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A Century of PhD Dress in Aotearoa New Zealand

By Scott Pilkington

Abstract

This article provides a brief overview of the history of the PhD in Aotearoa (a more detailed discussion is being prepared) and explores its first academic dress, the disbanding of the federal university, and the evolution of independent universities. It then analyses current PhD regalia across the country and concludes with a discussion on the future of academic dress. As the origins of universities and the development of academic dress in Aotearoa—particularly at the doctoral level—have been previously explored in this journal, only a summary is provided here.[1]

The PhD, now a ubiquitous and essential research qualification, was nearly never introduced in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa). On 25 May 1925, botanist Walter Stanley Yeates crossed the stage in Wellington, becoming the first Doctor of Philosophy graduate from Victoria University College of the University of New Zealand. The centenary of this milestone and presents an opportunity to examine PhD academic dress in Aotearoa.

The University of New Zealand and the original PhD academic dress

The first university in Aotearoa, the University of Otago in Dunedin, was founded in 1869. It was soon followed by the establishment of the University of New Zealand (hereafter UNZ) in 1870, which absorbed Otago as a constituent college.[2] By the turn of the century, three more university colleges had been established: Canterbury in Christchurch (1873), Auckland in Auckland (1883), and Victoria in Wellington (1897). While students studied at these colleges, degrees were awarded by the central UNZ Senate, which also determined programme structures and even lecture content. Most students did not reside at the colleges, instead studying in the evenings while maintaining employment. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, postgraduate travelling scholarships encouraged local research and supported students studying overseas, many of whom pursued PhDs in Europe or North America.[3]

The UNZ Senate first considered introducing a local PhD as early as 1906, but discussions across disciplines led to confusion over the degree's structure and pur-

1 Noel Cox, 'Academical Dress in New Zealand', *Burgon Society Annual*, 2001, pp. 15–24; Scott Pilkington, 'History and Development of University Doctoral Dress in Aotearoa (New Zealand)', *TBS*, 21 (2021), pp. 161–84.

2 Otago never relinquished its degree-awarding powers or the title of university and the merger took over five years to complete.

3 Sue Middleton, *Educating Researchers: New Zealand Education PhDs 1948–1998*, State-of-the-Art, 7 (Hamilton: New Zealand Association for Research in Education (Te Hung Rangahau Mātauranga o Aotearoa), 2001), pp. 4–5. <hdl.handle.net/10289/15166>

pose.[4] Ultimately, the University's Board of Studies did not adopt the PhD until 1921, with the first enrolments commencing in 1922. The degree appeared in the official calendar's list of programme regulations for the first time in 1923, and new academic dress was introduced in 1925, just in time for Dr Yeates to graduate.[5]

Since qualifications were awarded centrally by UNZ rather than by individual colleges, a single academic dress scheme applied across all institutions. The 1925 calendar prescribes the PhD dress as follows:[6]

> XXX. The gown for the Doctor of Philosophy is the same as that of the Master of Arts; the hood is the same size and shape as that of the Master of Arts, and made wholly of scarlet silk.
>
> XXXI. The cap for all graduates is a black trencher with tassel.

This prescription reflects a common pattern in Aotearoa, where academic dress has historically been influenced by Cambridge University. The UNZ Master of Arts was modelled on its Cambridge equivalent gown [m2] and hood [f1], differing only in the colour of the hoods. The dress for the other doctorates was similar, utilizing the same black gown (optional red/scarlet gown for special occasions) with a hood wholly in faculty colour.[7] The reason for UNZ's adoption of Cambridge styles remains unclear, though this influence persists across the country's universities.[8]

The UNZ PhD faced significant challenges from the outset. At a time when most students studied part-time and extramurally, the PhD required full-time, on-campus study, making it less flexible than the existing higher doctorates.[9] Additionally, maintaining uniform standards across disciplines and colleges proved difficult and was a frequent subject of Senate and Examination Board discussions. Enrolments remained low, and in 1926, the University closed the PhD to new students. A formal announcement in February 1930 set the final submission deadline for examination as 31 December 1931.[10]

4 Middleton, p. 5.

5 University of New Zealand, The New Zealand University Calendar 1923–1924 and 1925 (Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, Wellington: University of New Zealand, 1923 and 1925).

6 At p. 5.

7 Cox, pp. 18, 21.

8 The preference may stem from the University's early staff or Senate. Of the eight foundation professors at Otago and Canterbury, two—George Sale and Charles Cook—had attended Cambridge. Among the 24 Senate members, Sir Henry John Miller, the Hon. William Rolleston, and the inaugural Vice-Chancellor Hugh Carleton, MP, also attended Cambridge. Meanwhile, four Senators and one foundation professor, including founding Chancellor Henry John Tancred, had attended Oxford. Three foundation professors and three Senators were Edinburgh graduates, including the future Vice-Chancellor and Chancellor Sir James Hector, a leading figure in Aotearoa's scientific institutions and the first doctoral graduate *ad eundem* in Aotearoa. Three others had attended Aberdeen. Given the strong representation of ancient university traditions, it is reasonable to surmise that the Vice-Chancellor's alma mater influenced the academic dress adopted.

9 Alison Clarke, '"PhDs by the Thousand": University of Otago 1869–2019; Writing a History', University of Otago, online at <otago150years.wordpress.com/2015/06/22/phds-by-the-thousand//> [retrieved 5 June 2025].

10 University of New Zealand, Minutes of Senate and Academic Board, 1930, 458, R12485393, and 1931, 458, R12485393, Archives New Zealand, University of New Zealand

From 1925 until 1931, only 13 PhD candidates graduated: three from Otago, four from Auckland, and six from Victoria. Even before the programme's closure, calls emerged for its reinstatement, though these gradually faded during the 1930s. However, in the early 1940s, discussions resurged as government leaders planned for the post-war reintegration of returning service personnel. By this time, the value of university research—particularly in applied and industrial sciences—had become increasingly recognized.[11] In response, the PhD was reintroduced in 1944.

The first post-war PhD graduates, both chemists, were Richard (Dick) Dean Batt (1923–94) at Otago and William Irving Taylor (1923–2021) at Auckland, in 1948.

By the early 1960s, UNZ was struggling to function effectively. Operational and strategic decision-making had increasingly been devolved to individual colleges, and in 1961, legislation was passed to dissolve the federal university. The final UNZ graduation ceremony took place in December 1961, at which six honorary doctorates were awarded to senior university officials.[12] From 1962, the four university colleges became independent universities.

Shortly thereafter, Massey University in Palmerston North gained independence, and Lincoln Agricultural College (now Lincoln University) also became more autonomous, though it did not gain degree-awarding powers until 1990. The University of Waikato opened in Hamilton in 1964, and in 2000, Auckland Institute of Technology became the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), making it Aotearoa's eighth university.

As previously described by Noel Cox (2001) and further explored by this author, the six universities that were once part of UNZ have largely retained a common academic dress design. All continue to use the Cambridge Bachelor of Arts gown and hood for bachelor's degrees, and the Cambridge Master of Arts gown and hood for master's and doctoral degrees. Cox notes that AUT's academic dress is based loosely on the Oxford model, while Waikato is unique in using a separate shape for each grade, rather than one for each discipline.

In the years immediately before and after independence, many universities did not specify PhD dress in their calendars, suggesting continued use of the UNZ scheme. Massey was the first to list PhD dress in its calendar in 1962, initially following the UNZ model. (Figs 1A, 1B.) In 1965, Massey revised its regalia, introducing a post office red wool hood [f1] lined in dark blue and adding post office red facings to the gown [m2]. The black trencher [h1] was retained until 2003, when it was replaced by a Tudor bonnet [h2].[13]

Clarke.

11 Clarke; John E. Martin, 'Reflections on the History of the Royal Society Te Apārangi', *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 12.2 (2017), pp. 277–88 (pp. 279–80). <dx .doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2017.1391301>

12 The honorary LLDs and one DLitt were awarded, respectively, to Governor-General Viscount Cobham; the Chancellor, the Hon. Sir David Stanley Smith; Vice-Chancellor Sir George Alexander Currie; the former Chancellor of the University of Auckland, William Hollis Cocker; the Chancellor of Victoria University of Wellington, Thomas Duncan Macgregor; and the Academic Board Chairman, Professor Ian Alistair Gordon. UNZ Administration – Final Ceremony, 1961, 1202, R21083544, Archives New Zealand.

13 *Massey University of Manawatu Calendar* 1962, 1965, and 2003, (Palmerston North: Massey University of Manawatu, 1962, 1965, 2002).





Photographs by author, taken at The Graduation Place

Figs 1A, 1B. Massey University PhD.

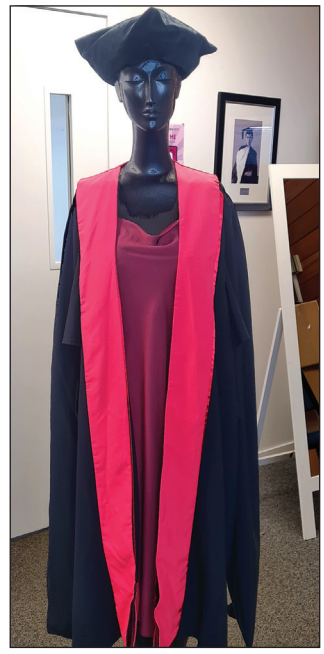


Fig. 2. Victoria University of Wellington PhD.

Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) also added its current PhD dress to the calendar in 1962, initially following the UNZ model. (Fig. 2.) In 1976, VUW added scarlet facings to the PhD gown [m2], but in 1998, both the hood and facings were replaced with a scarlet stole and a John Knox cap [h3].[14]

The University of Canterbury introduced its own doctoral dress design in 1970, adopting a unique Cantabrian style. (Figs 3A, 3B.) The PhD robe was a black gown [m2] with detachable maroon facings, while other doctorates used gowns in maroon. All hoods were in 'Canterbury grey', with the PhD hood lined in maroon. Cox notes these hoods are not a true [f1] cut but a more compact pattern. The University of New Zealand trencher was replaced by a John Knox cap [h3], which the Calendar incorrectly refers to as a St Andrews bonnet. In 2000, Canterbury replaced all maroon elements with signal red.[15]

Otago updated its PhD dress in 1963, specifying a black or maroon gown [m2] with a maroon hood [f1] (higher doctorates wore black silk or scarlet silk or cloth gowns with hoods lined in discipline colours). (Figs 4A, 4B.) In 1975, maroon was replaced by ruby red (higher doctorates had their scarlet replaced by cardinal red), and

14 *Victoria University of Wellington Calendar* 1962, 1976, and 1998 (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 1962, 1976, 1997).

15 *University of Canterbury Calendar* 1970, and 2000 (Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1970, 2000), Cox, p. 19.



Figs 3A, 3B. University of Canterbury PhD.



Figs 4A, 4B. University of Otago PhD.



Figs 5A and 5B. University of Auckland PhD.







in 1992, the gown was formally changed to red fabric with the trencher replaced by what it called a 'Scottish' cap [h3].[16]

The University of Auckland made its first formal change to PhD dress in 1973, replacing the black trencher with a Tudor bonnet [h2] and adding scarlet and gold facings to the gown, and retaining the scarlet hood.[17] (Figs 5A, 5B.) This design remains unchanged, though The Graduation Place (the academic dress hire firm which donates profits to women's scholarships) has modified the facings into a detachable scarf for easier cleaning between ceremonies.[18]

Prior to 1990, Lincoln graduates were awarded degrees by the University of Canterbury. In 1992, Lincoln introduced its own PhD dress: a black gown with ultramarine facings, an ultramarine hood (matching Canterbury in size and shape) but lined in Indian yellow, and a John Knox cap.[19] (Figs 6A, 6B.) While not specified in the academic dress regulations, note the Māori design screen-printed on the facings in the below figures.

AUT introduced the PhD as soon as it became a university in 2000, with its first PhD graduate in 2003. (Figs 7A, 7B.) However, the PhD dress was not officially listed in its academic calendar until 2006. This is a black gown [m2] with post office red facings, a post office red hood [f1] lined burgundy (other doctorates have subject colour linings), and a black Tudor bonnet [h2] with gold cord.[20] It has remained unchanged since, aside from the same The Graduation Place modification mentioned above.

It isn't clear when the University of Waikato introduced its academic dress. The earliest mentions of the academic dress, both cited in *Transactions of the Burgon Society,* date to 1980.[21] (Figs 8A, 8B.) The descriptions specify a maroon gown [m2] , a crimson hood [f1] with a crimson lining, and initially a black trencher [h1]—replaced in 1993 with a black Tudor bonnet [h2] with gold cord and tassels—for all doctorates. The dress does not appear to have changed in the recent forty-five years (apart from the cap change mentioned), so it can be assumed to have been consistent since its founding.

The first degree conferred by University of Waikato was an honorary doctorate in 1967 to the Governor-General of New Zealand, Sir Bernard Fergusson (later Lord Ballantrae). However, a photograph from the day suggests that his dress does not appear be the standard gown, but has open sleeves, much more like the [d1] Cambridge doctors' gown [d1].[22]

PhD academic dress across Aotearoa universities

At least seven of the universities have broadly the same PhD gown: the Cambridge Master of Arts gown with some kind of coloured facings. Otago and Victoria depart

16 *The University of Otago Calendar,* 1963, 1975, and 1992 (Dunedin: University of Otago, 1963, 1975, 1992).

17 *The University of Auckland Calendar,* 1973 (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1972).

18 Personal communication, Paul Fielder, FBS, December 2023.

19 The facing on the gown is meant to to go the hem; it is detachable. *Lincoln University Calendar*, 1992 (Lincoln: Lincoln University, 1992).

20 *Auckland University of Technology Calendar*, 2006 (Auckland: Auckland University of Technology, 2006).

21 Cox, pp. 19 ff.; *The University of Waikato Calendar*, 1980, in Pilkington, fn. 38, p. 173.

22 The original photograph is at <onehera.waikato.ac.nz/nodes/view/1934> [retrieved 26 April 2025].



Figs 6A, 6B. Lincoln University PhD.



Figs 7A, 7B. Auckland University of Technology PhD.



Figs 8A, 8B. University of Waikato PhD.









Fig. 9. The First Graduation ceremony, in 1967, at the University of Waikato.

from the standard in colour and facings, respectively. Waikato does not specify the shape of its gown, but it is unique in Aotearoa for closing entirely at the front. Due to this anomaly, it will not be included in detailed discussions of gown shape.

PhD caps are generally either Tudor bonnets (AUT, Auckland, Massey, Waikato) or John Knox caps (VUW, Canterbury, Lincoln, Otago). The choice between Tudor bonnets and Knox caps appears to follow a geographic division, with VUW and the South Island universities adopting Knox caps, while the North Island universities use Tudor bonnets. This may reflect historical provincial rivalries.

Six of the eight universities have the same hood, Cambridge full [f1], with only Waikato and VUW differing. As with the Waikato gown, the shape of its hood is not specified, meaning it could, in practice, resemble the standard Cambridge MA hood used by other universities. The colours specified for the hoods also vary. Three universities have single-colour hoods (plus VUW), while the remaining four use one colour for the shell, lined with another. A summary of all specifications is given in Table 1.

The eight Aotearoa universities feature several commonalities in their dress design. However, in the sixty-two years since the dissolution of UNZ, the PhD academic dress evolution has diverged. The UNZ dress had two options for robe colour, both a black and a coloured gown. The first bifurcation separated Otago, which retained the coloured gown, from the other universities, which kept black gowns. The next separation comes with the development of robe facings. The sudden introduction of gown facings may have coincided with the PhD becoming the standard research doctorate. As PhD graduations increased in the late 1960s and early 1970s, universities may have sought a clearer way to distinguish PhD graduates from masters' graduates, since the robes were identical, hoods were very similar, and most universities still used a tren-

Table 1. Summary of PhD academic dress regulations with universities in geographic order from north to south.

University	Gown [m2]	Facings	Hood [f1]	Hood lining	Cap
Auckland	Black	Scarlet & gold	Scarlet	Scarlet	Tudor bonnet [h2]
AUT	Black	Post office red	Post office red	Burgundy	Tudor bonnet [h2]
Waikato	Maroon unspecified (similar to [m2])	*	Crimson unspecified (similar to [f1])	Crimson	Tudor bonnet [h2]
Massey	Black	Post office red	Post office red	Dark blue	Tudor bonnet [h2]
VUW	Black	*	Scarlet stole	-	Knox cap [h3]
Canterbury	Black	Signal red	Canterbury grey (similar to [f1])	Signal red	Knox cap [h3]
Lincoln	Black	Ultramarine	Ultramarine (similar to [f1])	Indian yellow	Knox cap [h3]
Otago	Ruby red	*	Ruby red	Ruby red	Knox cap [h3]

* These gowns do not have facings in a contrasting colour.

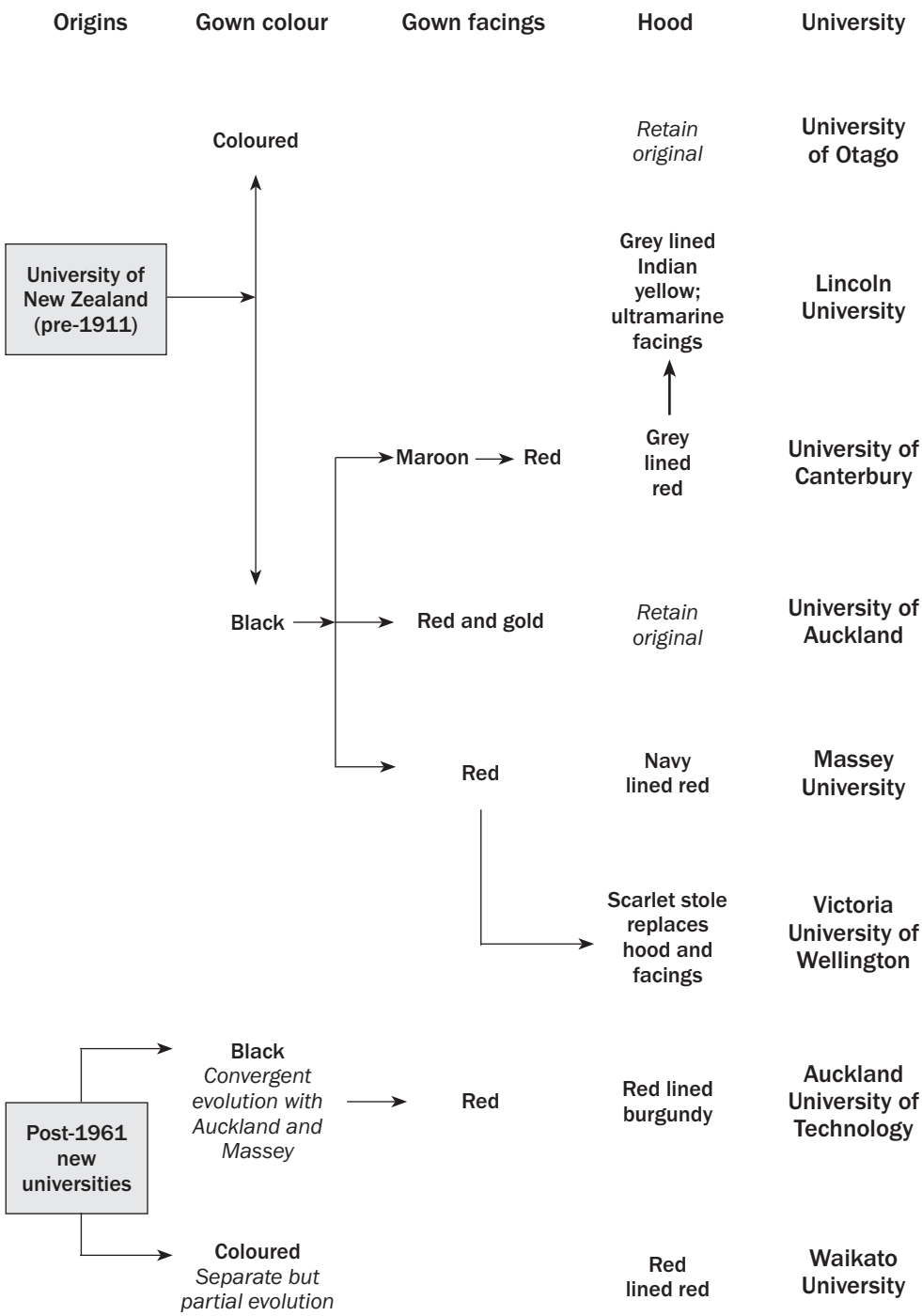
cher for all degrees at the time. VUW is unique in developing the facings and then losing them again, showing the most evolution over time. Table 2 shows a map of the evolution of PhD dress. While not mentioned in the table, it is important to note that all but Waikato relate to the Cambridge pattern MA gown and hood.

In many ways, the Otago PhD dress is the one that most resembles the dress of the early PhD in Aotearoa, with Waikato looking the most different yet featuring many of the same colours and trim in a different design. However, UNZ had two colour options for its gowns, so the Otago PhD is only half the story. The second closest would be the Auckland PhD dress, where the only departure is the red and gold gown facings. Despite having no connection to UNZ, the AUT dress visually aligns with it, perhaps intentionally. While AUT had existed as a technical school and later a polytechnic since 1895 (predating VUW), it was a relatively new university and may have opted for a more traditional design rather than developing a distinctive academic dress as Waikato did.

The future of PhD dress in Aotearoa

Over the past half-century, the PhD in Aotearoa has evolved significantly in its aims, breadth, and depth, as well as in the disciplines it encompasses. Looking ahead to the next century, the PhD's continued evolution invites speculation on how its academic dress might change. As the qualification becomes more widespread, practical considerations may drive further standardization. Universities with distinctive academic

Table 2. Scheme of PhD dress in Aotearoa.



dress but lower PhD enrolments might choose to adopt the dress of larger institutions. Periodic proposals to re-establish a national university—reviving the University of New Zealand in some form—could also lead to a consolidation of academic dress across institutions, whether for efficiency or symbolic unity.

There is also precedent for universities independently reinventing their academic dress. In 1998, Victoria University of Wellington replaced its PhD hood and facings with a stole, also adopted for a range of master's degrees. In 2014, Massey University redesigned the dress of senior officials, introducing garments made of fine Aotearoa merino wool and incorporating wheat and Māori poutama patterns to reflect the university's history and values.[23]

Globally, there are growing movements to reconsider and adapt academic dress for local contexts, and Aotearoa is no exception.[24] In 2022, textile artist Kiri Nathan MNZM (Ngā Puhi, Ngāti Hine, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Haua) designed Te Kākahu Hou ('The New Cloak') for an Education New Zealand Manapou ki te Ao campaign celebrating the reopening of Aotearoa's borders for international students. This project, which involved collaboration with her design team, international students (around whom the cloaks were designed and to whom they were given), and fashion and sustainability students at Whitecliffe College of Arts, resulted in eight bespoke cloaks that blended European academic traditions with Aotearoa's textile and cultural heritage. While Te Kākahu Hou was a symbolic initiative rather than a direct proposal for academic dress reform, it highlights the potential for future academic regalia to incorporate Indigenous design, sustainable materials, and new approaches to meaning-making.[25] The project and final designs can be found online.[26]

Conclusion

As Aotearoa marks a century of the PhD, the academic dress of its doctoral graduates remains a visible testament to the enduring influence of the University of New Zealand. Despite institutional divergence over the past six decades, core elements of UNZ's PhD dress still define modern regalia. The black Cambridge MA-style gown, once a universal standard, remains prevalent across most universities, even as variations in facings and hood linings have developed. Otago's ruby red gown and Waikato's departure from the traditional Cambridge style stand out as unique, yet their hoods and colours still maintain ties to earlier traditions.

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23 Scott Pilkington, 'Examining Official Dress in Universities in Aotearoa New Zealand', *TBS*, 20 (2020), pp. 9–13. The author is currently working on a project detailing changes to official academic dress which it is hoped will be published in due course.

24 The author is currently working on a project which includes a component interviewing graduating students about how they interact with academic dress and what future they envisage.

25 Ricki Green, 'Education New Zealand Reimagines Graduation Gowns in New Campaign Via Special Group', *Campaign Brief*, 22 June 2022, online at <campaignbrief.co.nz/2022/06/22/education-new-zealand-reimagines-graduation-gowns-in-new-campaign-via-special-group/> [retrieved 18 May 2025]. Matthew Knott, 'Education New Zealand Launches New Marketing Campaign', *Study Travel*, 1 June 2022, online at <studytravel.network/magazine/news/0/29078> [retrieved 18 May 2025].

26 At <nz.specialgroup.com/case-studies/te-kakahu-hou> [retrieved 18 May 2025].

Looking ahead, the next century of the PhD may bring new changes to academic dress. Whether through greater standardization, the reintroduction of a national university, or the adoption of Indigenous designs, doctoral regalia may continue to evolve. Yet history suggests that change in academic dress is often gradual, with tradition exerting a strong pull even as new ideas emerge. The persistence of UNZ design elements across Aotearoa's universities underscores the lasting impact of the country's first national university. Whatever transformations lie ahead, it is likely that echoes of UNZ will continue to be seen in PhD academic dress, just as the PhD qualification itself continues to balance legacy with innovation.

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