



INTERVIEW WITH THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

How was it ending such a year with the biggest graduation week in the University's history?

Seeing nearly 3,000 students celebrate the milestone of graduation was a wonderful reminder of why we do what we do, especially in a year in which maintaining the academic progress of our students required Herculean efforts by our academic and professional staff. Staff across the University have responded with speed, resourcefulness, and utter professionalism to each stage of the pandemic, while simultaneously dealing with the impacts on their personal lives. I can't thank them enough.

How have you supported students during the pandemic and in other aspects of the year?

The University has worked in partnership with students to ensure their welfare and continued academic success. We provided comprehensive communications so our students had up-to-the-minute information to navigate changes. In Trimester 1, students joined academic and professional staff to help design and develop course resilience. Against a backdrop of COVID-19 and the pivot to dual-mode delivery, student satisfaction with teaching remained very high, with 86 percent of courses and 96 percent of teachers assessed as good, very good, or excellent. Support for students has included a Hardship Fund, a loan laptop scheme, and a Tutor Relief Fund. We also launched Ngā Hoe a Kupe Pathfinder Scholarships for students from low-decile Wellington secondary schools. As well as financial support, scholarship recipients receive one-on-one academic mentoring, are supported by a student adviser from a similar background, and participate in a leadership development programme called Wellington Plus. I am pleased to say that, despite employment opportunities being impacted by COVID-19, our graduates remain in demand, with 95 percent in a job, further study, or not seeking work in their first year after graduating.

Were there any upsides from the pandemic?

Yes, there were. The pandemic required a collective societal pause—a chance to think and to reconsider what we value. One outcome of this reset has been a renewed sense of collective responsibility. Another has been to highlight the value of speaking truth to power—something our academic staff excelled at during this year. A third has been a very clear demonstration of the importance of sustainability. All of these outcomes create a stronger alignment between our society and the University. Responsibility is one of the shared values underpinning our iho as a global-civic university with our marae at our heart. So much so, we chose the niho taniwha pattern found in the kōwhaiwhai and tukutuku panels of our marae to take centre stage in our new visual identity. Institutional autonomy, the repository of expertise in universities, and a commitment to societal engagement are three of the key

ingredients of the critic and conscience role we so highly value. And of course, sustainability is one of our key areas of distinctiveness, whether it be our world-class research and teaching in this area or our efforts to reduce our own environmental footprint through initiatives such as the partnership with the city to plant trees in the city's Outer Green Belt.

What about the University's role in tackling the COVID-19 virus itself?

We have played a lead role in the country's vaccine research and evaluation, working alongside the Malaghan Institute of Medical Research and the University of Otago as part of the Vaccine Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand. Our researchers have provided analysis of such important issues as the legal implications of the New Zealand lockdown and the economic impacts of COVID-19. They have also been regular presences in the media, where they have explained the science behind COVID-19 and potential vaccines, and given mental health and other wellbeing advice.

What were some of the University's other initiatives to help New Zealanders during the pandemic?

More than 420 people took up our Trimester 2 fees scholarship, which covered 100 percent of tuition fees and was available to people whose work and life were disrupted by the pandemic. We also established a Provisional Admission category for 2021, whereby secondary school students who did not achieve University Entrance because of the disruptions, but met certain academic requirements, could start a Bachelor's degree in a restricted programme of study.

How is the University prepared for 2021?

It is going to be another challenging year, in some ways even more so than 2020, as we face the further financial consequences of COVID-19. But, inspired by the huge resilience and innovation shown in 2020, I am confident we will surmount the challenges and continue to build our contribution to society. I wish to thank everyone who is part of our community—staff, students, Council members, partners, stakeholders, alumni, and donors—for all they have done and will do in support of our shared purpose of research, teaching, and engagement that transforms lives.

Professor Grant Guilford
Vice-Chancellor