

OCTOBER 2026



Waipapa
Taumata Rau
University
of Auckland

UniNews



Marking milestones

Highlights from
Spring Graduation
Page 3

Head starts

How the University is
fostering start-up talent
Page 8

Sarah Hetrick

Why connection counts
in youth mental health
Page 6

CONTENTS

- 3 Spring Graduation stories
- 4-5 Good to Know
 - Jim Peters farewell
 - New Royal Society president
 - Professional staff awards
 - Māori-medium STEM pathway
 - Cultural connections exhibition
- 6-7 Cover story: Sarah Hetrick
- 8-9 Spotlight on start-ups
- 10 Juliet Gerrard book launch
- 11 Obituary: Artist Alberto Garcia-Alvarez
- 12 My Space: the Black Box



Cover photo:
Professor Sarah Hetrick
by Chris Loufte

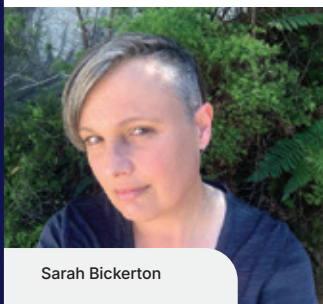
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For the fortnightly Whaimōhio The Loop
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any URLs.

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



Sarah Bickerton

TikTok in politics

Dr Sarah Bickerton (Arts and Education), who lectures in public policy and technology, discussed the fine art of engaging as a politician on TikTok with RNZ's *The Detail*. "Social media works best when you're targeting the people who'll vote for you anyway," she said.

tinyurl.com/bickerton-the-detail-tiktok

Big Tech's power problem

Professor Susan Watson (Auckland Law School) told *The Business of Tech* podcast that competition law may be the wrong tool for reining in Big Tech. She argues that data is a new form of capital, and questions whether the legal structure of the modern corporation itself has helped Big Tech become so dominant.

tinyurl.com/watson-business-of-tech



Susan Watson



Alexander Richter

AI's 'Oppenheimer moment'

Professor Alexander Richter (Business School), director of Huanui: The AI Initiative, joined the *The Front Page* podcast to talk about the rapid pace of AI development. He discussed whether AI is approaching an 'Oppenheimer moment' and how the technology should be developed and governed.

tinyurl.com/richter-front-page-ai

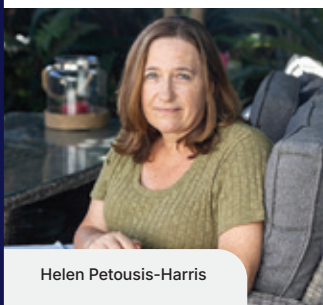
Trying to halt cancer's spread

Dr Akshata Anchan talked to *Mindfood* about her research seeking ways to stop cancers breaking through the brain's defences. Melanomas and cancers of the lung and breast pose the biggest risk of spreading into the brain, where it's particularly deadly, she said.

tinyurl.com/anchan-mindfood-cancer



Akshata Anchan



Helen Petousis-Harris

What's happening with flu vaccination rates?

Associate Professor Helen Petousis-Harris (Medical and Health Sciences) told RNZ that vaccine fatigue and declining trust in institutions since Covid-19 may be contributing to lower flu vaccination rates. She said many people underestimate the impact the flu can have on long-term health, particularly for the elderly.

tinyurl.com/petousis-harris-flu

Call for review to be released

Sir Collin Tukuitonga (Medical and Health Sciences) told *Pacific Mornings* the government should publicly release an independent review of the Māori and Pacific Admissions Scheme (MAPAS). He said the programme strengthens the Māori and Pacific health workforce and delivers long-term community benefits.

tinyurl.com/tukuitonga-rnz-mapas



Sir Collin Tukuitonga

September grads shine

Highlights from some of the stories behind the University's Spring graduates.

More than a string bag

Across West Papua, noken string bags are used to carry food, books, babies and treasured possessions. They are present at births, marriages, engagements and community ceremonies.

Veronika Triariyani Kanem – whose PhD in Pacific Studies explores the cultural, environmental and social significance of noken – says the traditional bags embody a way of life for many Indigenous Papuans.

“Noken carry our stories, our identity

and our relationships,” says Veronika, who is originally from the Muyu region of South Papua in West Papua. “They connect generations of knowledge and remind us that culture is something we live every day.”

Veronika's work has helped bring international attention to the knowledge systems, stories and values carried within the woven bags, which are regarded as symbols of prosperity, womanhood, kinship and connection to the land.

Her doctoral research drew on oral histories, community knowledge, ethnographic research and cultural practice, centring the voices and experiences of Muyu people.

Through the weaving traditions surrounding noken, Veronika examined how Indigenous knowledge is transmitted across generations and how communities maintain cultural continuity amid rapid social and environmental change.



Veronika Triariyani Kanem



Zoé Schelp

Understanding the silent mind

After starting university at just 15, Zoé Schelp has graduated a decade later with a psychology PhD that breaks new ground in cognitive neuroscience.

Zoé's graduation ceremony came just days after the publication of her first scientific paper as lead author.

Her thesis, 'Mapping the Silent Mind', explored anauralia, a little-known phenomenon where people can't imagine sounds. The silent mind has held a particular fascination for Zoé, both through her interest in neuroscience and cognition, and because she's a musician (although she herself can imagine sounds).

Originally from Berlin, she started studying economics at the University of Canterbury before switching to psychology after a semester. Zoé's advice to students, particularly those starting young, is simple: “It's okay to change your mind, at any stage.”

Outside her research, Zoé has taught and performed violin, volunteered with Anxiety NZ and church youth groups, explored New Zealand's back roads with a four-wheel drive club, and developed a passion for sewing and crafts.

She is now looking out for postdoctoral roles in New Zealand or Germany but over summer she may do that thing she hardly ever does – take a breather.

Name suppression rethink

What if name suppression was the rule rather than the exception?

Shannon Eldridge, who has graduated with a PhD from Auckland Law School, says New Zealand should scrap the public identification of criminal defendants.

The Rotorua lawyer spent several years researching name suppression at Waipapa Taumata Rau while working four days a week, uncovering bias and other troubling inconsistencies. “When I started looking into it, I realised name suppression is very under-researched for something so controversial.”

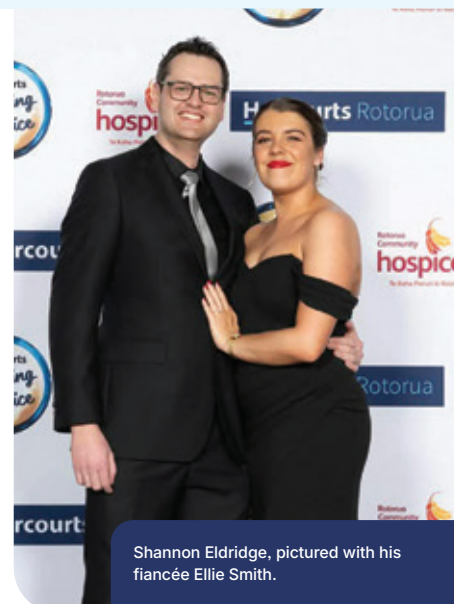
He found that suppression applications are possibly being declined “because people are stigmatised as deserving punishment, even when they have been acquitted or are not defendants”.

Bias in suppression decisions can compound this, says Shannon. This disproportionately disadvantages Māori and female defendants compared with European, male and corporate defendants, who are granted name suppression at higher rates.

Shannon proposed prohibiting the public identification of defendants and people connected to defendants in criminal justice proceedings, except to locate absconding defendants. Identifying victims, he says, would also be prohibited unless individuals opt otherwise.

“Open justice would be preserved by allowing the facts, decisions and reasoning of cases to be published, while identities could still be shared with those who need to know.”

 Full stories: auckland.ac.nz/grad-stories



Shannon Eldridge, pictured with his fiancée Ellie Smith.

Penny Brothers to head Royal Society

Professor Penny Brothers, an honorary academic with the University's School of Chemical Sciences, will serve as president of the Royal Society Te Apārangi from July next year.

The inorganic chemist's long links to the University began with her study for her BSc and MSc. After completing a PhD at Stanford, she returned to the University to be an academic in the School of Chemical Sciences from 1988 until 2019.

"Now that I have stepped back from my full-time academic career, I wish to draw on my accumulated skills and experience to contribute to the causes that are important to me," she says.

"The interweaving of scholarship, education and engagement are critical foundations to increase public understanding of science and research in these troubled times."

Penny's enduring links to the University also include many family ties. Her father Nick was a professor of geology, her brother



Professor Penny Brothers

Pete a dean of engineering, her husband David Ware a fellow chemist, and her children Hayley Ware and Tristan Ware are engineering graduates.

Her mother Margaret graduated with science degrees, worked in the Philson Library at the medical school, and, when she died last year aged 100, was among the University's oldest alumni at the time.

Penny will succeed the current president, the University's Distinguished Professor Dame Jane Harding, at the end of her three-year term next year.

"The role of the Royal Society Te Apārangi to promote the value of science and research has never been more important," says Dame Jane. "I look forward to working with Penny to ensure greater pathways to knowledge for all New Zealanders."

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/rsnz-penny-brothers](https://auckland.ac.nz/rsnz-penny-brothers)

New pathway for Māori-medium STEM teachers

A new graduate programme will support the development of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) education in Māori-medium settings.

Tohu Pōkairua Paetahi (Ara Reo) is a one-year graduate diploma at Waipapa Taumata Rau designed for graduates and kaiako seeking to become qualified teachers. It will strengthen their knowledge and practice in STEM through Māori-medium or Māori language-education settings.

The programme is part of the University's broader commitment to advancing te reo Māori and Indigenous scholarship, and aligns with *He Makau Mauroa*, the University's te reo Māori strategy 2026–2030, and *Kawea Ake*, its strategy for Indigenous scholarship and research.

Associate Head of Initial Teacher Education and programme co-designer Ella Pepi Tarapa-Dewes (Ngāti Tiipa, Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Pāoa) says the programme recognises the importance of developing STEM education within a Māori-medium context.

"It's not just about te reo revitalisation, but mātauranga Māori revitalisation," she says.

Ella says STEM education has particular significance when considered through te ao Māori.

"STEM disciplines have longstanding connections with mātauranga Māori, from navigation and astronomy to technology and environmental knowledge," she says.

"The programme provides an opportunity to consider how these knowledge systems can inform STEM education in contemporary Māori-medium classrooms.

"It's a great example of how our tūpuna have always been kaupūtaiao, or scientists – the navigators, the astronomers, the technologists."

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/tohu-pokairua-paetahi](https://auckland.ac.nz/tohu-pokairua-paetahi)



Ella Pepi Tarapa-Dewes

Exhibition explores Māori and Chinese cultural connections

From whakataukī and Chinese proverbs to whakapapa, market gardens and moon traditions, a new exhibition explores how Māori and Chinese cultures retain and transmit knowledge across generations.

Sharing wisdom – weaving together learning, memory and belonging is a collaboration between the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Māori, the Confucius Institute in Auckland, and He Māra Mahara, Cultural Collections.

While highlighting two distinct cultures, the exhibition also finds common ground in their values and experiences. Collections on display explore how knowledge, wisdom and traditions are preserved and shared, revealing connections between Māori and Chinese cultures and the ways these traditions have been valued and carried forward in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The exhibition will run at He Māra Mahara Cultural Collections on Level M of Te Herenga Mātauranga Whānui General Library until 22 February 2027. Curator talks and a hands-on Chinese calligraphy workshop will also be run as part of the exhibition programme.

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/sharing-wisdom](https://auckland.ac.nz/sharing-wisdom)



Jim Peters farewelled

The lasting impact on the University of Jim Peters MNZM (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Hine, Ngāpuhi) was recognised with a service at Waipapa Marae on 16 September.

Jim, who died on 15 September, had longstanding connections with Waipapa Taumata Rau – first as a student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in history and political studies, and later as the University's pro vice-chancellor Māori, from 2006 to 2017.

His wider legacy spans education, public service, Māori development and the Tai Tokerau community.

Jim and his whānau were welcomed to Waipapa Marae during a formal pōwhiri, led by Te Tari o te Ihonuku Māori, the Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Māori. Gathered were his former colleagues, students and members of the wider education community who came to reflect and pay their respects.

Pro Vice-Chancellor Māori Professor Te Kawehau Hoskins says Jim's contribution continues to be felt across the University.

"Matua Jim made the most sustained contribution to representing and meeting the aspirations of Māori students, staff and communities at Waipapa Taumata Rau," says Te Kawehau.

"He was an educational leader who brought a deep knowledge of the challenges facing Māori and understood education as a critical pathway to addressing those challenges.

"A true rangatira and gentleman, Jim will be remembered with warmth and affection by our entire University community."



Jim Peters served as the University's pro vice-chancellor Māori from 2006 to 2017.

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/jim-peters-farewelled](https://auckland.ac.nz/jim-peters-farewelled)

Professional staff recognised

A long-serving clinical research leader and the Animal Welfare Group will receive Te Rau Hiringa awards at a ceremony this month.

At the awards, which recognise professional staff who enhance research excellence, Janene McMillan will receive the Sustaining Research Excellence Award, recognising her contribution to supporting both research teams and research participants at the Liggins Institute.

As team lead for clinical research, she has helped guide the development of the Liggins Institute's Clinical Research Unit from a small two-bed facility, into a modern research unit supporting a broad range of studies.

Her role extends across clinical operations, participant care, study delivery, staff training, mentoring and research support. Throughout her career, she has worked closely with researchers, research nurses, technicians and students, sharing her extensive knowledge of clinical research processes and helping ensure studies are delivered to a high standard.

The Animal Welfare Group will receive the Catalysing Research Excellence Award, recognising their work that has strengthened support for animal-based research and teaching activities across the University.

The team reviewed existing processes and identified opportunities to improve transparency, communication, efficiency and researcher support while maintaining high standards of animal welfare and regulatory compliance.

Among the changes were the publication of Animal Ethics Committee processing timeframes, the development of service commitments, improvements to application pre-screening, and expanded training and support for researchers.

A major achievement was the introduction of a rolling pre-screening model for Animal Ethics Committee applications. The changes halved processing times, when compared with the year prior, and helped researchers navigate ethics requirements more effectively.

[Full story: auckland.ac.nz/te-rau-hiringa-2026](https://auckland.ac.nz/te-rau-hiringa-2026)



(Above) Janene McMillan and (below) Animal Welfare Group members (from left) Sabina Darke, Sara Azarpeykan, Dharsh Sreenivasan and Shirli Notcovich.





Sarah Hetrick

The crucial role of connection

Photo: Chris Loufte

Supporting young people's mental health is often less complicated than adults think, says Professor Sarah Hetrick.

As Mental Health Awareness Week approaches, Professor Sarah Hetrick talks about her career in youth mental health, and why she keeps arriving at the same conclusion: connection matters.

When Sarah Hetrick was 14 years old, she lost two classmates to suicide.

"I have hazy memories of being in a classroom and being told what had happened, and of the funerals," she says. "It was bewildering and devastating."

Although she didn't realise it at the time, the experience would eventually lead to a career devoted to understanding how young people experience distress and what helps them through it.

Today, Sarah is a professor of youth mental health at the University, where she is co-director of Te Ata Hāpara Centre for Suicide Prevention Research. They're

responsibilities she balances with work as a registered clinical psychologist. In September, she also became research director of Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ), the country's largest contemporary longitudinal cohort study of child development.

The theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is 'Belonging Matters', highlighting how opportunities to belong strengthen our well-being and communities.

Through decades of clinical and research experience, Sarah agrees that creating a strong sense of connection is vital for fostering youth mental health.

"Knowing there are people around who

care, who will notice, who will support young people if they need it, that goes a really long way," she says.

A belief in young people is also crucial. "They're creative, open and have solutions. Adults often treat them as if they have nothing to say or contribute, but that is not the case," she says.

"I think it's about giving voice to those who have often not had a voice."

Combining clinical work and research

Growing up in Lower Hutt, Sarah was initially interested in law, which she began studying at the University of Auckland. But psychology

soon captured her attention and ultimately changed her life's course.

Undertaking her BA and MA in psychology in the 1990s, she was increasingly interested in mental health and human behaviour.

"It was only once I started studying psychology that I became deeply interested in suicide prevention," she says.

Her pathway into academia, however, wasn't direct.

After graduating, Sarah worked at the Health Research Council of New Zealand, where she was introduced to public health research. Later, she worked in one of the University-based Cochrane Systematic Review groups, developing expertise in systematic reviews and evidence synthesis.

At the same time, however, she remained determined to become a clinical psychologist. She completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Health Science in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University, and later moved to Australia, where she undertook a Doctorate in Psychology (Clinical) at Monash University in Melbourne.

Sarah has since built a career that combines clinical work and research. The former, she says, gives her firsthand insights into the challenges faced by young people and their families; the latter allows her to investigate treatments, interventions and systems that make a difference.

Her time in Australia included a National Health and Medical Research Council training fellowship at pioneering youth mental health organisation Orygen, University of Melbourne, undertaking research into youth depression and suicide prevention. She also worked as a clinical psychologist for Headspace, Australia's national youth mental health foundation.

"Rather than a clinical psychologist, I probably should have been a youth worker," she says with a laugh. "I've just always enjoyed young people."

She returned to New Zealand in 2017 to take up a role as an associate professor of youth mental health at the University's Department of Psychological Medicine (through an Auckland Medical Research Foundation Douglas Goodfellow Repatriation Fellowship). She has continued combining research, clinical expertise and policy work ever since, including working within the Suicide Prevention Office at Manatū Hauora Ministry of Health, helping inform national approaches to suicide prevention.

Making a difference

Sarah's leadership in youth mental health research is recognised internationally. Much of her research focuses on evaluating interventions for young people experiencing mental distress, and examining the broader social and structural factors that influence well-being.

For example, in studies involving more than 950,000 young people she and colleagues examined how physical and natural environments influence mental health. The research showed better mental health outcomes when young people had less exposure to health-constraining features, such as alcohol outlets, and greater access to natural spaces, such as parks, forests, rivers and coastal areas.

One project Sarah is currently leading is the Trans-Tasman Internet-delivered Prevention of Youth Suicide trial. The project is evaluating three smartphone apps with 1,480 young people across New Zealand and Australia.

Two of these apps were developed in New Zealand: Bro Reach Out, a suicide-prevention chatbot co-designed with rangatahi Māori; and Tune In, a goal-setting app designed to strengthen well-being through small, achievable actions.

"We've co-designed those interventions with young people, acknowledging their lived experience and expertise," she says.

is now tracking the participants' transition into adulthood.

"I am excited to lead Growing Up in New Zealand into its next chapter, as participants enter emerging adulthood – a pivotal life stage that will shape their future health, well-being and opportunities," she says.

The role also holds personal significance for the mother of Luca, 17, and Zara, 14.

"What makes this study particularly special for me is that my teenagers are the same age as the Growing Up in New Zealand participants, and I see firsthand both the opportunities and challenges facing young people today.

"I love watching that process unfold as young people begin to understand who they are, where they fit and what gives their lives meaning."

And her research reinforces something she sees at home: "They do want their parents. It might not always seem like it, but they want us to be available when they need us."

Staying connected can mean stepping into her children's world.

"I love watching that process unfold as young people begin to understand who they are, where they fit and what gives their lives meaning."

»»»

Professor Sarah Hetrick, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences

The research has found that young people want technology to strengthen relationships rather than replace them. One result was the development of Bro Reach Out's 'Wall of Strength' feature, which allows users to collect photos, messages and memories that reinforce connections with whānau and friends.

Early intervention remains another major focus of her work.

As a co-director of Te Ata Hāpara Centre for Suicide Prevention Research, Sarah helps lead a number of projects. These span self-harm and suicide prevention in schools and other educational settings; support for families caring for distressed young people; risk-assessment practices in clinical services; and support for schools and communities following a suicide.

Growing up together

As the recently appointed research director of GUINZ, she is leading the landmark study that has followed the lives of more than 6,000 children since 2009 and 2010. The study

"I've had to tolerate a bit of dubious music," she says. "I took my daughter to a concert I wasn't interested in at all, but I absolutely loved it. I'm now a huge fan."

It can also be found in the routines of everyday family life. Sarah gets up early to make breakfast and pack lunches, valuing the conversations that happen before everyone heads in different directions. Breakfast is often the one time of day everyone is together, a chance to connect and check in.

Many years after the deaths of two classmates left a bewildered teenage Sarah searching for answers, she remains focused on helping young people feel connected, supported and valued.

"It's the showing up daily, isn't it? You consistently show up for your kids. You make them breakfast, pick them up and take them places. It's those shared moments that really matter."

»»»

Caryn Wilkinson

Start me up

To coincide with Auckland Startup Week, from 12-16 October, *UniNews* profiles four exciting start-ups that have emerged out of the University's research, and have benefited from its support.

Behind the gut revolution

In 2008, when gastrointestinal surgeon Greg O'Grady asked renowned biomedical modeller Professor Andrew Pullan which PhD research topic could have the greatest impact, the answer came quickly: the gut's electrical system.

Heart electrics were relatively well understood. But the electrical signals that control the digestive system remained largely a mystery, despite gut disorders affecting an estimated one in ten people worldwide with symptoms such as nausea, stomach pain, constipation and diarrhoea.

Greg joined Andrew's research team, determined to turn discoveries into better patient care.

Almost 20 years later, after a diverse academic surgical career, he is co-founder and chief executive of Alimetry, a University of Auckland spin-out company whose Gastric Alimetry device is helping clinicians diagnose disorders linked to the stomach's electrical activity. The company employs 50 people, has raised \$50 million in investment and its technology is now being used in more than 50 hospitals and clinics around the world.

Greg says success grew from both world-leading research and the University's innovation ecosystem.

The company's commercialisation journey began in 2019 at the



Auckland Bioengineering Institute's medtech incubator Cloud9. Greg also completed the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship's (CIE) Velocity programme, while UniServices contributed investment, commercialisation expertise and introductions to other investors.

"I first encountered commercialisation in the Velocity programme during my PhD," says Greg. "You learn best by doing."

The science behind Alimetry was equally collaborative. Andrew Pullan, who died in 2012, brought together researchers and clinicians from engineering, mathematics, surgery, gastroenterology and physics to better understand the gut's electrical activity through world-first studies and mathematical modelling.

Greg's research attracted American bioengineer Armen Gharibans, who joined Greg in Auckland in 2019.

"Within six months we had a prototype – and a company," says Greg.

"Alimetry is a product of world-leading research and a healthy deep-tech ecosystem at the University. When you're doing something really innovative and meaningful for people, it attracts others and the ecosystem grows."

A bright idea for nits

It started with a problem familiar to many parents: head lice.

It was 2022, and Kate Ricketts was frustrated by the never-ending cycle affecting her two young sons. The real problem, the University staff member realised, wasn't killing the lice but finding the tiny eggs, which could hatch weeks later.

A former veterinary nurse, Kate remembered using UV light to identify ringworm in animals. And she read about researchers using fingerprinting powder to make insect exoskeletons fluoresce. Could the same trick work on nits?

She ordered some powder online and tried it on her son's hair. Under a UV light, the eggs glowed. "I was like, 'This is amazing.'"

Trouble was, the powder wasn't safe for regular use. So, Kate enlisted some postgraduate chemistry researchers to develop and test non-toxic formulations.

Next step: creating her start-up, ISpyNits. She entered CIE's Velocity Ideas Challenge and won \$1,000. Encouraged, she moved on to the Velocity \$100k Challenge, won the



social category in 2022, and earned a place in CIE's six-month VentureLab incubator, which helped her develop the idea into a viable business.

She also pitched ISpyNits to research commercialisation programmes Return on Science and Momentum, and received investment and commercial support from UniServices.

There is much greater emphasis on commercialisation at the University than there was in the past, says Kate. "It feels like you have a true partner to bounce ideas off, and that is so valuable in this space ... We were in market within six months."

Today, ISpyNits manufactures its UV Glo-Powder and Lice Lotion in Taiwan and Auckland and sells through distributors in New Zealand and Australia, with further international expansion plans.

Kate says her experience showed her the value of entrepreneurship and innovation within the University ecosystem. And not just for future business owners.

"When you pare it down to the transferable skills, being a founder or learning about innovation is insanely useful."

Building for earthquakes

When the Christchurch earthquakes damaged buildings that had been designed to withstand seismic shocks, Professor Pierre Quenneville saw an opportunity to do better.

The University of Auckland timber engineering expert wondered whether buildings could be designed to not just survive an earthquake, but to move with it and then return to their original position.

Working with researchers and postgraduate students, he developed the idea that became Tectonus.

“One of the young researchers had an engineering brainwave,” says Pierre. The team brought together engineering, business and commercialisation expertise, recruited a business graduate to lead marketing, enlisted support from UniServices, and launched a start-up.

In 2015, the team won the University’s Velocity \$100k Challenge, while the Faculty of Engineering and Design helped secure \$3.4 million in government research funding to develop the technology. A year later, Tectonus won its first major contract for the new Nelson Airport terminal.

Pierre mortgaged his home to help build the company, while UniServices invested and, alongside CIE, introduced the team to early-stage investors.

Today, Tectonus employs 12 people, including University graduates and



Photo: Sav Schulman

Arth Patel, Professor Pierre Quenneville and Setu Agarwal of Tectonus.

postgraduate students, and has raised \$15 million in investment. Its seismic technology is being used in projects in North America, including Vancouver’s The Hive, the world’s tallest all-timber seismic-resistant building.

Pierre continues to teach and supervise at the University, believing research and industry are strongest

when they work together: “That is how we have impact.”

“When academics are connected to industry they can be the link between the need and the idea,” he explains.

“When industry starts talking about a problem that needs solving, you get ideas for research that can then be commercialised back to industry.”

Researchers, pizza and a start-up

It started with a conversation over pizza after a University of Auckland entrepreneurship workshop.

After the CIE session, five postgraduate students got chatting about their research. One was investigating treatments for brain cancer. Another specialised in needle-free drug delivery. Others brought expertise in business, clinical medicine and antibiotic development.

“We started talking about our different projects and suddenly thought, ‘Maybe we could combine our expertise,’” says biomedical engineering masters student William Si.

The five students, all originally from China and now studying at the University, have since begun developing a start-up aimed at one of medicine’s toughest challenges: treating glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer with a five-year survival rate of just five percent.

William’s research focuses on needle-free drug delivery, while PhD student Yuge Liu is developing new treatments for glioblastoma. Together they came up with the idea of a device that could deliver medicines through the nose, bypassing the blood-brain barrier that prevents many drugs reaching the brain, while potentially avoiding the harmful side effects of traditional treatments.

The project also brings in business masters student Wenyue Ruan, PhD student Yuhang Sui, and clinician and PhD student Jianhua Wu.

For Yuge, CIE’s Doctoral Entrepreneurial Leadership Programme changed the way she thought about research.

“We learned how to translate academic ideas into something that can impact society,” she says. “I shared my research with William, and together we realised there was a gap we might be able to address.”

The team is now preparing for the University’s Velocity entrepreneurship programme, while developing its business model through CIE’s VentureLab incubator.

“The University of Auckland has rich resources for commercialisation,” says William. “There is support from CIE, UniServices and the Auckland Bioengineering Institute. They encourage researchers to develop ideas that can have real benefits.”



Nikki Mandow



Jianhua Wu, Wenyue Ruan, Zheru (William) Si, Yuge Liu and Yuhang Sui are exploring a new approach to targeted nasal drug delivery.

On the front lines with science

In a new book, Professor Dame Juliet Gerrard examines how science can sway the direction in which our country travels.

A *Batman* ringtone injected a slice of humour during the six years that Professor Dame Juliet Gerrard served as the Prime Minister's chief science adviser.

The 'batphone' was never switched off, she writes in *Front Row Seat*, and the calls were almost always about something urgent or important.

The Waipapa Taumata Rau academic was perturbed during a reception at Government House in 2019 when her phone began to vibrate incessantly. Whakaari/White Island had erupted. On a Sunday morning early in 2020, then-prime minister Jacinda Ardern phoned asking to be talked through how and when viruses mutate.

The book's subtitle, 'How Science Can (and Can't) Shape Public Decision-Making', highlights that scientific evidence alone won't drive policy action; people must be up for it and the political climate right.

When she started in the role in 2018, Dame Juliet travelled the country asking researchers to jot down ideas about where science could better inform policy and to pop their notes into her biscuit tin. That resulted in a wall of Post-it notes, which helped shape a work programme spanning fishing, gangs, cannabis, fluoridation, AI, gene editing and alternatives to plastic.

Her team's first report to the Ardern government on plastic was, she says, one of its most successful, building on the ban on single-use plastic bags with more comprehensive changes to plastic use in New Zealand. Everyone knew plastic was a problem, and people were ready for action.

By way of contrast, the second, on sustainable commercial fishing, hit the rocks and sank. Dame Juliet, herself a one-time prawn trawler worker (in her student days), says problems with the fishing study included intractable feuds between key players and an absence of solid, uncontested scientific evidence. There was no public launch of the report, and the next government jettisoned its recommendations.

In the book, Dame Juliet takes readers inside the National Crisis Management Centre in the Beehive basement, a location known as 'the Bunker' – "a peculiar space, generally not used, but ready to house a hive of activity at a moment's notice".



Vice-chancellor Professor Nic Smith with Professor Dame Juliet Gerrard at the launch of her book, *Front Row Seat*, at Old Government House on 15 September.

Photos: Simon Young



"You can eat in the Bunker and sleep in the Bunker; it gets very crowded, and the air circulation seems poor. After a few days, it develops a rather funky odour, which thankfully everyone is too busy and focused to notice after descending the dark steps and signing in."

The rollout of 5G – fifth-generation cellular technology – drew anti-science activism.

"I got my first real taste of anti-science sentiment turning personal: a couple of friends discovered memes with my face on them and various bits of text that (at their most polite) referred to 'New Zealand's most wanted woman'."

When she wandered through the occupation at Parliament during the pandemic, she initially got a festival vibe.

"There were showers and toilets, food, and a medicine truck. I love a good protest and felt quite at home until some of the placards revealed themselves as violent and vile, many deeply misogynistic.

"Realising that my name was on the long list of those some protestors proposed should be executed for crimes against humanity began to mess with my head a little, and I left."

The three prime ministers – Ardern, Hipkins and Luxon – had "different thirsts for detail" but all examined the evidence, commissioned work to inform policy and listened in emergencies, she says.

Today, Dame Juliet is working out of the School of Biological Sciences and, following her secondment as chief science adviser, the biochemist is now focused on researching and teaching the interface between science and public policy.

She's involved in an MBIE Future Foods Research Programme project on cellular agriculture and is mulling over ideas for another book.

Looking back, she says the chief science adviser role was undoubtedly the most challenging and rewarding period of her career. Contributing to a team that saved up to 20,000 lives during the pandemic was "almost certainly the most useful thing I will ever do".

***Front Row Seat*, \$35, is published by Auckland University Press.**



Paul Panckhurst

Obituary: Alberto Garcia-Alvarez

25 March 1928

– 1 September 2026

With a prolific career spanning academia and art practice over more than 70 years, Alberto Garcia-Alvarez influenced generations of artists in New Zealand.

Garcia-Alvarez was born in Barcelona, Spain, where he grew up during the Spanish Civil War. He attended the historic Escola de la Llotja (Llotja Art School, 1944–1946) in Barcelona, before undertaking further artistic training at the Escola Superior de Belles Arts de Sant Jordi (University of Barcelona, 1946–1951). His early career reflected his classical art education, encompassing painting, fresco, mosaic, tapestry and stained glass works.

During the early 1960s, after exhibiting widely in Europe, he relocated to the US to teach at the University of Berkeley, California. He undertook major religious commissions for churches and monasteries on both continents during this era, while his studio practice saw explorations into abstraction and minimalism.

He staged notable solo exhibitions at San José Art Centre and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, also exhibiting alongside American artists including Frank Stella and Brice Marden.

In 1973, he was invited to be a guest lecturer at Elam, at the University of Auckland. What began as a one-year appointment became permanent, and he relocated to New Zealand with his young

family. During his Elam tenure, Garcia-Alvarez taught painting, printmaking and lithography. He was promoted to senior lecturer in painting and established the Master of Fine Arts programme.

His influence at Elam also grew beyond his core teaching responsibilities. He became a respected mentor for many leading New Zealand artists, including Stephen Bambury and Judy Millar.

His legacy is visually represented at the City Campus in his significant mural 'Collective Mind' (1980), which is on permanent display as part of the University of Auckland Art Collection.

The monumental work resides on the Princes Street façade of the Science Centre (Building 303) and incorporates 295 bisque-fired ceramic blocks, which advance and recede from the surface in a geometric, labyrinth-like format.

Around 600 ceramic pieces were first made for the project, which took more than a year to complete. They were handmade by then Elam students Katherine and Matthew McLean, who used glazed white and natural clays that were excavated from the site of the original Recreation Centre (completed in 1977). The finished components were assembled into eight heavy panels, before being lifted into place by crane.

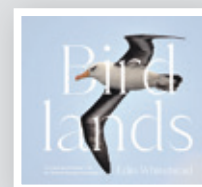
Garcia-Alvarez continued to paint and experiment across media throughout his long life, exemplified in his expansive mixed-media painting '2012-70', which was accessioned in 2013. He was working fastidiously in his studio well into his ninety-ninth year, until shortly before his sudden passing in July.



Madeleine Harvey, art collection adviser



Alberto Garcia-Alvarez. *Collective Mind* (1980). University of Auckland Art Collection

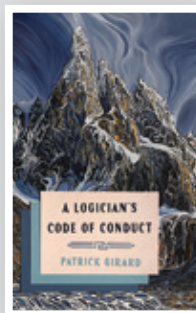


Birdlands

Biological Sciences research fellow and conservation photographer Dr Edin Whitehead takes readers to

the most remote outposts of Aotearoa, where our islands are populated not with people, but with birds. Described as 'part natural history and part love letter to these remote edges and their inhabitants', *Birdlands* includes stunning photography that captures these wild and fragile environments.

Edin Whitehead, Penguin Random House NZ, \$50, released on 6 October



A Logician's Code of Conduct

What if we could all use logic to better understand each other, thereby making the world a less divided place? Associate Professor Patrick Girard believes

we can. The philosopher examines how the language of logic is often used to shut down disagreement, and how we can avoid doing that by using logic to become better communicators and listeners.

Patrick Girard, McGill-Queen's University Press, paperback \$41



Ko Aotearoa Ināiane

Sixteen leading legal scholars ask who guards and protects Indigenous knowledge now, and in the future. Edited by Faculty

of Law senior lecturer and assistant dean Jayden Houghton (Rereahu Maniapoto) and Emeritus Professor David V. Williams, the book features wide-ranging essays engaging with law, policy, theory, science and culture.

Editors Jayden Houghton and David V. Williams, Auckland University Press, \$60, released on 8 October



Photos: Simon Young

Filmmaker and academic Peter Simpson (left) teaching screen production masters students Amelie Nalder, Felix Hannah and Taiaroa Tait how to use an industry-grade film camera in the Black Box studio.

Film noir

The name on the door says it all: the Black Box.

The University's film production studio is literally a big black box, with black floor tiles, black curtained walls, and a black ceiling hung with lighting rigs.

Tim Signal, the technician responsible for managing the studio, says the all-encompassing colour scheme isn't just for looks; it provides a neutral space in which film students can precisely control conditions and create the effects they want with lighting.

"If we're using cameras in here, we don't want competing colours on the walls," he explains, "and when we're doing lighting workshops, for example, we have full control because there's no daylight."

Film students in their final undergraduate and postgraduate years have a strong practical component in their coursework; they're making films, and the studio is home to all kinds of cool kit they can use to bring their visions to life.

In a recent camera workshop, filmmaker and academic Peter Simpson taught screen production masters students how to use an ARRI Mini LF – a type of camera used on major film sets – which they use to make their final films. Students also have access to equipment like dollies – platforms on which cameras are mounted that run on tracks to create smooth-moving shots (think the famous shot of actor Roy Scheider's face when his character realises a shark is attacking a swimmer in *Jaws*). The studio also has a cinema-quality setup for screenings.

As well as working as the studio's technician, Tim balances teaching duties with his PhD, which is looking at the potential impact of replacement technologies on how humans express themselves through film. It's a prescient and fast-moving topic, given AI is already being used to replace workers in many areas of the screen industry.

"With AI, we're always talking about data, data, data," he says. "But what we ask the students is, 'What is this data?' It's all the creative human expression



of screenwriters, directors, actors, set decorators, sound engineers, which has been taken and then used to make something that isn't as good."

Back in his studio job, Tim says he loves the variety of the work. While it's mainly used by media and screen studies students, when possible the Black Box is also used by students studying subjects such as communications, dance and drama.

"You'd think that there wouldn't be much you could do with a big, black empty space, but it's actually central to delivering an industry-fit curriculum," he says.



Caitlin Sykes