



# Changing Lives

**INSPIRATIONAL STORIES  
FROM CQUNIVERSITY**

**[cqu.edu.au](https://cqu.edu.au)**

RELEASED JULY 2026

**Be. WITH CQU**



# 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.

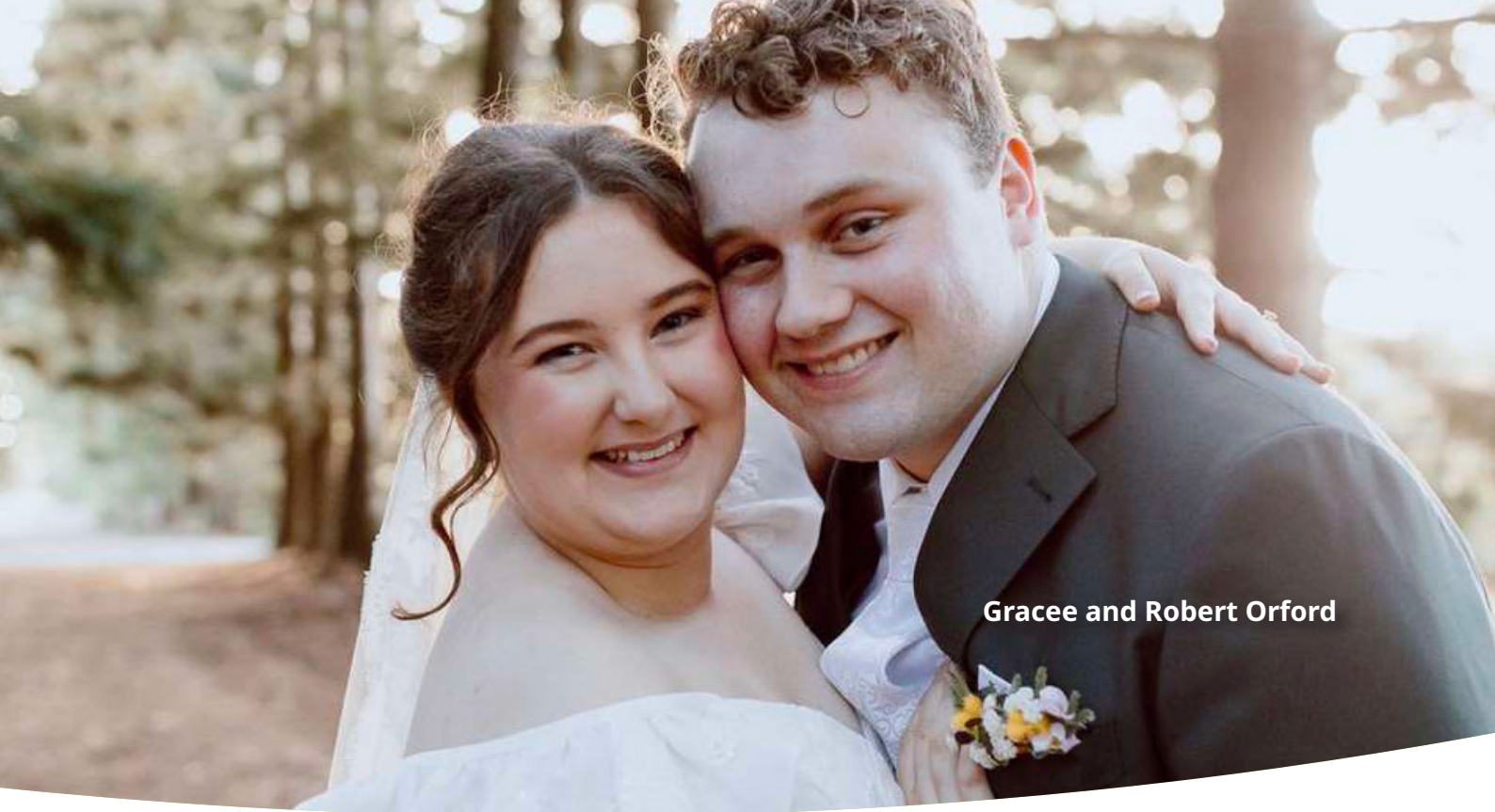
In this edition of **Changing Lives**, we've assembled stories of remarkable individuals whose lives have undergone profound transformations through the power of university study. We invite you to explore the extraordinary narratives of triumph, growth, and discovery that echo the diverse paths paved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



Gracee and Robert Orford

## A match made in medicine

From university classmates to newlyweds, Robert and Gracee Orford have used their skills to make a difference in Bundaberg's healthcare sector.

After meeting in a combined Medical Science and Nursing unit at CQUniversity's Bundaberg campus, what began as a shared class quickly grew into a shared purpose to serve the community.

As a recent Bachelor of Nursing graduate, Gracee works at the local hospital while Robert graduated from CQU's Bachelor of Medical Science (Pathway to Medicine). He is currently studying the University of Queensland's Doctor of Medicine (MD) program in Bundaberg as part of the Regional Medical Pathway (RMP). A third-generation nurse, Gracee said she followed in the footsteps of her grandmother and mother who is a midwife.

"I'm a Bundy girl, born and raised. I even work in the same hospital I was born in, which feels like a full-circle moment," Gracee said.

"My decision to work in healthcare was shaped by personal experience, my faith and my desire to care for people in their lowest moments.

"Staying local allowed me to work, pay for my tuition and graduate without a HECS debt. But more importantly, it kept me connected to the community I wanted to serve.

"People who study locally are more likely to

stay and work long-term. That continuity is critical in regional areas where workforce shortages can place pressure on services.

"When you train and live locally, you understand the needs of the community. That supports care that is relevant, accessible and holistic."

Robert agreed that regional communities, like Bundaberg, benefit from locally trained health professionals.

"I've seen a lot of healthcare inequalities between big cities, regional hubs and smaller rural locations. I think access to healthcare is a fundamental human right and a core Australian value," Robert said.

"Training doctors in the regions helps increase the number of health professionals locally and improve access, while also instilling a passion for regional health.

"It's more than just learning about regional and rural medicine in a book; we actually live it and are passionate about addressing it."

Together they see their roles as complementary parts of the healthcare system. "Healthcare is very much a team effort with many intersecting parts. If you take away any one part, the whole thing collapses," Robert said.

"I think because of our backgrounds we both bring unique perspectives and experiences to

—Cont.

the table.”

Their shared professional environment also allows them to better support one another through the demands of study, shift work and clinical training.

“We share a lot of common ground in our work, so it makes for lots of good conversation. But I think what makes us so strong as a couple is our shared love for God, people and each other,” Robert said.

“When things get busy, it can be easy to forget about being kind and compassionate, especially when it is part of your job. What we do well as a couple is show love, kindness and compassion.”

Gracee agreed that it is reassuring to feel seen by someone who genuinely understands the pressures of the healthcare environment.

“We’ve learned a lot from each other,” Gracee said.

“In healthcare, everyone functions as part of a team. Our roles are different enough that we’re not competing, instead we bring different perspectives that broaden how we understand patient care.”

---

**‘We share a lot of common ground in our work, so it makes for good conversation...’ - Robert**

---

The couple hope to continue to build their careers in Bundaberg and contribute to improvements in regional healthcare.

“I would love to see a fully staffed hospital. As for the impact I hope to have, I just want my patients to leave feeling that they have been genuinely and holistically cared for,” Gracee said.

Robert said he would like to graduate and work in Bundy for a few years before going even more rural.

“I think we need more workers who are passionate about rural Queensland and supporting those communities,” Robert said.

“I hope my career will help people access good healthcare, regardless of where they live.”



**Gracee and Robert Orford at their graduation**

A portrait of Wendy Augutis, a woman with long, wavy blonde hair and glasses, wearing a white top and a necklace. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile.

Wendy Augutis

# One small step, a lifetime of change

**By Isis Symes**

When Wendy Augutis first stepped onto CQUniversity's Bundaberg campus over 20 years ago, she carried more than nerves. She carried uncertainty, responsibility – and hope.

Wendy was raising three young children (Scott, Luke and Geoff), navigating personal upheaval and stepping into a world she never imagined would be hers.

University, at that point, felt less like a destination and more like a distant possibility.

"I left school at the age of 15 so because of that, I did STEPS (Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies)," Wendy explained.

"I started STEPS in 2002 and university was very new to me. I didn't know anything about referencing, assignment-writing or even senior maths – Karen Seary (Associate Dean of the School of Access Education) supported me in making my transition into university studies," she said.

"Everything was alien. It was like I'd come from another planet."

For Wendy, starting university was a decision that would quietly change the trajectory of her life – and her family's.

Born in Belgium, Wendy migrated to Australia at the age of eight, arriving without a word of English.

Like many migrant children of her era, she was dropped into a classroom and expected to "work it out."

Decades later, the memory still resonates – particularly now, as a grandmother herself.

"When my granddaughter turned eight, I realised that was me," she says.

"I just wanted to give that little girl a hug," she said while holding back tears.

STEPS became not just an academic bridge, but an emotional one.

Wendy credits early support – particularly from Karen – as instrumental in helping her persist during a time marked by financial strain, family breakdown and self-doubt.

"I remember going into Karen's office and just crying," Wendy recalled.

—Cont.



Geoff and Wendy  
at Geoff's graduation

"She listened. She told me it was normal. That support made all the difference."

What followed was a remarkable academic journey: a Bachelor of Biomedical Science (2003–2006), a Bachelor of Nursing (completed in 2016), and a Master of Research completed in 2023 – all through CQUniversity.

Along the way, Wendy's determination also quietly shaped those around her.

In 2024, Wendy watched her youngest son Geoff graduate with a PhD where he crossed the stage at the same university where her own journey began.

"It was one of my proudest moments," she said. "Not just because of the PhD, but because of everything it represented."

Now more than two decades since setting foot at CQU, Wendy walks those same campus paths as an Associate Lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery – an outcome she still describes as something she "has to pinch herself" to believe. Today, Wendy brings her lived experience into the classroom, meeting students with empathy, realism and encouragement.

"I understand how overwhelming it can feel," she explained.

"But I also know what people are capable of when they trust themselves."

---

### **'It's about staying open, staying curious and becoming the best version of yourself.'**

---

At 64, Wendy is still building.

Alongside teaching and research, she has trained as a yoga instructor, teaches weekly classes, and remains deeply curious about the world around her.

"I don't think learning ever stops," she said. "It's about staying open, staying curious and becoming the best version of yourself."

For those considering STEPS or returning to study later in life, Wendy offers simple advice earned through experience: "Trust yourself. Trust the journey. Don't let people – or fear – limit you. Sometimes you just have to step forward and let it unfold."

For Wendy Augutis, that first step into CQUniversity wasn't just the start of a degree. It was the beginning of a life she once couldn't imagine – and now she helps others believe it is possible.



CQU's Dr Angela Capper and Dr Anwaar Ulhaq with other members of the NO-PLASTIC project team

# AI, ocean data targets plastic for Indo-Pacific cleanup

By Mary Bolling

Plastic waste in oceans is choking coastal ecosystems – but a CQUniversity-led project is integrating live weather and ocean data with new artificial intelligence (AI) models to prevent trash hotspots in Jakarta Bay, Indonesia.

The NO-PLASTIC project funded by Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) through its Indo-Pacific Plastics Innovation Network (IPPIN) has developed an AI-enabled system that can detect and map plastic pollution in real time.

Teams from Australia, Singapore and Indonesia are led by CQUniversity Senior Lecturer in Artificial Intelligence Dr Anwaar Ulhaq and Senior Research Fellow Dr Angela Capper, who recently visited the region to trial the technology.

“The NO-PLASTIC project uses new computer-vision models to analyse CCTV and drone footage from major waterways in Jakarta Bay, and predicts movement from live weather and ocean data,” Dr Ulhaq explained.

“Tides, urban runoff and river flows all intersect to create recurring plastic hotspots, and our system means local teams can deploy trawl-nets and clean-up gear to the precise locations where plastic accumulates,

improving the efficiency of river-to-sea clean-up operations.”

## Global problem, local solutions

The United Nations' Environment Program estimates that more than 11 million metric tonnes of plastic enters the world's oceans every year, and Jakarta Bay is one of the Indo-Pacific's most affected marine environments. NO-PLASTIC international collaborators include Patrick Dupuis from Global MetOcean in Singapore, and Nicolas Bernier from OceanKita in Indonesia.

The technology is designed to support local operators rather than replace them, offering a practical tool that strengthens decision-making and reduces the amount of plastic reaching wider marine ecosystems, including Australian shores.

“OceanKita's unique local connections help to drive not only clean-up efforts but also community education, which is crucial to shift habits and attitudes about waste,” Dr Capper said.

In November 2025, Dr Ulhaq and Dr Capper visited Singapore and Indonesia to meet partners, evaluate the system at monitoring sites and observe field conditions firsthand. Their work will refine how environmental data from Global MetOcean feeds into the AI model, and how OceanKita's clean-up teams

—Cont.

can use the system in busy coastal settings. The on-site work also ensured that the AI tools are adapted to local conditions, unstable weather, variable tides and rapidly changing plastic movement patterns.

### **Collaborating for a cleaner future**

The NO-PLASTIC project is a model of Indo-Pacific collaboration, combining scientific expertise, local operational knowledge and regional commitment to marine stewardship. Each partner plays a distinct role:

Australia provides the AI, plastic pollution expertise and research design, Singapore contributes high-resolution environmental oceanographic and meteorological data, and Indonesia drives the practical deployment of pollution-reduction technologies.

The Indonesian government worked to reduce local marine plastic debris by up to 70 per cent by the end of 2025, while CSIRO – Australia's national science agency – has a goal to see an 80 per cent drop in plastic waste entering the environment by 2030.

---

**‘The NO-PLASTIC project uses new computer-vision models to analyse CCTV and drone footage from major waterways...’**

**- Dr Anwaar Ulhaq**

---

“By merging artificial intelligence with environmental science and community-led clean-up actions, our NO-PLASTIC project offers a scalable approach to identifying and reducing plastic pollution before it spreads,” Dr Ulhaq said.

“It’s positioned to inform policy, strengthen local capability and contribute to healthier coastal ecosystems for communities across the region.”

The team hopes the model can be adapted for other regions to tackle similar challenges, with smarter, technology-enabled marine stewardship.

You can explore more projects driving smart and real-world solutions for people and the planet at [cqu.edu.au/research](https://cqu.edu.au/research)



**Dr Anwaar Ulhaq and the drone technology used for the NO-PLASTIC project**



Diploma of Nursing  
graduate Dave Bruckner

## Dave keeps dedication to Nursing in the family

By Greg Chapman

Dave Bruckner is continuing his family's long legacy of nursing, with his CQUniversity training and his dedication making him an asset on the wards at Rockhampton Hospital. The 50-year-old Diploma of Nursing graduate currently works in the Surgical Ward, and recently accepted a new position in the hospital's Day Surgery Unit as an ENAS (Advanced Skilled Enrolled Nurse). Dave only studied and completed his CQU Diploma across 2024-2025, but his new role follows a long commitment to local health services.

"I have worked in the health industry for approximately 15 years. I started as an operating theatre orderly for a private hospital where I worked for several years," he said.

"People don't usually choose to be in hospital, so it's nice to be there to help... as you can be that person who can really make a difference.

"My mum was a nurse, my wife is a nurse, I have two sisters-in-law who are nurses and my daughter also studied her Diploma in Nursing

with me, so one could say it's in the family!"

Dave said he worked in mental health as an Assistant-In-Nursing (AIN) while he was studying his Diploma.

"The training was nothing short of amazing. The lecturers were there every step of the way, nothing was too much trouble if you needed help. The facilities were fantastic, from the training ward environment to the drug safe in the medication room.

"It was very realistic. The lecturers weren't just teachers reading from a book, they had real-world experiences as nurses themselves, which made the process so much more reassuring." During his final placement in the hospital's Surgical Ward, Dave discovered Rockhampton Hospital was where he wanted to be.

"I found the nurses there to be so helpful, polite, understanding and supportive. I spoke to the Nurse Unit Manager about applying for a position on completion of placement and gaining my AHPRA (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency) registration," he said.

—Cont.

"The CQU training, being so realistic, really set me up for the placement so I wasn't in too much shock getting onto the ward.

"Working as a team is a big culture in nursing – we always help each other where we can.

"The best part about being an Enrolled Nurse is job satisfaction, helping patients in a time of need and being part of a supportive team."

Dave encouraged anyone considering a nursing career to pursue the vocation.

Recently, he shared his insights with new Diploma of Nursing students during CQU's 2026 Orientation Week.

"The truth is that nursing is very rewarding,

---

**'The training was nothing short of amazing. The lecturers were there every step of the way...'**

---

fulfilling and enjoyable. No two days are the same," he said.

"You never know who you will be looking after: one day it's a teenager and the next a 102-year-old.

"You will never be out of work if you become a nurse. After a few years of developing your skills there are even opportunities to travel Australia or the world and work as a nurse."





**Chamika Kotakadeniya is on track to become the first local doctor to complete their full medical program in the Bundaberg region**

## Chamika on track with local medical pathway

**By Jocelyn Sticklen**

Bundaberg's Chamika Kotakadeniya is on track to become the first doctor to complete their full medical studies and training in the region, thanks to the Regional Medical Pathway.

The Regional Medical Pathway (or RMP as it is widely known 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.

Chamika started in the RMP straight out of high school in 2022 by entering CQUniversity's foundation cohort of the Bachelor of Medical Science (Pathway to Medicine).

He graduated from the course at the end of 2024 with distinction alongside 30 other foundation students from Bundaberg and Rockhampton.

After successfully completing the CQUniversity program, Chamika has now commenced his MD studies with The University of Queensland through the Bundaberg Rural Clinical school. Chamika explained that he felt honoured to be the first and only student from Bundaberg to enter the Pathway in 2022 and that he was

grateful to have the opportunity to become the first local to complete his medical education and training entirely in Bundaberg.

"It was honestly such a privilege to be from Bundaberg and to be part of the RMP in its foundation year.

"I think in some ways I definitely had a hometown advantage because I was the only person in my class that was studying with the added benefit of living at home," Chamika said. "This understanding also pushed me to make sure I did everything I could to help my cohort get settled into Bundaberg.

"Initially I took them to different places around the region, organised social events and even had them over for traditional Sri Lankan meals at home.

"I was also part of starting up the new medical society for CQU, started by the foundation year cohort. We called it the CQUniversity Medical Society or CQUMS and this is a legacy that will continue as new cohorts of students move through the program."

Having now started the four-year MD program with The University of Queensland, Chamika

**—Cont.**



**Chamika is pictured alongside fellow students from the foundation year cohort of the Regional Medical Pathway**

said he was expecting it to be challenging but felt prepared by the foundations delivered by the CQUniversity course.

"I feel like the Bachelor of Medical Science

---

**'To be able to study medicine from home with the support of your family is a very rare and unique opportunity.'**

---

(Pathway) to medicine has given me a great foundation to build on as I progress through my medical studies.

"Throughout the first three years of the RMP it was clear that all partners were aligned and that the opportunities we were given would set us up to succeed not just in the MD course but also in our future medical internships and training.

"I already feel like I have gained so much knowledge from the CQUniversity course content, the teachers and also through the embedded observational placements that have prepared me for clinical placement moving forward.

"The observational placements were incredible, and the medical professionals involved provided so much valuable guidance.

"In fact, my first ever observational placement was in elective surgery, and I was able to

witness a baby being born via a C-section procedure.

"It is something I will remember for the rest of my life and something I am really grateful to have experienced so early on in my medical studies," he said.

Chamika encourages other young people from regional areas to also seriously consider a career in medicine and to take advantage of being able to enter a program like the RMP.

"I say 'go for it'.

"To be able to study medicine from home with the support of your family is a very rare and unique opportunity.

"You will also have lots of fun on top of the amazing well-balanced learning opportunities.

"Medicine is also a noble profession and the RMP highlights the reasons why doctors do what they do. The course makes you understand that medicine is a group effort. With people from different backgrounds who are all serving people with one common goal – to ensure that people's health gets better.

"I highly recommend this course to anyone and everyone, especially young people from Bundaberg.

"It has given me so many opportunities that go far beyond just medicine and I know there are so many opportunities for me to make a difference in my local community moving forward."



## Pat proves it's never too late to pursue art

By Greg Chapman

At 82, Pat Handley is arguably one of CQUniversity's more senior silversmithing students, with a decade of Visual Arts courses helping her find a hidden passion in later life. It was in 2014 that Pat decided to enrol in a Certificate II in Visual Arts at CQU's Rockhampton City campus and now, 10 years later, not only has she held her first solo exhibition, but she's about to earn her Diploma.

Pat said she has enjoyed learning how to make jewellery and connecting with other visual arts students.

"I have found the creative process and problem-solving challenges of jewellery-making to be rewarding," she said.

"Most of my pieces are responses to a challenge set for an assignment. I have found that researching ideas and refining them to produce unique items very satisfying. Being in contact with other like-minded people of varying age groups has also been an attraction."

She's also enjoyed sharing the experience with her husband, Bob.

"I am very lucky that my husband, Bob, is able to cut and polish most of the stones that I use in my jewellery-making," she said.

Pat's stunning pieces were on full display at her recent exhibition which drew a crowd of 55 art aficionados.

"This was my first solo exhibition, and I believe it went very well. I had a great deal of help and support from CQU staff who helped with the planning and the mounting of the exhibition," she said.

"I want to give special thanks to Visual Arts teachers Carmen Gray, Lisa Gaze and Willby's Restaurant's Yush Mahadeo for their help and advice." Still, Pat remains modest about her artistic achievements, even though her talents speak for themselves with her eye-catching works dazzling her peers and admirers – and judges, with one of her pieces being awarded first prize in the student section of the CQU Creates competition in 2017.

—Cont.

The piece, 'At the going down of the sun and in the morning' (2017), is a brooch of jasper and sterling silver.

Another piece, a silver, titanium and chrysoprase brooch, is Pat's take on an art deco brooch made by Robert Templier in the 1920s.

"Most of my jewellery ends up as gifts, although I have sold a few pieces to those who insist on paying," she said.

---

**'I have found the creative process and problem-solving challenges of jewellery-making to be rewarding.'**

---



Pat's award-winning brooch 'At the Going Down of the Sun, and in the Morning'

"I doubt that I qualify to be an artist. I am more of a craftsperson who enjoys the challenges of learning new techniques and creating something as a result."





Sheree Blackley

## Reviving First Nations culture to rebuild identity

Sheree Blackley has sparked a cultural resurgence to reshape identity, strengthen community and ensure the next generation is deeply connected to their ancestral language and land.

A proud Kalkatungu, Waanyi and Gungarri woman, Ms Blackley has dedicated her career to revitalising Kalkatungu cultural practices in north-west Queensland.

As a CQUniversity Associate Degree of Building Design graduate, her work has spanned art, education environmental stewardship and community leadership, which she said has influenced the diverse operations of her business, Malkarri Culture and Connection. Through her not-for-profit, Ms Blackley delivers language classes, cultural workshops, song and dance programs and a growing suite of educational resources.

"I'm passionate about the revival of Kalkatungu culture and the protection of our natural ecosystems on Country," she said

"I've always been connected to Country. Even as a child you never felt frightened in the bush because you knew your ancestors are here with you."

Her cultural revival work first began in 2015 with the formation of the Sundowner Kalkutungu Dancers.

"We thought dancing was a good way to involve the kids," she said.

"They could pick up the language through listening to the music, singing and dancing. "Some of our young people started dancing with us at five. Now they've finished high school and young adults they're still dancing with us."

When Ms Blackley began her language revival aspirations, only one fluent Kalkatungu speaker remained and the language was considered critically endangered.

"We now have around 100 partial speakers," she explained.

"It's still a journey to get to fluency but I think we've got hope for the next generation. The little ones learning now, it will end up being their first language.

"It makes me feel really proud to see. The kids feel proud of themselves too as it makes you feel connected to who you are as an Aboriginal person."

This has led the creation of the Kalkutungu Punpatitjin Language Project, developing learning materials from beginner to advanced levels. In partnership with linguists and Elders, she helped build a full Prep to Year 9 curriculum which is being formalised by the Queensland Department of Education as a



Languages Other Than English offering. Malkarri has also grown into a multifaceted organisation that includes the Muu Tjaa Warriors Kalkutungu Indigenous Rangers. Ms Blackley's environmental leadership is reflected in her ongoing studies and is currently enrolled in CQU's Bachelor of Environmental Science. "We are focused on preserving our native flora and fauna. Getting rid of invasive species helps bring Country back to the way it was before colonisation.

"I hope the work we do today forms a solid foundation for the work to come," she said. "The young people of today will be the Elders of tomorrow."

Her leadership and vision were recognised this year when she was named CQUniversity's Alumnus of the Year – Social Impact, an honour she said also belongs to her community.

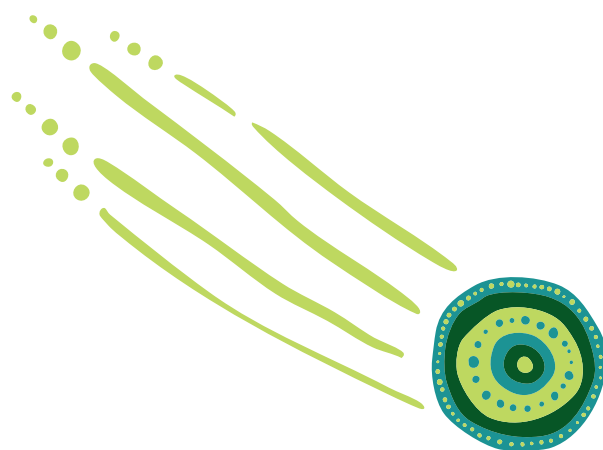
"Without the people who work with me, none of this would be possible. This award is as much theirs as it is mine," Ms Blackley said.

---

**'I hope the work we do today forms a solid foundation for the work to come.'**

---

"I feel very proud to bring it home to our community in Mt Isa."





Talia Moolenschot has been accepted into CQUniversity Cairns' inaugural Bachelor of Medical Imaging course

## Pioneering the Cairns Medical Imaging degree

By Isis Symes

Cairns local Talia Moolenschot has become a part of history, beginning her study journey among the first cohort of CQUniversity's Bachelor of Medical Imaging in Cairns. Fresh from graduating Year 12 at Redlynch State College, Talia, the first in her family to attend university, has joined 17 fellow students who have been accepted into the inaugural course for Far North Queensland.

Term 1 kicked off in March and Talia has hit the ground running.

"It's exciting to be part of something new and much needed in this region," she said.

"I feel proud knowing we'll be helping address the shortage of local radiographers and improving health outcomes for Far North Queensland residents."

With a long-held interest in healthcare, discovering Medical Imaging helped Talia finally narrow her passion into a clear and meaningful career pathway.

It wasn't until she attended CQUniversity's Open Day that everything clicked.

"Hearing directly from Medical Imaging professionals and learning about the wide range of modalities – and how quickly the technology is evolving – really inspired me to apply."

Talia said that what excited her most about the profession was the opportunity to support patients during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

"Patients often present for imaging seeking answers, diagnoses and relief. Knowing I can help provide clarity and compassion during times of uncertainty is incredibly motivating."

"I love that Medical Imaging allows you to support doctors, connect with patients and play a direct role in the healing process."

The launch of the course in Cairns was a welcome announcement for Talia, providing her with an opportunity to study locally without the added pressures of relocating.

"When I found out Medical Imaging was coming to Cairns, I felt both excited and relieved," she explained.

"Studying locally means I can focus on settling into university life without the added stress and financial pressure of moving away from home."

Remaining close to family and her support network was a key factor in Talia's decision to enrol at CQUniversity, allowing her to balance study, work and personal commitments while beginning her tertiary education.

If the course had not been available in Far North Queensland, Talia said she would have faced difficult choices, including studying remotely or delaying university altogether to save for a move south.

"I plan to remain in the region after graduation and work locally to support residents seeking timely, reliable care close to home," she said.

"Especially during stressful and uncertain times."

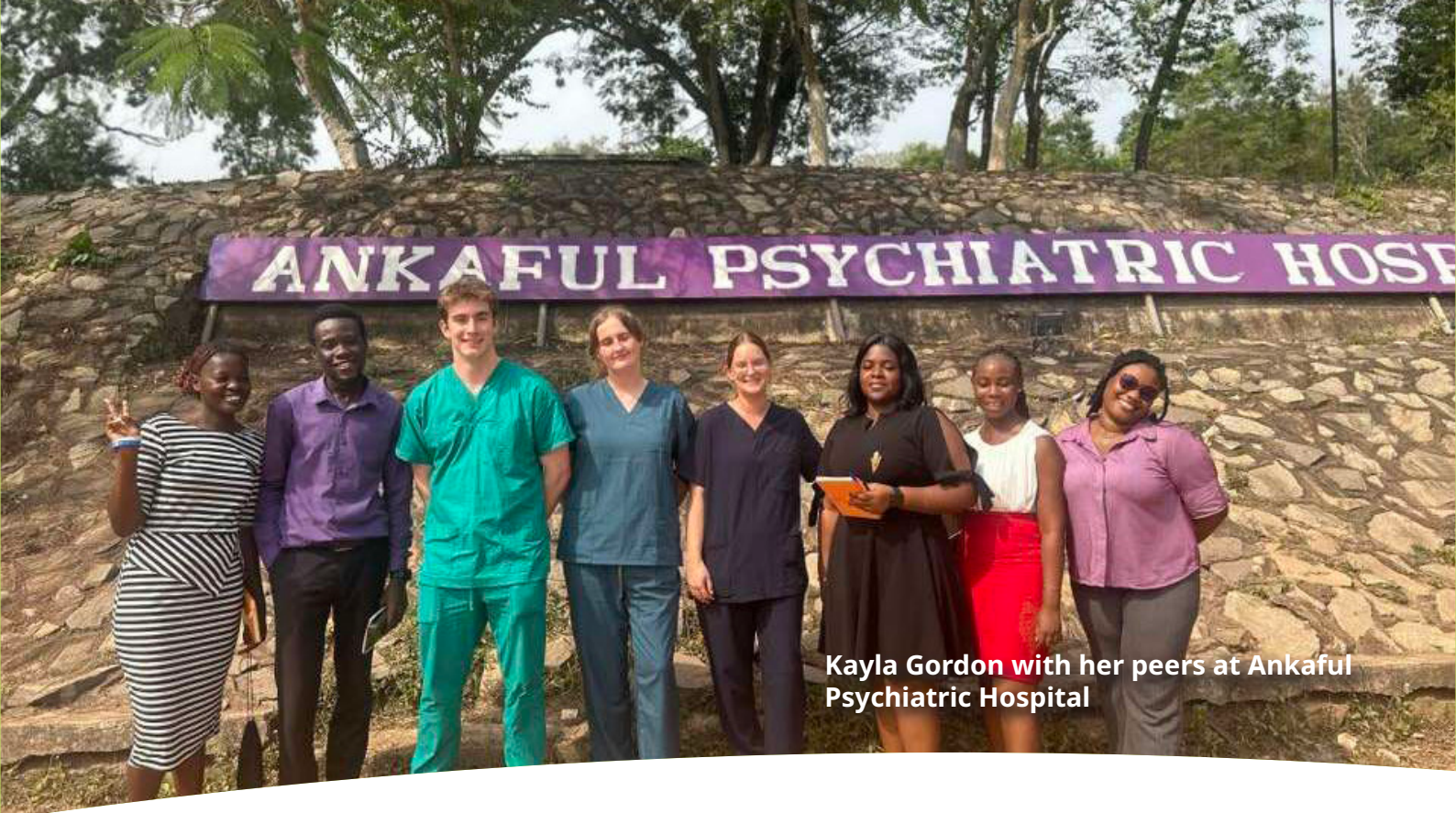
Looking ahead, Talia hopes to work in a hospital or private imaging facility, with a strong interest in mobile imaging to improve access for aged care residents and patients facing barriers to hospital-based care.

She is also keen to explore specialisation options such as sonography as her career develops.

Talia said the experience was both daunting and exciting.

"I'm incredibly grateful for the support of my family, friends and teachers – and for the services CQUniversity offers."

"I'm proud of how far I've come and excited for what's ahead."



Kayla Gordon with her peers at Ankaful Psychiatric Hospital

## Driving education in the Asia-Pacific

Less than a week after completing her Master of Professional Psychology, CQUniversity graduate Kayla Gordon boarded a plane to support hospital practitioners across Ghana in West Africa.

After learning about the overseas opportunity on CQU's careers page, Kayla spent her final year of study fundraising in her hometown of Bundaberg.

That community support, alongside a CQUniCares Alumni Development Funds Grant helped to fund the volunteer placement.

"I have always been interested in community-based, humanitarian work where I could use my knowledge and skills to give back," Kayla said.

"I think it is important to grow outside your comfort zone and to experience people and cultures that are very different to your own world view."

Kayla first worked alongside mental health nurses to treat clients with schizophrenia and epilepsy, supporting medication adherence through client and family education at Hope Christian Hospital in Fetteh.

At Mother and Child Hospital in Kasoa, she sat in on talk therapy and psychoeducation sessions covering marital issues, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) relapse prevention and depression.

As the only foreigner in many settings, Kayla

described the experience as 'challenging' – as she adjusted to a new climate, diet, infrastructure and pace of life.

"The culture shock was significant, and I felt isolated much of the time. There were moments where I doubted whether I would be able to manage in such a different environment, away from my usual support systems.

"While the hospital facilities were very different from those in Australia, the clinical training and assessment processes were familiar, which was reassuring.

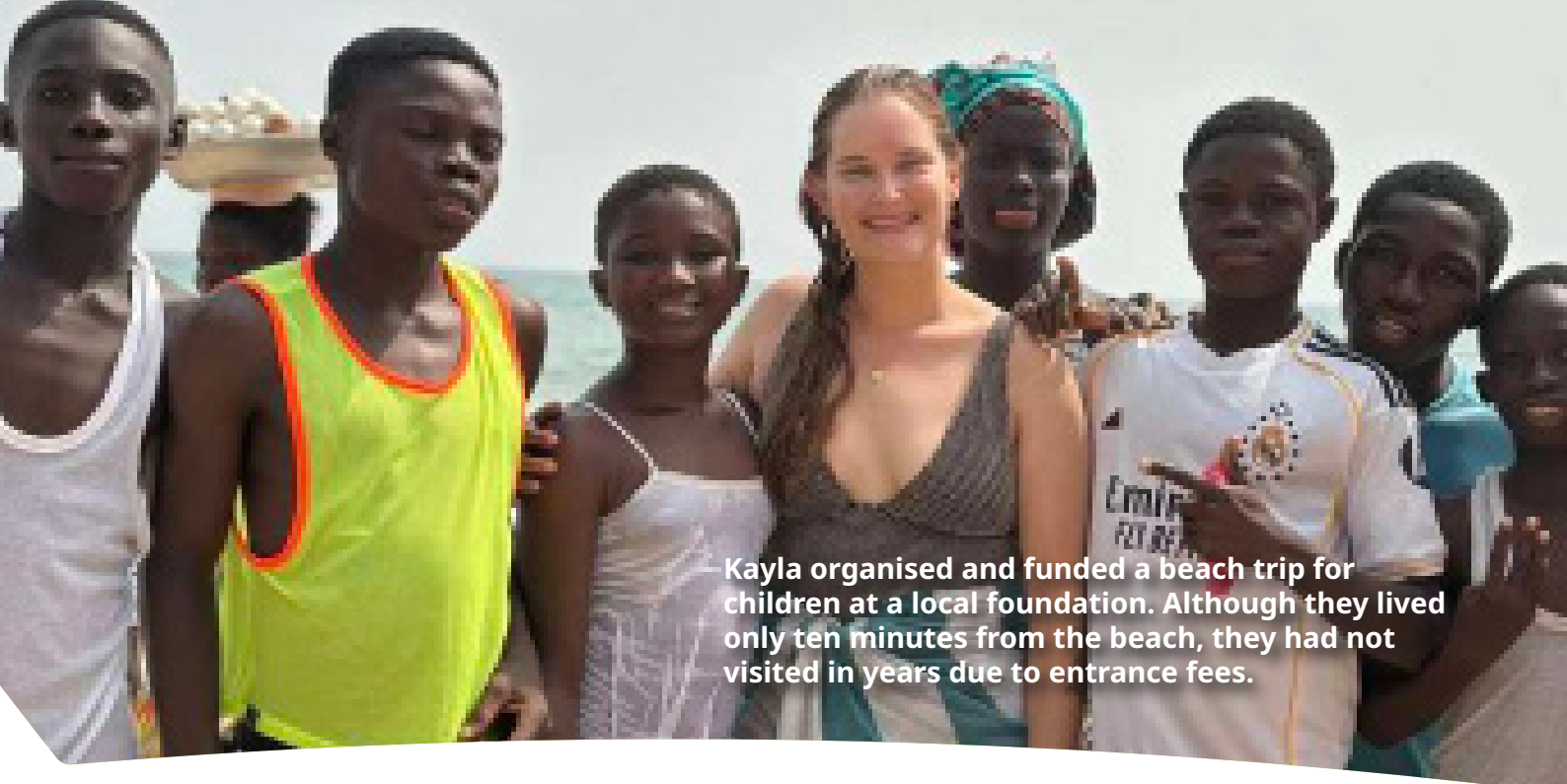
"I conducted clinical intakes, Mental State Examinations (MSEs), took full histories and applied diagnostic criteria, all of which were skills I had learnt during my studies."

Kayla said her CQU training helped to develop her practical assessment and formulation skills, but also the confidence to adapt those skills in settings where resources and systems looked very different from what she had trained in.

"CQU's emphasis on cultural competency was particularly critical. I was reminded to take a 'student stance' and to remain curious and avoid assuming expertise over someone's lived experience," Kayla said.

"I remember discussing a mock case with a nurse and realised just how much my

—Cont.



**Kayla organised and funded a beach trip for children at a local foundation. Although they lived only ten minutes from the beach, they had not visited in years due to entrance fees.**

perspective shaped the way I conceptualised the client's presentation and how I put emphasis on never assuming and always seeking a deeper understanding of a person's lived experience.

"It also strengthened my appreciation for having trained in a highly multicultural setting, where curiosity and culturally responsive practice are prioritised allowing me to work with anyone."

At Ankafu Psychiatric Hospital, Kayla worked in both acute wards and a rehabilitation unit, conducting MSE's, case formulations and motivational interviewing with patients, many of whom were admitted involuntarily. She also attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings in the rehabilitation ward, where she was struck by the resilience of those in recovery.

"Many patients in the acute wards presented with substance user-induced psychosis, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

"Ghana's mental health system operated under significant constraints and most services are funded out of pocket by patients' families. Physical facilities were basic and mental health stigma remained a significant barrier to care," Kayla explained.

"In acute psychiatric episodes, patients are sometimes taken to religious prayer camps before reaching hospital, further delaying clinical treatment.

"Mental health nurses in Ghana hold a broader scope of practice than in Australia, including the ability to diagnose and prescribe antipsychotic medication."

Kayla said the placement strengthened her commitment to working in regional Australia, where she said there was a demand for mental health practitioners.

"I developed greater confidence in my clinical skills, particularly formulation, assessment, diagnosis and micro-counselling techniques. "At times, I did not fully understand the local languages being spoken, so I relied heavily on observing non-verbal cues and therapeutic presence to interpret interactions," she said.

"This experience also gave me a deeper appreciation for the career opportunities available in my hometown. Seeing the limited access to mental health care and graduate roles in Ghana put into perspective the privilege of training and working in Australia." Kayla has planned to complete an internship at a regional Australian hospital, where she would like to contribute to a multidisciplinary team and provide holistic, collaborative care.

"This was one of the toughest experiences I have undertaken, and I believe it has shaped me into a more grounded and adaptable future psychologist," she said.

"There were many days that I had to put into practice things I would teach clients about and other days I drew a great deal from watching their strength."

A photograph of Caleb Pigliafiori, a man with a mustache, wearing a black graduation cap and gown. He is smiling and holding a framed diploma. A colorful sash with green, blue, and yellow patterns is draped over his shoulders. The background is a dark wood-paneled wall.

Caleb Pigliafiori at the  
Townsville graduation

## Caleb's journey to the frontline

By Lucy Stafford

When CQUniversity paramedicine graduate Caleb Pigliafiori crossed the stage at Townsville, it marked more than the end of a degree.

Wearing a cultural sash as he received his Bachelor of Paramedic Science, the moment represented a journey he once never thought possible.

"I never thought I'd be able to achieve a bachelor's degree, let alone go to university or be successful at it," Caleb said.

"To cross the stage, shake the hand of the Chancellor and get my paper, it's a feeling of accomplishment for myself, my family and my friends who believed in me."

Caleb's path into paramedicine was shaped by both family influence and a leap of faith. Inspired by his mother and grandmother, who both worked in nursing and encouraged by a friend already in the program, he decided to give it a go.

That decision led him to the Queensland Ambulance Service's Indigenous Paramedicine Pathway (IPP) Cadet Program, delivered in

partnership with Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) and CQUniversity.

For Caleb, the program was a turning point. "My experience with QAS has been awesome," he said.

"Like any job, it came with challenges, but the people I connected with were incredibly supportive and never gave up on me along the way."

Designed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many based in regional and remote Queensland, the cadet program combines university study with real-world, on-road experience.

For Caleb, that hands-on learning made all the difference.

"The cadet program supported my learning style. I was able to study and then put that same knowledge into practice out in the field," he said.

"It helped me cement what I was learning and really set me up for my career."

Working alongside experienced paramedics, Caleb said he was challenged to grow, think differently and build confidence in his abilities.

—Cont.



Left to Right: Harley Morton Graduate Diploma of Paramedic Science, Kari Arbouin QAS Deputy Commissioner Operations, North, Rural and Remote, Caleb Pigliafiro Graduate Bachelor of Paramedic Science

"They shaped me as a paramedic. They guided me, but they didn't hand-hold. I was given the tools to do this job the best I can."

That practical experience also reinforced one of the most important lessons he will carry into his career.

"Be kind to people," he said.

"They might not understand the clinical side of things, but they'll always remember the kindness shown and how they were treated."

Throughout his studies, Caleb found a strong sense of belonging at CQUniversity, particularly during residential schools where he connected with peers and learned from industry professionals.

---

**'I've always had my eyes set on helping other cadets through their journey and shaping them as clinicians.'**

---

"I really enjoyed coming to campus, seeing my mates and getting through those stressful practicals together," he said.

"Having QAS paramedics as lecturers brought a sense of calm. It reminded me to trust myself and what I'd learnt on the road."

Now a graduate, Caleb is focused not only on building his own career, but on giving back.

"I've always had my eyes set on helping other

cadets through their journey and shaping them as clinicians," he said.

Looking ahead, he is also considering further developing his skills, with an interest in critical care down the track.

His story highlights the impact of partnerships between universities and industry, and the role they play in creating pathways for Indigenous students into meaningful careers, particularly in regional and remote communities where they are needed most.

For Caleb, the journey is just beginning but he's already determined to make a difference.

"I want to be the person supporting cadets the way I was supported," he said.

"And to keep learning, growing and helping people every day."



## Corporate Communications

### Contact us

[media@cqu.edu.au](mailto:media@cqu.edu.au)

[cqu.edu.au/about-us/media-resource-centre](http://cqu.edu.au/about-us/media-resource-centre)

+61 7 4930 9966

### FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

[cqu.edu.au/news](http://cqu.edu.au/news)

RELEASED MARCH 2025