MARCH 2026

Waipapa Taumata Rau
University of Auckland

UniNews

Diving deeper

Professor Simon Mitchell on pushing the edges of diving research

Page 6

ClockTower turns 100

Celebrating a century of a University icon

Page 3

Strength in numbers

Passion for maths steers students to success

Page 8

UniNews

CONTENTS

Cover photo:
Professor Simon Mitchell diving the wreck of the *Nagato*, Bikini Atoll

Editor: Caitlin Sykes
caitlin.sykes@auckland.ac.nz
Photography: Chris Loufte, Simon Young
Design: Craig Berry
Production: University of Auckland
Volume 56 – Issue 1 – March 2026
Published by: Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland
Communications Office,
Alfred Nathan House, 24 Princes Street,
Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142
Web: auckland.ac.nz/UniNews

Something to share? The next *UniNews* is April 2026, copy due 10 March.
Email: uninews@auckland.ac.nz

For the fortnightly Whaimōhio The Loop newsletter, email: staff-comms@auckland.ac.nz. Deadlines are on the intranet under News, Events and Notices, The Loop.

When posted, *UniNews* is delivered in certified degradable EPI packaging in keeping with our sustainability goals. In PDF, this document has clickable links to any URLs.

IN THE NEWS

A selection of University staff and students who provided expert commentary in the media recently. Let us know! Email: uninews@auckland.ac.nz.

Martin Brook

LANDSLIDE DANGERS

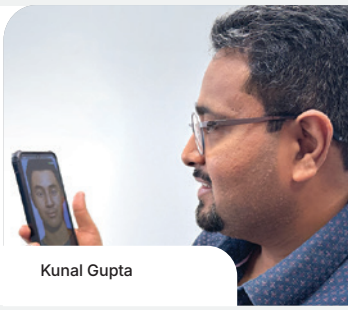
Most of New Zealand is geologically under-researched, with more work needed on modelling landslides, Professor Martin Brook (School of Environment) told the *New Zealand Herald* after the Mount Maunganui disaster. The country recognised risks from tsunami but is only just waking up to those posed by landslides.

tinyurl.com/brook-nzherald-landslides

AI BUDDY TO TRACK ANXIETY

Shaped by his own experience of depression as a young man, Dr Kunal Gupta (Auckland Bioengineering Institute) has designed an AI-powered virtual reality buddy that can provide personalised help. He talked to various media outlets, including *Stuff*, about his mental health tool.

tinyurl.com/gupta-stuff-vr-buddy



Kunal Gupta

David Chisholm

AN (AI?) SOUL ARTIST

Associate Professor David Chisholm and PhD candidate Sophie Burbery (School of Creative Arts) featured in a *1 News* story about the Spotify sensation Sienna Rose, who has racked up millions of monthly listeners on the platform. They shared their reactions to the fact the neo-soul artist is likely to be entirely created by AI.

tinyurl.com/chisholm-1News-ai-soul

BLENDING ANCESTRAL MEDICINE AND MODERN VIROLOGY

Dr Natalie Netzler (Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Hauā, Moto'otua/Falealili – Sāmoa) from the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences told RNZ's *Nine to Noon* how Indigenous healing practices shaped her early understanding of well-being and inspired her research, which links ancestral Pacific medicine and antiviral science.

tinyurl.com/netzler-rnz-medicines

Natalie Netzler

Gertjan Verdickt

TIME TO RETHINK LOTTO?

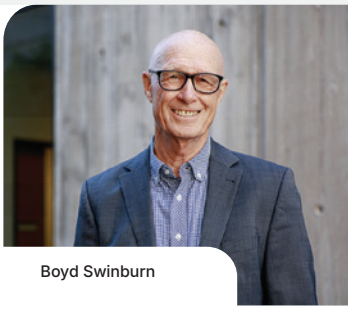
Business School senior finance lecturer Gertjan Verdickt's study of a 1905 Dutch lottery ban suggests governments might steer traditional Lotto into 'lottery bonds' – prize-linked bonds that return principal plus interest. He told *Stuff* that New Zealand could consider a savings-style alternative to Lotto.

tinyurl.com/verdickt-stuff-lotto

WEIGHT-LOSS DRUGS ENDORSED

Pharmac is considering subsidising weight-loss drugs like Wegovy and Ozempic for people with clinical needs. Professor Boyd Swinburn (FMHS) told RNZ's *Morning Report* the struggle for Pharmac would be finding a mechanism to make it affordable within its fixed budget – but it would bring savings.

tinyurl.com/swinburn-rnz-wegovy



Boyd Swinburn

The ClockTower building originally housed the University Library, as well as Arts, Architecture, Law and Music.

ClockTower rings in a century

The iconic building celebrates its 100th birthday this month.

Standing sentinel for a century, the ClockTower has become a symbol of the University, conveying the gravitas and prominence of the institution.

But it's also been the site of some not-so-serious activities – such as the time a car was parked in its foyer (pictured top right) or an umbrella planted high up on one of its spires in the heyday of capping stunts.

They're details that Cultural Collections team leader William Hamill and University archivist Jane Ferguson have unearthed while curating an exhibition, *Standing tall: a century of the ClockTower*, highlighting the building's history.

The 12th of March marks 100 years since the landmark building was officially opened as the home of Arts, Architecture, Law and Music as well the University's Library. William says that while curating material for the exhibition – which contains everything from photographs and original building plans to ClockTower 'merch' – he was struck by how central the building has been to student and social life for so many years.

"There was a time when the ground floor was used as a ballroom and would host up to 1,000 people for the graduation ball, which was a highlight of the Auckland social calendar," he says. "Others will remember it as the backdrop to many Summer Shakespeare productions." (Pictured top left.)

When the University gained funding in the early 1920s to create its first significant purpose-built building, a trans-Tasman competition was launched. The successful design – selected by architects Professor Leslie Wilkinson, Basil Hooper and Walter Cumming – was by architects Roy Lippincott and Edward Billson, and their original plans for the building, including costings (£97,000), are a highlight of the exhibition.

American-born Lippincott moved from Melbourne to Auckland to oversee the build, which raised some eyebrows. Many expected a more traditional, 'English' design, but the winning plan was heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement of the time, embracing elements of the natural world, including native flora and fauna. Where gargoyles might conventionally sit, the design placed kākā and kea, while ponga fronds and kōwhai flowers provide other decorative flourishes on the building's exterior.

Faced with Mt Somers stone, the building's white exterior earned it the nickname 'the wedding cake' but its tower, as well as other elements, were made of concrete – an early use of the building material in New Zealand.

The exhibition features images of student life in the building and milestones in its history, such as the extensive earthquake strengthening work that was undertaken in the 1980s and its conversion into the administrative heart of the University. Today the building houses the offices of the Vice-Chancellor and other senior leaders.

"The ClockTower has become an icon of the University – its image is on everything from calendars to plates," says William, "but its changing use also tells a story of how the University has grown and changed over the course of a century."

Caitlin Sykes

***Standing tall: a century of the ClockTower* runs from 2 March to 24 June in He Māra Mahara Reading Room, Level M of the General Library.**

Eradication experts return to Auckland

It was a full-circle moment when more than 300 researchers and practitioners recently gathered at the University of Auckland for a conference on eliminating invasive species from islands and island-like environments.

From 9-13 February, the Island Invasives conference returned to the University, which hosted the inaugural event – the world's first conference on invasive species – in 2001.

Twenty-five years later, international experts returned, sharing knowledge on everything from countering invasive pink salmon in Norway to controlling feral cats in the Cayman Islands.

Professor James Russell (pictured above) from the School of Biological Sciences attended the first event as a student and said he was proud to be continuing the tradition. The first conference was set up by now Emeritus Professor Mick Clout and Wildlife Service veteran Dick Veitch.

"New Zealand leads the world in managing invasive species and continues to set its ambitions incredibly high in this area," says James.

The Department of Conservation has eradicated rats and mice from more than half the offshore islands they have invaded, while the organisation Zero Invasive Predators has eliminated rats and possums from nearly 100,000 hectares in South Westland.

"Attendees from around the world will be excited to learn about how we have achieved this, while also bringing their own success stories to share," he says.

University of Auckland researchers spoke about shrews, ants on Great Mercury Island, and the social science of pest control projects.

More: auckland.ac.nz/island-invasives-2026

Delegates at the inaugural Pacific Academy of Sciences congress in Apia.

Pacific science ties strengthened

The University played a prominent role at the Pacific Academy of Sciences inaugural congress, held in Apia, 16–18 February.

The landmark gathering aimed to shape the future of Pacific-led science, regional research collaboration and resilience across island nations.

The congress brought together scientists, policymakers, Indigenous knowledge holders and early-career researchers from across the region and the diaspora to strengthen Pacific scientific leadership and respond collectively to the region's most urgent challenges.

The University's delegation included Professor Sir Ashley Bloomfield, Professor Sir Collin Tukuitonga, Professor Yvonne Underhill Sem and Pro Vice-Chancellor Pacific Professor Jemaima Tiatia Siau.

At the congress, the University signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP). It aims to strengthen collaboration in Pacific-led science, research and capacity building, with a strong focus on environmental sustainability.

SPREP is the Pacific's premier intergovernmental agency dedicated to protecting and managing the region's environment and natural resources.

The MoU builds on longstanding relationships between the two organisations and follows the inaugural Oceanic Seabird Symposium, which was run by SPREP and held at the University last year.

More: auckland.ac.nz/pas-2026-congress and **auckland.ac.nz/sprep-mou**

Medtech pioneer appointed to research funding board

Auckland Bioengineering Institute Distinguished Professor Sir Peter Hunter (pictured below) says his appointment to a new research funding board is "an exciting opportunity to produce a more connected science system".

The board of Research Funding New Zealand was announced in early February. The new organisation has been established to "streamline research funding and provide independent, strategic investment decisions that support economic growth", according to Science, Innovation and Technology Minister Dr Shane Reti.

Research Funding New Zealand will replace most existing research funding decision-makers, including the Marsden Fund Council, the Science Board, some MBIE functions and the Health Research Council.

Sir Peter is a worldwide pioneer of human digital twin technologies and has been a driving figure in establishing New Zealand's medtech research ecosystem.

"This is an exciting opportunity to produce a more connected science system, in terms of linking discovery science with outcomes across healthcare, environment and economics," says Sir Peter. "It will also boost collaboration between universities, the new Public Research Organisations and industry."

auckland.ac.nz/rfnz-hunter

Photo: Chris Loufte

International recognition for Dame Margaret


Photo: Simon Young

Distinguished Professor Dame Margaret Brimble was "very humbled" to receive the highest accolade of the Royal Society of Chemistry (London) after a long medicinal chemistry career.

In February, Dame Margaret (pictured right) was named an Honorary Fellow for innovation in drug discovery. Of the seven new Honorary Fellows, three are Nobel Prize winners.

The honour highlights the world-class science at the University of Auckland, she says, and serves as an inspiration for emerging researchers in New Zealand.

"Honours like this are important for our young scientists... no matter where you are in the world, you can be recognised."

Dame Margaret has advanced medicinal chemistry, transformed fundamental science into real-world applications, and provided exceptional scientific leadership and mentorship – particularly for women, the society noted.

Her laboratory played a central role in the medicinal chemistry behind DAYBUE™ (trofinetide), approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2023 as the first treatment for Rett syndrome, a rare neurological and developmental disorder.

Dame Margaret's work "has broadened the horizons of the chemical sciences and enriched the communities they serve," said Dr Annette Doherty, the society's president. "Her pioneering contributions to peptide and neuroprotective drug development have opened new avenues for treating disease and improving lives."

Creating aspirin in the lab as an undergraduate at the University of Auckland got Dame Margaret hooked on organic chemistry and started her on the path to becoming the University's first director of medicinal chemistry.

Today, she continues to contribute to major research efforts, including the development of broad spectrum antiviral agents, next generation antibiotics and innovative agrochemical solutions.

More: auckland.ac.nz/brimble-honorary-fellow


Photo: Chris Loufte

VC award winners

Thirty-one staff contributions were recognised at the Vice-Chancellor's Awards for Values and Te Ao Māori Principles on 16 February for applying thoughtful innovation to everyday challenges.

They were recognised not just for their work but for how their decisions and actions brought manaakitanga, whanaungatanga and kaitiakitanga to life across the University.

As in past years, nominees and winners came from a variety of areas at the University. Among those recognised with a Values and Te Ao Māori Principles award were the Kōrero Mai delivery team (above), while the Faculty of Science Sustainability Network (right, top) and Professor Saeid Baroutian (right, below) were among the Toitūtanga Sustainability award winners.

Speaking at the awards, Professor Dawn Freshwater said the University centres values of service, respect, integrity and excellence.

"Much of what enables a University to function well happens behind the scenes. It's important we continue to celebrate and make these contributions visible."

More: auckland.ac.nz/vc-awards-2026

Simon Mitchell

Pushing the edge of diving research

Photo: Richard Harris

Professor Simon Mitchell at the Pearse Resurgence, the focus of the documentary *Deeper*, in which he features.

Professor Simon Mitchell's abiding passion for scuba diving and dive medicine has led to him winning a major award for his work advancing dive practice worldwide – and starring in a documentary.

The Pearse Resurgence is an icy spring, emerging beneath an overhang at the base of a steep-sided valley two hours' walk, or a shortish helicopter ride, into Kahurangi National Park, west of Nelson.

The room-sized pool conceals a complex network of caves, which extend far beneath the forested mountains and are occasionally visited by extreme cave divers.

This is where Professor Simon Mitchell, head of the University's anaesthesiology department, has often returned with his technical-diving buddies, 'the Wetmules' – so called, because they are stubborn, frequently wet and haul heavy loads of diving gear in miserable conditions.

In 2023, Simon and the Wetmules attempted a world-first dive using hydrogen as a breathing gas at the Pearse, which is now the subject of a documentary, *Deeper*, currently screening on Netflix.

In the documentary, we see the divers enter the underwater cave system and follow the line into Nightmare Crescent, then drop 100 metres before following a shaft further down, passing through chambers with names like Stanton's Hole and Well of Our Souls.

It is terrifying to watch on screen, but Simon denies being courageous.

"I don't think I'm a particularly brave person, but I'm confident in what I've learned over the years and the training and experience that I've had. It doesn't feel like a brave thing to jump in the water and go really deep. It just feels like something I do."

In the aftermath, Simon's research team (including University research fellows Drs Hanna van Waart and Xavier Vrijdag) has gained close to $1 million of funding to test the addition of hydrogen to the diver's gas mix for ultra-deep diving. Hydrogen is slightly narcotic, so Simon will conduct further work on whether it could calm a neurological tremor that can affect divers when they exceed depths of around 180 metres.

The self-appointed 'guinea pig' for the Pearse hydrogen dive was fellow anaesthetist Dr Richard 'Harry' Harris, hero of the Thai cave rescue of 12 schoolboys and their coach. Harry had reason to trust Simon if things went wrong: Simon is listed on Expertscape, a global directory of scientists, as the number-one expert worldwide in decompression sickness, or 'the bends'.

"Simon is one of the most experienced technical divers there is, and has a planet-sized brain," says Harry in *Deeper*.

This year, Simon's dive-medicine research has been acknowledged with a prestigious award from the Academy of Underwater Arts and Sciences, the NOGI Award 2026 for Science. Previous winners have included Jacques Cousteau; Bob Ballard, who discovered the wreck of the *Titanic*; and director James Cameron, who said it's harder to get a NOGI than an Oscar.

Notes Simon: "I'm not sure I believe that, but it is cool to be recognised."

In 2015, Simon was also named Rolex Diver of the Year.

During the experiment documented in *Deeper*, at 200 metres down in the Pearse cave system, Harry turns the switch to breathe the hydrogen, and the tremor he has already experienced subsides.

On the return journey, there is – spoiler alert – an emergency, when breathing gear floods, and Simon manages the surface response with an apparent cool head. He is used to managing life and death in his work as an anaesthetist, but this is on a whole other level.

"You have this massive sense of responsibility with no option to intervene," he narrates on the documentary during a period when the divers are ultra-deep with no communication. When the emergency unfolds, he sends divers down with fresh gas tanks and narrowly avoids a terrible conclusion.

Another leading-edge experiment has taken Simon and Harry to the Caribbean this year. The pair are taking blood samples from four elite breath-hold divers at the bottom of an 80-metre dive and then again at the surface before the divers take a breath. It is hoped the data from this experiment, funded by a US philanthropist, will help prevent a deadly syndrome where breath-hold divers, even snorkellers, pass out when they reach the surface.

Simon's passion for diving started at school while his family were living in Seatoun, on Wellington's South Coast. "It was just what the kids did in that suburb. We were interested in snorkelling and spearfishing. But not all of them fell in love with it."

Simon's first degree, from Central Institute of Technology, was in marine biology and he worked as a science technician before heading back to university. "It wasn't until I was 26 that I knuckled down, got into med school and came to the University of Auckland," he recalls.

He always maintained his "whole diving passion thing". After completing his medical degree he joined the Navy, with a view to specialising in dive medicine working with the late Professor Des Gorman, who supervised Simon's PhD. However, Simon discovered that it was virtually impossible to make a career out of dive medicine, even in the Navy.

So, after about eight years, he left and trained in anaesthesia. "It's a very compatible specialty, partly because the physiology is similar and you learn a suite of interventional skills that make you a very good candidate to have around if something goes wrong on a diving expedition."

Simon now spends three days a week in the operating room and two days a week at the University, on teaching and research, most of the latter diving related. "We've really found the edge and pushed it in diving activities and in diving research."

In 2002, Simon did the then deepest-ever shipwreck dive, which was to the wreck of the *AHS Centaur*, 175 metres deep off the coast of Australia, near Brisbane.

"It was a big deal because it was a substantial historic event when the *Centaur*, a hospital ship, was sunk by a Japanese submarine in 1943. Two-hundred-and-sixty-four Australian servicemen and women died, mostly medical people.

"That wreck had never been dived, and it had never been confirmed as the *Centaur,* and we actually found it was the wrong wreck."

Subsequently, the actual wreck was found not far away but two kilometres deep, over the edge of the Continental Shelf.

It was one of Simon's many shipwreck dives, which have led to some scary experiences. "One of the dangers with shipwrecks is that the water is nice and clear, as you go inside, but the wrecks are very silty, and it's very easy to stir up the silt, and then you cannot see a thing and get lost and trapped. People die that way.

"Not trying to blame shift, but, on one or two occasions, people have come in behind me and stirred the silt up.

"You just can't find your way out, and you can feel the panic rising. You have to control that and tell yourself, 'If I panic, I'll die, simple. If I don't panic, there's a good chance I'll be able to find my way out of here' and that has been what's happened."

Other commitments involve editing the top academic journal in the field, *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine*, and he has co-written the hyperbaric and diving-medicine chapter in four editions of the revered text *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*. Life at home in the Waitākere Ranges is shared with his wife Sian, a nurse manager, and a menagerie that includes chickens and two pugs.

The total dedication has all been worth it. "The amazing places I've been, the people I've been with, the sights that I've seen underwater, I would consider it collectively, a massive highlight of my life.

"This whole world that right from being a little kid has fascinated me – I just enjoy it."

Jodi Yeats

"It doesn't feel like a brave thing to jump in the water and go really deep. It just feels like something I do."

Professor Simon Mitchell, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences

Photo: Peter Mesley

Simon taking a blood sample from a breath-hold diver 60 metres below in Lake Taupō, as part of a research project.

Katalina Ma

Finding strength in numbers

Photo: Chris Loufte

A love of maths, nurtured since childhood, helps Katalina Ma support young people as they transition into university.

As someone who studied maths through university, and later taught it for 15 years, Katalina Ma knows numbers don't just communicate facts – they can tell a story.

Using data to illustrate what success looks like is part of the job for Katalina, who is the University's Pathways Programme manager. A member of the Schools and Community Engagement team, she's charged with supporting young Māori and Pacific people to make a successful transition from high school into and through University.

"One question that young people will ask you is, 'why should I care?' And you really need to show them evidence, the data, to paint a compelling picture that proves why something matters," she says.

She shares an example from Pacific Academy, a University mentoring and tutoring programme that supports Māori and Pacific senior secondary school students sitting external assessments in maths and science. For some high school students, it's possible to gather enough credits through internal assessments to gain University Entrance, but Katalina has worked with the Planning and Information Office to source data that proves why end-of-year exam experience still matters.

"The data shows that for students who come into University with at least 20 credits from external exams, there is a 92 percent success rate in their first year. But if they come in with none, that success rate falls to 65 percent," she says.

"We also show the Pacific Academy students an example of a first-year accounting paper – a core paper that needs to be done as part of an accounting or finance major in a BCom – and we ask, 'What do you notice?' The first thing they see is that 50 percent of their total mark comes from an exam component. For some other courses, the exam component is even higher."

They're insights she's been able to share with a wider audience of secondary students and teachers through another initiative she oversees: the UE Success Plan. Launched in 2023 in partnership with 12 Auckland secondary schools, the plan aims to boost students' academic success and Māori and Pacific UE achievement rates, to gain parity with overall rates by 2030. It has since grown to 15 schools, widening the doors of opportunity at university.

"A big part of these initiatives is ensuring that young people have as many options as they can, as early as they can," says Katalina, "because the more you close down your options, the fewer opportunities you ultimately have to choose from."

Community support

It's an understanding that Katalina grew up with, and was instilled by her father, who she says also passed on a passion for maths.

"A love of maths is something my siblings and I share with my dad, who was very keen on the subject. He had a strong belief that if we were capable students in maths, then it would offer us more options in terms of what we could go on to do in the future."

Crucially, he wasn't a lone voice.

"He found opportunities for us to get support. We used to go to the house of a friend of his on Saturday afternoons, and this friend would ask us real-life questions about maths that engaged us and kept our interest.

"Then there was a homework centre at Mt Roskill Grammar that my dad ran, alongside some other Tongan parents. It was a place where we could improve and where university was seen as a pathway because we had uni students, a lot of them also Tongan, who were teaching us.

"My parents were big supporters of higher education, and believers that higher education can transform lives. What I liked about their approach was that they found a group of other parents who had those same beliefs about wanting to give their kids options, so it was done as a collective within a community."

At the end of high school, Katalina gained a scholarship through the University's Department of Maths to do the equivalent of the Summer Start programme, which introduces students to University life and study before they start their first semester.

"I enjoyed it so much that I decided I wanted to do a Bachelor of Science majoring in maths. The experience also exposed me to the Tuākana programme, so when my friends started in Semester One, I already had my ID card and knew where to go for lectures and could tell them about the support that was available to us."

Ultimately, she decided teaching was the path she wanted to take: "It aligned with my values of wanting to serve young people, especially in a subject that I enjoyed, but also because there were so few of us. I can remember being the only Pacific person in my calculus class, so I wanted to be able to show other young people the opportunities maths can offer."

Taking up the challenge

One of Katalina's passions as a teacher was helping students find enjoyment in maths, and as early as possible, to help them be more successful in later stages.

It's been the impetus for her involvement with the South Auckland Maths Challenge (SAMC), which she set up with her former University classmate Josephina Tamatoa (a former Department of Mathematics professional teaching fellow).

The high school maths competition, which pits student teams against each other to solve maths problems, evolved out of an experience she had as a teacher in 2018.

"I had accompanied a school team to a regional maths competition for the first time, and on the ride home, they said, 'Do you teach us the same stuff as those other schools? Because we just got a hiding.'

"I reflected on our lead-up and training and we, as a department, had just wanted to expose them to something new. But they didn't just want to participate; they wanted to compete. And to compete requires practice. It's like a sport, where you have to train and test yourselves against others."

SAMC launched in 2019, with teams of year nine and ten students from six schools competing, with the aim of getting them match fit to compete in bigger, regional competitions. The challenge has since expanded to central and west Auckland schools and to include students from year five upwards.

Katalina continues to be involved with the challenge in her University role, which she took on in 2023 when she made the shift from her job as assistant principal at Māngere College. This year she was thrilled to learn that three Pacific Academy students had come through the SAMC ranks.

Initiatives such as SAMC, Pacific Academy and the UE Success Plan involve a team of people from across the University, as well as schools, which she says is one of the joys of her job.

"There are so many different pockets of knowledge around the University that you get to learn from, and we're also able to collectively support one another as we think about the journey of a young person from application to enrolment, through to study and graduation.

"For young Māori and Pacific people especially, it's not a journey that they take alone, and it's not a success that they experience alone. I'm proud that this is an active university that goes out and supports young people, their families and school communities so that their students have better preparedness and can succeed in whatever they want to do."

Caitlin Sykes

High school students competing in the South Auckland Maths Challenge, which was co-founded by Katalina.

Podcast reaches top ten percent globally

University research podcast *Ingenious* hit a major audience milestone with its recent second season.

Ingenious podcast host Nikki Mandow (left) with Dr Sarah-Jane Guild of the Auckland Bioengineering Institute.

Photo: Tegan Stonnell

When the first episode of *Ingenious* went to air last April, host Nikki Mandow was excited about the chance to showcase the breadth of research at Waipapa Taumata Rau.

But she wasn't sure what audience numbers to expect for the podcast, which tells indepth stories of how our researchers are impacting the world.

"I talked to Matt Hodapp, who was then assistant director of the podcast network at the University of Chicago, and he warned me that building an audience takes time. He used terms like 'long tail' and 'slow burn'," says Nikki, who has previously worked on podcasts for RNZ and Newsroom.

"But he also said certain guests or topics would hit a button with listeners and that would lift numbers for subsequent episodes."

And that's what has happened. While the first season attracted audience numbers in the low hundreds, a season-two episode, 'Inside the new science of obesity', marked a turning point. For that episode, Nikki spoke with scientists researching genetics, gut bugs, new drugs and surgery, and examined how their work is reshaping how obesity is understood and treated.

"More than a million people saw the University's Facebook post about the episode, almost 100,000 engaged with it, and many clicked through to the episode," she says. "A good percentage stayed with us for the rest of the season."

Those figures were enough to place *Ingenious* firmly within the top 10 percent of podcasts globally.

"We're back in the office and working on season three, with some fabulous research stories planned for 2026. There is so much groundbreaking research going on at the University and I can't wait to share it with more people than ever," says Nikki.

You can listen to *Ingenious* on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Pocket Casts.

Open to view

Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) students shared their work with the public at the annual Elam Artists Graduate Show 29–30 November last year, held at Elam Fine Arts Studios.

To view more work from Elam artists visit: elam.ac.nz

1

2

1. Kasish Prasad & Sophie Drury BFA: installation shot 2025
2. Manaia Thomas Bloom BFA 2025: installation detail: 'Reunion with the mother is a siren call haunting our imagination'.
3. Yolanda Huang BFA 2025: Installation shot: 'Pictures I cannot look at and place I cannot be'.
4. Thea Long, MFA 2025: 'Wonderland'.

3

4

Professor Niki Harré documents her year as a 'secular priest' in a new book, *The Calling*.

Following the call

Academic's new book explores what the secular world can learn from religion.

In 2021, University of Auckland psychology professor and atheist Niki Harré appointed herself as a 'secular priest'.

"Some people thought I was playing with fire – like a child with no clue of what they're doing – and I'm not saying they were wrong," says Niki, who heads the School of Psychology.

She was exploring what's lost when religion fades away, as in New Zealand, where most people profess no religion – a dramatic shift from last century.

Her account of the experiment is *The Calling*, a book that argues the secular world can learn much from religion.

Taking advantage of a year's leave from the University, Niki plunged into Christianity, the religion most familiar to her. She attended services, immersed herself in Christian writing, and stepped back from busyness and consumerism. She devised vows for herself, constructed Sunday services, and launched a secular priest website to advertise her services, which included conducting ceremonies and personal conversations.

Under a vow of 'simplicity', she limited her clothing to a black and grey 'uniform'.

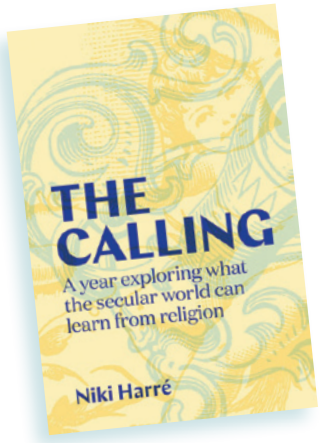
In Sunday services, delivered to as few as three people and as many as 18, there was singing (Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah', The Pretenders' 'Hymn to Her'), shared food, small rituals and talks by Niki on topics such as service.

She came to see that religion had a lot to offer – from engagement with the mysteries of life to community service.

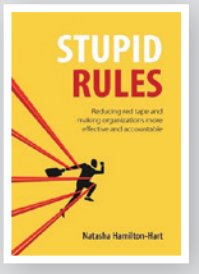
The nonbeliever noticed a tolerance among liberal Christians seemingly absent from the secular world – especially notable to her when University colleagues were vilified and ostracised for stating beliefs about mātauranga Māori and science. And at some point, she experienced what she describes as "a strange new feeling of happiness".

Following the experiment, Niki has kept returning to the interdenominational Rhythms of Grace church in Parnell. "I'm sitting there knowing that God is at one level a fabrication," she says, "and yet such a human and beautiful and poetic fabrication."

Paul Panckhurst



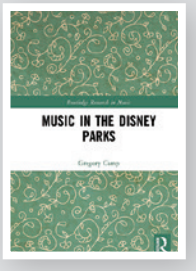
***The Calling* will be launched at Maclaurin Chapel on 12 March by Auckland University Press ($35).**



Stupid Rules

Natasha Hamilton-Hart, who is a professor in the Department of Management and International Business, shares her insights into reducing red tape and making organisations more effective and accountable. This book is described as a must-read for anyone frustrated by the bureaucratic overload that regulations create and for those needing to rethink their approach to management.

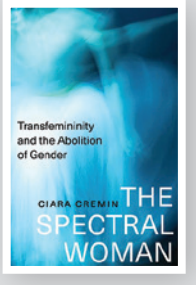
Natasha Hamilton-Hart, Agenda Publishing, $35



Music in the Disney Parks

Senior lecturer in music Dr Gregory Camp explores how Disney's theme parks expertly use music to evoke nostalgia and guide visitors. This strengthens emotional attachment to 'brand Disney', benefitting the company's bottom line. A Disney enthusiast, Gregory draws on years of visits to theme parks, where he noticed how Disney blends classic and newer songs to appeal to multiple generations.

Gregory Camp, Routledge, $292



The Spectral Woman

Sociology lecturer Ciara Cremin argues for the feminine as the force that can abolish the rigid categories of sex and gender that she says sustain class exploitation, androcentrism and repression. In this book, she describes a utopian femininity that challenges what she believes are the psychic impairments perpetuated by capitalist, colonial and patriarchal systems.

Ciara Cremin, Pluto Press, $34

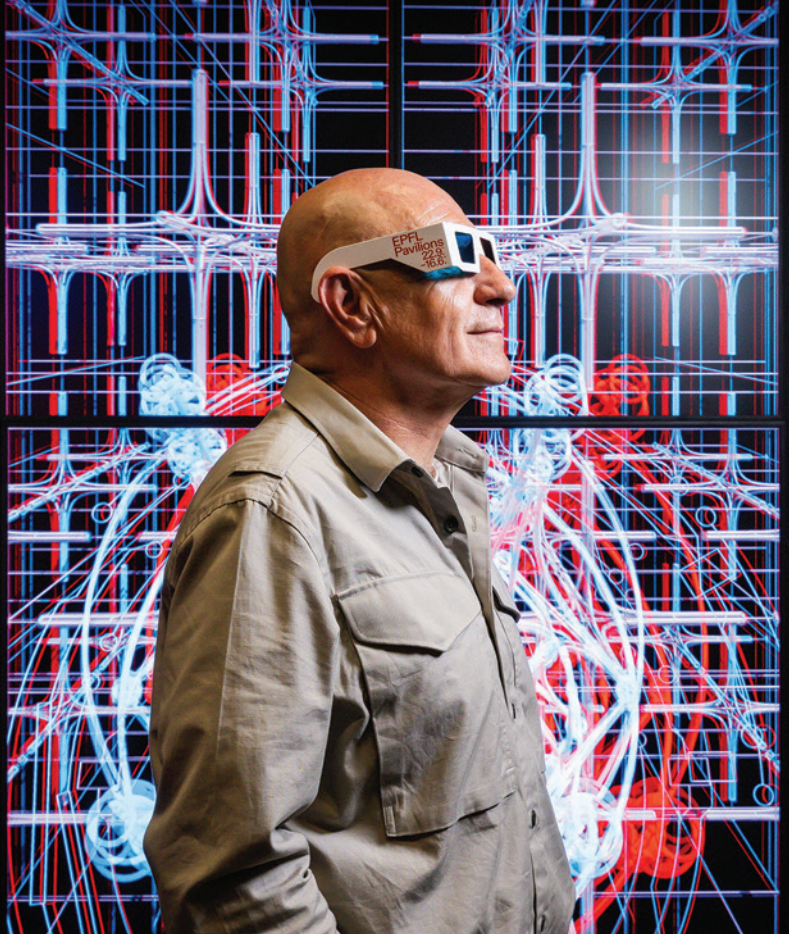


Photo: Simon Young

Associate Professor Uwe Rieger wears 3D glasses that the arc/sec Lab uses with some of its digital installations.

Mixing realities

Buried in the basement of the School of Architecture and Planning is a room lined with interactive screens, motion-capture cameras and an array of headsets resembling futuristic visors.

This is the arc/sec Lab, short for 'architecture per second', where the physical and digital worlds collide.

Run by Associate Professor Uwe Rieger – along with chief technologist Yinan Liu and Dr Charlotta Windahl, a senior lecturer in Management and International Business – the lab lets people step into architectural spaces that might not yet exist.

Put on a HoloLens – a lightweight, mixed-reality headset – and virtual walls and furniture appear around you. Once inside this 'reality', you can walk through a room and sense its scale and light, pick up objects and pull up files with a pinch of your fingers.

"We're trying to create architectural environments that aren't static anymore, but can behave like a computer," says Uwe. His definition of architecture is broader than buildings and construction sites: "Architecture is the relationship between a person and the space around them."

That philosophy is already evident in the lab's applications of the technology, including the XR Tumour Evolution Model, developed alongside the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences in 2022. The project drew on nearly a decade of data that tracked the treatment of a patient who had developed 90 tumours.

Initially the FMHS researchers asked for a virtual reality fly-through of the patient's body, he explains, but when questioned further it turned out they really wanted a way to communicate between specialists.

The arc/sec Lab responded by creating a 3D interactive workspace, which synchronised ten HoloLenses to create a hybrid environment. Medical specialists could explore how different cancers spread through the body, handling holographic information directly in space and time.

"We created a prototypical laboratory to bring all this information into a spatial context," says Uwe.

"Not only were they able to access the data as holograms, but they could also grab digital information, pull it up, see it on the walls, and move through timelines to follow how the cancer and treatment evolved. It also took into consideration how these people work and how much space they need – and that makes it architecture."

The model brought two-dimensional information from a computer into a three-dimensional space that could be experienced and touched. For Uwe, this is the ethos of the arc/sec Lab: cyber elements that enhance physical architecture, rather than replace it.

More recently, he's been exploring installations that blend motion-capture technology with a relic from the past: disposable red-and-cyan 3D glasses (like you'd use to watch a 3D movie). Just put on a pair and step in front of the lab's large screens, and the holographic structures created in the lab become crystal clear.

It's a small-scale version of the installations and prototypes Uwe and the lab have exhibited, including 'LightSense' – an installation shown in Lausanne during 2023 and 2024. Spanning 12 metres, the structure depicts a pair of translucent wings that move like a bird in flight. Digital 3D projections extend the wings' reach, while a microphone beneath the structure picks up visitors' voices.

The AI system (developed at the Auckland Bioengineering Institute) that controlled the installation's structural movement, verbal responses and holographic images was trained on 60,000 poems. Visitors wearing 3D glasses could engage with the work.

"These projects don't just push functionality, accuracy or efficiency," he adds. "They introduce a new technological idea for cyber-physical architecture – one that only became possible in the last two decades with fast computing.

"We don't yet fully understand how it will operate, or how we will relate to it. That is why we build these objects: to explore new hybrid possibilities."

Jogai Bhatt

For more images from the arc/sec Lab visit: auckland.ac.nz/UniNews