve this, there is a challenge to reduce a significant budget gap caused by further reduction in international student revenues and cost increases in areas like insurance. However the early signs are encouraging aided by much of the hard work and sacrifice to date. In terms of teaching and learning, the University is well placed. Staff have a year of experience of dual in-person and online delivery and are better positioned to understand its opportunities and constraints. This will be of benefit well beyond the time of the pandemic.

## And aside from COVID-19?

We reinforced our position as New Zealand's number one university for intensity of high-quality research in the Performance-Based Research Fund, the country's main measure of research activity. Even in the midst of COVID-19, our academics had their best year ever for grants from the Government's Marsden Fund for 'blue

skies' research. Of the 134 grants awarded, teams led by our researchers received a fifth of these. The 27 grants were the highest number for the University in the fund's 26-year history and their total value of more than \$16 million the most we have received in a single round. Our total external research income for 2020 was \$87 million, well above target and over double the level in 2014 (the first year of our current strategic direction). Wellington UniVentures successfully met its goal of 61 invention disclosures for 2020, well up on the 26 recorded in 2014 and a good indication of the strong pipeline of research commercialisation that has been developed in partnership with faculties.

## What other achievements stand out?

This report details numerous achievements of the University across research, teaching and learning, and engagement. Notable achievements include improved scores in student evaluation of courses and teachers (despite the challenges of COVID-19); continued expansion of the Trimester 3 offering to cater for current and new students; establishing Wellington Uni-Professional to ensure growth in non-degree teaching; ranking among the top 40 universities in the world for Sustainable Development Goals social impact and commitment; and the many honours, awards, fellowships and other forms of recognition our academics have received. Council was delighted to approve support for the commencement of the Living Pā project.

## Who would you like to thank?

Our staff and students, for their resilience in the face of COVID-19. Academic and professional staff, in every role and at every level, went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the University continued to operate and students continued to receive the high-quality education for which the University is renowned. I would also like to thank my Council colleagues, Vice-Chancellor Professor Grant Guilford, his Senior Leadership Team, and management for their hard work and leadership throughout the year. COVID-19 is among the most challenging things that could happen to the University. The response displayed examples of the University community at its very best and exemplifying our core values of respect, responsibility, fairness, integrity, and empathy. Thank you to all of you.

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