

Vice-Chancellor and President's review

Resilience and agility. These are the qualities that shone through in our community, as we negotiated our way through the many challenges that arose in 2020.

After a 6-and-a-half year absence, I was incredibly proud to return to The University of Queensland (UQ) in August this year to take up the position as UQ's Vice-Chancellor and President.

Given that my return occurred in the second half of 2020, I would like to start by acknowledging my predecessor, **Professor Peter Høj AC**, and I want to thank him for his leadership of the University – especially through the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the pandemic created numerous disruptions for the University and our community in 2020, I also want to acknowledge the remarkable resilience and agility shown by our staff as we dealt with these challenges.

In Semester 1, for instance, our staff worked incredibly hard to shift 1,529 courses to online delivery in the space of just one week. In the weeks that followed, as the nationwide lockdown came into effect, around 6,700 UQ staff quickly moved to working from home, while another 1,300 remained on campus to maintain our facilities and grounds, and to ensure the continuity of vital research.

As we sought to keep the UQ community connected and safe, the shift to digital delivery of our programs and events became a consistent theme throughout the year. The UQ Life Virtual Village was established in April as an online forum for students. In May, the UQ Theatre Festival and Reconciliation Week were both conducted online, while the School of Music started live-streaming its lunchtime concerts. Then, in August, we held our first fully online Open Day, attracting more than 6,000 prospective students from 109 nations.

The UQ community also pulled together in 2020 to provide much-needed support for the thousands of students facing hardship as a direct result of the pandemic.

In total, \$1 million in grants was distributed to 600 students via the UQ COVID-19 Student Emergency Support Fund. Meanwhile, an army of staff volunteers, led by Student Services, pitched in to deliver 9,000 food hampers and 28,000 free meals to students in need of support.

2020 highlights

Once again in 2020, our research and educational programs had a wide-ranging impact and UQ continued to enrich the communities that we serve.

UQ either enhanced or maintained its position in the major ranking systems of the world's universities released in 2020. Most of these ranking systems place UQ among the world's top 50 and Australia's top 3 universities.

The excellence of our teaching was recognised in February at the Australian Awards for University Teaching, where UQ received more awards than any other university. Among the 8 awards won by UQ academics, I was delighted to see that **Professors Blake McKimmie, Barbara Masser** and **Mark Horswill** were jointly named the Australian University Teachers of the Year.

The shift to teaching online in Semester 1 enabled the University to continue developing the knowledge and skills of our students, and prepare them for their future careers. In total, we taught almost 55,000 students in 2020, which was only slightly down on enrolments in the previous year.

However, one significant difference this year was that, due to the impact of border closures, we had more than 9,000 students who continued their studies purely online, from an offshore or interstate location. This meant we were able to support these students to progress towards graduation.

Despite the challenges created by the pandemic, we ensured that the University finished the year in a relatively strong financial position and we maintained around 8,000 research projects – and continued to feed the research pipeline with the approval of 700 new projects this year.

Importantly, our research is having a global impact too, with 32 UQ researchers being included on the Clarivate Highly Cited Researchers 2020 list – up from 28 on the 2019 list.

COVID-19 response

In a year when the emergence of COVID-19 dominated most aspects of our lives, UQ's research community played a prominent role in improving our understanding of the virus and, importantly, informing the community response to it.

For instance, it was a UQ team working with CSIRO that developed a method of detecting viral fragments in wastewater as an early indicator of the virus being present in the community.

A number of other scientists from across UQ shifted their focus this year to work with clinicians to either study the virus's impact in a range of different scenarios or to investigate potential treatments for COVID-19.

Of course, the most high-profile of UQ's COVID-19 projects was the remarkable team effort that went into developing a vaccine using the University's patented 'molecular clamp' technology.

With financial support from the Centre for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, as well as the Australian and Queensland governments, the UQ team was able to rapidly develop a vaccine candidate that proved to be safe and elicited a robust immune response in Phase 1 trials.

Although the trials will not proceed beyond Phase 1, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary hard work and commitment of the UQ vaccine team throughout 2020. They have been tremendous ambassadors for UQ and for Queensland – and they have consistently highlighted the importance of science and the value of the scientific process. It will be fascinating to see how they apply their innovative molecular clamp technology to the development of vaccines in the future.

Building for the future

We continued to invest across our campuses, sites and facilities in 2020 to ensure that UQ is positioned to support Queensland education and research long into the future.

The refurbishment of the Mayne Medical building at Herston was completed in January. The landscaping upgrade of the Gatton campus was completed in March. And then in August, we opened ModWest, a flat-floored building at St Lucia that features 7 rooms for large-scale interactive learning.

Two other major building projects continued to take shape at St Lucia this year with the construction of the Andrew N. Liveris Building and the new Student Residence building. Both are on track to be completed in 2021.

Another significant milestone this year was the opening of the 64 megawatt UQ Warwick Solar Farm in July. With the Warwick facility complete, UQ is now the only major university in the world to have the capacity to offset 100 per cent of its electricity consumption with renewable power produced from its own assets.

More importantly though, the investment at Warwick is proof of UQ's commitment to protecting the environment and playing a leading role in renewable energy research and education.

Looking ahead

While 2020 was a very challenging year, I am confident that UQ's response to the pandemic has helped to instigate significant changes that will benefit the University in 2021 and beyond.

Certainly the sudden, mass adoption of online learning will create new opportunities for designing more flexible educational programs and experiences – and it will enable us to offer students greater choice in how, where and when they study into the future.

The economic shock associated with the pandemic is already encouraging greater collaboration between government, industry and research organisations – and I am optimistic this is going to provide a vital boost to Australia's innovation capacity over the coming years. Given UQ is already Australia's leading university when it comes to the commercial translation of our research, we are well positioned to play a more active role in the nation's innovation ecosystem.

The disruption created by COVID-19 also means it's an opportunity for UQ to reassess our strategic priorities – and this will be the highest priority of the University as we work collaboratively with staff, students and partners to develop the next *UQ Strategic Plan 2022–2025*.

Thank you

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the members of the University Senate for their support and encouragement as I have settled into this role over the past 6 months.

In particular, I would like to thank the Chancellor, **Peter N Varghese AO**, for his wise counsel and strategic guidance. The fact that he has been re-elected for a further 5-year term as Chancellor (starting July 2021) will be of great benefit to the University as we plot our future path – and the contribution that UQ will make to pandemic recovery.

I also want to acknowledge everyone across our wonderful UQ community – our students, staff, alumni and partners – for the way that you have so warmly welcomed me back to the University.

It really is great to be back.

Professor Deborah Terry AO
Vice-Chancellor and President