

AUGUST 2026



Waipapa
Taumata Rau
University
of Auckland

UniNews



Advancing our interests

Academic and entrepreneur
Professor Cather Simpson

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Echoes of the past

What can we learn from
the ancient world?

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High performer

Olympian, alumna and performance
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Cover photo:
Alexis Pritchard
by Chris Loufte

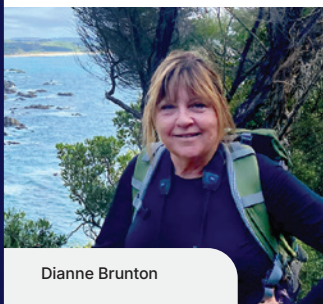
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Something to share? The next *UniNews* is September 2026, copy due 11 August.
Email: uninews@auckland.ac.nz

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.

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



Dianne Brunton

Bird flu poses deadly threat

Professor Dianne Brunton (Biological Sciences) commented about avian flu in a number of media outlets, including RNZ's *First Up*. She spoke to host Nathan Rarere about the vulnerability of our native bird species and why New Zealand's environment calls for a conservation approach.

tinyurl.com/brunton-rnz-bird-flu

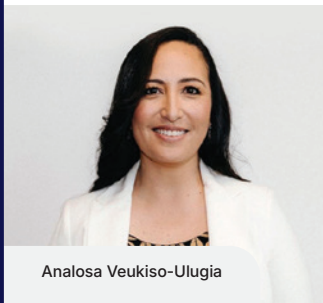
Smarter tests, faster treatment

Biomarkers in the gut microbiome can indicate bowel cancer with up to 80 percent accuracy, Dr Theo Portlock (Liggins Institute) told RNZ. He wants to re-test national bowel cancer screening programme poo samples, using AI to look at the microbiome. This could improve diagnostic accuracy, he says, and treatment times.

tinyurl.com/portlock-rnz-bowel-screening



Theo Portlock



Analosa Veukiso-Ulugia

Consent starts at home

Dr Analosa Veukiso-Ulugia (Arts and Education) talked to PMN in response to National's promises to introduce affirmative consent laws if re-elected. She said helping Pacific children learn about respect, boundaries and healthy relationships was needed alongside legal reform, to protect young people from sexual harm.

tinyurl.com/veukiso-ulugia-pmn-consent

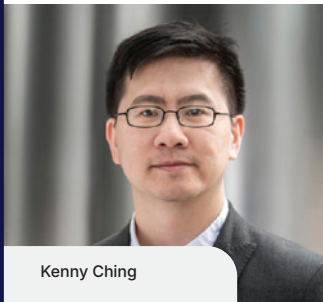
Whale poo analysis

Analysis of southern right whale poo reveals the creatures may have a more varied diet than we realised, Associate Professor Emma Carroll (Biological Sciences) told *Yahoo News*. That could aid resilience, she said, allowing the whales to shift prey and take advantage of what's locally or seasonally abundant.

tinyurl.com/carroll-yahoo-whale-poo



Emma Carroll



Kenny Ching

Tennis' Big Four barrier

Dr Kenny Ching (Business School) used decades of professional tennis data to explore whether the longevity of the 'Big Four' tennis players (Federer, Nadal, Djokovic and Murray) bottlenecked the generation below them. He discussed his research on RNZ's *First Up*.

tinyurl.com/ching-rnz-big-four

Tsunami of problems

After the Civil Defence website went down during a tsunami alert, computer scientist Dr Ulrich Speidel told RNZ that the site had major issues even when it was working as intended. Trying to find basic information on the nearest evacuation centre, for example, involved clicking through multiple pages, he said.

tinyurl.com/speidel-rnz-civil-defence



Ulrich Speidel



Signature Research Areas launched

The initiative connects existing research strengths to tackle major issues and create clearer pathways for collaboration.

The vision of a sustainable planet lies at the core of the six Signature Research Areas (SRAs) launched by the University via a series of roadshows at each faculty and large-scale research institute.

Interim Vice-Chancellor Professor Frank Bloomfield (pictured) says the SRAs help demonstrate how the University's research and innovation ecosystem contributes practical solutions to real-world challenges.

"Our research is globally ambitious and locally grounded. The Signature Research Areas draw strength from Aotearoa and the Pacific while contributing knowledge and solutions that matter internationally," he says.

Behind-the-scenes work to develop the SRAs has included bibliometric analysis and digging into other sources of evidence of research excellence.

There has been an academic-led process to iterate concepts within the University's research communities, and a process to understand how external stakeholders gauge the University's research strengths – and their potential to make a difference.

Higher education and university research face increasing scrutiny, with universities expected to not only generate new knowledge and skills but clearly demonstrate public value. In part, the SRAs are a response to a time of uncertainty and change in the public research sector.

The Interim Vice-Chancellor says the SRAs stand for a deliberate and future-focused response: a way to strengthen our research to lead, collaborate and deliver impact in a fast-changing world.

The initiative brings together world-class expertise from across disciplines, connecting existing strengths to tackle major issues at scale and create clearer pathways for collaboration with government, industry, iwi, funders and international partners.

"The Signature Research Areas recognise where we already have exceptional capability and where we can make the greatest contribution in the years ahead," says Frank.

He cautions that the SRAs provide a framework but could never represent the totality of research at a comprehensive university. The SRAs do not narrow research activity or ranking disciplines; the ambition is they create a framework to connect expertise and amplify impact across the institution.



Gilbert Wong

"The Signature Research Areas recognise where we already have exceptional capability and where we can make the greatest contribution in the years ahead."



Interim Vice-Chancellor
Professor Frank Bloomfield



The six Signature Research Areas

Mā Kiwa te moana nui e whakaumu, Blue Pacific Horizons

Building resilient, just and sustainable futures – grounded in the Pacific, relevant to the world.

Mātauranga Tuku iho, Ancestral Futures

Shaping research with Indigenous knowledge to solve global challenges.

Hangarau Haputa, Frontier Technologies

Making sure tomorrow's technologies work for our communities today.

Pūngao Toitū, The Energy Movement

Accelerating the transition to cleaner, more resilient and accessible energy systems for everyone.

Hangarau Hāpai Hauora, Future Health

Using Aotearoa New Zealand as a living lab to turn cutting-edge health research into solutions that work for all.

Mōhiotanga tōtōpū, Advancing Trust in Knowledge

Strengthening the knowledge and trust that help societies understand, decide and act together.

PM's Science Prize win tinged with sadness

A simple but transformative treatment developed at the University was awarded the 2026 Prime Minister's Science Prize at an event at Parliament on 30 June, recognising its global impact on newborn health.

The Fetal Physiology and Neuroscience team, from the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, pioneered the use of mild cooling to treat brain injury caused by oxygen deprivation at birth. Now standard care in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, the therapy has prevented severe disability or death in thousands of babies worldwide.

The research was co-led by the late Professor Alistair Gunn and Professor Laura Bennet. Alistair, who passed away suddenly in May 2026 before the formal award, had been informed of the honour. He described it as recognition of decades of collaborative work and the trust of families who participated in early trials.



Associate Professor Joanne Davidson, the late Professor Alistair Gunn and Professor Laura Bennet.

Photo: Royal Society Te Aparangi

The team provided the first evidence that reducing a baby's body temperature by just 2.5 to 3 degrees Celsius could limit brain damage, first in animal studies and later in clinical trials. The work ultimately led to the development of a safe, cost-effective cooling cap device now used in neonatal care worldwide.

Judges praised the research for changing the global standard of care and delivering significant health and economic benefits. Associate Professor Joanne Davidson, who joined the research project when she began her PhD, says cooling works in multiple ways,

slowing cell death and reducing inflammation in the injured brain.

For Laura, the impact is deeply personal. She recalls meeting a child treated during early trials who grew up healthy and active. "We can make that difference to their lives," she says.

The \$500,000 prize will support further research into improving outcomes for newborns, including those with milder injuries and preterm babies.

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/2026-pm-science-prize](https://auckland.ac.nz/2026-pm-science-prize)



Photos: Say Schulman



(Far left) 3MT winners Emma McGuigan (people's choice), Faith Culas (overall winner) and Sachi Rathod (runner-up).

(Left) Ross Miller talked about developing a writing system for sign language.

Keeping calm and carrying on wins 3MT final

Engineering and Design PhD candidate Faith Culas won the University's 2026 Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition on 17 July with her presentation on diversity in software engineering.

A global academic research communication competition, 3MT challenges doctoral candidates to share the story of their research with a general audience in under three minutes, supported by only a single, static slide.

Alongside these restrictions, Faith also had to contend with her microphone and AV

cutting out halfway through her presentation. Soldiering on, she still managed to take away the top prize for her talk investigating how the design of digital tools can unintentionally favour certain ways of thinking.

Thirteen doctoral candidates showcased their smarts in the final in front of a packed lecture hall. Among the topics were the hidden identity struggles faced by young adults living with autoimmune disease; microscopic zooplankton; how virtual reality might foster intercultural understanding; and how medieval church courts dealt with repeat adulterers.

The finalists represented faculties and disciplines from across the University, and their speeches were ranked by the judging panel: Professor Dame Juliet Gerrard, Gilbert Wong (research communications) and last year's 3MT runner-up, Rebecca O'Leary.

Speaking at the event, Pro Vice-Chancellor Global and Graduate Research Professor J.R. Rowland said the finalists presented outstanding research, and shared "something of their genuine selves".

"Every doctoral candidate enriches our University, our city and our country, and together they create the diversity of thought, curiosity and discovery that makes a research-intensive university thrive."

The event's runner up was Sachi Rathod (Medical and Health Sciences), talking about building better eye-care policy by creating a pathway woven from preschool through to high school, and people's choice winner was Emma McGuigan (Science), speaking about 'uncovering the ocean's hidden heroes'.

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/2026-3mt-finals](https://auckland.ac.nz/2026-3mt-finals)



Photo: Chris Louffe

Associate Professor Ben Lawrence, a practising oncologist, is leading the new Department of Cancer Sciences.

Department of Cancer Sciences established

The University's new Department of Cancer Sciences was formally launched on 23 July, bringing together leading researchers, clinicians and educators from across disciplines.

The department creates one of New Zealand's most comprehensive cancer-focused academic communities. It represents a major step towards the University's long-term vision of a comprehensive cancer centre for New Zealand.

Cancer is the leading cause of death in Aotearoa. Currently around 30,000 new cases are diagnosed annually and the Cancer Control Agency projects this to rise to more

than 45,000 by 2044 due to population growth and ageing.

The department will connect expertise across the full cancer pathway, from prevention and laboratory discovery through to clinical treatment, living with cancer, and evidence-informed health policy.

It brings together the Auckland Cancer Society Research Centre, the Department of Oncology, and Cancer Trials New Zealand. More cancer researchers will join from across the Faculties of Medical and Health Sciences, and Science, and from other areas of the University. It will also create opportunities for collaboration across Te Whatu Ora, Health

New Zealand, the community and through international research partnerships.

The department's founding head, Associate Professor Ben Lawrence, who is a practising oncologist, says the department dramatically expands the scope of cancer research and teaching.

"The department spans the complete continuum of cancer sciences, from prevention to fundamental discovery, translating research for real-world prevention, care and treatment," says Ben.

 **Full story:** auckland.ac.nz/cancer-sciences-department

Engineering duo lift off with space scholarships

Two University of Auckland engineering students have been awarded prestigious New Zealand Space Scholarships, earning three-month internships at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Southern California.

Kyja McCabe, from the Department of Electrical, Computer and Software Engineering, and Thomas Phillips, a Master of Aerospace Engineering student, are among seven recipients nationwide.

At JPL, Kyja will help develop next-generation electronics for power distribution on the Moon, Mars and other planetary surfaces – technology that could support future human settlements beyond Earth.

"Aotearoa is my favourite place on the planet, so to be able to learn at an institution like JPL and hopefully bring that knowledge home to help grow New Zealand's aerospace industry is an unreal opportunity," he says.

Thomas will work on NASA's Ultra-Compact Imaging Spectrometer for the Moon project, improving a cryogenic testing platform used to assess spacecraft components in the extreme temperatures and vacuum conditions of space.

The pair will work alongside scientists and engineers contributing to active space missions, gaining hands-on experience at the forefront of global space exploration.

The scholarships were presented by Space Minister Chris Penk



Kyja McCabe (left) and Thomas Phillips (third from right), pictured with fellow New Zealand Space Scholarship recipients at a ceremony in Wellington.

at a ceremony in Wellington on 18 June. The minister described the programme as a "career-defining opportunity" that gives talented New Zealanders experience on real-world space missions before bringing that expertise home.

Kyja and Thomas departed for the US on 20 June with fellow recipients Alexander Wiseman, Angela Xue, Laura Doyle and Zhen Hong Chai (Victoria University of Wellington), and Laura Franssen (Auckland University of Technology).

A full-body portrait of Alexis Pritchard, a woman with short dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt, a blue and white floral blazer, and dark trousers. She is standing in front of a black punching bag and a grey perforated wall. The punching bag has the text 'CH', 'UNT', 'NCH', and 'e Cameron' visible. She is wearing a green pendant necklace and a gold ring.

Alexis Pritchard

High performer

Olympian and alumna Alexis Pritchard is drawing on her own experiences as a student athlete in her role as the University's performance sport team lead.

Alexis (Lex) Pritchard didn't start boxing until she was 19 – and it happened by chance.

Her sporting passion to that point had been hockey, but one Sunday afternoon she joined a class at boxing gym Boxing Central, and she never looked back.

"I fell in love with boxing the first time I tried it," recalls Lex. "It made me feel powerful and strong."

Despite the sport's fierce physical reputation, Lex says she was hooked by the mental challenge that boxing offered. Few things are more confronting, she says, than being hit in the face, so it's crucial for boxers to harness their demons, quell insecurities and summon courage to be successful.

That mental strength took her far. As did disciplined training, coaching from "one of New Zealand's best boxing coaches" (and her former husband) Cameron Todd, and dedication. That included fundraising to compete in a sport not traditionally favoured by funders.

In 2012, when boxing became an Olympic sport for women, Lex entered the ring at the London games and became the first New Zealand woman to win an Olympic boxing bout.

Her 16-year professional career also saw her compete at the 2014 and 2018 Commonwealth Games. She won bronze at the latter before hanging up her gloves that year.

Many strings to the bow

Through the early years of this high-level sporting career, Lex was also a student. The University of Auckland alumna graduated in 2007 with a BSc majoring in exercise science and went on to complete a Bachelor of Health Science in physiotherapy at AUT.

It's personal experience that she's now drawing on in her role as the University's performance sport team lead.

One of two main aspects of her role is leading the High Performance Support Programme, which provides tailored academic, performance and personal support for students who are competing in sports at an elite level. There are 315 students in the programme, including Olympic and Commonwealth Games athletes and world champions, as well as those on a path to compete at those highest levels.

"The programme involves a lot of coordination with academic staff and the students, because the biggest thing for these athletes is having the flexibility that allows them to balance study while performing at an elite level," explains Lex.

"When I was studying exercise science, I was competing at a world-championship level, so there were lots of overseas trips and sporting commitments, as well as holding down a part-time job.

"So, I recognise the challenges that many

of our students have – and not only our student athletes but students in general. I think that lived experience is an asset. I'm not saying that my experience is their experience, but there's a similarity and understanding."

Lex was working as a full-time bartender when her boxing coach encouraged her to pursue an academic path.

"He said, 'If you're going to take sport seriously, you also need to have another part of your life that you're taking seriously'. He was advocating for all his boxers to be multi-dimensional, because he thought it made them better humans.

"Many athletes have one focus, and that works very well for some, but if you're having a tough time with injury, or a performance slump and your whole identity is tied to being an athlete, your self-esteem, confidence and mental health can really take a hit.

"If athletes have an opportunity to have more than one string to their bow ... then there's an opportunity for them to feel a sense of achievement and joy in other areas of life."

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Alexis Pritchard, performance sport team lead

"On the other hand, if athletes have an opportunity to have more than one string to their bow – maybe as a student or serving in their community – then there's an opportunity for them to feel a sense of achievement and joy in other areas of life. That makes them more mentally and emotionally robust."

At the time of her own retirement, Lex had a busy life outside of professional sport, including running her own businesses. Even so, she admits she was surprised how she grieved for her 'athlete self'.

"It made me wonder how much bigger, longer and deeper that period of transition and grief would have been had I not had those other strengths to draw on."

An ecosystem of excellence

The other major part of Lex's University role is overseeing our national tertiary teams. These represent the University in badminton, basketball, 3x3 basketball, football, futsal, netball, volleyball, rowing and Ultimate (often

referred to as Ultimate Frisbee). The teams compete on regional, national and sometimes international levels; last year the University's men's football team competed in the FISU Football World Cup in China.

"There is a lot of opportunity for us in the National Tertiary Competition programme to foster a sporting identity and pride for Waipapa Taumata Rau, which has a flow-on effect into the student community," says Lex.

"The hope is to be able to pack stadiums and have people chanting and cheering for Waipapa Taumata Rau.

"As an Olympian, I experienced the New Zealand Olympic Committee doing an incredible job of bringing people on that kind of journey; of telling the story and reminding athletes of the legacy they are a part of by being selected onto a New Zealand team.

"That's a kind of framework that my team and I are working on developing here."

It's all part of a wider aspiration Lex has to support the ongoing development of a coordinated "ecosystem of excellence" for sport at the University.

That not only includes supporting elite athletes in their studies and growing winning teams but also serving as a wider hub for sporting research, innovation and excellence.

"It's figuring out how we connect the sporting community in a coordinated way to all the expertise in our University. We could be an entry point for national sporting organisations or professional sports teams, for example, to come to us and say, 'We need some innovation in this area' and we could then connect them to the right people, in exercise science or engineering or health sciences and beyond."

Reframing movement

Movement is still a big part of Lex's life, but she thinks about it differently since retiring from professional sport.

"I remember going on my first run after being on the sofa for six months after retiring, and I was really mean to myself in my head. I thought, if I keep on with this narrative, I'm not going to be getting off the sofa again.

"I decided in that moment to reframe movement from a place of competition to a place of kindness and joy."

She does yoga, bouldering, weights, a bit of running and generally lives an active, outdoors-focused life with her partner, who is a high-performance paddler.

And does she still box? Visit Hiwa on Thursdays at 7.30am and the Olympian will put you through your paces in a fun, social boxing fitness class – but that's it for now.

"Yes, I still want to push every now and again," she says, "but that's definitely not the reason why I'm out there."

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Caitlin Sykes



Photo: Simon Young

Professor Cather Simpson hopes the New Zealand Institute of Advanced Technology can help Kiwis harness innovation to solve big, global problems.

The entrepreneurial academic

In a new role on the board of the New Zealand Institute for Advanced Technologies, Professor Cather Simpson is drawing on her vast track record of turning cutting-edge research into commercial ventures.

Using the parlance of basketball, Professor Cather Simpson describes herself as a ‘point guard’.

A team player, she’s the one who sets up the plays, making sure the ball gets to the right players at the right time so they can take the shot.

The professor of physics and chemical sciences is certainly in full swing in the role when she meets with *UniNews*. The fourth start-up company that she has co-founded through the University’s Photon Factory has just been spun out. She established the Photon Factory in 2009 to harness cutting-edge research in photonics, the science of light, to solve real-world problems.

The start-up, Beam Agritech, is developing tiny low-cost lasers that zap parasitic varroa mites off honeybees as they fly into their hives. The mites feed on honeybees and their larvae and pupae, spread disease and can cause bee colonies to collapse, representing a global threat to food security due to bees’ critical role as pollinators. The idea, which began in one of the Photon Factory’s brainstorming sessions over beers at Old Government House, was developed by Cather and Dr Francesco Merola, a University senior research fellow in physics, in collaboration with Plant and Food Research. Francesco is now taking the reins as the company’s chief science officer, alongside a CEO.

Cather is also immersed in a multimillion-dollar capital raise for another Photon Factory spin-out company, Orbis Diagnostics. She is CEO of the company, which is developing a low-cost, point-of care

diagnostics platform that offers clinically accurate blood test results using just a drop of blood from a fingerstick.

Cather says her drive to turn research ideas into commercial ventures is likely due to a range of factors. One is her love of working in teams; another is the creative excitement that comes from finding innovative deep-tech solutions to globally critical problems.

She also points to her peripatetic upbringing. She was born in Germany, where her father was stationed as a US military officer, and she moved well over a dozen times in her childhood.

“Because I moved around so much, I tend to be adaptable, and to see new landscapes through the lens of opportunity rather than constraint,” she says.

As well as working on the front lines of start-ups, Cather is supporting others to shoot for their goals through her high-profile national and international governance roles.

She’s on the board of Fisher and Paykel Healthcare, one of the country’s biggest technology success stories, and is president-elect of SPIE, the international society for optics and photonics. The 25,000-member organisation brings together engineers, scientists, students and business professionals to advance light-based science and technology.

She’s also bringing her extensive experience translating research into commercial applications to the board of the New Zealand Institute for Advanced Technology (NZIAT). The new Public Research Organisation was announced last

year, as part of one of the largest reforms in decades of our science sector, and is charged with connecting research, industry and investment to translate world-leading science into new products, services, industries and high-paying jobs. The NZIAT articulates this mission as ‘From frontier research to frontier firms for a prosperous New Zealand’.

Cather says she jumped at the opportunity to join the board to help address New Zealand’s persistently stagnant productivity levels. She points to a couple of major challenges the country needs to overcome to turn the tide.

“You can’t point to the science and innovation system in isolation and say, ‘You guys need to lift your game and give us more return on investment’. Too many other factors are required to support the translation of innovation into economic growth – including business dynamism, taxation and policy settings, and advanced infrastructure.”

Another is shifting our innovation culture to think bigger and more expansively. That means taking a leaf out of the innovation playbooks of both established and emerging companies like Fisher and Paykel Healthcare, and Halter, respectively.

“We need to hold on to all the innovative drive that comes with our number-eight wire mentality, and apply that outwardly, to solving big, global problems; to not just fix your own paddock gate, improve one township’s water quality or deliver better patient care to one doctor’s practice,” she says.

“It’s about having the confidence and thriving commercialisation ecosystem to turn your innovation into a product that delivers solutions to the world biggest challenges, and economic benefit to New Zealanders today and tomorrow.”



Caitlin Sykes

What can we learn from the ancient world?

Raising the Bar speaker Alex McAuley says ancient times can seem eerily familiar.

With a primary research interest in the Hellenistic world, Alex McAuley spends his working life exploring a world more than 2,000 years in the past.

But the period, which spans from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC to the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC, has more in common with today than you might expect.

"The Hellenistic world is remarkably similar to the twenty-first century in a lot of ways," says Alex, a senior lecturer in Greek history and language at the University.

"There is no one empire ruling over all, but rather different powers and groups vying for land and resources. It's messy, oftentimes brutal, and fundamentally divided, but underneath is a common language and a common way of speaking.

"There's no political unity, but there is a cultural unity. What can we learn from that? How does it make us rethink what is happening in the world around us?"

They're questions that will be the focus of Alex's upcoming Raising the Bar talk, 'Lessons from the ancient Greeks for today's global world'. An annual event, Raising the Bar features 20 talks by academics across ten bars, and Alex says audiences can expect his talk to be "human, diverse and maybe eerily familiar".

Alex has spent more than a decade researching the intricacies of the ancient world, which first captivated him as a first-year university student in Canada.

Alex, who grew up in Ottawa, was studying a Bachelor of Commerce at McGill University in Montreal when a friend convinced him to take an ancient history paper.

"It changed my life," he recalls. "I realised commerce wasn't really my thing, and that the subjects in the arts were far more intellectually stimulating and engaging."

He switched to an arts degree and has never looked back.

Following his undergraduate studies, he learned Latin and Greek, completed a masters in classics at the University of Edinburgh, then returned to McGill for his PhD. In a full-circle moment, his doctoral supervisor had been the lecturer in that history paper he took by chance as a young commerce student.

Alex subsequently taught classics at the

University of British Columbia and Hellenistic history at Cardiff University.

He has been at the University of Auckland since moving to New Zealand with his Australian wife in 2023. Alongside teaching ancient history at all levels, he is a postgraduate supervisor and the Bachelor of Arts programme director.

The shift to New Zealand has also allowed him to reconnect with an element of his Canadian roots – refereeing and playing ice hockey, a sport that he pursued seriously as a teenager until an injury forced him to stop.

"Within about three weeks of arriving in New Zealand, I got back on the ice for the first time in ten years," he says. "It's been a dream to unlock that part of my life again."

Alex is also working on two books, to add to his previously published works: one about the Hellenistic queen Stratonike, and another about the connection between 9/11 and perceptions of the ancient world.

So what is it about these ancient times that has sustained his interest?

"With Rome, we know how the story ends. There is the idea – right or not – of a linear trajectory. Rome always had a monolithic character and a centre of gravity to it that was interesting to me," he explains.

"The Greek world was both very unified and very diverse. It had hundreds of different cultural and mythical traditions, civic and social worlds that were distinct and fractious, but ultimately still part of a coherent whole.

"In moments where Greek communities came together – like at the Olympic Games – they would recognise that they were part of a unified culture.

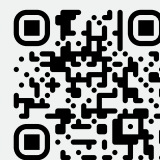
"I've always found that unity and diversity fascinating."



Nikki Addison

Raising the Bar is an annual event hosted by the University since 2017, featuring 20 talks by academics across ten bars. See Alex's talk on 25 August at Norma Taps. Tickets are free and available now.

rtbevent.com/auckland



Alex McAuley is among 20 academics giving talks across ten bars at Raising the Bar on 25 August.

The art and science of our natural world

A new exhibition explores the history of botanical study and our fascination with plants.

A family quest to learn more about an artist forebear has sparked an art exhibition, now on at the General Library.

Evergreen: The Art and Science of Plants explores how artists and scientists have worked to understand and represent the natural world. A collaboration between He Māra Mahara, Cultural Collections and the School of Biological Sciences, the exhibition includes unique anatomical plant models, called Brendel Models, and botanical artworks by Olive May Tonkin (1880-1954) from the University of Auckland Art Collection.

The spark for the exhibition was ignited when Olive May Tonkin's great-grandson contacted the art collection team to ask about her watercolour paintings held in the collection. Art collection adviser Madeleine Harvey arranged for ten family members to view the paintings, which hang in the School of Biological Sciences' Thomas Building.

Madeleine and Cultural Collections archivist Sarah Cox had also discovered a cabinet of Brendel Models displayed in the neighbouring George Mason Biology building. Intrigued by the models' sculptural qualities and how they were once used in teaching and learning, the pair embarked on some further research.

Created for teaching and display purposes by R. Brendel & Co in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century, the anatomical plant models were handpainted



Olive May Tonkin. 'Kohekohe' (c.1940). Watercolour on paper. University of Auckland Art Collection

and constructed from materials including papier-mâché, wire, wood and glass.

In the University's archives, Sarah found a record, dated March 1900, for the purchase of some of the Brendel Models in papers related to Sir Algernon Thomas, the University's first professor of natural science. They also found a photograph taken in his lab, in which the models are visible.

Alongside the models and artworks, the exhibition brings together published and archival materials from the University's diverse collections.

***Evergreen: the art and science of plants* is open Monday to Friday 11am-4pm until 16 September at He Māra Mahara Cultural Collections, Level M, Te Herenga Mātauranga Whānui General Library.**



Brendel Model no.130 *Drosera*, University of Auckland School of Biological Sciences collections



Can you solve the mystery of this distinctive stopwatch?

An old Swiss stopwatch bears the engraving 'Univ. Of Auckland Psychology Dept 20'. But what is its story?

The stopwatch was found in an opshop by Rosie – who prefers to use her first name only – who was intrigued by the object, which was in a lovingly made pouch. She approached the University to see if anyone had information about the timepiece, but investigations have come up short.

The watch probably dates from 1958

onward, as prior to that the University was known as Auckland University College.

Could it have been a gift to a staff member to mark an anniversary or retirement? Or could the Department of Psychology have purchased watches like this for timed performance tests for research of some kind?

If you have any clues that may help solve the mystery, email: paul.panckhurst@auckland.ac.nz

Obituary: Robert Wiremu

16 September 1970 – 18 July 2026

Robert Wiremu (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Tūwharetoa) was a gifted vocal coach, pianist, composer, choral conductor, musician, linguist and educator whose influence on music in Aotearoa New Zealand was profound and far reaching.

Throughout his life, he placed education at the centre of his work, inspiring generations of singers, conductors, composers and musicians through his teaching, mentorship and artistry.

Robert grew up in Flaxmere, surrounded by music. His grandmother first encouraged his musical journey, deciding that piano lessons would be a good idea. She sent him to the same teacher who had taught his mother and aunts more than two decades earlier.

In a *kōrero* with Dale Husband for *E-Tangata* in 2025, Robert said: “Those piano lessons were like finding a place that felt like home. Music felt like home.” That sense of belonging he gained through music remained a defining thread throughout his life and career.

After completing a degree in composition at Victoria University of Wellington, Robert came to the University of Auckland in 1993 to study singing with Beatrice Webster MBE.

Possessing a magnificent baritone voice, Robert sang in all of New Zealand’s national choirs, including the New Zealand Secondary Students’ Choir (NZSSC), the New Zealand Youth Choir (NZYC) and Voices New Zealand, as well as the World Youth Choir.

He also sang with New Zealand Opera, both as a soloist and in the chorus. In 1998, he went to Brisbane to continue his voice studies but returned to the University of Auckland later that year to teach for Beatrice Webster as her health began to fail. From that point onward, he remained at the University, becoming one of its most respected and influential educators.

For nearly three decades, Robert stood at the heart of vocal and choral education in New Zealand. His students valued not only his remarkable musical insight and expertise but also his gentle way of challenging them, always accompanied by his wicked sense of humour.

As a vocal coach, he provided fresh ideas and clear direction, helping singers feel genuinely seen, supported and empowered in their development. Many of his former students now grace the stages of the world’s leading opera houses and concert halls.



As a teacher of musicianship, he taught almost every music student who passed through the School of Music during his tenure, and he was equally generous and nurturing as a mentor to many emerging composers. His innovative ‘Vowel Clock’ pedagogical system has become an important teaching resource for choir directors and voice teachers in New Zealand and internationally.

Beyond the University, Robert inspired thousands of singers through clinics and workshops for the New Zealand Choral Federation (NZCF), his work with the Auckland Chamber Choir, Auckland Choral Society, the national choirs, New Zealand Opera, New Zealand National Singing School, and many other school and regional musical groups.

He taught music and worked with the choirs at Westlake Girls’ High School for many years and was vocal coach and pianist for both the NZSSC (where he served as music director in 2007–2008) and the NZYC. He was also director of Opera in the Pā, continuing his commitment to nurturing young performers and fostering excellence in performance.

Robert’s broad expertise was welcomed by many organisations. He served as a trustee for the NZCF, Choirs Aotearoa NZ (CANZ), the Auckland Chamber Choir, and

the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation, and he served as co-chair of SOUNZ Centre for New Zealand Music.

Robert was deputy director of the New Zealand National Singing School and was a member of the artistic team that helped establish the New Zealand Children’s Choral Academy. He served as artistic adviser for CANZ and worked alongside fellow creators and producers to present their annual conference Sing Aotearoa.

More recently, he contributed to and conducted ‘Matariki He Kahui Reo’, a centrepiece of the 2024 World Choir Games, held in Auckland.

Although he often described himself as “an occasional composer”, Robert’s music earned international recognition and is admired for its originality, depth and distinctive New Zealand voice. ‘Erebus’ for example, his landmark reimagining of Mozart’s ‘Requiem’, received widespread acclaim.

Robert’s legacy lives on in the thousands of singers, students, composers, teachers, conductors and colleagues whose lives he touched. In the people he shaped and the works he created, Robert’s voice will continue to resonate for generations.



Dr Morag Atchison, School of Creative Arts colleague and friend



Photo: William Chea

Horticulturalist Sarah Han in a favourite spot, under a liquid amber tree outside the Thomas Building on the City Campus.

A job for all seasons

A carpet of leaves underfoot is one of the defining features of the University's City Campus in the cooler months.

And while it's among Sarah Han's tasks to blow, sweep and rake up the leaves that colour the grounds, she loves them all the same.

The horticulturalist's favourite spot on campus is under a liquid amber tree outside Biological Sciences' Thomas Building. It sits in the oldest section of the City Campus, home to a huge variety of special and stunning trees, and the liquid amber puts on a particular show with the changing of the seasons.

"I feel like time moves too fast these days, but being in nature slows it down," says Sarah. "Being among these trees and seeing the seasons change makes me feel small; it humbles me every day."

Sarah's role involves keeping the grounds safe, clean and tidy for students, staff and visitors. On any given day she could

"I feel like time moves too fast these days, but being in nature slows it down."

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Sarah Han, horticulturalist

be chainsawing a fallen branch, pruning, planting, weeding or fertilising.

She has been a member of the grounds team for a year, returning to the University where she initially studied pharmacology, but ultimately gained a degree in biology, compelled by her love of plants. A postgraduate diploma in horticulture from Massey University followed. She then spent time working in Hawke's Bay in apple breeding and later with MPI back in Auckland.

"I decided that job wasn't for me though, because it was mainly indoors. I felt

like I couldn't see the seasons change, I couldn't see time passing. You lose sight of everything when you're indoors."

Sarah recently represented the University at the Young Amenity Horticulturalist of the Year event, competing in areas like irrigation, pest and weed identification, public speaking and leadership. The amenity sector has an ageing workforce, so one of the competition tasks was to create a business idea that would help engage young people with the industry.

Engagement doesn't seem to be a problem for Sarah, who says working on the University grounds is like being in a village, where she meets and greets familiar faces every day.

"I feel lucky because it's a rare job to have. There's physical labour but there's also so much science behind what we do – the pruning, the fertilising, the propagating. And although I do like plants, it's the people in our team who make the job so enjoyable.

"I would love to work here until I retire. This is exactly where I want to be."

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Caitlin Sykes