Vice-Chancellor's Report to Council

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY
Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND

March 2026

Introduction

UC is experiencing another year of strong enrolments with the latest figures indicating the total is 6.8% higher than the same time last year. The overall trend reflects continued demand for UC's programmes and the ongoing appeal of Ōtautahi Christchurch as a study destination for both domestic and international students.

Engagement

The first of the UC Business School's 2026 Thought Leadership Series was hosted at The Piano on 26 February. *The Meritocracy Paradox: The Benefits of a Diverse Workplace* featured three visiting Erskine Fellows: Professor Michelle (Mikki) Rae Hebl from Rice University, Associate Professor Remi Trudel from Boston University, and Associate Professor Clifford Lewis from Charles Sturt University in Australia. The free event was well attended, with approximately 170 members of the public (including industry representatives, employers and alumni) and UC staff.

On 19 March the University hosted two Careers Fairs on campus – one for Business and Arts and one for Law. The events were attended by hundreds of current students and featured 45 organisations from around the country. The fairs provide a platform for students to meet employers, explore career options, and build confidence in professional interactions, while offering employers access to UC's diverse talent and recruitment opportunities. The STEM Careers Fair will be hosted on 12 May.

Following its selection at the New Zealand Mountain Film Festival in 2025, the documentary *MOKOMOKO: The Otago Sanctuary – Restoring a Lost Lizard Population*, directed by Digital Screen lecturer Ellie Adams, was released for open public access to extend its reach and impact beyond the festival context. The film translates long-term ecological research and community-led conservation practice into an accessible creative work, supporting public understanding of environmental restoration and biodiversity protection in Central Otago.

On 6 March there was an appreciation morning tea to recognise donors who supported the Biomedical Engineering Service Trip to Tonga. The event provided an opportunity for students to share their experiences, learning, and impact, while demonstrating the outcomes of donor support and strengthening engagement between donors, students, and the University community.

Education – Accessible, Flexible Future Focussed

Students are well underway with their study as we reach the mid-way point of the first term.

Orientation and early-semester support programmes recorded significantly higher engagement than the previous year, reflecting both strong student demand and the effectiveness of targeted wellbeing, advising, and peer-assisted learning initiatives. Peer Assisted Learning Support (PALS) continues to expand with 78 PALS leaders, including 20 Māori and Pacific Leaders across 21 courses. PALS has been shown to improve academic success in courses, setting students up to succeed in their degree. Record participation in discipline-based welcome events and industry engagement opportunities was also noted. The increased participation reflects the value students place on early connection to academic communities and professional pathways.

The Te Kakau a Maui (TKAM) programme is now entering its fourth year after launching in 2023. For 2026, there are 104 new scholars. Retention remains high for the TKAM scholars, with over 90% retention across the years. The end of 2025 saw the first intake of the TKAM scholars, who were enrolled in three-year degrees, reach graduation eligibility. The 2023 (TKAM) cohort completed their qualifications at a rate of 5% higher than matched pairs and with a lower dropout rate. A number of the cohort are in four-year degrees so will be eligible for graduation at the end of 2026.

Having career goals is an important part of student success. In the last month, the Centre for Employability and Career Development was launched. The Centre focuses on developing career readiness by partnering with faculties, employers, and students to provide a comprehensive approach to career readiness. Already, there has been growth in the number of students seen individually for career coaching, including peer mentoring.

Research – Impact on a Changing World

Some of the new research grants awarded are included below, noting how each demonstrates our commitment to undertaking research with Impact in a Changing World, as specified in Tangata Tū, Tangata Ora.

New grants awarded include to Taylor Winter (Mathematics and Statistics) from Oranga Tamariki to investigate the prevalence of mental health conditions among children in out-of-home care, with the research expected to provide new insights to inform policy and service responses. Dr Ali Reza Nazmi (Product Design) from the NZ Bioeconomy Science Institute (Scion) received a grant to investigate the potential for high-value personal care ingredients derived from Black Soldier Fly extracts, exploring novel applications of bio-derived compounds for sustainable personal care products. Professor Angus McIntosh (Biological Sciences) is collaborating with the Cawthron Institute to develop tools to support the conservation of river-resident galaxiid species.

Further positioning UC and New Zealand as a global leader in earthquake risk modelling, Professor Brendon Bradley (Civil and Environmental Engineering) received funding from the Royal Society | Te Apārangi for a project looking at Next-generation seismic risk analysis using New Zealand as a natural laboratory. Dr Camilla Penney (Earth and Environmental Sciences) and Dr Robin Lee (Civil and Environmental Engineering) received funding from the Natural Hazards Commission | Toka Tū Ake respectively for projects looking at new statistical models to enhance the accuracy of earthquake modelling and to create high-resolution maps to help identify areas where local soil or rock conditions could make earthquake shaking stronger and more likely to cause damage in New Zealand.

A team of researchers within Chemical and Process Engineering, led by Professor Daniel Holland, are partnering with KnowYourStuffNZ (KYSNZ) and Public Health and Forensic Science to undertake a research trial exploring an innovative analytical approach to reduce the harm associated with consumption of illicit drugs. The trial software, developed at UC, analyse samples presented to KYSNZ's drug checking services in the Canterbury region, including at the weekly UCSA clinics run by KYSNZ and donated samples from clients at Electric Avenue event.

The High Altitude and Long-Range Observatory (HALO)-South mission brought together researchers from seven German research institutes, Carnegie Mellon University, UC (led by Professor Adrian McDonald, Chemical and Physical Sciences) and the New Zealand MetService to improve the representation of aerosols, clouds, and precipitation in climate modelling. The German team chose Ōtautahi Christchurch and UC as their research base for several key reasons: it has access to the clear skies of the Southern Ocean, the City has logistical experience as an Antarctic Gateway city to support crews, and local climate change experts are available to enhance the project. Alongside the research flights, extensive ground-based measurements were carried out at the Tāwhaki National Aerospace Centre, south of Christchurch, and in Invercargill. More than 50 weather balloons were launched on HALO flight days, involving students from UC who gained invaluable experience working in the field. HALO-South is part of the goSouth-2 campaign and runs from 2025 to 2027. Together, these efforts are supported by more than €9 million in international investment from German research agencies, alongside New Zealand Government funding through MBIE.

UC Botanist, Professor Pieter Pelser (Biological Sciences), has been recognised with one of the highest honours in taxonomy, with a newly established South American daisy genus named *Pelseria* in acknowledgement of his decades-long contribution to studying the family tree of plants. While new species are named regularly, the recognition of a new genus is far less common. Professor Pelser also has a Philippine orchid species named in his honour — *Bulbophyllum pelseri,* while his wife Dr Julie Barcelona (Biological Sciences) is also recognised with as many as three species names.

Chemical and Process Engineering PhD student, Glen McClea has been awarded an Andrew Fellowship from the UK Institute of Chemical Engineers (IChemE). The Fellowship requires research to be industrially relevant, and a partnership between academia and industry. In his fellowship Glen will explore how plasma spray additive manufacturing can be used to optimise the structure of electrocatalytic materials. He will be working with Ternary Kinetics Ltd, seeking to decarbonise heavy transport and other industries using electrochemistry.

People – Nurturing Staff, Thriving Students

First year students arriving into our halls of residence had a full induction and social programme in the days leading to Orientation Day. The Thrive lectures which provide an introduction to on-campus and academic life were well attended. The Halls and the UCSA provided a range of social functions, with up to 1500 people attending some UCSA events.

A number of UC departments worked with the UCSA and the Halls to provide health and safety information and services to students attending Electric Avenue, and UC Security worked closely with Police and Noise Control. In response to high volumes of foot traffic going to and from the festival, Facilities Management ensured our grounds were kept clean and tidy, and the UCSA coordinated a programme of volunteers to assist with the cleaning of the surrounding streets.

A series of monthly leadership webinars is being run for current and aspiring academic and professional leaders. These are being offered in partnership with Victoria University of Wellington and the University of Otago. Examples are *Resilience as a Leader, Strategies to focus attention and manage distractions*, and *Creating a culture of feedback*.

Induction sessions for the 2026 cohort of the Academic Mentoring programme have been conducted. The programme matches academic staff with a senior colleague outside of their School/Department, and this year saw a record number of 39 partnerships formed. A code of conduct and mentoring agreement uphold an environment of trust, respect, and confidentiality.

UC continues to provide encouragement to various Communities of Practice (CoP):

- TechCoP (Community of Practice for UC Technical Staff): Recent workplace visits included the Psychology, Speech and Hearing Research Facility, the Rose Centre for Stroke Recovery, and the Physical and Chemical Sciences Cryogenic Lab. These visits enable Technical Staff to network, while seeing facilities and equipment in use in other areas which are often not accessible. A workshop was also attended by nearly 70 staff and included a showcase of technical staff innovation and equipment, as well as presentations on projects that are of interest to this group.
- Academic Mentors CoP: An event held for the community for senior Academic Staff who act as mentors in Academic Mentoring, focussed on wellbeing with an interactive discussion led by Professor Sarah Wright, UC Business School, on her research into tackling loneliness at work and how mentors can support building belonging. There was also an update on the UC staff wellbeing plan.
- Academic Heads' Forum: This celebrated its fourth year of bringing those in this critical role together each month, for collaboration and collegial support.

Health and Safety
The online Health and Safety training module for staff has been refreshed, with one of the themes being the just and fair health and safety culture highlighted in the recently renewed Health and Safety Policy. All staff are being asked to complete this revised module. A Fire Safety training module has also been completed and is being rolled out online.

HSE Global has completed Health and Safety training for the Senior Leadership Team. The team has found this informative and practical.

Internationalisation – Locally Engaged, Globally Networked

Several international delegations were hosted at UC over the past month.

Professor Orlando del la Vega Luna, Director General of International Affairs at the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso, Chile, met with academics from the Faculties of Engineering, Science and Education regarding enhancing various ongoing research projects. This visit also builds on the work of the Research Committee of Universities New Zealand to build research and teaching connections across Latin America.

A senior delegation from Estonia, including the Director General of the Estonian Research Council, and the Rectors of all five of Estonia's universities, met with researchers from across the university focusing on the themes of space and aerospace, energy transition, sustainability and resilience and

biomed and MedTech, areas of mutual strength and ambition. Research collaboration mechanisms and potential funding sources (including Horizon Europe opportunities) were discussed in mutual areas of research strength. UC already has several joint research projects, including a Horizon Europe project, with Estonian universities.

A delegation from the University of Fort Hare, South Africa, met with researchers from Science, Engineering and the Ngāi Tahu Research Centre to discuss potential areas of research collaboration. A tripartite agreement including Lincoln University is being developed along with an industry partner to create a hub supporting diary science, including the hosting of doctoral scholars.

UC hosted a senior Malaysian government and university delegation in February, led by the Chair and Director General of the Malaysian Government Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (MARA). The delegation included Her Excellency, Ms Mazita Marzuki, High Commissioner of Malaysia, Wellington, and the Vice-Chancellors of two MARA funded universities. The delegation met representatives from Engineering, Arts, Business, the UC International Team and 200 of our Malaysian students, a number funded through MARA scholarships.

On 23 February, our first 2026 cohort of Erskine Fellows were welcomed at a morning tea. The cohort includes academics from Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their research specialties span ornithology, tectonic geomorphology, neurolinguistics, and many other areas of expertise.

Dr Hamish Avery (EPECentre) was part of the MBIE Science and Innovation delegation to Europe to participate in an international research collaboration summit in Brussels, to meet with Ambassadors and to visit the Joint Research Centre (JRC) in Ispra, learning how science informs policy in Europe.

Organisational Efficacy – of a sustainable scale by 2030

An operationally smooth start to Semester 1 saw our front-line Digital Service desk staff support a record number of students. In February, the Digital Service Desk team delivered high-volume frontline support for students and staff through phone, walk-in, and ticketing channels.

UC's Student Mobile App was relaunched for Semester 1 and has seen an encouraging early uptake, with over 15,000 active users within the first two weeks of students returning to campus. An in-app survey has received more than 3,000 responses, providing useful insight into how students are using the app and where improvements are needed. Some of the features available to students included calendar, maps, notifications, student news and a first year "getting started" student checklist.

Environmentally Sustainable

In the annual Aotearoa Bike Challenge, UC was the winning organisation for Canterbury, and second nationally. UC's final points tally of 121,664 was greater than Health NZ - Canterbury (102,574), the University of Auckland (97,900) and Christchurch City Council (89,996). 294 people from the UC community took part in the challenge, cycling over 55,000 km in 5,052 cycle trips made during February. Compared to if these trips had been made by fossil-fuel-powered cars, 6 tonnes of CO_2-equivalent emissions were saved. UC has now won the Canterbury competition for four years in a row.

The UC Biodiversity Plan and Waterways Plan have been updated. These new plans cover the period 2026 to 2030 and have been published on the UC Website. The Biodiversity Plan includes a review of recent progress, highlighting extensive native plantings and improvements to Waiutuutu/Okeover Stream. Monitoring by Biological Sciences staff shows strong gains in native birds and plant diversity. The future focus is on further improving stream health, doubling native bird populations, expanding canopy cover to 30%, and strengthening predator suppression across all campus land. The Waterways Plan summarised the progress in monitoring stream health, improving riparian plantings, upgrading stormwater systems and trialling restoration projects, and with the future focus being physical restoration projects such as sediment removal, daylighting sections of stream, improving stormwater treatment, and upgrading degraded structures like the Ilam Homestead weir.

A major global review led by UC's Professor Jonathan Tonkin was published in Nature Reviews Biodiversity, warning that increasingly severe floods, droughts and heatwaves are reshaping river ecosystems worldwide. The study calls for a shift from reactive, local interventions to catchment scale, resilience focused strategies such as floodplain reconnection, nature-based solutions and improved monitoring. It's news now because the publication provides urgently needed guidance as extreme climatic events accelerate, placing UC at the forefront of global river resilience science.