NZ varsity reaches out to the world

Earthquake prompts University of Canterbury to offer new scholarships to 24 international students

SINGAPORE — The earthquake that hit Christchurch in February was the “kick” that New Zealand’s University of Canterbury (UC) needed to set in motion plans to internationalise its undergraduate student experience — and Singapore students keen on an outdoorsy tertiary experience stand to benefit from a new scholarship programme offered by the university.

Tenable for four years, each of the 24 international awardees stand to receive up to NZ$20,000 (S$20,600) a year, starting from next year.

The number of Singaporeans studying full-time at the UC is small — fewer than 20 — but it hopes to entice more. UC also has an exchange programme with the National University of Singapore (NUS). Since 2000, 41 NUS students and 28 UC students have participated in it.

Both universities are keen to grow the programme and UC is also keen on research collaborations with Singapore, said UC vice-chancellor Rod Carr (picture).

Besides internationalising the student experience, UC’s new scholarship is also part of measures undertaken to tell the world, post-earthquakes, that it is open for business, said Dr Carr, who was here earlier this week to meet alumni, NUS and the Nanyang Technological University.

The 6.3-magnitude quake hit on the second day of the school term on Feb 22, causing classes to stop for three weeks, while all the university’s buildings were thoroughly inspected. But the quake affected mainly Christchurch’s eastern suburbs and the city centre; UC’s buildings, lying 10km west of the city, suffered only cosmetic damage, said Dr Carr.

But much good has risen from the disaster, which claimed the lives of two faculty members and two students who were in the city centre. Thousands of students have volunteered for recovery and rebuilding efforts, with the faculty nimbly adjusting their lesson plans to minimise impact on students. In the end, only five teaching days were lost last semester.

This semester, a new elective offering service learning was introduced, after the school observed how students had reached out to the community in the quake’s wake.

Three thousand student volunteers rallied themselves in two weeks to shovel knee-deep silt and sand out of Christchurch residents’ houses.

The elderly residents “enjoyed seeing these young, able people helping out” and the students set out to shovel silt, only to find themselves also offering “kind words” to the victims, said Dr Carr.

UC’s students have been resilient to the disaster, with “very little take-up” of counselling services offered. “The 18- to 22-year olds, basically they’re bulletproof,” Dr Carr quipped. “But their parents do require a bit more reassurance, that the university is taking time to make sure buildings are safe, has got well-developed emergency response procedures, is concerned about the welfare and safety of students.”

Going forward, it hopes to grow its international undergraduate student numbers by 50 per cent, to 15 per cent of the cohort.

UC’s research has shown its students to be “more interested in the outdoors”, “more outgoing, more adventurous”. And for graduate students looking for a unique opportunity, there is the chance to spend 21 days in the South Pole in UC’s Antarctic Studies courses. “I think we’re one of the only universities in the world that has some space down in the Antarctic,” said Dr Carr.

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