



Changing Lives

**INSPIRATIONAL STORIES
FROM CQUNIVERSITY**

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Changing Lives

At CQUniversity we change lives. From trades training to PhDs, people of all ages and from all walks of life come to CQU to change their careers, learn new skills and turn passions into lifelong pathways.

In this edition of **Changing Lives**, we've assembled stories of remarkable individuals whose lives have undergone profound transformations through the power of university study. We invite you to explore the extraordinary narratives of triumph, growth, and discovery that echo the diverse paths paved by education.

From overcoming personal challenges to embracing newfound passions, each story is a testament to the boundless possibilities that unfold

when one dares to pursue higher education. Whether it be the pursuit of knowledge, the forging of lifelong connections, or the realisation of untapped potential, these narratives illuminate the myriad ways in which CQU is a catalyst for change.

Join us in celebrating the triumphs of those who dared to dream, learn, and redefine their destinies. As we delve into these transformative tales, may you be inspired to recognise the untapped potential within yourself and consider the incredible impact that a university education can have.

The following stories were produced by CQUniversity's Corporate Communications team.



Associate Professor Michael Cowling, Dr Geoff Augutis, and Associate Professor Linda Pfeiffer

Turning a diagnosis into purpose

By Isis Symes

Six years ago, on an ordinary flight back from a work trip, a casual conversation changed the trajectory of Geoff Augutis' life. The Bundaberg local and CQU alumnus was sitting beside a university professor and struck up a conversation.

'Remarkably, I emerged unscathed, both physically and mentally, and my work continued.'

"He explained his role in supervising PhD students, and I casually mentioned how I'd always wanted to pursue a PhD myself," Geoff recalls.

He said the passenger's response was direct and unexpectedly challenging: "Why not do it now?"

"I had no answer. A year later, I enrolled – not knowing where it might lead, just a vague sense that I wanted to contribute to something meaningful."

At the time, his business Queensland Computers, which he founded with brother Luke 20 years prior, was thriving financially, but faced a critical gap: the technology it sold wasn't being used effectively in classrooms.

"This realisation sparked an effort to not just sell, but to empower schools to maximise the value of their investments. "My PhD became focused on addressing these real-world challenges," he explained.

Through research, Geoff said he stumbled upon an unexpected gap – the untapped potential of peer facilitation, where students help one another integrate technology into their learning.

"This discovery shifted my thesis, and I envisioned using my findings to help educators design more effective programs – a vision rooted in both personal and professional fulfillment."

But life had other plans.

In February 2024, after a brief foray into Muay Thai kickboxing for fitness, the 37-year-old husband and father of three children began experiencing unexplained dizzy spells.

"A series of scans revealed a 40mm brain tumour. What was initially thought to be benign turned out to be a rare and slow-growing form of brain cancer called oligodendroglioma," Dr Augutis said.

The diagnosis didn't stop the determined candidate from completing his PhD.

"I contacted my supervisors Linda Pfeiffer and Michael Cowling and notified them of

—Cont.

my situation and that I would be undergoing surgery, aware of the possibility that the procedure might impair my cognitive abilities," he explained.

"Remarkably, I emerged unscathed, both physically and mentally, and my work continued."

In December 2024, Dr Augutis crossed the CQUniversity graduation stage to not only officially receive his doctorate, but to share his inspiring story with the graduating crowd as the guest speaker.

And his speech barely left a dry eye in the house.

His journey, from launching a successful

business with his brother while studying an undergraduate degree, to navigating a life-altering diagnosis – has reinforced one truth: life rarely follows a linear path, but even in uncertainty, there is purpose.

"Whether mentoring young talent at our company, working to improve technology in schools, or cherishing moments with my family, I am focused on leaving a legacy of impact and gratitude."

Geoff Augutis' journey isn't just a story about overcoming obstacles. It's about embracing them, finding meaning in the struggle and striving to make every moment count.





Award sparks interest in red seaweed

By Priscilla Roberts

CQUniversity PhD researcher Emma Theobald's studies into red seaweed (*Asparagopsis*) have earned her a national marine science award and an opportunity to showcase the importance and opportunities that exist for this vital marine species.

The Coastal Marine Ecosystems Research Centre PhD student has been awarded the 2024 Allen Award from the Australia Marine Sciences Association (AMSA).

The Allen Student Travel Award provides full financial support to an outstanding postgraduate student to attend and present research at the ASMA conference.

The Gladstone-based researcher's work has focused on developing cultivation techniques for *Asparagopsis taxiformis*. She aims to inform nursery protocols to support the development and scaling of ocean-based *Asparagopsis taxiformis* cultivation, an emerging industry with significant commercial and environmental potential.

Emma's presentation discussed the effects

of temperature, irradiance, and nutrient supplementation on inducing reproduction and promoting spore production in this economically important red seaweed.

Emma is excited for her research findings to help maximise productivity in seaweed hatcheries, to produce a reliable supply of young *Asparagopsis* plants for ocean-based cultivation.

"There is global interest in farming the red seaweed *Asparagopsis*, due to its ability to reduce methane emissions in cattle by over 80 per cent and increase feed efficiency when included in small quantities in cattle feed," she explained.

"*Asparagopsis* is excellent at absorbing nutrients as it grows, and it has significant potential to be used for improving water quality in nutrient-enriched waters, including in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon."

However Emma said there are significant knowledge gaps around the farming of *Asparagopsis*, including methods for

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Inside the CMERC lab in Gladstone where Emma Theobald is nurturing her red seaweed spores

maximising growth, managing contamination, and establishing the best conditions for hatchery culture of this seaweed.

"These knowledge gaps are hindering the development and scaling of the Asparagopsis farming industry, a sector currently in its infancy, but with the potential to be worth as much as \$1 billion by 2040 in Australia alone."

'Sharing my research results with the Asparagopsis industry, both within Australia and globally, will help to inform farming protocols, allowing scaling of production and development of supply chains, bringing positive environmental and social outcomes.'

"Sharing my research results with the Asparagopsis industry, both within Australia and globally, will help to inform farming protocols, allowing scaling of production and development of supply chains, bringing positive environmental and social outcomes."

The Australian Seaweed Institute is the commercial partner for the research and is interested in its application in supporting the development of a network of ocean-based seaweed biofilters in the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, with the potential to improve water quality, contributing to the Reef 2050 Water Quality Improvement Plan.

The Australian Seaweed Institute's research program is supported by the Reef Trust, a partnership between the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and the Australian Government.

Emma's research aims to fill some of these knowledge gaps using laboratory-based experiments and will be complementary to broader industry research efforts being led by the Australian Sustainable Seaweed Alliance to develop hatchery techniques for Asparagopsis.



First Nations cousins Jay Warcon and Tylin Guthrie have graduated from CQUniversity's Bachelor of Medical Science (Pathway to Medicine) course

First Nations cousins' doctor dreams

By Priscilla Roberts

Two First Nations cousins and doctors-to-be crossed the stage at the graduation ceremony in Rockhampton, to complete the first leg of their seven-year study journey to practicing medicine.

Tylin Guthrie and Jay Warcon graduated with Bachelor of Medical Science (Pathway to Medicine) degrees – Jay with Distinction – as part of CQUniversity's first cohort of medical students.

'Growing up, I didn't really see any Indigenous doctors...'
—Tylin Guthrie

With proud families encouraging their decision to pursue medical careers, the pair has only huge praise for the support they have received from their family and the CQUniversity community.

"I think my family are pretty proud of me and I am pretty proud of myself too," said Tylin, who is the first in her immediate family to complete a degree.

"For me, I just wanted to make my family proud and give other young Indigenous kids someone to look up to.

"Growing up, I didn't really see any Indigenous doctors. So, I just want to be someone that other young Indigenous kids can look up to and make them realise that

they can achieve anything they want to and they can be anything they want to be."

For Jay, being able to study in his hometown for the past three years has been amazing.

"Quite simply, graduating from this degree means a lot to me.

"This is really inspiring for us and our families

"As both Tylin and myself are Darumbal, being able to study together on Country (as Rockhampton is in Darumbal country) has been a great privilege.

"Not only that, but knowing that we will become some of the first Darumbal doctors is also an honour and a privilege."

Tylin said the entire experience was "pretty surreal".

"To have two Indigenous people graduating from university is a huge achievement within itself, so to be able to do it with your cousin is pretty cool!

"We have definitely become closer over the last few years. I think the end goal for both of us was to make our families proud, and I think we have done that!"

Jay said he hopes they inspire other young First Nations students to pursue rewarding careers.

"We have shown that it is possible for First Nations people to achieve our dreams, even if they are hard to achieve."

Jay has also been supported by a CQUniCares BHP Indigenous Scholarship since 2023.

Among the many highlights of their time at

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CQUniversity, the pair both cherished their close-knit cohort - and they are among 14 to graduate in Rockhampton.

"I truly believe we have become each other's family!" said Tylin.

"You spend so much time with each other you begin to fight like brothers and sisters.

"The last three years have been filled with nothing but laughter. It's nice to have people to relate to and who are going through a similar journey."

The cousins now continue their medical journey in the University of Queensland's four-year Doctor of Medicine degree as part of the Regional Medical Pathway program.

The Regional Medical Pathway is an Australian-first university and hospital partnership between CQUniversity, the University of Queensland, and the Central Queensland and Wide Bay Hospital and Health Services.

CQUniversity's Bachelor of Medical Science (Pathway to Medicine) articulates directly to the University of Queensland's Doctor of Medicine (MD), allowing students to complete the full seven years of study in the Central Queensland and Wide Bay regions. Learn more at CQU's Medicine Pathways website.





CQU Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT)
scholarship recipient
Ritu Singh

Fashion future forged from struggles

By Tiahna Fiddling

From a challenging childhood on the streets of India's capital city, to launching her own fashion enterprise - a CQUniversity Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT) scholarship has helped Ritu Singh design her dream life.

After Ritu's family faced severe financial hardship on the streets of Delhi, her mother sought help from SBT, which provides crucial support services to street and working children. The aim of the Trust is to remove kids from the streets and empower them through community centre housing and education.

'In every situation, you have to move on, whether it's hard or uncomfortable for you.'

CQUniversity has been a proud partner of the Trust since 2011, supporting the education of SBT's former street children through

scholarships.

"My mother used to send me to the open shelter home at Connaught Place to study. One of the teachers suggested I attend SBT's Aarushi Home. That was the turning point for me.

"At Aarushi Home, I was enrolled in the Non-Formal Education program, and soon after, in a private school," she said.

Ritu excelled in her studies and completed her high school education with commendable results.

With the support of CQUniversity's SBT scholarship, Ritu went on to fulfill her dream of studying fashion design at the prestigious Pearl Institute in Delhi.

Ritu also tragically lost both her parents and sister during her studies.

Despite the struggles, she remained committed to her education.

"In every situation, you have to move on, whether it's hard or uncomfortable for you," Ritu said.

"I was fortunate to have unwavering support

—Cont.

from CQUniversity throughout my journey." After completing her degree, Ritu decided to venture into entrepreneurship, founding her own fashion brand, Phulwa Creation, which she named after her mother.

Currently working as a fashion consultant, Ritu said her enterprise pays tribute to the strength and support of her family.

The CQUniversity Salaam Baalak Trust Scholarships has supported more than 100 children, enabling them to pursue undergraduate courses across various disciplines, from commerce and engineering to

fashion design and cinematography. Through SBT, CQUniversity is committed to changing lives and building brighter futures for vulnerable children in India, learn more at CQU's SBT website.





Dr Jaime Manning with students from Park Avenue State School at the Kids 2 Farm event

Connecting kids to agriculture

By Priscilla Roberts

CQUniversity has staged more than 100 events for primary and secondary schools across Australia in 2024 to showcase the vast range of career opportunities that exist in the agricultural sector.



Nearly 1500 students from 33 CQ schools participated

From learning about cattle monitoring technology to coding robots for farm use, using technology to identify sweetness in fruit to learning about the sources of all the milk we see on our grocery store shelves, students

have gained great insight into the changing world of agriculture.

The school engagement activities are run by CQUniversity's hugely successful Agri-Tech Education and Extension research team. "This year we have connected with more students, teachers, parents, and industry partners than ever before," said Associate Professor Amy Cosby, head of CQUniversity's Agri-Tech Education and Extension team. "More than 5700 students registered for events across the country to increase their knowledge and perception of ag and careers."

In 2024 the entire Park Avenue State School student cohort participated in the Kids 2 Farm project for a day, highlighting the support the team has received from schools in Central Queensland.

Nearly 1500 students from 33 schools in Central Queensland have participated in the team's programs in 2024.

The Agri-Tech Education and Extension team also launched five micro-credentials for Queensland teachers in 2024, awarding an impressive 450 digital badges to educators.

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Park Avenue State School students learn about wearable technology for cattle

‘These micro-credentials were a way to showcase to them the various ways they can embed agricultural concepts into their curriculum, into their classrooms, regardless of what they are teaching.’

CQUniversity Senior Lecturer, Dr Jaime Manning said the micro-credentials aimed to upskill teachers so they can impart the knowledge and understanding that their students will need for future careers in the sector.

Dr Manning explained that many of the teachers who participated in the program had little agricultural knowledge or qualifications.

“It is important to us that our projects also reach teachers who may not be confident with agriculture.

“These micro-credentials were a way to showcase to them the various ways they can embed agricultural concepts into their curriculum, into their classrooms, regardless of what they are teaching.”

CQUniversity has also been announced as the provider of the Agribusiness Gateway to Industry Schools program.

“This initiative will activate school engagement and education programs, introducing young Queenslanders to the many exciting careers available in the State’s agricultural industry,” said Assoc Prof Cosby.

“It’s just another way we will be engaging with the state’s school students in the coming years.”



Jody defies odds to gain degree

By Greg Chapman

Jody Knight is the epitome of perseverance, battling chronic pain and health issues for almost a decade to complete her Bachelor of Digital Media at CQUniversity.

The 58-year-old woman who lives in Bella Creek, near Imbil in the Gympie region of Queensland, graduated from the course, completing a nine-year journey which began with CQU's Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) course.

Jody's journey started when she saw an advert for CQU on a bus in Imbil in 2012 and it spurred her to take a new path in life.

"I am disabled through chronic pain and health issues, and I wanted more from life than sitting around in pain all day," Jody said.

"I thought I'd like to be an artist of some kind, and so I looked into what courses were on offer at CQU and found the Bachelor of Digital Media Course very interesting."

After attending Open Day she enrolled in STEPS and successfully completed the course, opening the door to start the Bachelor of Digital Media

in 2015.

Although Jody's health condition raised many challenges, her determination and support from family and CQU staff kept her going.

"At first, I could cope with doing two units per term, but I had to realise that I could only do one unit of study per term as I was stressing myself too much," she said.

"I was also stubborn initially because I didn't want to register as a disabled student, but I soon realised I was only hurting myself by not doing that so I got an Accessibility Plan organised."

The Accessibility Plan provided Jody extensions on assignments when her condition became unmanageable.

"My health has taken quite a beating over the last nine years while studying, so it's taken great willpower to keep going," she said.

"I really loved trying all the different aspects of digital media in the first-year subjects such as illustration and visualisation, photography, digital video and audio, web design, animation, graphic design, media writing and

—Cont.

communication in a professional context. "I wanted to feel proud of myself (by doing the course) and I wanted my mum and dad, my son and daughter and my partner to be proud of me too. That's what kept me going. I also wanted something I could do even if I did have to be sitting down a lot because of my condition, and thankfully, I have that now."

'My health has taken quite a beating over the last nine years while studying, so it's taken great willpower to keep going.'

"When I completed the course, I cried happy tears of relief and pride for about 20 minutes. I can't explain the feeling I felt."

"I was so amazed I'd done it and quite well too. Mum and dad are very proud by the way. It's funny how even at 58 years old I still wanted to make my mum and dad proud."

Jody said she was proud of the work she completed during the course including several short films, her photography and 2D animation assignments.

"The photography assignment covered

the birth of one of my grandchildren that ended up being quite complicated as he was born early and one of his lungs collapsed. Everything turned out fine in the end, but the photographs really tell the story quite well," she said.

Jody said she hoped to use the skills and knowledge learnt from the course to make more short films, animations, music videos and documentaries across various topics and genres.

"I also want to help organise art installations that involve kids during school holidays especially in rural areas where kids have limited play/fun activities on offer at times," she said.

"I have already done some graphic design work, and I'd like to keep doing some more if possible. I realise that at 58 years old and disabled I'm not likely to be offered a job any time soon, but I've done this so I can be my own boss and do the things I want to do."

"I'm going to be who I want to be after all, and for that I'm extremely grateful to CQU and its wonderful staff."



One of Jody's digital artworks she created while studying the Bachelor of Digital Media



Positive Psychology
alumnus Krista Barry

Krista's deep dive into psychology

By Mary Bolling

She's had multiple careers in the water, and Krista Barry is determined her ocean experience can flow into helping others. The Gold Coast surf school founder and CQUniversity Positive Psychology alumnus is launching a new ocean therapy initiative, working with groups and individuals to grow resilience, bravery and energy.

A passionate advocate for positive psychology, Krista said she first connected with the ideas as a teenage 1500m swimmer, training at the Australian Institute of Sport and at one time ranked fourth in the world.

"I didn't realise it back then, but all the principles we grew up with, and got from our coaches, were all about resilience and positive mindset," she explained.

Now in her 50s, and managing Godfathers of the Ocean Surf School for the past 23 years, Krista has seen first-hand how surfing has helped her clients feel more positive about tackling challenges back on land.

"While I was studying with CQU, I was realising how many of the positive psychology concepts were relevant to teaching surfing – facing vulnerability, and having a growth mindset, and sitting with unpredictability," she explained.

"At the same time, I was noticing a movement of more middle-aged women learning to surf, and wanting to get into the ocean, so I focused my research on the reasons behind that." Mrs Barry found that big life changes, such as divorce, or children leaving home, or

career challenges, often prompted a desire to get out comfort zones, and face something intimidating.

Graduating with her Master of Applied Positive Psychology in 2022, Krista then presented her research at the 2023 World Congress on Positive Psychology in Vancouver, Canada.

"Traditionally surfing is a male-dominated sport, especially where we operate at Burleigh Heads on the Gold Coast!" she said.

"So focusing on this female cohort gave me a new perspective on why people surf, and the psychological benefits that come with the process.

"Surfing is hard to do when you're young, let alone older, and getting into the line-up with people who have been surfing all their lives!"

"But deciding to do that, and stepping up despite the fear, was changing how these women approached life, and shifting their attitudes and positivity and energy."

CQUniversity's Positive Psychology courses are available to study online, options to structure across six months, or up to four years.

Krista said CQU's practical units covered topics including coaching, research and group facilitation, and she was able to implement strategies in her surf school, and to design Flow Like Water Academy.

"The course is so helpful, not only for my work and career, but I loved learning about myself, and learning how to help others too," she said.

"It's exciting to be able to share what I've learned, and know from experience the impact positive psychology will have."



Krystal Perger accepts her degree from CQUniversity Deputy Chancellor Shelia Houston

Krystal's life-changing scholarship

By Jocelyn Sticklen and Rob Fabiny

Bundaberg's Krystal Perger has graduated with her second degree from CQUniversity and is reflecting on the scholarship that has made it possible.

Krystal completed a Bachelor of Psychological Science and recognises the transformative legacy of the Walter and Eliza Hall Trust Opportunity Scholarships for a Student with a Physical Disability.

Her journey at CQUniversity was deeply shaped by the scholarship and says that receiving the scholarship gave her the confidence to grow and succeed.

"Receiving the scholarship gave me confidence and enabled me to take on units that I felt were beyond my reach because of residential schools and costly learning resources.

"These experiences have been essential to my academic progress and hold deep personal significance by transforming the way I view my disability and fostering a sense of empowerment," she said.

Krystal also said she faced significant challenges during her studies, including having to withdraw from courses twice due to injury and illness.

Reflecting on these moments, she emphasised the importance of seeking support: "It's okay to ask for help, and it can make a world of difference.

"By leaning on CQUniversity's resources, my scholarship and my own resilience, I overcame these setbacks and continued on a path to success."

As Krystal looks to the future, her passion for healthcare is steadfast and she plans to pursue CQUniversity's Graduate Certificate in Nursing (Re-Entry) program in 2025, with a long-term goal of specialising in mental health nursing.

"My degree in psychological science has provided me with a unique perspective and valuable skills that I can now apply to my nursing goals."

Beyond her academic achievements, Krystal has also made a lasting impact as a student leader and community champion, by mentoring her peers and raising funds for rural health charities.

Since 2017, the Walter and Eliza Hall Trust has provided over \$127,500 in support to CQUniversity students with physical disabilities, providing support for students to pursue

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Krystal Perger recently graduated from her second university degree

‘These experiences have been essential to my academic progress and hold deep personal significance by transforming the way I view my disability and fostering a sense of empowerment.’

degrees in disciplines such as Engineering, Music, Chiropractic, Digital Media, and Law. As the Walter and Eliza Hall Trust Opportunity Scholarship program concludes in 2024, CQUniversity acknowledges its profound and lasting impact on the students who have

benefited from the generous support. CQUniversity’s Deputy Director of Philanthropy, Francois Gallais said that the Trust’s support has not only opened doors for students like Krystal but has also fostered a culture of inclusion and resilience across the university community. “Krystal’s journey exemplifies the power of targeted support and the transformative potential of philanthropy. CQUniversity celebrates her achievements and those of all scholarship recipients, honouring the Walter and Eliza Hall Trust’s legacy of empowering students to overcome challenges and achieve their dreams,” said Mr Gallais.



Dr Yuli Rahmawati from the Universitas Negeri Jakarta with Dr Karena Menzie-Ballantyne at the UNESCO Regional Policy Dialogue in Bangkok

Driving education in the Asia-Pacific

By Priscilla Roberts

At a time of rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific, CQUniversity is leading a charge for systemic change in education to ensure the region is nurturing global citizens and securing sustainable futures.

‘We’re building their compassion, intercultural understanding, empathy and motivation to contribute to their world, as well as providing them with opportunities to develop the cognitive and social emotional skills to do something about it.’

Dr Karena Menzie-Ballantyne, is a Bundaberg-based Senior Lecturer and researcher in Education at CQUniversity. She’s working in consultation with colleagues from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Paris, Bangkok and New Delhi, Sophia University, Japan, the Asia-

Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding (APCIEU) and the Centre for Asia Pacific Excellence at University of Waikato in New Zealand - is steering the development of a road map to support the implementation of UNESCO’s new Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development.

Developed in consultation with key education stakeholders at a Regional Policy Dialogue in Bangkok in June 2024, the road map focuses on actions that link distinct but interconnected components of education, namely human rights, global citizenship, digital technologies, climate change, gender equality, health, well-being and cultural diversity.

Dr Menzie-Ballantyne explained that achieving UNESCO’s big picture goals for education will require Australia, along with the rest of the Asia-Pacific, to rethink the purpose of education and take action to revise education-related policies, curricula, pedagogies, learning resources and environments. Teachers and education personnel also need training and

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Dr Menzie-Ballantyne (right) with Lydia Ruprecht
Global Citizenship Education Team Leader from
UNESCO Head Office Paris

professional development to make it happen on the ground.

"The work we are doing is known by many names such as education for global citizenship, global competence, sustainable development, 21st Century skills, peace education and so on, but its focus is on educating our young people for today's world," she explained.

"We're building their compassion, intercultural understanding, empathy and motivation to contribute to their world, as well as providing them with opportunities to develop the cognitive and social emotional skills to do something about it."

Dr Menzie-Ballantyne said the road map acknowledged that implementation needed to occur in all societal settings and should encompass formal education from early childhood through to tertiary, non-formal and informal education, to ensure learning is life-long and life-wide.

"Too often the focus of education is narrowed to the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy or what is required for an ATAR assessment, or to pass a university or VET qualification.

"No one is denying the importance of ensuring everyone is literate and numerate and has the best start in life, but in our rapidly changing, globalised world we need more.

"We need the critical thinking and digital literacy skills to see past fake news; the empathy and intercultural understanding to identify and respect alternative perspectives; and the ability to collaborate with others for employment and to address pressing local and global issues such as those identified in the Sustainable Development Goals.

"However, without fundamental changes to policy, curricula and pedagogy and how we train teachers to teach these concepts and skills, they will simply stay on the periphery as a 'warm and fuzzy' set of ideas."



Deborah Sandow (pictured right) is presented with a Certificate of Attendance by CATSINaM President Vanessa Browne (left) at the conference in October

Deborah sets sights on US study trip

By Sala Mkoka

University was almost out of reach for Deborah Sandow when a shock subject miscalculation was revealed in her senior year of high school, but now with almost three qualifications under her belt and an overseas study trip on the horizon, there's no barrier to her dreams of revolutionising healthcare for First Nations people.

In the second year of her Bachelor of Nursing with CQUniversity in Rockhampton, Deborah has grappled with the challenges of stop-start study through the COVID-19 pandemic and is balancing the juggling act between assessment and placements, describing her university journey as nothing short of a "rollercoaster". Yet, embracing the challenges through support of lecturers and Indigenous Student Engagement staff, Deborah is now looking ahead to her first overseas study trip to the United States, taking part in an Indigenous International Study Tour coordinated by Aurora Education Foundation, an Indigenous organisation that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to realise their

full education and employment potential. With requirements for successful applicants stipulating a study record of a Distinction average, minimum GPA of 6, or heading for First or upper Second Class Honours, her achievements saw her competitively selected as one of only 10, chosen from First Nations applicants Australia-wide.

"I am extremely grateful for this opportunity and to the Aurora Education Foundation for making this study tour possible as I have never considered studying overseas before, because I didn't think it was possible, nor did I think I had the ability to do so," Deborah said.

"It almost seemed like university was out of reach for me when I found out in Year 12 that I didn't have the correct number of subjects to qualify to apply for university studies.

"I was never told about this or asked if I wanted to attend university, receiving no support from teachers to investigate applying for alternative entry, but thankfully my Indigenous Community Education Counsellor Terry Willmot made enquiries on my behalf.

—Cont.

The Indigenous Support unit at the time helped me to apply to uni and I was finally accepted to study."

Having dabbled with a Bachelor of Arts and eventually finding her footing with a Bachelor of Education in her mid-20s, Deborah worked for several years as a primary school teacher, but didn't quite feel that her journey with education was complete, leading to her decision to enrol in a Bachelor of Nursing in 2019.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, she changed over to the Diploma of Nursing, completing the qualification in 2022, enabling her to feel ready to return to the degree.

'I want to be able to provide nursing care that is culturally safe and appropriate and in a way that First Nations people can understand.'

"I have a strong interest in chronic disease, for example conditions like Type 2 diabetes and chronic kidney disease, in First Nations people," Deborah said.

"I want to be able to provide nursing care that is culturally safe and appropriate and in a way that First Nations people can understand.

"I have seen the lack of First Nations nurses, both male and female, in the regional town that I live in, and my personal experiences as a patient in my local hospital have been very daunting and distressing at times as there are usually only non-Indigenous staff involved in my care.

"I know that I am not the only First Nations person that struggles with this."

As Deborah prepares for her upcoming three-week trip to the US between February and March in 2025, she said she is looking forward to exploring potential postgraduate study options and being able to tour some of the world's most renowned universities.

"I'm really looking forward to visiting the universities on the study tour; we'll be heading to the University of Arizona in Tucson, New York University and Columbia in New York City, and MIT and Harvard in Boston.

"I'm just excited to be able to say that I've been to Harvard!

"But if it wasn't for the support throughout the year from the Rockhampton Indigenous Student Engagement team, and especially

Senior Coordinator Leonie Taylor, I wouldn't be enrolled or participating in this amazing opportunity.

"I would also like to thank Aunty Patricia Leisha (Ghungalu Elder), Leonie, Jessica Birt (Associate Lecturer, School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Sciences) and Laurie Armstrong (Associate Lecturer, School of Access Education) for providing me with references to apply to go on the study tour. I really appreciate it.

"All of this support greatly assisted me with preparations for the trip, such as being able to also participate in workshops at a symposium in Sydney to prepare me to "pitch" myself to university Heads of Course, in order to secure meetings face to face with them when I am in the US.

"This will enable me to find out more information about the courses I have selected to potentially pursue as outlined in the study plan I devised for the application process," Deborah explained.

With the knowledge that she's looking forward to receiving on her trip, in addition to her current studies, the passionate student is looking to the future and the positive impacts she is committed to making and contributing for her people and community.

"First Nations people mistrust the health system which stems from colonisation and government policies at the time, so seeing and being cared for by a First Nations nurse will hopefully ease the stress they may be feeling and improve health outcomes.

"I want to be the Indigenous face for the patients in my care and to be able to develop a rapport with them so that they can get the maximum benefit and understanding of the treatment they are receiving."

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