

Latin American links

Victoria University's ties with Latin America are strengthening thanks to a number of international initiatives.

Chilean PhD student Erasmo Macaya is at Victoria studying the genetic diversity of a brown seaweed, the 'giant kelp' *macrocystis*, to ascertain genetic differences between the dispersed algae.

He says that, although split by the Pacific Ocean, New Zealand and Chile have a kelp connection. *Macrocyctis* is found in New Zealand's cool waters, and off the coast of Chile, Argentina, South Africa, the United States, Canada and southern Australia.

"The kelp is an important economic resource; it's used for food for abalone (paua) aquaculture, as fertiliser and alginate (gel) extraction. Ecologically it's very important as it provides food and a habitat for thousands of organisms."

Erasmo is one of nine Chilean PhD students studying at Victoria University, jointly funded

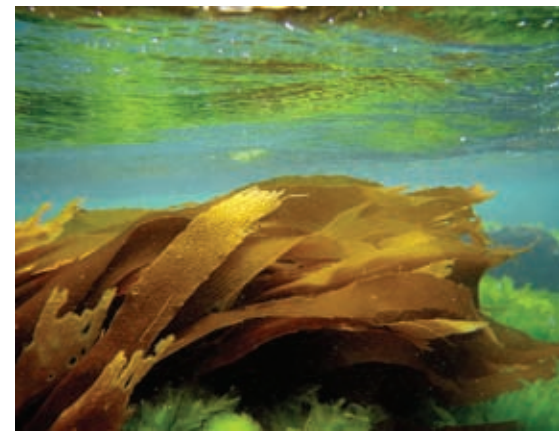
between Victoria University and the Chilean Government, and delivered through Chile's National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICYT). The four-year scholarship, established in 2004, enabled Erasmo to complete his PhD in an English-speaking country.

Victoria's Institute for Links with Latin America (VILLA) also fosters academic and student relations with our Pacific partners.

Institute Director, Associate Professor Warwick Murray, says Victoria's engagement with Latin America is long-standing—going back to the work of the School of Geography in the 1970s.

Founded in December 2007, VILLA aims to formalise and encourage this interaction, stimulate postgraduate research in areas of interest to both parties, connect diplomatic staff and academics and promote wider academic, student, community and business interests in Latin America.

"New Zealand has growing economic, political and cultural links with Latin America, including



trade agreements and academic exchanges. To interact with its nations effectively and sensitively we need stay abreast of their issues, challenges and cultural changes," says Warwick. To this end, VILLA hosted their annual Latin America seminar on contemporary cultures in Latin America in September.

Other Latin American links include the jointly-funded programmes in Portuguese and Brazilian culture thanks to the Brazilian Government, and recently the Mexican Embassy donated a number of books to VILLA and the University's library.

warwick.murray@vuw.ac.nz
+64-4-463 5029

Victoria's pioneers

Victoria International's Simon Hodge describes the small but significant group of Saudi Arabian students at Victoria University as pioneers.

There are 55 Saudi Arabian students at Victoria this year. Most are completing English language programmes before beginning their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees.

"A lot of countries in the Middle East are looking towards developing their human infrastructure. At present, they depend on migrants to do much of their work for them and are looking to up-skill their populations," says Simon, Victoria International's market services co-ordinator for the Middle East.

Each year, more than 8,000 Saudi Arabian students leave home to study at tertiary education institutions around the world on the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme.

Of the students who reach Victoria University in Wellington, most are interested in commerce and science degrees—particularly in the areas of engineering and computer science.

"In a way, these students are pioneers. They are the first students from Saudi Arabia we've had here at Victoria and it's an incredibly challenging process for them. They're under a



Celebrating a year's hard work—Victoria's Saudi Arabian students and support staff

lot of pressure; they only have a certain amount of time to complete their English studies and for many students it's their first time overseas."

To better support the students the University has hired native Arabic speaker Assma Bouhalba as a student administrator.

"English is the second language for Saudi Arabian students. They listen to songs in English, they know sayings and they'll watch American movies—although they're not in a Kiwi accent," says Assma.

The University has held extra workshops for the students on what studying in New Zealand is like and has invited speakers to inform staff on what life is like in Saudi Arabia.

The number of Saudi Arabian students is not expected to rise next year, but the University will host one special student. A sheikh from the Saudi Arabian royal family will travel to Wellington to begin a PhD in Religious Studies with supervisor Professor Paul Morris.

simon.hodge@vuw.ac.nz
+64-4-463 9470