

# CHILE'S UNIVERSIDAD ANDRÉS BELLO IS YOUNG AND REACHING FOR THE STARS

A conversation with **ARIEL ORELLANA**, vice rector of research at Universidad Andrés Bello



Founded in 1988, Universidad Andrés Bello's youth is belied by its ranking and reputation. Recognised in Chile by the National Commission of Accreditation, it is also accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in the US. In 2017 it was among the top four Chilean institutions in the Shanghai Ranking survey, and in the Scimago Institutions Ranking, the Santiago-based university was third nationally. Ariel Orellana, its vice rector of research, describes how the university has matured.

**How has Universidad Andrés Bello built up scientific strengths so quickly?**

There was a firm commitment to develop research as part of the university's mission. It brought an active interest in hiring faculty with research experience — leading to the gathering of senior faculty members and talented young academics. In the beginning the focus was on chemistry and biological sciences, and then physics, astronomy, ecology, engineering, education, social sciences and the humanities, among others, were developed. As a consequence, different PhD programmes have been created, supporting research growth.

**How has the university made itself an attractive place to do research?**

We have a strong commitment towards research, with efficient policies and academic quality assurance mechanisms that have allowed us to become highly competitive: internal funding for research grants in different disciplines, support to attend international conferences, great access to equipment as well as protected time allocation for research projects.

**What other incentives do you provide for researchers starting their careers?**

Chile's main funding agency is the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Research (FONDECYT). Researchers with FONDECYT grants are

allowed to use the overhead (17 percent) to provide additional support to their initiatives, such as for equipment and travel.

**What is the research culture like at Andrés Bello?**

We have a young and vibrant community that is expanding. There is a spirit of shared common interest, and in the last five years, three of our researchers won the award for the most distinguished young Chilean scientist in the field of biology. Most researchers are bound to research units such as centres or departments, where common research interests favour collaborative work, attracting PhD and masters students. In the humanities, social sciences and nursing, there is an increasing development of interdisciplinary programmes.

**What kinds of work are your most vibrant groups doing?**

Astronomers are active in major discoveries, such as the recent observation of a 'kilonova' generated by the fusion of neutron stars. The first Chilean dinosaur ever described, which was reported in *Nature*, was discovered by a geologist from Universidad Andrés Bello. Chemists are carrying out world-class applied physical and theoretical chemistry with impacts on new developments in material sciences and catalysts, while researchers in biological sciences are driving new insights in neuroscience, structural biology, microbiology and plant biology.

**Why is astronomy such a strength in Chile, and particularly at Andrés Bello?**

Because we have clear skies throughout the year, the European Southern Observatory (ESO) and the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) of radio telescopes, among others, were built here. Chilean astronomers are guaranteed ten percent of the observation time at these facilities. It was natural for the university to develop this field, so we have an undergraduate programme, a PhD programme in astrophysics and a very active research group in astronomy.

**Any other international consortiums?**

We participated in international biotechnology efforts to publish the peach genome and the strawberry genome. We are part of the Latin American Chinese European Galaxy Formation Network (LACEGAL). In addition, our researchers collaborate with top research centres worldwide.

**Why are such international collaborations important?**

Trying to publish in high-impact journals from Chile is not easy, unless you have a network of people. Having collaborations with the US and Europe allows us to get access to infrastructure and equipment.

**How are you drawing international students?**

We are getting a significant number from Latin America — Argentina, Colombia, Peru.

Our graduate programmes in chemistry, biotechnology and molecular biosciences in particular are becoming known at an international level.

**What is an example of why Andrés Bello is a good place to do research?**

We are a very flexible institution. Being a younger university, we have an efficient management system which can make things happen more quickly than at other institutions. For instance, we have a group of young researchers who excel at working with anaerobic microorganisms, so we made certain the group has the infrastructure it needs.

**Any other major infrastructure developments?**

We are creating a new building for experimental research, with 5,000 square metres of lab space that will contain animal facilities and cutting-edge equipment for cell sorting, atomic force microscopy, and a physical properties measurement system (PPMS). We were the first research university in Chile to provide X-ray facilities for research in chemistry, material sciences and geology. We are also pursuing the highest standards of research equipment in cell biology, with state-of-the-art confocal microscopy.





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