

APRIL 2026



Waipapa
Taumata Rau
University
of Auckland

UniNews



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Cover photo:
Natalie Netzler
by Chris Loufte

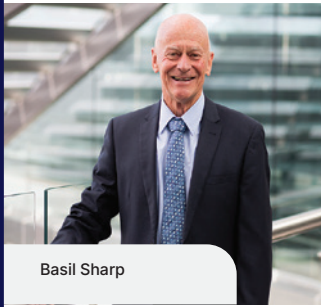
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caitlin.sykes@auckland.ac.nz
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Something to share? The next *UniNews* is May 2026, copy due 14 April.
Email: uninews@auckland.ac.nz

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

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



Basil Sharp

Green hydrogen needs a leg-up

Emeritus Professor Basil Sharp (Business School, Energy Centre) featured on RNZ regarding the role of green hydrogen in helping to cut New Zealand's industrial emissions. His team's modelling found that, at best, green hydrogen was capable of supplying about 12 percent of industrial process heat energy by 2050.

tinyurl.com/sharp-rnz-green-hydrogen

Analysing ancient bird DNA

PhD anthropology student Patricia Pillay (Arts and Education) talked to Pacific Media Network about using state-of-the-art techniques to analyse ancient bird DNA in the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia. Patricia and her team identified two species of shearwater and one tropicbird dating back at least 650 years.

tinyurl.com/pillay-pmn-bird-dna



Patricia Pillay

Photo: Richard Ng



Andrew Jeffs

Protecting rock pools

Bans on harvesting sea life from rock pools at East Coast locations, such as Whangaparāoa, may merely shift the problem elsewhere, marine scientist Professor Andrew Jeffs told RNZ. Andrew welcomed the restrictions but was concerned to witness a crowd of shellfish collectors targeting a West Coast reef.

tinyurl.com/jeffs-rnz-rock-pools

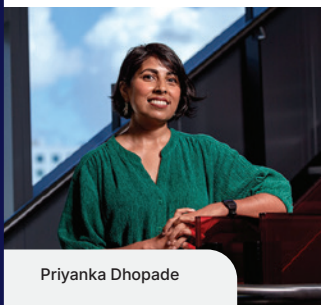
Aliens 'probably out there'

Are aliens out there? Astronomer Professor Richard Easther (Science) agreed with former US President Barack Obama's headline-grabbing comments that the odds are good. "It's not just that our galaxy has 100 billion stars, it's also that there are a trillion galaxies in the universe," he told Ryan Bridge on *Herald NOW*.

tinyurl.com/easterheraldnow-aliens



Richard Easther



Priyanka Dhopade

The politics of orbit

Tech entrepreneurs who fund rockets and satellites often herald the 'democratisation of space'. On RNZ's *Our Changing World* podcast, Dr Priyanka Dhopade (Engineering and Design) questioned that framing. "A better term might be the commoditisation or transactionalisation of space – but it's not as catchy."

tinyurl.com/dhopade-rnz-orbit-politics

Defamation case tests media

Simon Schofield (Auckland Law School) told *Newsroom* a defamation case between Talley's and *1News* highlights the challenge of proving financial loss from allegedly defamatory reporting. He said the High Court judgement largely favours *1News*, but there will be occasions when judgements favour companies.

tinyurl.com/schofield-newsroom-defamation



Simon Schofield



The candidates and Jack Tame with AUSA's Matthew Lee (left) and the Debating Society's Joe Howells (right).

Election candidates on campus

A sold-out student crowd pressed politicians on everything from retaining graduates to reining in the cost of living.

Heckles, cheers and groans filled the University's Fisher & Paykel Auditorium on 9 March as 600 students packed in for one of the first general election debates of 2026.

Held by Auckland University Students' Association (AUSA) with the University of Auckland Debating Society, the event brought together candidates from six parties. Those present were Paul Goldsmith (National), Arena Williams (Labour), Chlöe Swarbrick (Greens), Simon Court (ACT), David Wilson (NZ First) and Qiulae Wong (Opportunity). Te Pāti Māori was absent.

Journalist Jack Tame took the moderator seat, steering the candidates through a fast-moving hour of curly questions and sharp audience reactions.

He pressed Goldsmith over National's changes to enrolment rules and whether they would disproportionately shut young people

out of voting. Williams was challenged on Labour's record with Light Rail, KiwiBuild and other unfinished projects.

Wilson was asked why, given NZ First's focus on growth and reducing wasteful spending, the party felt it was a good use of parliamentary resource to push through a law change making English an official language. And Wong was asked what elections The Opportunity Party had won (Tame recalled Opportunity's only election victory was on the Featherston community board in 2022).

As the candidates laid out their priorities, the room made its own views known – at various times responding with raucous laughter, waves of groans and chants of “answer the question”.

A big topic of the evening was what the various parties would do to retain graduates in New Zealand, with nearly 240,000 New Zealanders moving overseas over the past two years.

Answers ranged from creating more jobs to easing barriers to first-home buying, adjusting tax and transport settings, tackling rent prices, and even introducing a Citizen's Income to address the cost of living.

Wong received some of the biggest applause of the night for her words on the environment: “We need to restore our relationship with nature and make sure that we don't have extractive industries ripping up our seabed floors just to sell a few boxes of fish fingers overseas.”

She was also a vocal advocate for less-divisive politics.

The evening ended with questions from the audience, as students pressed the candidates on promises made, broken or yet to materialise.

A query on scrapping the smokefree generation law prompted one candidate to joke they could “still sneak a cheeky dart” in the name of freedom.

Another student pressed the government on rising costs: “Our rego, public transport and prescription fees are up. Why are you lying to students? Why should we believe you?”

One audience member asked Swarbrick why the wealthiest should contribute more through a wealth tax. The Greens co-leader argued that freedom is meaningless without the basics: “It is utter bullshit if regular people do not have a decent income, a place to live and food to eat.”

She said decades of rising GDP had failed to improve wealth distribution and that those “at the top” needed to pay their fair share.

A chaotic round of ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ followed, placards wavering as the candidates tried to pin down their positions – a fittingly uncertain finish to a debate where candidates tested their lines and the crowd proved unwilling to let them off easy.



Jogai Bhatt



Funding helps fight cervical cancer across the Pacific

The fight against a largely preventable disease, which is the leading cause of cancer death among Pacific women, has been given a significant boost.

Te Poutoko Ora a Kiwa – Centre for Pacific and Global Health at the University, and its Pacific partners, are supporting the rollout of safe initiatives across the Pacific that are proven to prevent cervical cancer and save lives.

The Matariki Fund, administered by Rt Hon Dame Jacinda Ardern, is supporting the programme with \$5.1 million of funding, allowing more people across the Pacific to access new and existing locally led cancer prevention initiatives.

Cervical cancer can be prevented through HPV vaccination, regular screening, and timely diagnosis and treatment. Yet access to these services remains uneven across the Pacific. This new investment provides a critical opportunity to align national programmes, regional partners, and women leaders around a common goal towards eliminating the disease.

Aligning with the WHO Global Strategy to Eliminate Cervical Cancer, the initiative supports countries to achieve specific targets by 2030 that represent a threshold at which elimination becomes possible.

Professor Sir Collin Tukuitonga (pictured above), co-director of Te Poutoko Ora a Kiwa, says the funding is a gamechanger for regional collaboration.

“Cervical cancer is preventable, yet too many Pacific women continue to die from it. This investment allows Pacific countries to work together, sharing expertise, strengthening systems, and supporting women leaders to achieve elimination.”

 More: auckland.ac.nz/matariki-fund

New School of Exercise, Sport and Rehabilitation Sciences

Marking a new chapter for a discipline that has grown steadily over three decades, the University has unveiled a School of Exercise, Sport and Rehabilitation Sciences.

The school was formerly the Department of Exercise Sciences, and a function for staff, alumni, and the school’s partners and supporters was held in February to acknowledge those who shaped it.



Photos: Mark Scovren

Speaking at the function, held at the Newmarket Campus, Acting Dean of Science Professor Michael Kingsley said: “The new name reflects who we are, our growth, and the breadth of our scholarship, from elite athletic performance to exercise as medicine.”

Since 2019, student enrolments have doubled and the school has added courses including a Master of Clinical Exercise Physiology and New Zealand’s first graduate-entry Master of Physiotherapy Practice.

Michael also noted that the opening of Hiwa Recreation Centre (pictured left) has bolstered capabilities for research into athletic performance.

“We have strengthened our collaboration with elite sporting groups with the aim of improving high-performance sport in Aotearoa New Zealand,” said Michael.

Sports science began at the University in 1994, and the Department of Sport and Exercise Science, led by Associate Professor Bob Marshall, was established in 1997. Since 2018, the school has been based in Newmarket.

In 2025, the University’s sports-related subjects were rated 24th in the world by the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings.

Team Engineering triumphs

Competition was fierce when teams led by the Acting Dean of Law, Professor Susan Watson, and the Dean of Engineering and Design, Associate Professor Richard Clarke, faced off in the Battle of the Deans pub quiz.

Alumni, students and staff gathered at

Strata on the City Campus on 11 March for the inaugural event, which ultimately saw team Engineering and Design triumph.

Fittingly, the winning team walked away with a 3D-printed trophy created by the faculty’s own Professor Olaf Diegel.



Photo: Richard Ng

Dean of Engineering Richard Clarke holds aloft the 2026 Battle of the Deans trophy.



Professor Nic Smith begins as the University of Auckland's new vice-chancellor on 3 August.

New VC announced

Professor Nic Smith has been appointed the University's next vice-chancellor, taking up the role on 3 August.

It's a return to the University of Auckland for Nic, who was dean of engineering from 2013 to 2020.

He is currently vice-chancellor of Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington and has also served as Provost at Queensland University of Technology (2020–2022), head of Biomedical Engineering at King's College London (2011–2013) and was professor of computational physiology at the University of Oxford (2008–2011).

He takes over from Vice-Chancellor Professor Dawn Freshwater, whose final day in the role is 10 April.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research and Innovation, Professor Frank Bloomfield, will become acting vice-chancellor in the intervening months.

An alumnus of the University of Auckland with a doctorate in Engineering, Nic says he is honoured to be returning to lead his alma mater, in a city that has shaped both his life and his career.

"The University of Auckland plays a uniquely important role in our national life. It brings together diverse expertise to contribute trusted, evidence-based insights into the complex issues facing Aotearoa New Zealand," he says.

"At a time when public debate can feel increasingly short-term and polarised, universities matter profoundly as a place of careful analysis, long-term perspective and respectful disagreement. This contribution to our shared future has never been more important."

He said Auckland was a city of extraordinary energy, diversity and ambition, and that the University both reflects and helps shape that character.

"Having first come to Waipapa Taumata Rau as a student, and later as a member of staff, I understand how formative this place can be. At its heart are its people, students, scholars and professional staff, whose ideas and commitment lift society in ways that often exceed what can be immediately measured," he says.

"That personal connection shapes how I see the role of vice-chancellor. My responsibility is to provide conditions that enable our students and colleagues to do work that is distinctive, courageous and of lasting value, strengthening Auckland and contributing to the future of Aotearoa New Zealand."

[More: auckland.ac.nz/vc-announced](https://auckland.ac.nz/vc-announced)

Record student numbers

The University kicked off the 2026 academic year in record fashion, with more students enrolled than at the same point in any previous year.

At the start of Semester One, on 2 March, the total headcount of students was 47,033 –

around the same number of people as who live in Invercargill. This compares with 43,411 (about the size of Whanganui) at the start of Semester One in 2025 – an increase of 3,622 students (8.3 percent).

The total Equivalent Full-Time Students (EFTS) number for the start of 2026 is 33,395. This compares with 30,601 at the same time in 2025 – an increase of 2,795 EFTS (9.1 percent).

The biggest jump is in undergraduate enrolments, up 2,447 EFTS (11.4 percent), with headcount up 2,978 (10.4 percent).

Māori and Pacific undergraduate enrolments are also up: 14 percent for Pacific and 11 percent for Māori. This includes Māori postgraduate numbers, up 3 percent, and Pacific up 9 percent.

[More: auckland.ac.nz/2026-enrolments](https://auckland.ac.nz/2026-enrolments)

Natalie Netzler

Taking traditional medicine viral



Photo: Chris Loufte

All findings from Dr Natalie Netzler's study of traditional medicines will be fed back to the traditional healers involved.

Working in partnership with communities and healers, virologist Dr Natalie Netzler is researching the antiviral properties of traditional Sāmoan and Māori medicines in the pursuit of saving lives.

When Natalie Netzler had a headache as a child, she would go to her father, Gene, who would administer traditional Samoan massage – a fōfō.

“He had such big strong hands – I thought my skull was going to collapse under them,” says Natalie.

“But, as soon as he finished and took his hands away, the headache was gone.”

Her father, who was from the Sāmoan villages Moto'ōtua and Falealili, knew where all the pressure points were to alleviate the pain.

“It taught me the value of traditional

medicine and the knowledge that has been passed down.”

Now, Natalie (Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Hauā, Moto'ōtua, Falealili) is researching the antiviral properties of traditional Sāmoan and Māori medicines. It's a career path the senior lecturer in immunology and virology never imagined as a young person. Although she had a supportive family, university wasn't a common route and she lacked mentors to light the way.

“There's that saying, ‘you can't be what you can't see'. There was no one to follow, so I've always just followed what I like,” she says.

At school in Whangārei, Natalie's favourite subject was art, with biology a firm second, but her parents, Gene and mother Beatrice (Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Hauā, Pākehā), steered her away from pursuing art as a career.

“I'm not sure if that is testament to my lack of artistic abilities, or they didn't want me to be a starving artist, but my parents really encouraged me to go down the STEM route,” she recalls.

Her sister was studying teaching at the University of Waikato, where Natalie followed and completed her undergraduate and masters degrees in science.

“My masters research was on plant viruses and that lit a fire in terms of how fascinating viruses are – you can’t see them, yet they cause such devastation and disease.

“There are around 300 human viruses that cause disease, yet, despite all modern medicine, we lack tools to fight back. We have antivirals against 11 types of virus and vaccines for roughly 25.”

Working as an early-career scientist, however, was far from lucrative and Natalie’s sense of adventure drew her to South Korea to teach English, then to work in a French holiday resort, and later to London. It was there she met her Australian husband.

The pair moved to Sydney, where, missing science, Natalie took up a doctorate, researching broad-spectrum antivirals at the University of New South Wales. During her PhD, she had her daughter, who’s now eight.

“It’s a real privilege to be a mum,” she says, “and I think nothing teaches you more than motherhood.”

After graduating with her PhD, Natalie and her family returned to Auckland. She initially worked in biotech but found it didn’t resonate with her values.

“Often, it’s profits over people and following the market as opposed to the need, which don’t always align,” she says. “And you can’t really talk about what you are doing because of intellectual property [considerations], so it is difficult to engage with Māori and Pacific communities.”

Natalie sent her CV to “nearly every principal scientist in Auckland” and University of Auckland Professor Peter Shepherd came back to her, steering her toward an HRC Pacific postdoctoral fellowship in his molecular medicine lab. Under Peter’s mentorship, Natalie has been able to establish her own independent research team.

Soon after starting at the University, the Covid-19 pandemic arrived. Natalie saw the need for scientists who could span scientific, Māori and Pacific communities to dispel some of the misinformation and disinformation that was circulating. With Dr Chris Puli’uvea, a Tongan immunologist at Auckland University of Technology, she held more than 60 online fono and community information sessions during the pandemic. In 2023, they were both awarded the Cranwell Medal for excellence in communicating science to the public, by the New Zealand Association of Scientists.

“It is about presenting information in a way that you know is accessible and takes people along for the entire journey so they can make their own informed decisions,” says Natalie.

Relationships and trust built through that work have in turn supported her research.

Through her family, Natalie has a first-hand understanding of the limited access to medicines, including antivirals, in the Pacific. “The idea,” she says, “is to work in partnership with Māori and Pacific

communities and traditional healers to find what antivirals are in the medicines they already use and can access easily.”

Natalie has developed her research in partnership with the Scientific Research Organisation of Sāmoa (SROS), which partners with a broad network of traditional healers in Sāmoa, and with Dr Helen Woolner, a Cook Islands chemist based at Victoria University of Wellington. They were initially funded by the Health Research Council and Te Niwha, an infectious diseases research platform, to look at traditional plants and a range of respiratory viruses.

“We found two traditional Sāmoan medicines that work against the virus that causes Covid, the Omicron variant. And those same two plant extracts worked against RSV and the cold-sore virus. This hints at broad-spectrum activity, which is exciting.”

In late 2025, Natalie won a \$1.2 million fellowship from the Royal Society

keep the identities under lock and key. I test them blinded. We don’t put data in the cloud or send information over email unless it is all coded.”

Environmental issues are also important to consider, she says.

“What we don’t want is to find that there’s something antiviral in a Sāmoan plant, and then for big pharma to come in and plant 1,000 hectares. That would damage the land and damage the relationships.”

It’s not that traditional treatments need to be validated, says Natalie; they have been safely used by Indigenous healers for centuries. However, colonisation has introduced new diseases, such as measles and influenza, for which there were no Indigenous medicines.

All study findings will be fed back to the traditional healers, who could use that information to guide their use. In future, the active compounds could also be used

“It would be fantastic if we could interweave some Indigenous innovation to try and solve these problems.”



Dr Natalie Netzler, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences

Te Apārangi to study the antiviral properties of traditional medicines used both in Sāmoa and rongoā Māori against the measles, dengue and Zika viruses. This work is being done in partnership with SROS and rongoā practitioners from Muriwhenua.

“It would be fantastic if we could interweave Indigenous innovation to try and solve these problems,” she says.

As she notes, while the MMR vaccine is the best way to prevent measles, mumps and rubella infection, not everyone can take the live-attenuated vaccine, which is not recommended for pregnant women or people with severe immune system issues.

“For those people, if they get infected with measles, it would be good to have an antiviral.”

In both Aotearoa New Zealand and Sāmoa, the research is governed independently by groups representing communities, environmental groups, government, clinicians, church leaders and traditional healers: “There are whole cultural frameworks to work within, and it’s important that these are consistent and trusted.”

Protecting the intellectual property of the traditional healers is vital, she says, “because this is their livelihood”.

“We code-name all the medicines and

to develop nutraceuticals and synthetic medicines that could provide income and be patented to protect Indigenous knowledge.

Natalie also aims to provide the role modelling and mentorship she didn’t have as a young person. She regularly hosts Māori and Pacific students in the lab.

“It’s about engaging with school students, and then once they’re here trying to keep their momentum going.”

Between standing on various committees to ensure there is a Māori and Pacific voice, and caring for her daughter, Natalie seldom has time to pursue her love of sketching and painting. However, her daughter does.

“She’s really into art, and I’m encouraging it, because I can just see how it helps her flourish. For myself, it is going to be a lifelong passion on the side.”

However, Natalie’s life goal is clear: “The main reason I get out of bed in the morning – and I think most researchers would be the same – is you want to leave the world in a better place than you found it.

“I would love it, just love it, if I could contribute to developing an antiviral that saves lives.”



Jodi Yeats

Charl de Villiers

Accounting for impact



Professor Charl de Villiers has been ranked in the top 50 accounting academics globally.

The accounting professor's international impact in the field has been recognised with national honours.

Charl de Villiers' path to academia began in an unlikely place: mandatory military service in apartheid-era South Africa.

After earning an accounting degree from the University of Stellenbosch and completing three years of auditing to qualify as a chartered accountant, he had to serve two years in the South African military during the mid-1980s.

"I felt like it was a total waste of time," recalls the University of Auckland Business School professor of accounting.

"They teach you how to march, and how to obey orders and not think for yourself. I spent around nine months like that, running around, carrying tree stumps, building fitness and learning a little bit along the way."

However, things changed when Charl was posted to the military academy and asked to teach accounting.

"I loved it," he says. "I felt I could explain things to people in a simple way, without using big words or making it complicated."

Charl ultimately went on to further study and to hold academic positions at several universities, including the University of Auckland between 2008 and 2011 and, most recently, since 2016.

Earlier this year he was named a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the New Year Honours for services to accountancy. The honour recognises his career shaping corporate accountability and sustainability reporting, guiding organisations and governments to adopt more rigorous reporting practices.

"The award made me think about how

lucky I am to do this job where there's so much choice and so many wonderful people," he says.

Charl's work has also been recognised internationally, with a Stanford University study ranking him among the top 50 accounting academics globally and in the top two percent of scientists worldwide.

This month he will be among six academics celebrated at the University's own event recognising international reach – Hīkina kia Tutuki, Rise to the Challenge: Researchers with Global Impact.

Charl grew up on a small farm outside Cape Town. His father worked for the railways while running a modest business part time, and his mother trained as an accountant but left the workforce after marrying. Both parents instilled a strong work ethic in him, he says.

In his final year of school he decided he wanted a business career.

"In order to do that, I thought I needed to become a chartered accountant, because many of the CEOs at the time were."

After he'd graduated from Stellenbosch, and was in his late twenties, he got a job as a financial manager. But when he was made redundant at age 30, he phoned the head of accounting at his former university, asking for a job – and landed one.

"I was very lucky," he recalls.

At the time, no one at the University of Stellenbosch was doing accounting research, so Charl sought advice from another academic who explained how research worked. Within months, Charl had two papers accepted at international conferences.

His doctoral research focused on environmental accounting, an area that would grow rapidly over the following decades alongside his own influence in the field.

He went on to hold academic positions at

several universities, including as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin, before moving from Pretoria to Auckland in 2005 with his wife and two daughters. He has subsequently worked at Auckland, AUT, Massey and Waikato Universities.

He has been influential as editor of *Meditari Accountancy Research*, helping transform the journal into one of the leading publications in its field. He has also launched the annual Meditari Conference.

Now, Charl's focus is on fostering the next generation of researchers through his academic roles, which include adjunct professorships at the University of Pretoria and the University of Cape Town.

His research continues to investigate the role accounting plays to benefit society and the natural environment, and he is on the steering group of the Business School's Centre for Inclusive Capitalism. He is also preparing a paper, and will serve as guest editor, for a special issue in one of the top accounting journals on how accounting can help make capitalism more inclusive.

"If you think about the idea of inclusive capitalism, it's that some groups in society don't feel particularly well served by the system of capitalism. And the question is: how can accounting help ameliorate that problem?"

"At its core, accounting is about accountability," he says. "It's about giving an account to the people you are responsible to – providing information so society can make better decisions."



Sophie Boladeras



Read an extended version of this story at: auckland.ac.nz/UniNews

Making the right moves

The hyper focus and risk taking required in chess have carried over into Saptorshi Gupta's academic work.

When Saptorshi Gupta first sat down at a chess board aged nine, learning the skills of the game was somewhat secondary.

"I was a very shy and timid kid, and my dad thought it would be nice to introduce me to chess so that I could meet more kids of my age and open up through the game," recalls Saptorshi, pictured, who is now a PhD student and graduate teaching assistant in the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences.

However, Saptorshi's skills on and off the board progressed swiftly at the Behala Chess School, near his home in Kolkata.

"My coach advised my dad to take me to tournaments ... so that's when I started travelling with my dad and coming out of my introverted self. When I played my first nationals at the age of 11, we travelled from Kolkata to Chennai – and I have lost count of how many national championships I've played since."

Recent successes have included winning a New Zealand national chess event in November – the Fischer-Random Championship – and becoming a member of the New Zealand Chess Federation selection committee, which selects New Zealand's players for international events, including the Chess Olympiad (the Olympics of chess) held in Uzbekistan this September.

"I'm an outsider, so it's an incredibly high honour to be a part of this important decision-making process, and to see these players go on to do very well in tournaments makes me very satisfied."

After topping his biostatistics masters programme in Mumbai, Saptorshi was drawn to study in New Zealand by the work of Dr Simon Thornley in epidemiology and biostatistics. He is now wrapping up the thesis for his PhD, where he's involved in exploring the relationship between scabies and immune-mediated diseases of childhood, like acute rheumatic fever, supervised by Simon as well as Dr Gerhard Sundborn and Professor Cameron Grant.

The confidence he's gained through playing competitive chess have come in handy, he says, when presenting his research at conferences, where the chess connections have continued.

Last year when he travelled to present his research at a conference in Austria, he tacked on a trip to the Czech Republic to compete in an international chess



tournament, where he placed third. Then, with a few days to spare before starting a summer school in Dublin, he travelled to the Irish city of Carlow to play in a tournament where he placed joint-first.

Two particular skills he's learnt playing competitive chess have also helped him succeed academically.

"One is the ability to hyper focus for a long number of hours," he says.

"If I'm coding or writing a research paper I can work for a long stretch without losing my focus, even if I'm in a stressful situation, like if I have a submission due.

"In chess, we're taught that the biggest risk is to not take a risk."



Saptorshi Gupta, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences

"The second and most important skill is not being risk averse. In chess, we're taught that the biggest risk is to not take a risk.

"I'm not shy to take on a big challenge or big role, because I know that if I get selected, I can work my way through it and,

basically, there's nothing in this world that is not achievable."

In the world of chess, the higher your rating, the better you're ranked; Saptorshi is currently rated 2105 on the International Chess Federation's FIDE ratings (for context, the world's top-ranked player, Norwegian Grand Master Magnus Carlsen, has a 2840 rating). Saptorshi's aim within the next few years is to become an International Master, which requires a rating of 2400, for which he'll need to play in more international tournaments in Europe.

In the meantime, he's also been nurturing the aspirations of young players as a coach, including one who last year represented New Zealand at two under-12 world championship tournaments. It's been a full-circle experience, he says.

"When I was training this kid for his world championship match, I noticed he was also shy. So, one of the main pieces of advice I gave him was, 'you're going to a tournament, and you need to be serious, but also focus on making friends from new countries.

"I had a talk with his parents last week, and they were like, 'he's now a completely different person after travelling abroad and listening to your advice'. At the end of the day, it's not just about chess skills or accolades, but also what you learn from the game and how you take that into your life."



Caitlin Sykes



Photos: Madeleine Harvey



Rest, repair and re-engineer

Following a theatrical rehanging, one of the University's largest artworks is back on display.

Community, collaboration and connection have always been at the heart of 'Siu I Moana', one of the treasures of the University of Auckland Art Collection.

And they were central during a six-month project to rest and conserve the monumental installation before it was rehung in the atrium of the Science Centre in December.

'Siu I Moana' ('reaching across the ocean') is a 2011 work by artists Dame Robin White (Ngāti Awa, Pākehā) and Ruha Fifita (Vava'u, Tonga; Palangi). It was created in collaboration with the women of Haveluloto, Tonga, and with the blessing and guidance of Dowager Lady Tunakaimanu Fielakepa. Representing threads of connection and exchange between Tonga and Aotearoa New Zealand, it traces the migration paths of humans and sea creatures across the Pacific.

Each part of the triptych of ngatu fuatanga (marked barkcloth) measures approximately six-by-four metres, so a monumental blank space was left when the work was removed from display last year. However, after seven years' hanging with a magnet-based system, 'Siu I Moana' was showing signs of stress. The ngatu had moved over time, and portions of the barkcloth were under tension, while areas of the pigments were faded from prolonged exposure to light.

Made from the inner flesh of the hiapo (paper mulberry plant), ngatu is prized in Tonga and in other forms across the Pacific.

A kautaha koka'anga (Tongan women's making collective) undertakes the rhythmic soaking, beating and joining of the fibres into large lengths of barkcloth, traditionally measuring between 10 and 100 marked lalanga in length (commonly five to 60 metres).

During construction, the barkcloth is marked with kupesi rubbings (design relief templates made to assist in the making and decorating of ngatu in Tonga), then is over-painted with natural dyes and pigments. Ngatu ta'uli, such as the central 'Siu I Moana' panel, are distinctive for the predominance of the black tuitui pigment (candlenut soot).

Ngatu are not culturally intended to be exhibited as artworks through a Western art lens. Highly significant in Tongan culture, they are present during important gatherings and milestones, then traditionally folded and kept stored in domestic environments between celebrations and ceremonies.

The rest and conservation project required intensive planning by the art collection team, who collaborated closely with Dame Robin and whānau collaborator Ebonie Fifita-Laufilitoga-Maka.

Ebonie, who is a fele practitioner, says the conservation of 'Siu I Moana' needed to be approached in a collaborative and innovative way.

"Robin has become a dearly loved friend and family member, and all her works are like whānau to be cared for," she says.

"The invitation to rest, repair and re-engineer the cloths for their unique role in the University of Auckland space was not something to overthink and measure up, but simply a challenge to accept and trust."

The project was carried out in three phases.

The first was the deinstallation of the ngatu, undertaken by experienced abseilers, pictured above left, and transportation to the art collection storage space.

The second was a resting period of five months, during which remedial work was carried out on the barkcloth and the pigments. Largely done by Ebonie and her son Vitolio, this work was time intensive and involved sourcing pigments and the tuitui from family and friends in Tonga and Fiji. Fresh pieces of barkcloth sourced from across the Pacific were used in patching, reinforcing and construction.

During this phase, students and staff groups from Elam School of Fine Arts, Pacific Studies and Indigenous Philosophies had sessions with the artists to learn about the making and conservation processes and the kaupapa of the work. Students from each group also had the chance to physically handle 'Siu I Moana' before creating their own small rubbings of kupesi from the series, on masi (Fijian barkcloth) sourced from mentor Tamari Cabeikanacea, using 'umea (red-brown earth pigment) sourced from Lola Tukuafu in Vava'u, pictured above right.

A new hanging system, better suited for long-term display and enabling easier access, was designed and fitted before the third phase: the rehanging of 'Siu I Moana' in December, which was accompanied by karakia from Michael Steedman and a speech from Dame Robin.

The art collection team thanks the experts involved in the project, including Ebonie and Vitolio Laufilitoga Maka, Dame Robin White, APS, Carolina Izzo and the Studio Izzo team, the Faculty of Science and Campus Environment.



Madeleine Harvey, art collection adviser

[Read an extended version of this story at: auckland.ac.nz/UniNews](https://auckland.ac.nz/UniNews)

Dr Tess Moeke-Maxwell with one of the graphic novels offering whānau insights on assisted dying.



Photo: Chris Loufte

Assisted dying resources launched

New resources, including two graphic novels, have been launched to help whānau understand and navigate assisted dying in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The launch was led by Dr Tess Moeke-Maxwell (Ngāi Tai ki Tāmaki, Ngāti Porou). The Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences research fellow developed the resources alongside research advisers and the Te Ārai Research Group, which focuses on palliative care and end of life research.

The graphic novels were informed by whānau experiences of assisted dying and are part of a suite of resources, including 18 short films and a new website, Pou Kāpura.

They're the first dedicated Māori resources on assisted dying, and offer whānau culturally grounded tools to understand the End of Life Choice Act (2019) and the realities of assisted dying in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Tess says the project was motivated by a sense of personal and cultural responsibility. She was supported in the work by Te Ārai colleagues Associate Professor Jackie Robinson, Professor Merryn Gott and New Zealand's leading assisted dying academic, Dr Jessica Young.

"Our whānau have always assisted each other in dying, but the End of Life Choice Act (2019) introduces an entirely different, legally regulated way to die," says Tess.

"Even though I didn't vote for the Act, once it became law I realised some of our whānau would want to use this or consider choosing it, and they needed clear, culturally safe information to make a genuinely informed decision."

Motivated by whānau members who were navigating terminal illness, she felt compelled to understand assisted dying from a Māori perspective. However, recruitment for the research was challenging due to the topic's tapu nature, with some kaumātua choosing not to engage.

"This kaupapa is tino tapu [very sacred]. I have so much gratitude for the whānau and Māori communities who trusted us with their stories," she says.

Tess completed more than 60 interviews involving more than 100 participants. These included Māori whānau who had loved ones who completed the assisted dying process; whānau who considered it but chose not to use the Act; and individuals who applied and were declined.

Support workers – including hospice staff, kaumātua, tohunga, palliative care specialists, chaplains, funeral directors and assisted dying attending medical practitioners – were also interviewed, as were 11 participants who didn't want an assisted death.

With the latter, Tess notes it was important to understand the cultural and spiritual reasons why whānau chose not to use the Act. The event to bless and launch the resources was held at the University's Waipapa Marae, and Tess says she hopes the material will spark helpful discussions.

"My hope is that these resources will help whānau have friendly, safe conversations so they can weigh up the pros and cons and support one another, whatever decisions they make," she says.



Kim Meredith

poukapura.co.nz

[More: auckland.ac.nz/assisted-dying-resources](http://more.auckland.ac.nz/assisted-dying-resources)



Claude Megson Architect
As a teacher, New Zealand architect Claude Megson influenced generations of architects who studied at the University's School of Architecture. These included Giles Reid, who has co-produced this book recognising Megson's legacy.
Giles Reid and Jackie Meiring, Massey University Press, \$75, released 9 April



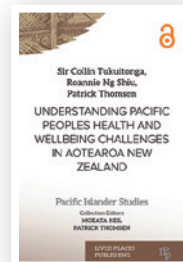
Servants of God, Slaves of the Church
The close relationship between sacred devotion and coerced labour in early medieval Europe is uncovered in this new book

by Associate Professor of Humanities Lisa Bailey.
Lisa Kaaren Bailey, Cornell University Press, \$86



Oceanic Diplomacy
An exploration of how the arts of persuasion, negotiation, reconciliation and relationship building have been woven into life in Oceania for millennia.

Editors Salā George Carter, George Fry, Gordon Leua Nanau; Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies Press, University of Canterbury; free online



Understanding Pacific Peoples Health and Wellbeing Challenges in Aotearoa New Zealand
Pacific health experts from across New Zealand,

examine in depth public health issues for Pacific peoples and communities through their own words and research.
Editors Sir Collin Tukuitonga, Roannie Ng Shiu, Patrick Thomsen; Lived Places Publishing; paperback \$60, free online



Rock star

As keeper of the University's rocks, Dr Neville Hudson (pictured) manages vast geological collections.

In his role as a School of Environment technician, Neville oversees everything from 3.8-billion-year-old rocks from Isua in Greenland to fossilised whale vertebrae and immense ancient crystals.

The specimens are housed in towering banks of trays in a warehouse tucked away in industrial St Johns. Among them, fossils are the most numerous – some discovered by Neville himself in Port Waikato, Kawhia and Awakino during his earlier exploits as a biostratigrapher (someone who dates rock layers via the fossils contained within them).

The collections are nationally and internationally important, says Neville – and they're fascinating.

Propped against one wall is a replica of a monster, 1.4-metre-long fossilised clam from the Kaipara Harbour. There are remains of New Zealand marine creatures called

trilobites, visually akin to slaters, which are 500 million years old.

In the geothermal collection there are cores drilled between 1955 and 1965 from locations now completely protected; stalactites and stalagmites make up a collection of their own; and there are fossils of land snails and moa bones. Oddities include shells and coral seized at the border.

Spending his days surrounded by pre-history, does Neville think he's developed a different sense of time than the rest of us?

"Yes and no," he says. "I guess I've got the normal sense of time that everybody else has, but also an understanding that something that looks like it was created by the animal yesterday – a shell or something – could be 10,000 years old, could be several million years old, depending on exactly what kind of shell it is, what creature it was."

Such a sprawling collection is never quite tamed; there's always something to be done. On a typical day, Neville prepares samples for loan; processes returned loans; sorts, accessions and files uncatalogued material; and edits and updates catalogues.

An expert in the mid-Jurassic period, between 178 million and 164 million years ago, he's a co-author of the newly updated *New Zealand Geological Timescale*, the definitive guide to the ages of the rocks, fossils and minerals of these Shaky Isles.

Despite his love of fossils, Neville doesn't have a collection of these at home. Instead, the keen amateur entomologist has a large insect collection. He has also authored papers on palaeontology and geology, moths, and the future of university collections.

The collections moved out of rented premises last year into the University-owned St Johns facility, but Neville won't get to enjoy the new site for long. After nearly 30 years of managing geological specimens, retirement is near. Which begs the question: Who will be our next rock star?



Paul Panckhurst

For more images from the University's geological collections visit: auckland.ac.nz/UniNews