

CHANGING LIVES

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES FROM CQUNIVERSITY





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At CQUniversity we change lives. From trades training to PhDs, people of all ages and 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 university study has become 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 on the course of one's life.

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

FROM WAR ZONE TO AWARD

Atyaf (front left) with her CQU teachers.

How determination and compassion helped Atyaf Awad find hope

When Atyaf Awad moved from Iraq to Bundaberg as an 11-year-old, the culture shock was overwhelming – but finding caring teachers transformed her experience.

Growing up in a war zone, and with life-long visual impairment, Atyaf said she and her family faced huge challenges.

“Changing from a background of underdevelopment, poverty and limited education to an environment offering compassionate special education programs was still a challenge!” she said.

“Despite facing discrimination based on my culture, religion, and disability, I am grateful for the support and accessibility provided by the remarkable teams at CQUniversity, at Bundaberg State High School and at my workplace (at Bundaberg’s Beemart).”

As a determined high school student, Atyaf grew her English skills and successfully graduated in 2022, supported by Special Education Teacher Melinda Stack.

Now Atyaf is embarking on her Bachelor of Business and Bachelor of Accounting with CQUniversity, empowered by CQU’s pathway program STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies).

“The CQUniversity STEPS course provided me with the skills and confidence I lacked before...I never imagined that a 13-week course could inspire and transform my life in such a reflective way,” she said.

“It is in this environment that diversity is valued, personal growth is adopted and individual potential is recognised.”

Atyaf’s connection to CQU goes back much further though – her father, Dr Lafta Awad Atshan, first moved to Australia to study his PhD with CQUniversity Bundaberg when Atyaf was young. The move separated the family, and they were only reunited in

2015 when Atyaf and the rest of her family secured Australian visas.

But heartbreakingly, her father’s visa ended when he finished his studies, and he had to return to Iraq.

“He has sacrificed everything to ensure that my siblings and I have a successful and safe future,” Atyaf said.

“My dad is my biggest hero. I would do anything in the world to see him again.”

Recently, Atyaf was named a Bundaberg Region Youth Scholarship Awards recipient, one of eight local students recognised for overcoming significant obstacles in pursuit of their personal achievements.

The inspiring student credits passionate teachers, including Mrs Stack and other high school teachers, supporting her achievements.

“I was fortunate to have met incredible teachers who inspired me to never give up and to overcome my disabilities,” she said.

CQU Bundaberg STEPS lecturers Hermina Conradie, Luise Straker and Trixie James provided technology and accessible resources to support Atyaf’s learning and encouraged her to pursue her dreams.

And Atyaf hopes her studies will help her “make a lasting impact on the world.”

“Every journey has its ups and downs, but in the end, every bit of it is worth it...I am ready to embrace the future with gratitude in my heart and a determined spirit and this is just the beginning of my unique journey.”

— By Mary Bolling

CAMP PROMOTES GIRL POWER

Thirty-five Indigenous girls from Mt Morgan State High School and Baralaba State School converged at CQUniversity's Rockhampton North Campus to participate in the second annual Indigenous Girls Academy Leadership Camp.

The CQUniversity-led initiative was held in partnership with the Q-Coal Foundation, and is based on the principles of respectful relationships, strength-based and place-based approaches, as well as cultural support and wellbeing.

CQUniversity Indigenous Connect Officer Kira Allan said the camp aimed at improving the welfare of First Nations youngsters while encouraging them to stay in school.

"Students experienced what it was like living at the student residence, participating in TAFE and university classes as well as engaging in cultural experiences

on-country," Ms Allan said. "The four-day camp saw the girls engage in many activities including resume-writing, boxing, a traditional art session run by Darumbal Youth Services and fun activities such as a movie night and dance party."

The camp concluded with a presentation by Aunty Frances who spoke about her cultural heritage, shared the creation of stories from New Zealand and provided insight into her culture's women's business.

"The girls expressed enjoyment about learning another culture and the pride other cultures have. It empowered them and made them feel more proud to be strong, Indigenous women."

— By Isis Symes



The Indigenous Girls Academy Leadership Camp group of 2023



SCIENCE EARNS PM'S PRIZE

From award-winning student at CQUniversity, to 2023 Prime Minister's Prizes for Science recipient, innovative Kalkie State School teacher Judith Stutchbury says telling a good story is the key to science teaching – and the passionate educator says regional Queensland might be the best place in the world to inspire the next generation of scientists.

Mrs Stutchbury grew up in Bundaberg, and moved to Rockhampton to study a Diploma of Primary Teaching with CQUniversity (then Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education), graduating in 1988.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I left school, but my dad was a veterinary surgeon, so I grew up with science in my backyard – literally!" she laughed.

"Taking that interest and experience in science, I am very thrilled with the pathway the CQU Bachelor of Teaching degree led me on."

Mrs Stutchbury was named the recipient of the Prime Minister's Prize for Excellence in Science Teaching in Primary Schools in October 2023, recognising her efforts as a Reef Guardian teacher, as a global leader in classroom science collaboration, and most recently as an author of the science education resource, *Hatch Saves the Reef*.

"Looking back, a lot of small steps in my teaching have led to big impacts – but I couldn't have done it without the CQU degree!" she said.

"My teaching career has meant I can explore science in ways that have been really mentally interesting, and because I'm staying interested and passionate, I've been

able to inspire my students, too."

While at CQU, Mrs Stutchbury remembers an early push to strive in science, receiving the Bob Beevers Prize for Computing.

The experience also showed her the importance of connecting with people, and building relationships.

"Bob Beavis had passed away, and the award was named in his honour – I remember writing a thank you note to his wife, she she wrote back saying, 'you're the only one who's ever said thank you!'," Mrs Stutchbury said.

"That really stuck with me, that people really appreciate it when you make the extra effort to connect – and students are just little people; they appreciate it too!"

In her teaching placements, and in her first job at a regional Queensland school, Mrs Stutchbury was quick to use the Great Barrier Reef as a teaching tool.

Soon she was sharing her science education with a wider audience after an invitation from a local TV news crew to cover her students' "spaghetti writing" project turned into her hosting a statewide science education series.

"That's the great thing about teaching in regional areas – you can make contacts and make things happen," she said. Kalkie State School, only eight kilometres from the Reef's Mon Repos Beach, is home to the greatest number of loggerhead sea turtles nesting in the South Pacific region, and Mrs Stutchbury's students have learned the importance of marine turtle conservation, and how the

...continued

beach is critical to the survival of the endangered species. Recently, Mrs Stutchbury returned to CQU's lecture theatres, to inspire some first-year Bachelor of Education students as a guest speaker in Bundaberg.

"That was a beautiful opportunity for me, because I know my teaching career wouldn't have happened without my CQU education," she said. "It's wonderful to see a new generation on that same path.

"Although it was also a reminder of how much time has passed since my studies – one of the students put their hand up to tell me I'd been their teacher in Year 3!"

Her students also present their science experiences to other classrooms around the world, as part of the Roots & Shoots project founded by globally renowned primatologist Dr Jane Goodall.

"Some of the students love to jump up in front of the

camera, but not all of them – but it's so important for them to understand talking in front of people isn't scary, it's really a life skill they need, and enthusiasm for the topic can unlock that!

"Kalkie State School is leading the way for global collaboration with other schools across the world, creating connections with other schools that are also passionate about protecting the environment and the world's oceans, and I'm proud to be part of that.

"When parents tell you that you're making a difference in children's lives, and I see it in their attitudes and what they do, it's both very humbling and exciting as a teacher."

— By Mary Bolling

CQUReview

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN MINJERRIBAH

Anthony Galea is ready for the next phase of his life providing health care as a Queensland Ambulance Service cadet paramedic on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island) after recently graduating from CQUniversity.

The 64-year-old Quandamooka man crossed the stage in Brisbane to receive his Diploma of Paramedical Science, continuing a study journey that started with CQU's Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) in 2019. Anthony's decision to become a paramedic was fostered by his desire to help provide better health care to First Nations peoples.

"I have been interested in health care for a long time.

"I started out in Aboriginal health, working in the local community and then with the QAS. It was a natural progression in health," he said.

"I've been a cadet in Minjerribah for two years and I do feel like I am making a difference there."

Anthony said being a mature age student had its challenges, but they were challenges he relished.

"It's been interesting and busy, with lots of study, and balancing university with work, but I've received very good training - practical hands-on, relevant for the role that I am in."

He said he was looking forward to the next phase of study having been admitted into CQU's Bachelor of Paramedic Science.

He encouraged other First Nations peoples to pursue their dreams, whether it be as a paramedic, nurse, or tradesperson.

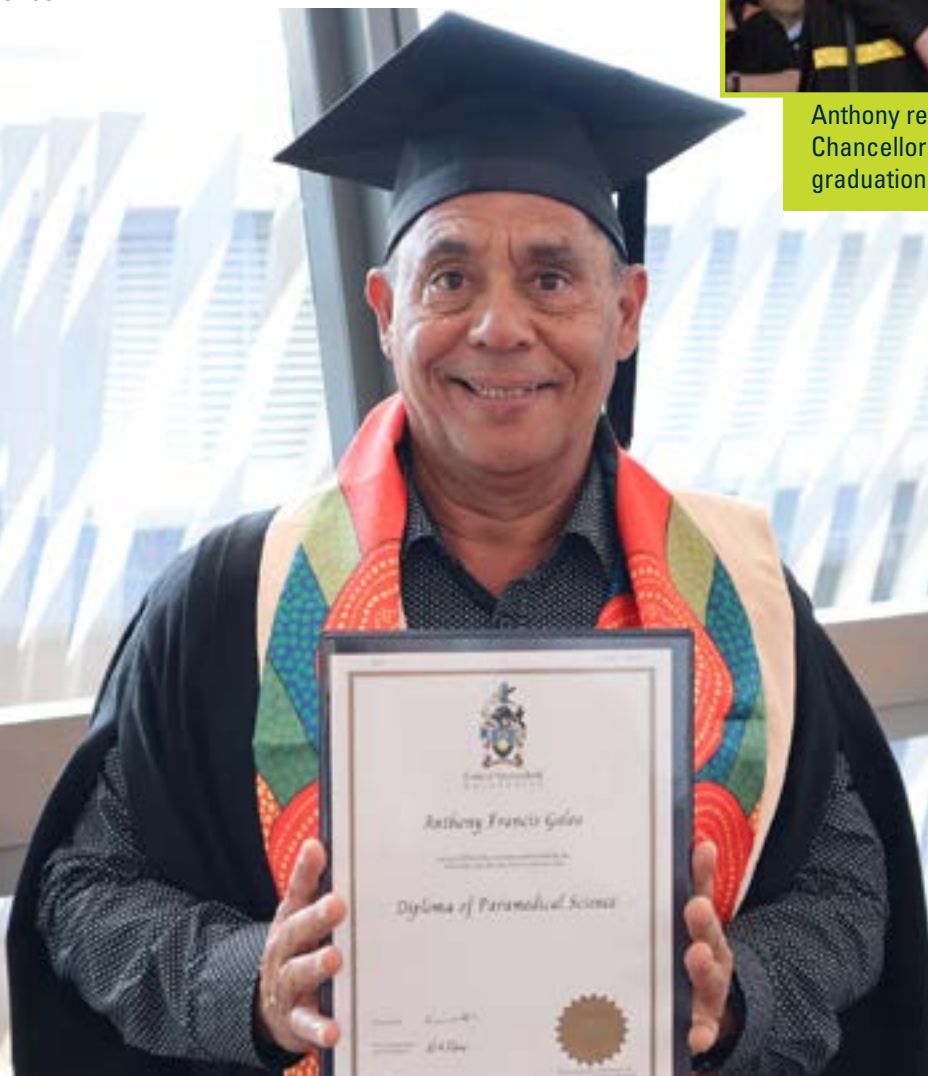
"Yes, just do it, that would be my suggestion, if that's what they would like to become," he said.

"I would also like to thank the QAS Aboriginal and Torres Islander Cultural Safety Unit for their efforts and support, during my studies."

— By Greg Chapman



Anthony receives his testamur from CQU Chancellor Graeme Innes at the 2023 Brisbane graduation ceremony.





STACEY'S HEALTH HARDSHIPS

CQUniversity Diploma of Enrolled Nursing graduate Stacey Mason is arguably the very definition of the 'Aussie battler'.

Despite needing a kidney transplant, three years of dialysis and the threat of heart failure, Stacey has been an amazing mum to her two young children, successfully completed a Diploma, secured permanent casual employment at Rockhampton Hospital – and has now won a Central Queensland Regional Queensland Training Award.

After many years of waiting for a donor, Stacey received a new kidney and although she was unable to receive her Vocational Student of the Year Award at the event in Mackay, she said the award and the new kidney were equally life-affirming.

"I was so shocked to win," she said. "It was a nice surprise.

"I guess I doubted myself that I would win, but it was just nice to have been nominated by my peers and teachers.

"The kidney and the award are both the gift of life."

Stacey said although she'd experienced more than her fair share of health problems, she'd dreamed of becoming a nurse long before they surfaced.

"When I was in high school, just 17, I was given an opportunity to do nursing training with the Australian Defence Force, but a diagnosis of ulcerative colitis meant it wasn't possible as nursing in the ADF is a frontline role," she said.

"Although I wanted to be a combat nurse rather than a civilian one at the time, when my kids came along, I realised I needed something permanent."

Not long after giving birth to her son, Stacey was diagnosed with heart failure and kidney disease and

required regular dialysis, but she was determined to pursue her dream of nursing.

In 2021, Stacey enrolled at CQU, juggling her health alongside her studies, but she said the support she received from her teachers and fellow students was inspiring.

"Being on dialysis twice a week for four hours at a time gave me time to do my assessments – it was either that or sleep and I just got into the study," she said.

"I thought managing study with my health was going to be more challenging, but the support I received from family, friends and CQU kept me going.

"The teachers were so supportive and helpful. As many of us are mums, they tried to work around our school pick up times, allowing us to start classes earlier in the day."

The support paid off and Stacey was able to complete her Diploma of Enrolled Nursing on time. She then landed a casual nursing role at Rockhampton Hospital, working in almost every department.

She said one of her primary motivators for being a nurse – and a patient – was being an advocate for patients and an inspiration to her children, aged five and three.

"They're still quite young to understand – I tell them that some parts of mummy's body don't work properly, but in the future, they'll understand it better," she said.

And the future does indeed look bright for Stacey, who now has a new kidney, an award which recognises her sacrifices, and the possibility of more training.

"I'll have to keep my word now and do the Bachelor of Nursing so I can become a Registered Nurse, so I guess I'll be jumping back into study very soon," she said.

— By Greg Chapman



THE RACE TO VEGAS

A team from Gladstone’s Faith Baptist Christian School celebrated their win at the Australian Horizon Hydrogen Grand Prix (H2GP) regional final by meeting with sponsors to showcase their skills.

As winners of the Australian H2GP, Faith Baptist Christian School became the official Australian representatives to compete at the global event run by Horizon Educational in Las Vegas, USA.

The World Final attracted competitors from across the globe, with the Faith Baptist Christian School team comprising of students Kaleb Galea, Mason Byers, Lola Howells, Kate Alcorn and Emily Sauvageot plus their teacher, Mrs Shantell Nelson.

The team’s attendance at the World Final was supported by several sponsors including Gladstone Ports Corporation (GPC), CQUniversity Australia, the Queensland Government and Stanwell, the CQ-H2 project as well as the school community.

Team Leader of the Faith Baptist Christian School team Kaleb Galea said the group was thrilled to compete on the world stage and put their vehicle to the test, which underwent several enhancements after the Australian final.

“It felt amazing to be a school with less than 120 kids,

competing and winning at a worldwide level!” said Kaleb. Gladstone Ports Corporation (GPC) proudly sponsored the local team, cheering them as they headed to the finals in Las Vegas.

CQU Associate Vice-President for the Wide Bay and Gladstone Regions Luke Sinclair said that CQUniversity was proud to be among a group of sponsors supporting the

team’s participation at the world finals.

“Central Queensland is poised to become a regional leader when it comes to clean energy production and innovation, and we are extremely proud to be engaging a new generation in the opportunities that are aligned with this.”



— By Jocelyn Sticklen



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STUDY, SHELTER AND STABILITY

Michelle Prizeman's study journey has not always been an easy one, but adversity has never stopped the dedicated CQUniversity student from reaching her goals.

When the Queensland resident found herself living in a women's shelter alongside her two young children, Michelle said she was grateful for her studies in helping her overcome one of the most challenging times in her life.

"After the breakdown of my marriage - work, home, friend and family's houses, even our local café was no longer safe for me," Michelle explained.

"A friend recommended I contact DV Connect for support, and they provided us with much-needed accommodation, food, and clothes.

"We lived in the shelter for around three weeks as I struggled to secure a rental and did not have much money for bond."

Determined to provide her family with a stable home, Michelle said she focused on the most important aspects of her life - her kids and career goals.

"Studying full-time, working full-time, and having full custody of my children didn't leave much time for well, anything.

"The three of us sacrificed a lot during those years," she said.

"When we left the shelter, I only had enough money to pay the bond on a one-bedroom apartment, however, it was close to the beach and had a great park for us to play.

"To keep up with my studies, I spent hours typing assignments at the local library and using the free internet at McDonald's to watch my lectures."

Now at the end of her degree, the Bachelor of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) student said she is proud to look back on her experiences and recognise the challenges she faced.

"Around 18 months ago, I was on the phone with one of my teachers as I was struggling with a unit. They suggested I try and get some real-world experience and exposure to assist with my degree.

"The first company I reached out to took me on a couple of days a week which I somehow managed whilst juggling my other job.

"A few months later, I was offered a full-time role and haven't looked back!"

She also acknowledged the support and flexibility CQU provided during her trying times.

"CQU offered me the flexibility I needed to study from home and outside of work hours.

"If I needed help with anything or couldn't attend an online



lecture, the teachers were great at responding to emails or taking phone calls. The support offered to me as an online student was amazing.

"I had great people in my life supporting and encouraging me every day. My teachers, Dr Elise Crawford, Frank Bogna and Dr Aldo Raineri, not only guided me but inspired and flamed my passion for health and safety."

This passion has proven to be a large asset for Michelle who is utilising her rewarding OHS career in the construction industry.

"I decided on OHS because I knew it would offer a challenging career. Legislation is clear, yet fatalities and serious injuries occur across Australia in workplaces every week.

"I was curious and optimistic that I could make a positive impact by empowering people, encouraging change, and stepping away from the 'safety police' stigma attached to the role," she said. "I believe tertiary education is an asset in your professional career and my degree set me up for success when I entered the industry.

"I feel very lucky to have the ability to attend university and thrive and feel supported working in a male-dominated industry."

— By Tiahna Fiddling

TRANSFORMATIVE STEPS

From a blue-collar family and dropping out of high school with barely a passing grade in Year 10, Katrina Johnston now has three tertiary degrees, an academic career and a family following in her footsteps - and is passionate about transformative education.

As Associate Lecturer in the School of Access Education at CQUniversity's Bundaberg campus, Mrs Johnston teaches classes in the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program, CQU's tertiary enabling course where she began.

Now coming full circle, Mrs Johnston is paving the way for students just like her to create new futures for themselves and is setting them up with the necessary knowledge to tackle undergraduate studies with preparedness.

However, she said it wasn't the future she had initially envisioned.

"Pursuing higher education beyond Year 10 was not conventionally contemplated, and I was convinced I'd never be 'university material', as I struggled with my grades in school," Mrs Johnston said.

"But now I can say that I am a woman who has personally thrived with academia, and along with my own study journey, I've been witness to the transformative power of education through my experience as a teacher – I've seen how STEPS has served as a catalyst to enable individuals to achieve not only their dreams but also to surpass their own expectations, opening doors to previously unimagined possibilities."

The catalyst began for Mrs Johnston when she was a young mother of two, working at a supermarket, packing shelves, when the realisation struck that she did not want to remain in a cycle of manual, underpaid labour, knowing that there had to be other ways to create a more fulfilling future.

"I was working as best as I knew how to help support my family, but I knew there had to be better ways of utilising my time wisely," Mrs Johnston reflected.

"I envisioned being able to study while my children were young and in school, where I'd then be able to position myself for a well-paying job once they reached a level of independence that allowed me to re-enter the workforce."

Now holding a Bachelor of Informatics, Graduate Certificate in Tertiary & Adult Education, and a Master of Information Technology majoring in App Development – all with high-level GPAs – Mrs Johnston has been instilling generational change in the students she teaches as well as within her own family. Her academic journey has served as testament that in a supportive, thriving educational environment, one can chart onto a successful trajectory.

That single decision to enrol into a university program has unlocked a life of change-making impact and inspiration, with Mrs Johnston's mother, husband, daughter, brother-in-law and many nieces, nephews and friends have since embarked on their own journeys through STEPS and have subsequently pursued a diverse array of degrees.

"Witnessing these transformative journeys has been profoundly



gratifying, and I take great pride in serving as a source of inspiration for those in my sphere," Mrs Johnston said.

"Notably, my eldest son, who was merely three years old when I commenced my educational endeavours, has now attained an engineering degree and is successfully established within the industry. The collective growth and achievements of my family have been a source of immense joy, and an awe-inspiring experience as they have unveiled their true potential and progressed towards higher aspirations."

It was the nurturing support, mentorship, and expertise of the STEPS team that Mrs Johnston said was instrumental in her development as a student – an environment of which Mrs Johnston is passionate in recreating for her own students, fostering growth through rapport from shared experience in overcoming obstacles and barriers to education.

"The connection established with students becomes even more profound when they discern that I, as their instructor, have undergone a similar journey as a mature-aged student, endeavouring to balance familial responsibilities and other commitments while advancing through the STEPS program and ultimately attaining both an undergraduate and Masters degree," said Mrs Johnston.

"This shared experience fosters a sense of assurance among students, knowing that their struggles and challenges are understood and met with genuine empathy. This assurance serves to motivate and inspire them to believe in their own potential and instills confidence that they too can overcome hurdles and achieve their academic aspirations and effect positive change not only in their lives, but also in the lives of their families.

"Without my venture into higher education, I might still be in a mundane job, devoid of the fulfilment that this role provides me; and I aspire to extend this empowering journey to others, regardless of the obstacles they may face.

"My personal narrative stands as a testament to the transformative power of education in shaping a more rewarding professional and personal life."

— By Sala Mkoka

PASSION FOR THE REEF



A wave-maker built with the help of some keen woodwork and mechanical enthusiasts is helping a marine ecology researcher understand how microplastics (plastics smaller than five millimetres) are affecting seagrass, mangrove and coral reef ecosystems in the waters of the Southern Great Barrier Reef.

Jack Greenshields, a marine ecologist and PhD researcher at CQUniversity's Coastal Marine Ecosystems Research Centre (CMERC) in Gladstone, said the machine built by members of the local Men's Shed under his guidance was helping him to understand how and why microplastics are becoming trapped in different environments.

"I'm looking at how different flora and sediment types found in different ecosystems affect how microplastics become trapped" Mr Greenshields explained.

"For example, mangrove and seagrass sediment can be very silty, while beach sand is usually coarser...my hypothesis is that the siltier sand found in mangroves and seagrasses are more likely to trap plastics than in heavy, denser beach sand, because they are more fluid and more likely to move around.

"I'm also looking at how that trapping affects the health of the mangroves and seagrasses as well."

Mr Greenshields said seagrasses are naturally good at trapping particulate matter and holding down sediment, as well as providing a vital food source for juvenile fish, dugongs and turtles.

"Because it's so good at trapping particulate matter and sediment, it may also be very good at trapping plastic, making them at risk of being hotspots for plastic pollution." However, this unique skillset of seagrass may also be

troublesome for the animals that rely on them for habitats and food.

Mr Greenshields said while it's common knowledge there are plastics in our waterways, he hopes to shed some light on why plastic is more than just a public eyesore, and why it's important to take notice, sooner than later.

"I want to draw attention to why people should care about it. The more we understand about plastics, the more we understand how much of a detrimental effect it is having on the flora and fauna."

The English-born researcher is part-way through his PhD project and believes he's scored the best environmental backdrop to conduct his studies.

"Australia is one of the best places in the world to study marine ecology. We are right next to the Great Barrier Reef where there are so many fantastic animals...I can't believe I'm here most of the time."

— By Priscilla Roberts



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