

WAIPAPA TAUMATA RAU | UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

Ingenio

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ALUMNI MAGAZINE

AUTUMN 2024

FUTURE FRONTIERS

WHERE COULD AI LEAD US?

Legislation up
in smoke

The retreat of
democracy

Bryan Caldwell:
taking up space

BIG PICTURE





LEADING LIGHTS

Glow dance group Vosperton lights up the ASB Waterfront Theatre stage at Taumata, celebrating the University's 2024 Distinguished Alumni Award winners. (Read more about the winners, from page 31.)
Photo: Richard Ng

this issue

16

Sweet deal

James Arden swapped cars for chocolate to take the reins at Whittaker's

20

Up in smoke

Health experts are determined to see our groundbreaking smokefree legislation reinstated

25

Democracy in decline

Around the globe, democracy is on the back foot. What forces lie behind the shift?

28

Lifelong focus on women's health

Professor Janice Rymer says this long-neglected area is finally becoming a priority

36

A head for business

Celebrating the competition that has sparked some of New Zealand's hottest start-ups

38

Around the Globe

From Switzerland and Fiji to India, we meet alumni making their mark in different corners of the world

REGULARS

6

Editorial

7-9

News

17-19

Research

30

Guest columnist
Simon Bridges

34

Taking Issue

40

Golden Graduate

41

7 tips to combat
loneliness

42-45

Arts and Books

46

Connection Points



SUSTAINABLE

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23

Important voices

Chief Children's Commissioner Claire Achmad on why tamariki must be heard



31

Beacons to follow

We meet the 2024 Distinguished Alumni



24

Taking up space

Alumnus Bryan Caldwell now runs research projects for NASA



10

Where could AI lead us?

AI is opening doors to unprecedented places. Should we step through them?

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Editorial

ANGELS, DEVILS AND SPICY KOFTA CURRY



We've all been in situations when attempting to satisfy two equally legitimate and well-meaning objectives leaves us

underwhelmed on both counts. Like that Sunday evening in Dublin a few years ago when I decided to surprise my wife with a homecooked spicy kofta curry from a recipe I found on the internet. The instructions were impossibly elaborate, the ingredient list endless and the preparation took much longer than I expected. Then, in the final stages, I discovered I was missing one of the exotic Indian spices listed in the recipe, so I traipsed the length of Terenure Road to find it. In the end, although I was faithful to the recipe, dinner got served at 11pm and it wasn't even particularly nice.

The University's commitment to sustainability, exemplified through Te Rautaki Aronga Toitū, our new sustainability strategy, is rife with challenges to our status quo: pretending otherwise would be disingenuous. As the country's foremost university, we have an absolute obligation to show leadership in sustainability; not only in how we run the institution, but also in how we mobilise our research and education in support of sustainability locally, nationally and regionally. We have hundreds of world-leading sustainability specialists on campus; many of them are affiliated to Ngā Ara Whetū, our new Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Society. Simultaneously, equipping our 46,000 students with critical skills and knowledge relating to sustainability will help them make sustainable decisions for themselves and their communities in the years to come.

At the same time, we frequently have to prioritise important activity that seemingly contradicts our carbon-reduction ambitions. Much of our research is carbon-intensive, yet our research breakthroughs add to the critically important corpus of knowledge that will hopefully guide us to a healthier, more prosperous and more sustainable future.

International students? We have around 8,000, making a massive contribution to the

dynamism of campus life. Unfortunately, their travel to and from New Zealand accounts for 40 percent of the University's total carbon emissions. Incidentally, our \$200m in annual international student tuition fee income funds research infrastructure, student services and other essential university operations that would not be possible if we relied purely on government funding.

International travel by staff also accounts for 40 percent of the University's carbon emissions, but is arguably necessary to maintain international collaborations, disseminate our research findings and allow our colleagues to participate in important expert working groups and panels internationally. Our position as a world-leading (and highly ranked) university is meaningfully reliant on such engagement.

The scale of the University's philanthropic fundraising also requires significant face-to-face activity, much of it in major cities offshore. The generosity of these donors unlocks innumerable equity and diversity initiatives, scholarships and groundbreaking research projects.

In essence, all these activities come with a meaningful carbon cost, but without them we would simply not be able to deliver the positive change to our communities that we do.

So, where does this leave us? As someone who feels these contradictions particularly acutely (I am simultaneously the strategic lead for many of the University's externally facing activities, such as student recruitment and fundraising, as well as being the strategic lead for sustainability), I like to tell people that I go about my business with an angel sitting on one of my shoulders and a devil sitting on the other, both incessantly yabbering paradoxes into my ears.

Coming to terms with these contradictions, and finding a workable balance, is one of the University's great strategic challenges. The angels and devils on our shoulders won't quieten anytime soon, but with our public commitment to be Carbon Zero by 2030, we must move quickly, honestly and with conviction.

Oh, and flick me an email if you want that spicy kofta curry recipe. Or, better yet, don't.

Dr Erik Lithander

Deputy Vice-Chancellor Strategic Engagement
Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland

ACHIEVING ARCHITECTURE'S HIGHEST HONOUR

Deidre Brown was told to 'leave Māori architecture on the marae' – she did the opposite.

Professor Deidre Brown made history in March when she won the New Zealand Institute of Architects' 2023 Gold Medal, its highest honour. She was the first Māori woman and first academic to receive such recognition.

Judith Taylor, president of the institute, said: "The breadth of her work is impressive, encompassing architecture and art, history and housing, culture and craft. Through teaching, research, writing, art curation, leadership and mentoring, Deidre has touched the lives of many. Her sphere of influence is so far-reaching that it's impossible to define."

Deidre (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Kahu) says her contribution to architecture has not been through the usual route of professional practice.

"My role in academia has been to educate the next generation of practitioners and support professional practice through research and service," she says. "My success is not mine alone. It is the success of many."

In 2019, Deidre's appointment as head of the School of Architecture and Planning made her the first Indigenous woman in the world to hold such a position.

It also marked 30 years since she began studying architecture at the school, where she was told to "leave Māori architecture on the marae where it belonged". Her response was to do the opposite.

"Being part of a group, which I would argue is now a movement of Māori architects and architectural designers, demonstrates how far we have come," says Deidre.

Now Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Creative Arts and Industries, she is making a notable contribution to architecture in New Zealand.

She says her students enjoyed seeing her honoured. "Working in the area of Māori and Pacific architecture and housing affordability, they have been encouraged to see recognition of research and teaching in these areas by the architectural profession."

Deidre is the author of several books, with another on the way this year: *Toi te Mana: A History of Indigenous Art from Aotearoa New Zealand*, written with Associate Professor Ngarino Ellis from the Faculty of Arts.

Deidre says her focus within her discipline



Professor Deidre Brown is the first Māori woman to receive the NZIA's Gold Medal. Photo: Adrian Malloch

is working with people to enhance their well-being, while creating culturally responsive and responsible architecture.

In 2022, she established the MĀPIHI Māori and Pacific Housing Research Centre, which she co-directs with Dr Karamia Müller.

"Housing is consistently raised as the most important issue by Māori communities; particularly its quality, affordability, cultural-responsiveness and location relative to services, schools, work and community infrastructure such as marae. It's important that we broaden the diversity of housing stock to include homes for multigenerational and intergenerational living, to enable Māori and other communities with extended family lifeways to thrive."

Another win came recently after she tracked down eight treasured whakairo rākau (traditional Māori wood carvings) in museums around the world that had been missing for 200 years.

"These taonga are important because they express a Ngāpuhi spirituality and world view that was recorded in detail when they were collected," she says.

Locating them required determined investigative skills. She outlined the process in *Waka Kuaka: The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, describing how she uncovered a mid-19th-century catalogue that played a crucial role in the rediscovery. Deidre is still working on the research, including exploring questions over the provenance of the carvings.

Hussein Moses

Full stories: auckland.ac.nz/deidre-brown-gold-medal and auckland.ac.nz/wood-carvings-found

"My success is not mine alone. It is the success of many."

– Professor Deidre Brown

MISSION TO TRACK METHANE

Satellite operation will provide hands-on experience

A new mission control centre established at the University will be used to operate a methane-tracking satellite.



The centre, located at Te Pūnaha Ātea Space Institute at the University, allows New Zealand to take an active role in the MethaneSAT space mission.

The global methane-tracking satellite MethaneSAT launched in March from the Vandenberg Space Force Base in California. Designed to help combat climate change, the satellite uses state-of-the-art technology to detect methane emissions from oil, gas, agriculture and landfill.

Te Pūnaha Ātea is taking over mission control operations of the spacecraft for up to 12 months following its launch.

The institute's Mission Operations Control Centre lead, Chris Jackson, says the centre will provide hands-on experience to a new generation of space engineers and scientists, and help them kick-start their careers in New Zealand's space industry.

March was a busy month for the institute, with New Zealand's first space minister, the Rt Hon Judith Collins, being briefed at the University on its innovative research with real-world impact, which included a tour of Te Pūnaha Ātea.

Full stories: auckland.ac.nz/uoa-methane-sat and auckland.ac.nz/space-minister

The Mission Operations Control Centre will operate the methane-tracking satellite MethaneSAT. Photo: BAE Systems

NEW ROYAL SOCIETY FELLOWS ELECTED

Outstanding research achievements in diverse fields recognised

Six University of Auckland researchers have been announced as Ngā Ahurei a Te Apārangi Fellows, acknowledging their research excellence in fields ranging from neonatal nutrition and Māori architecture to epidemiology.

The Vice-Chancellor Professor Dawn Freshwater said the University's position as the country's leading research institution was founded on the exemplary quality of its researchers. Their work has led to positive change in New Zealand and internationally.

The new Fellows are Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research, Professor Frank Bloomfield for his leading work in neonatal nutrition; Professor Nicola Gaston, physicist, for her insights into the behaviour of low-temperature, liquid metal; Professor Anthony Hōete, Architecture and Planning, for his advancement of New Zealand

and Māori architecture; Professor Rod Jackson, epidemiologist, for advancing the field of epidemiology; Professor Peter O'Connor, pedagogy, for his pioneering work in researching and using the arts for social transformation; and Professor Mary Sewell, biologist, for being at the forefront of research on the impacts of anthropogenic change on life in the ocean.

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/new-rsnz-fellows

Professor Rod Jackson, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, is among six University researchers elected Royal Society Te Apārangi Fellows.



GOOD SPORT

Sports sociologist recognised in a league of her own

Professor Toni Bruce, who has led the contemporary global study of women in sports media, has had her scholarship recognised with a major award.

Toni (Faculty of Education and Social Work) received the International Communication Association's Sport Communication Legacy Award. The award recognises scholars with a distinguished research record who have positively influenced the development and growth of sport communication at the highest level.

Professor Michael Butterworth, from the University of Texas at Austin, acknowledged Toni's impressive work in gender in sport, women in sports media, and the intersections of sport communication and sociology.

Says Michael: "Quite simply, the contemporary study of women in sport and sport media is largely built on the foundation provided by Professor Bruce."

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/toni-bruce-award

Professor Toni Bruce has helped shape the emergent field of sport communication.
Photo: Craig Berry



FINDING NEW PATHWAYS

Research centre tackles climate, biodiversity and societal challenges

In February, the University launched Ngā Ara Whetū, the Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Society – its first cross-faculty research centre tackling climate, biodiversity and societal challenges.

University of Auckland Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research, Professor Frank Bloomfield said the country and world faced major challenges in each of the areas of climate, biodiversity and society.

"Some might see them as separate challenges, but clearly they are interwoven and interconnected and critical to our way of life and the future of our tamariki."

Ngā Ara Whetū co-director Professor Jacqueline Beggs, an ecologist, said climate change was much more than a scientific or technical problem.

"Climate change involves values, beliefs, cultures and worldviews and can lead to passionate responses and often exacerbates existing inequalities and injustices."

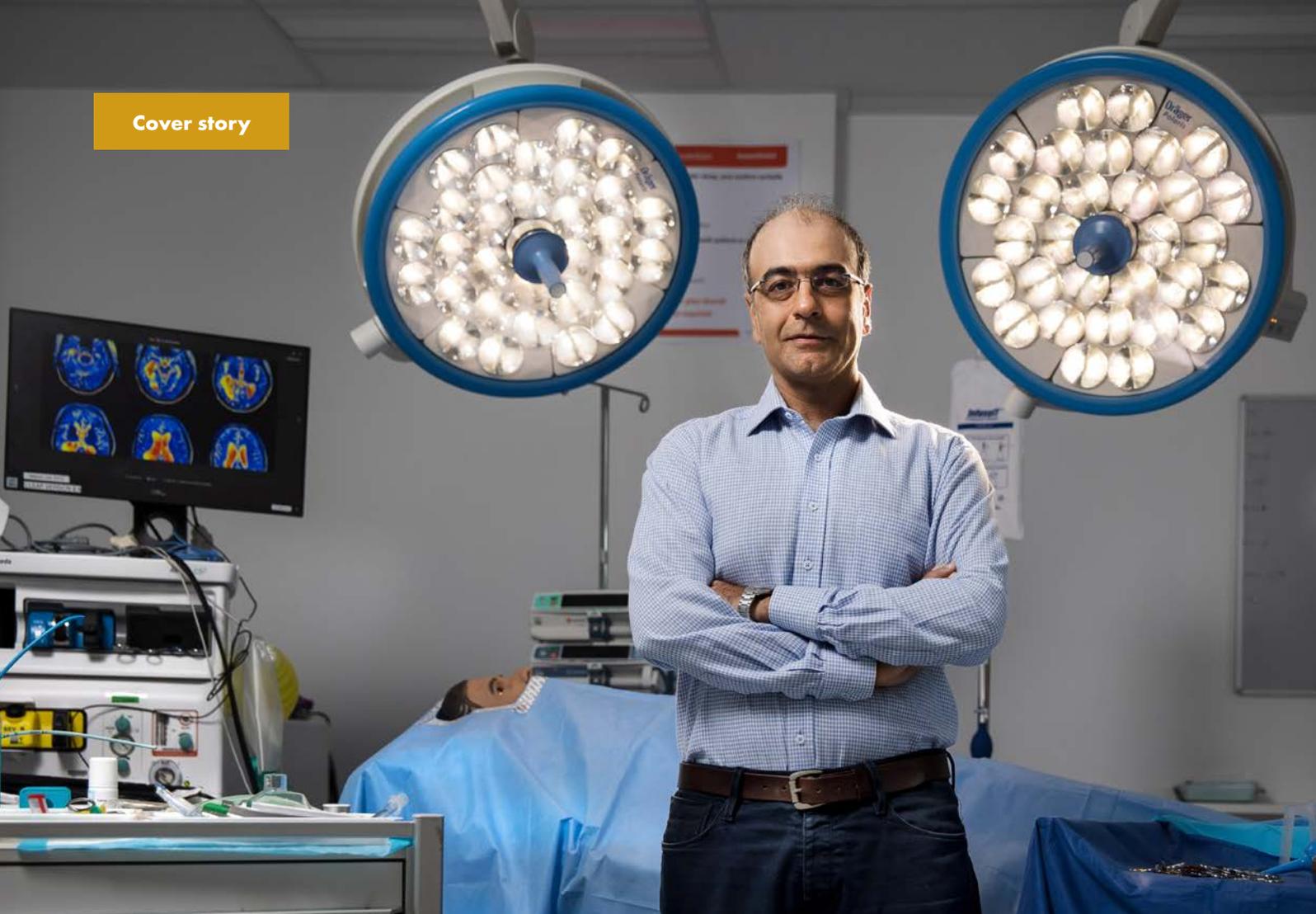
Ngā Ara Whetū can be translated as 'star paths', a metaphor referencing the knowledge of the Pacific people who navigated to Aotearoa, to inspire today's pathfinders. The centre aims to connect the diverse pockets of expertise in climate, biodiversity and society, creating transdisciplinary research to respond to persistent societal challenges.

It has brought together 130-plus researchers from eight faculties, including engineers, architects, biologists and social scientists.

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/nga-ara-whetu

Professor Jacqueline Beggs is co-director of the new research centre Ngā Ara Whetū.
Photo: Chris Louffe





WHERE COULD AI LEAD US?

Dr Hamid Abasi is working on an AI tool to help neurosurgeons make better decisions (pictured with surgical training model).
Photo: Chris Louffe

Artificial intelligence offers powerful new ways for humans to harness vast quantities of information to improve everything from human health and well-being to workplace productivity. But, with its ability to amplify discrimination and misinformation, it also poses significant challenges to our privacy and data sovereignty. Owen Poland talks to University of Auckland AI experts about where the technology may lead us.

The prospect of a neurosurgeon being guided by artificial intelligence to perform brain surgery is thought provoking, to say the least. However, the potential precision that comes from using AI to diagnose and treat complex medical procedures may be closer to reality than many care to think.

There's no doubt that AI has rapidly begun

to touch many walks of life, so much so that it became the *Collins Dictionary* word of the year in 2023. For Auckland Bioengineering Institute research fellow Dr Hamid Abasi, the technology led him into a brave new world of medical research.

“AI is poised to revolutionise every aspect of current medical practice and patient care, equipped with robust capabilities that significantly enhance outcomes,” he says.

For Hamid, the revolution is the development of an advanced neuro-navigation tool called Neurofanos. Meaning ‘lantern’ or ‘to bring to light’, the tool is designed to analyse complex data in real-time and provide neurosurgeons with high-resolution images while they conduct high-risk tasks like brain tumour resection.

“AI improves precision and helps surgeons see through the ‘unseen’ to visualise and preserve critical structures at every moment of surgery,” he says. “Knowing those factors is going to help reduce accidental harm and then improve patient care and outcomes.”

Having won the University of Auckland’s 2022 Velocity \$100k Challenge, the transdisciplinary Neurofanos team of biomedical engineers, Auckland City Hospital neurosurgeons and researchers at the Mātai Medical Research Institute were subsequently granted \$1 million from the MBIE Endeavour Smart Ideas fund.

“That funding has helped us to find our feet and start walking,” says Hamid, but “we need to run”. Additional financial support will be required to get the concept into operating theatres as soon as possible.

“Our talented team is fully equipped with all the necessary expertise and resources and is set for a robust launch,” he says. “But we need more local funding to ensure that the IP stays within the country.”

Beyond Neurofanos, Hamid believes that AI will play an increasing role in what’s known as personalised or precision medicine for illnesses like cancer, where advanced algorithms can explore long-range connectivity in data that humans struggle to comprehend.

“AI is able to bring it forward, analyse it in a blink and say, ‘Look, this patient needs this specific type of care. This is the right time to start the treatment.’”

MEDICAL ADVANCES

In the Faculty of Engineering, Dr Reza Shahamiri uses his deep learning engineering expertise to design software platforms that leverage AI technologies to make healthcare services more accessible and provide healthcare professionals with better digital tools to help patients and their families.

For more than a decade, Reza has been developing automatic speech-recognition technologies, similar to Apple’s Siri, which can hear and comprehend the otherwise unintelligible speech of those with speech impediments.

“When we enable computers to hear the atypical speech, the impact of this technology is way beyond having software like Siri that can understand them. We can build automated speech therapy systems to help patients find their voice.”



Dr Reza Shahamiri says AI could release health system pressures.
Photo: Chris Louffe

“These AI advancements have significantly boosted our capabilities and opened doors to unimaginable achievements.”

– Dr Reza Shahamiri, Faculty of Engineering

Another project involves the analysis of speech patterns to automatically identify memory flaws and detect the early signs of dementia and memory loss, which prompt an early referral to a specialist.

“With dementia, there is no known cure. The best way to deal with it is to detect it as early as possible so that the progression can be slowed down and managed.”

Designing an AI platform to help with the early identification of autistic children is another of Reza’s long-term projects, and his Autism AI platform has now collected behavioural data from around 12,000 people worldwide.

“It’s very important that we identify autistic children as early as possible to ensure that the effectiveness of support plans is maximised.”

Reinforcing the power of AI, he points to Google’s recent conversational AI diagnostics tool AMIE, which was tested alongside primary care physicians in a blind trial to evaluate patient needs.

“Surprisingly, the AI tool was around 15 percent more accurate in diagnosing patients – and AI asked better questions and communicated more effectively with patients,” says Reza. “Once thoroughly tested and deployed, such technologies could have a huge impact in releasing pressure on our healthcare sector.”

And while open AI research risks being misused, he says that its collaborative nature has fostered the development of powerful tools.

“These AI advancements have significantly



Professor Michael Witbrock says AI could boost our productivity.
Photo: Elise Manahan

“There’s a tremendous need for people to increase the amount that they know about AI.”

– Professor Michael Witbrock, Strong AI Lab

◀ boosted our capabilities and opened doors to unimaginable achievements. They are making us smarter and more capable, likely leading to massive productivity improvements.”

AIDING HUMANITY

As the leader of the Strong AI Lab (SAIL), which sits within a wider centre in the University focused on intelligence research, Professor Michael Witbrock believes that current limitations around AI will be removed very quickly.

“This is here to stay, and it’s going to get better very rapidly because there’s a huge need for better problem solving for humanity and there’s, frankly, a huge amount of money to be made in serving that need.”

What’s more, he says New Zealand has a history of “looking change in the face”, with strong advantages to doing so.

“New Zealand probably can do a better job, more rapidly, of integrating AI effectively into the way we do things.”

Given the country’s productivity crisis and our limited population, the creation of an ‘intelligent ecosystem’, where AI helps with organisational intelligence that enhances human intelligence, is a focus for Michael and his team.

“Imagine if we had 5 million shareholders in the country and then 115 million AI systems filling all the gaps. We could be the most productive country in the world.”

From a business perspective, he says AI could be an economy-wide accelerator that helps entrepreneurs with legal and accounting advice, and product design.

“All of these things can be done to some degree at the moment with AI systems, and increasingly well quite rapidly.”

On the teaching front, Michael helped design a new Master of Artificial Intelligence programme at the University (see page 14), which provides an opportunity to study the field in depth – and potentially attract local and international talent.

“There’s a tremendous need for people to increase the amount that they know about AI, and also a tremendous need for people to have mentorship in doing things with AI.”

As co-founder and chair of the global AI for Good Foundation, Michael says there’s a large gap between what can be done and what needs to be done to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. He says more technological capacity could be deployed “in the service of humanity”.

The deployment of large-scale robotics to deliver agricultural surpluses to people in need is one of many possibilities, and he’s called on alumni who have the time and capability to support the cause.

Michael’s view on where AI could ultimately take us: “There’s a real opportunity for New Zealand to lead in AI for humanity.”

ENSURING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Behind the scenes, Professor Gill Dobbie and a large team of researchers in the School of Computer Science’s Machine Learning Group are working to eliminate bias and the so-called ‘hallucinations’, from which large language models such as ChatGPT suffer.

“They don’t actually understand what

they're writing about. We want to add in more semantic information so that they understand the context in which the writing is happening.”

The aim is to develop deep-learning neural networks that work more like the human brain and produce richer results. Gill says the University is pushing the boundaries, “so other countries can learn from us”.

She is involved in a variety of projects in the AI field, including the use of algorithms to predict severe acute pancreatitis.

“With our machine-learning model, clinicians will be able to input some routinely collected data into the model and get a result based on others in the population.”

Having previously been involved in predicting the peaks and troughs of Covid cases, she's now helping to predict the number of flu cases, which fluctuates from season to season and impacts demand on hospital beds and staff.

“If we can predict, say, ten days in advance, then that will allow hospitals to manage their resources better.”

Another piece of research is an analysis of data to identify diabetes-related dementia, which is prevalent in Māori and Pacific communities. “If you can control the diabetes, then that may have an effect on their memory,” she says.

As one of the founding chairs of the Artificial Intelligence Researchers Association, which has around 300 members, Gill says the group is a way of pulling everyone together, including those from Crown Research Institutes (CRIs).



Professor Gill Dobbie says fear of AI is not a valid reason to halt research.
Photo: Elise Manahan

“That’s important, because a lot of the practical research is going on in the CRIs and it’s useful for academics to link with that practical research.”

While there’s a lot of fear about the potential harm that can come from AI, she says it’s not a valid reason to stop the research. “New Zealand could benefit a lot from AI, and we just have to work out how we can best benefit.”

Another School of Computer Science lecturer supporting the AI masters programme is Dr Daniel Wilson (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Pikiao), whose special interest is in AI ethics and Māori algorithmic sovereignty.

“I’m hopeful that through raising awareness about potential pitfalls, we can create equitable AI,” says Daniel. “We could help lead the way, particularly with respect to Indigenous communities. I think that’s a hopeful thing.”

One of the underlying problems is that some algorithms don’t have representative information, which leads them to discriminate against certain populations. A case in point was the Amazon CV filtering system, which eliminated female job applicants because it was trained on historical data that favoured men.

Likewise, Daniel says, “You’re bound to have lots of examples of English texts but relatively fewer texts in te reo Māori.” On the flip side, however, “You don’t want companies simply vacuuming up more Māori information, because that data has its roots in people and intentions.”

Another problem is that the performance metrics of algorithms tend to be one-dimensional. “So you might be missing out on lots of different dimensions related to

“New Zealand could benefit a lot from AI, and we just have to work out how we can best benefit.”

– Professor Gill Dobbie, School of Computer Science



Dr Daniel Wilson says we must ensure AI is equitable.
Photo: Chris Louffe

Professor Yun Sing Koh is helping the next generation create ethical AI solutions. Photo: William Chea



MASTERING AI

“It’s been surreal,” admits Professor Yun Sing Koh, when talking about demand for the University of Auckland’s new Master of AI programme.

Despite little promotion, the programme, which launched in March, was oversubscribed, with 33 students now enrolled.

AI is a hot topic, says Programme Director Yun Sing, and the masters has attracted a diverse group of students drawn from both the faculties of Engineering and Science (computer science), and from industry.

The masters is designed to meet the needs of both developers and researchers who want to improve the capability of AI systems.

The course covers the fundamentals of AI, how to build AI systems and manage AI projects, she explains, but importantly, students learn about the ethical, philosophical and societal implications of the technology.

“This is a transformative programme that allows us to train the next generation to better prepare ourselves in the face of AI being everywhere,” says Yun Sing.

“It’s about understanding what AI means to us, not on a superficial level, but on a deeper level; to understand how AI technology, for one, is a tool but also how we could use this tool in more facets and with an understanding of how we use it responsibly and ethically.”

◀ Māori health and well-being, or hauora. That includes the spiritual components, the cultural components, and the social components, for instance.”

With that in mind, Daniel is part of a team involved in a tikanga technology project, which he says needs to engage with communities to iron out issues from the beginning.

“The idea is to create algorithms that Māori will benefit from as well. It’s about putting forward some principles to help guide thought on how to make these systems safer and more culturally appropriate.”

Daniel says the Centre of Machine Learning for Social Good, launched in 2023, will consult with communities about their needs. As well as undertaking health and social projects, the centre is also looking into issues like pest control.

“In order for the Centre of Machine Learning for Social Good to have real traction and change, and to survive outside of research funding rounds, it needs this real motivation to come from the community.”

ETHICS OF USE

Auckland Business School senior lecturer Dr Benjamin Liu is ringing alarm bells about the rise in the use of artificial general intelligence (AGI, a type of AI that can perform cognitive tasks as well as, or better than humans), and a widening divide he sees between what it can do and people’s understanding of it.

“I can see the tremendous benefits that AGI can bring to society, but I also see the tremendous dangers and I just don’t think we are prepared for that.”

Dr Benjamin Liu says lawmakers will always be several steps behind the commercial world. Photo: Elise Manahan



A major concern is the increased power the technology has given to governments like those in Russia and China in terms of surveillance and its potential for political manipulation and misinformation.

“Governments can use it to enhance power and increase control over every aspect of society,” he says.

Including in war. In recent months, it has been claimed Israel used an AI-powered database known as Lavender to assist in the identification of human targets.

Benjamin believes there should be a proper legal and regulatory framework for the safe development of AI, but he says that lawmakers don't understand the technology and will always be several steps behind the commercial world as it evolves.

“I don't think anything we do here in New Zealand is going to have any substantial impact on the future of AI, and I don't see how governments internationally can come together to do something really meaningful about it.”

But from a research perspective, he says that ChatGPT “is really the best tool that I have ever encountered”, primarily because of its ability to sift through sometimes voluminous texts and journals to quickly summarise a particular legal issue.

He's also a huge believer in using AI to learn faster, and strongly encourages students to use OpenAI to access the free version of ChatGPT, which he has also used to design his own financial law tutor.

“This kind of AI is going to revolutionise a lot of teaching – not just, of course, in law but also in accounting, maths and many other areas.”

Where he draws the line is in the use of tools like ChatGPT in examinations. “That's where we test the students' own ability to perform original thinking or reasoning to solve a problem.”

Data sovereignty is another key issue for academics, and associate professor in commercial law at the University of Auckland Business School Gehan Gunasekara says it's incredibly complicated from a legal and technological standpoint.

“It's an arms race, which I'm not confident that the lawmakers and policymakers will win, because technology is forging ahead so quickly, unless we come up with a radical new way of regulation itself,” says Gehan.

While encryption techniques could theoretically be used to give people control over the use of data, locally owned companies could still be subject to overseas data requests because of political considerations.

“Look what happened to Kim Dotcom. Data localisation, in my opinion, is not a solution, because even a local New Zealand cloud provider is ultimately subject to these overseas requests.”



Associate Professor
Gehan Gunasekara
says he's confident
machines won't take
over. Photo: Chris Loufte

“It's an arms race, which I'm not confident that the lawmakers and policymakers will win because technology is forging ahead so quickly.”

– Associate Professor Gehan Gunasekara,
University of Auckland Business School

One issue he believes needs more scrutiny is the government's ‘cloud first’ policy, which enables foreign companies to provide cheap services but also allows them to aggregate and commercially exploit New Zealand data.

“We don't know how they are mining it to train their algorithms, and if they are, as is likely, who's going to get the value from that? Well, it's not going to be the New Zealand government.”

As a former chair of the Privacy Foundation New Zealand, and now the convenor of its surveillance working group, Gehan says the Privacy Act applies if AI is fed with personal information. However, there's less control over outputs – like job assessments – where he says the Privacy Act falls down.

There's also scepticism about a recommendation from the Privacy Commissioner that businesses should conduct a ‘human review’ of AI use, especially when thousands of people might apply for one job.

“The nature of the digital age and technology is that human review is possible sometimes, but sometimes it's not going to be possible or practical.”

Nevertheless, Gehan is confident that machines won't be allowed to take over.

“I'm not taking a doomsday view,” he says. “Humans will come up with a new way to deal with these technologies as we've always done. So, I'm ultimately optimistic.” ■

SWEET DEAL



The planets aligned when James wanted to return from the US just as the Whittaker family sought their first leader from outside their own ranks.

Engineering alumnus James Ardern shifted from the US Midwest and the car industry to take up the job of Whittaker's CEO. But, as Janet McAllister finds out, it wasn't as big a shift as it might seem.

Warning: The first quote in this story may have you reaching for a tiny chocolate violin.

"It's quite tempting working here because the smell is always around us, which is delicious," says Whittaker's CEO, James Ardern, beaming in from the celebrated Porirua chocolate factory.

Yes, let's file that temptation under 'problems we all wish we had'. Cheerful and friendly (and no relation to Dame Jacinda Ardern), James appreciates his good fortune. His favourite Whittaker's creations are the classic Creamy Milk, the smooth newcomer Hazella, and the legendary Peanut Slab – which, he marvels, has remained the same since its 1950s introduction: "Things like shrinkflation, we've never done!"

So – apart from following his nose – how did a non-Whittaker family member and former vehicle-trim manufacturer living in the American Midwest end up as chief executive of the family-owned sweet-treats firm?

James insists that the transition was not as outlandish as it might seem. The planets aligned: Waikato-born James and his American wife and two children wanted to move closer to James's parents just as the Whittaker family was looking for its first non-family executive leader. James grew up in Paeroa and Orewa (his father built his own boats, giving James a love of the water and hands-on engineering) and attended Rosmini College in Takapuna.

While living overseas, James often visited the Arderns' off-grid Coromandel property where family members have been regenerating native bush for 17 years, contributing to both carbon sinking and biodiversity. They also trap predators themselves, and are delighted to host increasing numbers of kiwi, with the property acting as a corridor between the "awesome work" of Project Kiwi and the Matarangi Bluff Reserve.

As unlikely as it is, his former US-based employer, Lacks Enterprises, like Whittaker's, is also run by the third and fourth generations of a family whose name is literally on the building.

For "brilliant" owner-chocolatier brothers Andrew and Brian Whittaker, the company is "like their second home", says James. "They invest in it; they really care about it."

James says he works very closely with Andrew's children, Holly and Matt, who are the company's co-chief operating officers.

"There are other people out there who are quite loud and voice their views. New Zealanders should be able to, too."

– James Ardern, Whittaker's CEO

Like his bosses, James is proud of the Miraka Kirimi block labelled in te reo Māori; and also of the company's community work, such as assisting schools in Ghana, where it's mapping every farmer in its supply line to achieve 'fully traceable cocoa'.

"So, since 2022, not only is it 'beans to bar', it's 'from farm to beans to bar', which is fantastic," says James.

Finally, jumping from cars to food wasn't a stretch, given James's focus is on process innovation rather than a particular product. He has manufacturing experience in the UK as well as the US and New Zealand, and credits his Bachelor of Engineering for his professional curiosity and exposing him to a "diversity of thought", with elective courses in philosophy and accounting.

Majoring in engineering science meant doing mathematical and computer courses on top of mechanical engineering. "It gave us a really good grounding," he says.

His 25 classmates have gone on to succeed in everything from heading air-conditioning firms, to project management in Malaysia, and financial sector innovation in London. Plus, added bonus: "Some of us are lifelong friends."

And his advice to aspiring engineering business leaders? Go to Toastmasters. "It was so valuable."

He learned how to explain technicalities but also how to promote ideas and persuade – a leadership skill he'd like to see New Zealanders flex more internationally. Our opinions, he says, are worth listening to.

"You know, there are other people out there who are quite loud and voice their views. New Zealanders should be able to, too."

Also helpful: offer your listeners good chocolate.

FEELING THE ELECTRICITY

Understanding electrical activity in the gut is offering hope for sufferers of unexplained stomach woes.

By Nikki Mandow

Peter Tremain comes from a line of builders and tinkerers; people who choose to make rather than buy. The 27-year-old moved from a role in a start-up consultancy designing earthquake-strengthening systems to a PhD at the Auckland Bioengineering Institute (ABI), measuring the electrical pulses in the human gut to diagnose and, hopefully, treat stomach problems.

It's a burgeoning area of research attracting international attention. In 2023, Peter received two travel awards taking him to conferences in Chicago and Kobe that were covering digestive diseases. As part of the University's Vanguard entrepreneurial leadership programme, Peter also headed to Silicon Valley.

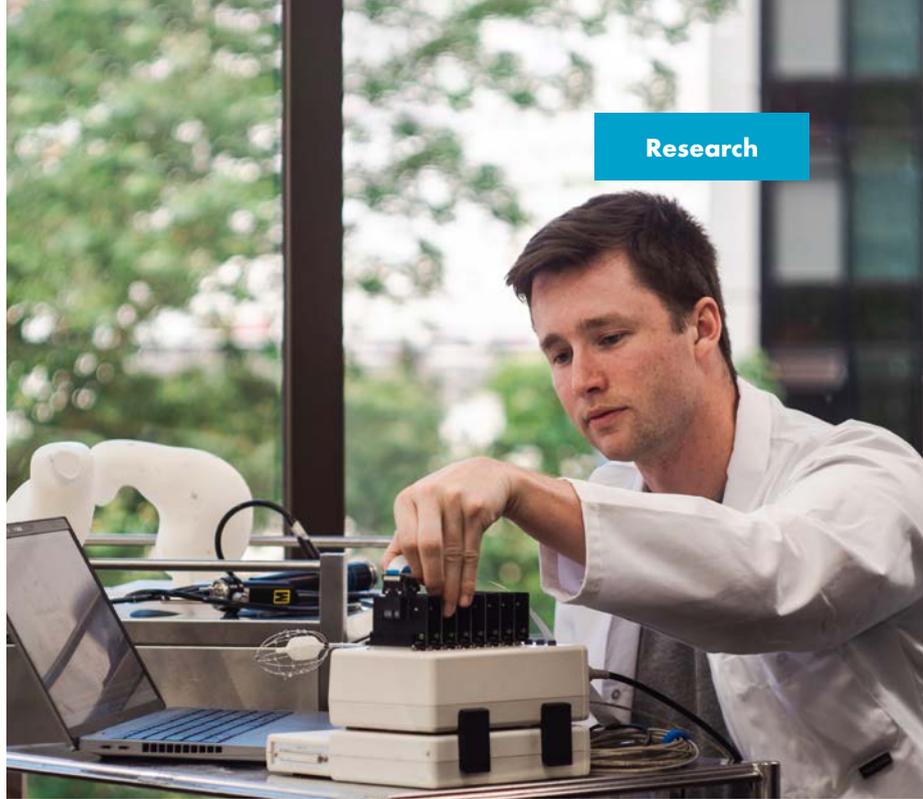
To cap off a stellar 2023, Peter won a Prime Minister's Scholarship for Latin America. This \$10,000 award is funding a 12-week research collaboration with the Millennium Institute for Intelligent Healthcare Engineering in Chile.

The Chilean institute is focused on developing medical imaging technologies integrating physics, engineering and artificial intelligence. That's a good fit with what Peter's team is doing: developing a probe-style device that can be sent into the gut through the mouth. In the same way an endoscope – a camera at the end of a long, flexible tube – might go into the body to take pictures, the probe is used to measure the electrical signals in the gut.

In Chile, he'll focus on two areas: signal processing and taking the device itself closer to a commercially viable product.

"The raw signals you get back from the device can be quite messy," he says. "So, there's a lot of hardware filtering you have to apply, then a lot of signal filtering – cutting out certain frequencies and smoothing the signal so you can pick out what you need."

Scientists realised in the 1800s that electrical signals told the heart to beat. In the gut, it's electrical pulses that stimulate the muscle contractions that move food through the different parts of the digestive tract. Gut researchers at ABI have shown that electrical signals going awry can be a reason for otherwise unexplained stomach symptoms like pain, nausea and vomiting, diarrhoea and bloating.



Research

“Using the data, we can determine whether the electrical rhythm is normal or abnormal.”

– Peter Tremain, Auckland Bioengineering Institute PhD student

A big challenge for doctors and researchers is that gut electricity is weaker than cardiac electricity, and the way it works is far more complicated. There isn't a steady beat like in the heart, and different parts of the alimentary canal have different bio-electrical activity.

ABI's gastroenterology team is still working on understanding the link between abnormal gut electrical signals and people with stomach problems – and what to do about it. Another group is exploring whether ablation, the burning or freezing technique used in the heart to block irregular electrical signals, could be used endoscopically in the gut.

As part of his PhD, Peter is leading the first in-human trial. The team has already recorded electrical activity of the stomach with the new endoscopic gastric electrical mapping device, and its first cohort results have been published, in the journal *Device*, while it continues to analyse the data from the second cohort.

“Using the data, we can determine whether the electrical rhythm is normal or abnormal. This provides a biomarker; something to measure from your body to say there's something wrong,” he says.

As 2024 kicked off, Peter's team received just under \$80,000 in a Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment-funded MedTech research acceleration grant to redesign and improve the device.

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/peter-tremain-gut-research

Peter Tremain is leading a team using a mapping device to record electrical activity in the stomach.

SOLVING THE PLASTICS PUZZLE

Can the circular economy provide an answer to our plastics problem?



Researchers from engineering, business and design are taking on the big problem of what to do with growing mountains of plastic waste.

They're part of a wider team of more than 50 academics, postgraduate students, policymakers, and industry players trying to come up with a systems-wide solution to the country's massive plastics recycling problem.

They have four years and a total of \$11.7 million from MBIE's Endeavour Fund to create a circular economy for a strand of plastics waste that mimics the virtues of a natural ecosystem.

The big hairy audacious goal of this transdisciplinary team has three parallel and interwoven strands. The Engineering team will develop an entirely new material made from recycled plastic, the Business School is scoping the recycled plastics ecosystem, while the third piece of the puzzle involves working out how to bring everyone on board and designing systems to make change actually happen.

The challenge they face is enormous. The vast majority of plastics produced globally aren't recycled at all. "The current plastics lifecycle is far from circular," warned the OECD, when it published its first Global Plastics Outlook in early 2022.

Humans produced twice as much plastic waste in 2019 as 20 years earlier, plastics use was rising significantly, and only nine percent was recycled, the study found.

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/conquering-plastics

Professor Johan Verbeek (left), Faculty of Engineering, is helping find solutions to our plastics problem.
Photo: William Chea

SUPPORTING CAST RESEARCH

Chartwell Trust commits to further support of centre's vision

The Centre for Arts and Social Transformation (CAST) at the University of Auckland has secured its existence for a further five years, thanks to a substantial pledge from the Chartwell Trust.

This follows a similar donation in 2019, reaffirming the trust's status as the centre's principal and founding donor.

Devoted to creating a more socially just world through the arts, CAST projects include looking at how an arts-based approach can tackle issues like homelessness, post-disaster responses, disengagement from schooling, and mental health and well-being.

It is also focused on helping Asian survivors of sexual violence, promoting global citizenship and addressing the lack of creativity in schools.

Exploring the power of the imagination in classroom teaching, and the value of having time to wonder and ponder as an enriched way

of learning, is a central theme in its research.

CAST founding director Professor Peter O'Connor, who was recently joined by co-director Professor Selina Tusitala Marsh, is delighted with the trust's ongoing commitment to the centre's ambitious vision.

"The generosity of the trust has enabled world-leading research already, and we look forward to continuing our relationship over coming years."

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/cast-support

CAST co-directors Professor Peter O'Connor and Professor Selina Tusitala Marsh.
Photo: Tamarin Hart



RISING OPIOID USE A CONCERN

One in ten staying on the drugs following surgery

New local research shows an increase in dispensing of opioids in older people and in all age groups after surgery. In the US, addiction to opioids has reached epidemic levels, leading to a surge in illegal sales, overdoses and deaths.

“Opioids are commonly prescribed for pain, and while we don’t yet have an epidemic in New Zealand as in the US, these findings should spark concern,” says Associate Professor Amy Chan of the School of Pharmacy.

One new opioid study looked at persistent use among opioid-naïve patients who underwent surgery and were dispensed the drugs after discharge.

Researchers looked at community pharmacy dispensing records for more than 260,000 patients who were admitted to any New Zealand hospital between 2007 and 2019.

They found the overall rate of persistent use to be 9.1 percent.

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/rising-opioid-use



Associate Professor Amy Chan of the School of Pharmacy says the findings should spark concern. Photo: Elise Manahan

ALCOHOL IN WASTEWATER

Smaller settlements shown to consume more than larger ones.

Scientists at the University of Auckland have carried out New Zealand’s first large-scale trial of using wastewater to monitor alcohol consumption.

The trial was successful and the technique of testing wastewater, already used for monitoring Covid-19 and illicit drug use, could help health service providers track the use of the nation’s most harmful drug.

“This method can give a lot of insights, which wouldn’t otherwise be available,” says Dr Lisa Pilkington, a senior lecturer in the School of Chemical Sciences and Principal Investigator with Te Pūnaha Matatini.

Ten water catchment areas covering about 40 percent of the population were monitored over six months during 2021 in collaboration with the Institute of Environmental Science and Research’s (ESR) wastewater testing team, led by Andrew Chappell. Sampling took place over seven days each month.

Average alcohol consumption was estimated to be 1.2 standard drinks each day for people aged 15 and over, notably lower than the estimate in a World Health Organisation report in 2018.

Testing also revealed South Islanders consumed more than North Islanders, and that smaller settlements had higher consumption than bigger ones. South Aucklanders drank the least of any place studied.

Consumption spikes were also associated with events like public holidays and sports matches.

Full story: auckland.ac.nz/wastewater-alcohol

Dr Lisa Pilkington says wastewater testing can offer new insights. Photo: William Chea



UP IN SMOKE

Earlier this year, the new government dismantled changes to New Zealand's groundbreaking smokefree legislation. Donna Chisholm meets University of Auckland experts determined to see it reinstated.



Professor Boyd Swinburn says we must accelerate the decline in smoking rates with what powers we have.
Photo: Chris Loufte

“Tobacco is basically a defective product.”

– Professor Chris Bullen

University of Auckland Professor in Public Health Chris Bullen says he was almost shocked speechless by the government's recent changes to New Zealand's smokefree laws.

“I could hardly speak for two days I was so livid,” says Chris, who joins a raft of academics and physicians condemning the move, which dismantled New Zealand's world-leading legislation to denicotinise tobacco, prohibit cigarette sales to those born after 1 January 2009, and drastically reduce outlets.

That reaction was shared by Boyd Swinburn, professor of population nutrition and global health, who described the move as “jaw-dropping”.

“It took a long time to sink in that these guys actually mean this; that they have been got to and are doing the tobacco industry's job. They're shameless about it and they're not going to listen to the evidence or public opinion and have just ram-raided it through.”

Since then, however, actions have replaced words as they push for a reinstatement of the laws, introduced last year to global acclaim.

Heading the moves is Health Coalition Aotearoa, which Boyd co-chairs and on which Chris also serves as a member of its Smokefree

Expert Advisory Group. The group is working on a possible citizens-initiated referendum to reinstate the legislation that the new government repealed under urgency as part of its 100-day plan. The law change was part of the National Party's agreement with coalition partners New Zealand First and ACT.

It's a high bar to reach – requiring 380,000 signatures, which have to be collected on paper rather than electronically. Boyd describes this as a legacy of law around citizens-initiated referenda, which was written in the 1990s, and requires “a total military exercise” in planning and execution.

While only \$50,000 can be spent on advertising, at least that amount again will be required to coordinate the project and to pay for other expenses, such as legal advice.

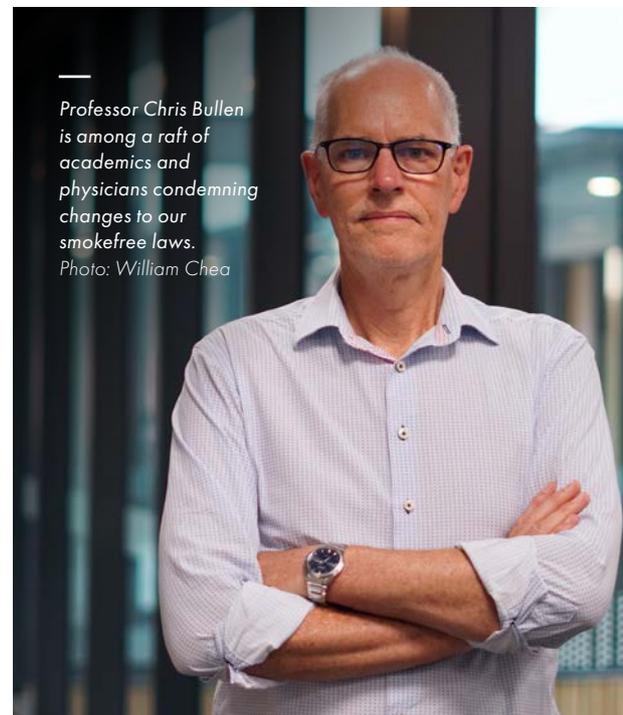
That will likely take a couple of years, says Boyd, so it's possible the referendum question wouldn't go to the public before the 2026 general election. By then, they say, thousands more smokers will have died, despite smoking rates falling to unprecedented lows.

New Zealand's smoking rate stands at 6.8 percent, although that doesn't apply across the board, with Māori smoking levels much higher, at 17.1 percent.

But with only one percent of those aged 15 to 17 using cigarettes now, won't smoking become a thing of the past, anyway?

Eventually, yes, say Chris and Boyd, but not soon enough, and those statistics aren't a reason to do nothing.

Professor Chris Bullen is among a raft of academics and physicians condemning changes to our smokefree laws.
Photo: William Chea



Without the interventions, Boyd reckons it will be 2060 before New Zealand's rates drop below five percent for all ethnic groups. In the meantime, up to 5,000 people a year are dying of smoking-related illnesses.

"Saying we're chugging along okay, so let's put up with thousands more deaths just because we seem to be heading in the right direction... no. We have to accelerate that decline using what powers we have."

Professor Paula Lorgelly, from the School of Population Health, holds a chair in health economics at the University. She says from a health economics point of the view, the government's decision is shortsighted.

"Excise duties on tobacco raise revenue for the government's budget, and a smokefree Aotearoa will have less government revenue from these duties. But we also need to factor in lower health expenditure as we reduce tobacco-related illnesses, and more income and income tax by avoiding illness and early death.

"Big business is being put ahead of people's health," says Paula.

A recent *Newsroom* story in fact pointed to independent analysis, published in November last year, which found that while the government would experience a \$17 billion loss out to 2050 as a result of the 2022 legislation, this would be offset by a vastly larger \$46 billion economic benefit over the same period.

The story noted that health officials briefed Associate Health Minister Casey Costello, who oversees tobacco control, about the research outlining the legislation's economic benefits, but this wasn't passed on to Cabinet when the minister proposed repealing the reforms.

The briefing also largely backed up Boyd's 2060 date for achieving the target of a five percent smoking rate for all population groups in the absence of the smokefree legislative changes; health officials noted this wouldn't be reached until 2061.

Chris says that with the law changes introduced by the Labour Government, the country might have "sneaked in" to reach the target around 2027. The Smokefree 2025 slogan was always just that, rather than an achievable target, but the three policy planks were vitally important.

"Tobacco is basically a defective product, and it's highly addictive," says Chris. "Imagine a government being okay with a vehicle on the road which has a fundamental flaw and over its lifetime of use, half the people who drive it were at risk of dying in a major crash. Imagine if the government turned a blind eye and continued to allow those vehicles to be sold."

The laws were about locking in protection for future generations, he says, adding that it's not guaranteed that smoking in young

Professor Paula Lorgelly
says from a health
economics perspective,
the government's decision
is shortsighted.

Photo: Elise Manahan



people will continue to decline. Australia, for example, has just seen an uptick in smoking rates for the first time in 25 years. Although Australia has largely the same policy settings as New Zealand, its vaping laws are different. It legislates nicotine as a poison and vapes are available only via a GP's prescription or the black market.

In 2018, just over two percent of Australians aged 14 to 17 smoked cigarettes, but that increased to nearly 13 percent by March 2023. In the same cohort, vaping rates increased from one percent to more than 14 percent.

If everyone who took up vaping did so with the intention of ultimately giving up vaping and never going back to smoking that would be a brilliant public health success story, says Chris. "Unfortunately, people are taking it up when they didn't smoke, and that's a problem."

The rise in vaping is a particular concern for Associate Professor Kelly Burrowes, a researcher at the Auckland Bioengineering Institute, who worries that the long-term health effects – which may not be as dire as smoking – are largely unknown.

"I do think there is a place for vaping, for people to switch from smoking, but an unexpected consequence has been the huge

**"Big business
is being
put ahead
of people's
health."**

– Professor Paula
Lorgelly



Associate Professor Kelly Burrowes says the long-term effects of vaping are largely unknown.
Photo: Chris Loufte

“An unexpected consequence has been the huge uptake among people who didn’t smoke.”

– Associate Professor Kelly Burrowes, Auckland Bioengineering Institute

◀ uptake among people who didn’t smoke.”

This includes her own husband, who’d given up smoking 14 years earlier before moving to nicotine patches and gum but wasn’t using anything when he began vaping a few years ago.

She’d like to see fewer shops selling vapes and the eradication of flavours, which encourage younger people to vape. She says a US study that surveyed about 1,400 young people found that 70 percent said they would stop vaping if they could buy only tobacco-flavoured vapes.

Kelly’s research involves testing the chemicals in e-liquids and aerosols and has found at least 40 different chemicals used to create flavour, and some heavy metals off the vape itself. She and her team are studying the effect of vape aerosols on lung cells grown in the lab.

Although most of the publicity about the tobacco law changes in recent months has been on the loss of the ‘smokefree generation’, Chris and Boyd believe the move to denicotinisation had the greatest potential to change smoking habits, because it could eliminate addiction to the product – if not to smoking behaviour.

“If I were to invest in one strategy only, it would be denicotinisation, because it’s highly likely to lead to a massive drop in smoking prevalence across all population groups rapidly,” says Chris. “It takes out the addictive component and not just on theoretical grounds – it has been shown to be effective in large randomised controlled trials here, and in the US and other countries. People lose interest when they can’t get the nicotine.”

He believes the government’s response that denicotinising tobacco was an unproven strategy is incorrect. The US Food and Drug Administration had said it wanted to start regulating nicotine in tobacco and was looking to New Zealand to learn how to do that.

“When it suits the government to say there is not enough evidence, you say ‘what evidence do you need?’, and they’ll say ‘let’s see another country do this’. It needs a first country to make the move, and New Zealand was going to be that country.”

As the pair push ahead with their plans, they’re mourning the loss of the groundbreaking laws that had made New Zealand a world leader in the field.

“It was groundbreaking, end-game stuff,” says Boyd, “and this is why the tobacco industry gives a shit about New Zealand, not because of the numbers of smokers – they couldn’t care less if New Zealand became smokefree because we are just a tiny speck of the market. It’s the model we show to others. They do not want the first domino to fall.” ■

DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Dr Claire Achmad says we must create space for children's voices to be heard. By Janet McAllister

With doom and gloom, worry and injustice out there, what gets Chief Children's Commissioner Dr Claire Achmad out of bed in the morning?

Claire is typically upbeat and approachable. But even so, her answer is surprisingly positive: her motivation is not just having hope for good change. It is that she is already seeing communities, including children, creating it.

She cites, as an example, the kaupapa Māori transitional housing run by Mā Te Huruuru charitable trust in Auckland. It's for mokopuna Māori who have had "really tough experiences: trauma and poverty, homelessness, experiences in the criminal justice system, the care and protection system". In 2023, Claire shared time with these young people who she says get the "empowering experience" of living in their own home, and the chance to heal from their trauma and learn about their whakapapa and culture.

"Several said to me, 'For so long we felt we couldn't even have dreams and hopes for the future'. And through the support they're getting, they realise they can have dreams – and they do have dreams for their future."

Claire has dedicated her career to advocating for children's rights and, working with others, she has had several wins. Satisfyingly, European governments stopped their "harsh" policies of forcibly returning unaccompanied-minor asylum seekers back to dangerous situations. This came a few years after Claire, working for UNICEF in the Netherlands, assisted refugee children from Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere to share their stories to create change.

Now, as then, "It's partly my role to let children and young people know I'm listening to them. I value what they're sharing with me to encourage them to speak up," she says. "Too often children aren't getting those signals from society that they really do matter, and it's their right to participate in things that affect them. They have very powerful and important voices that we all need to listen to."

Claire grew up in the Waitākere Ranges and credits teachers at Titirangi Primary, Glen Eden Intermediate and Avondale College (where she was head girl) for opening her eyes to social justice. Family, friends and ngāhere – native forest – remain her rejuvenating touchstones.

During Claire's childhood, her Pākehā mum Robin taught in the University's Asian



Dr Claire Achmad, with Mana Mokopuna Youth Advisory Group members Taivaka Afelee (centre) and Cyria Lowrie-Hetet.

Languages department, then worked as a school library manager. Her Javanese dad, Bambang, led quality control for Bic manufacturing.

"We've been back a few times to Indonesia to see family. I'm very fortunate to walk in two worlds," says Claire, who is part of the Asia New Zealand Foundation leadership network.

During her Law and Arts conjoint degree, she helped set up the Law School's Equal Justice Project in 2005, a student-run volunteer organisation that increases youth awareness of legal rights and supports individual cases in Community Law Centres. Claire initially led refugee and migrant advocacy, before becoming co-director in the organisation's second year.

On exchange at the University of Copenhagen, she immersed herself in international human rights law studies and graduated from Leiden University in 2018 with a PhD on children's rights in international commercial surrogacy. She did this in between advocacy stints at the Human Rights Commission, World Vision in Melbourne, and Barnardos Aotearoa, before leading Social Service Providers Te Pai Ora o Aotearoa.

She became Chief Children's Commissioner in November 2023 – the same year the Office of the Children's Commissioner became Mana Mokopuna, the Children and Young People's Commission, which is led by a board of commissioners, chaired by Claire. (The new government, however, has since indicated this structure will likely change.)

She follows other University alumni as children's commissioners: Justice Andrew Becroft (2016-21) and Dame Cindy Kiro (2003-2008), who became the University's Pro-Vice Chancellor (Māori) and then Governor-General.

The principles remain the same, says Claire. "Every child and young person in this country has rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; every mokopuna Māori has rights under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. These are the things we are standing up for."

See auckland.ac.nz/ingenio for an extended profile.

"Children have very powerful and important voices that we all need to listen to."

– Dr Claire Achmad,
Chief Children's
Commissioner



TAKING UP SPACE

Former theatre lighting designer Bryan Caldwell now manages research projects for NASA. He tells Janet McAllister how he shifted from the stage to the stars.

Bryan Caldwell experiencing weightlessness before starting the hash brown experiment.

“That is quite thrilling in itself – the idea that you’re contributing to human space flight.”

– Dr Bryan Caldwell

So there he was, frying hash browns, weightless on a parabolic flight. For science, you understand. Not where you’d expect to find a theatre lighting designer from Aotearoa New Zealand, who left school in the sixth form (Year 12).

“I don’t think many people believed I’d get to NASA because, I mean, it’s a bit far-fetched,” says Dr Bryan Caldwell. But for the past four years, he has indeed been managing NASA research projects (contracting via KBR) at the “awe-inspiring” Johnson Space Center in Houston.

Last year, NASA even awarded Bryan its Silver Achievement Medal civilian award, lauding his “exceptional leadership” during a complex four-year project using bed rest to mimic zero gravity, to study certain physiological effects of space life. The project involved four groups of people lying with their heads six degrees lower than their feet, for 30 days at a time, while researchers tested for things like near-vision impairment.

Bryan was ultimately responsible for the project: research integration (ensuring diverse experiments didn’t compete), timing, equipment, shipping.

“You’re finding out how to keep astronauts safe in space,” he says. “And that is quite thrilling in itself – the idea that you’re contributing to human space flight.”

Previously, he managed an experiment on Mauna Loa volcano in Hawai‘i, in which people lived in isolation on (cold) lava for up to a year, as if they were on Mars.

Then there are the hash browns. Bryan’s postdoctoral research at Cornell University included investigating whether astronauts could cook meals on the Moon, or Mars, because cooking is a psychologically ‘healthy and wholesome activity’ compared to ripping open pouches of dehydrated nutrients. So, Bryan and his fellow researchers cooked hash browns dyed red during a parabolic flight to mimic the gravity of non-Earth surfaces, and their crimson sauté splatter patterns were photographed – like a crime scene – to assess the likelihood of hot-oil injuries. A hard job, but somebody had to do it.

Meanwhile, Bryan’s two teenage children are thriving in Texas. Bryan and his marketing director wife, Shannon Huse, met at a party 25 years ago; he only realised after they’d been seeing each other for a month that she was the 95bFM theatre critic responsible for his only negative theatre-lighting review.

After leaving St Patrick’s College Silverstream in Upper Hutt in 1986, Bryan was in Tauranga when offered the chance to become an apprentice stage technician. Lynda Topp helped him get work in Auckland, and he enjoyed an impressive theatre-lighting career including shows for the Mercury Theatre and Auckland Theatre Company (*Shortland Street: The Musical, Cabaret, Horseplay, Hair, Waiting for Godot* etc.). For Louis Vuitton’s 150th birthday, with Inside Out Productions, he lit a sports-field-sized luggage trunk theatre/nightclub that toured the world.

But behind the scenes, Bryan debuted at university aged 28, specifically aiming to become an astronaut. Why?

“I just thought imagine being in space and building a space station that other people would live in. Quite an amazing thing to be part of.”

After a Bachelor of Science (Hons), his PhD, done with the Auckland Bioengineering Institute (ABI), supervised by Professor Bruce Smaill, involved computer modelling and surgical experiments, including fabricating gold microelectrodes to map the heart’s electrical conduction. The ABI research helped him attain his first US postdoc and “opened the pathway to NASA”, says Bryan, who wants to see other New Zealanders work there.

While his US citizenship came through too late for any astronaut attempt, he feels privileged and happy. “I mean, we’re going back to the Moon. We’re going to put the first woman on the Moon and the first person of colour. It’s a pretty exciting mission.”

See auckland.ac.nz/ingenio for an extended profile.

THE ADVANCING RETREAT OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is on the back foot around the globe. Adam Dudding explores the forces behind the shift – and what it might mean for the international rule of law.

There seems to be an awful lot of democracy going on right now. By year's end, major national elections will have been held in at least 60 countries, involving half the world's population.

But this isn't a sign that democracy's in rude health. As the Economist Intelligence Unit wrote in February in its annual Democracy Index, "Elections are a condition of democracy, but are far from being sufficient."

A functioning democracy needs elections that are free and fair. It needs good things like true pluralism, freedom of speech, civil liberties, adequate political participation and a functional political culture. So, the Economist index tallies marks on such indicators, then sorts countries into four boxes: 'full democracies' (such as New Zealand and Norway); 'flawed democracies' (Chile, Italy and, since 2016, the US); 'hybrid regimes' (Fiji, Mexico, Nigeria); and 'authoritarian regimes' (Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Qatar).

The result? The authors concluded 2023 continued a trend of democratic "regression and stagnation", to hit the lowest score since the index began in 2006.

Meanwhile, American NGO Freedom House's annual 'global freedom' ranking,

**"Most of the good things
correlate with democracy,
and most of the bad things
correlate with dictatorship."**

– Stephen Hoadley, retired associate professor of Politics and International Relations

tallying similar metrics, concluded planet Earth was into its "eighteenth year of democratic decline": 21 countries saw rights and liberties improve; 52 went backwards.

Stephen Hoadley, a retired associate professor of Politics and International Relations, says the metrics are depressing.

"Democracy is in trouble. You can cite those declining figures. You can cite Hungary breaking ranks with its European partners. You can cite Donald Trump, and the Freedom Caucus, and the restrictions on registration and voting imposed by Republican-dominated US states."

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin's return to power with an implausibly large majority is another reminder of why Russia sits in the 'authoritarian' box. Should this retreat of democracy worry us?

"We should feel alarmed," says Stephen. He says modern democracy is a "brilliant invention". ▶

*Stephen Hoadley says
democracy is in trouble –
and we should be alarmed.
Photo: Chris Loufte*



Dr Maria Armoudian says an independent, ethical media is crucial to a healthy, functioning democracy.
Photo: Elise Manahan

“How can democracy function if you hate and want to destroy your fellow citizens?”

– Dr Maria Armoudian, senior lecturer, Politics and International Relations

◀ Democracies are associated with greater prosperity, creativity and scientific advances, says Stephen, and better numbers in the human development index (a United Nations metric merging measures of lifespan, health, education and living standards).

“Most of the good things correlate with democracy, and most of the bad things correlate with dictatorship.”

Another reason to embrace democracy is ‘democratic peace theory’ – the idea that democratic countries seldom attack each other, meaning a more democratic world is safer.

Critics might point to the democratic US’s attacks on Vietnam, Libya and Iraq, or democratic Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza, but Stephen argues these are “not exceptions because none of the targets was democratic”.

He says most analysts concur that by promoting democracy abroad, the US has not only advanced its own security, but also the security provided by the international rules-based order. As more of the world’s population find themselves under authoritarian regimes, Stephen says “we liberals need to work a bit harder to protect what we have”.

How to do that? “By voting, by exercising freedom of speech, by engaging in debates, by holding government to account if it does an undemocratic thing, by demonstrating.”

Democracy here is in okay shape, but as New Zealanders travel, some may get their hands on levers further afield.

“Some will take up careers abroad, maybe in non-democratic countries like in the Middle East,” says Stephen. “They should be aware of the debate about democracy and why it’s under threat, and who knows, maybe they’ll find themselves in a pivotal position one day.”

A free media is considered a hallmark of democracy. Yet worldwide, media companies are haemorrhaging influence (and staff), as the advertising model that sustained an industry for centuries is strangled by the economics of the online era. Meanwhile, the internet has created new pathways for transmission of a mishmash of information, misinformation and disinformation.

Dr Maria Armoudian, senior lecturer in Politics and International Relations, says media can still be a powerful force for good. “A healthy, functioning democracy relies upon educated citizens who understand socio-political and environmental developments so they can make decisions that are in the best interest of their communities, themselves and humanity. Ideally, independent, ethical media can provide this.”

On a good day, the media “offers us models of ways we can talk civilly and present ideas in compelling ways, so that we can understand policies and developments better, and make rational decisions”.

On the flipside, however, “the media can also model a destructive way of talking with one another. There are examples throughout the world of these roles media have played.”

As an example, Maria cites Chile in the 1970s. “Chile was the longest-standing democracy in Latin America, and it was an extremely civil and genteel culture. But after they elected a socialist president [Salvador Allende], the Nixon administration sent the CIA in to destroy his presidency.”

She says the CIA put media on its payroll and it set about “attacking and blaming him, his supporters and his policies in dehumanising ways”. The result was “people were having fistfights instead of talking respectfully about policies, which tore into Chile’s cultural fabric, making way for the Pinochet dictatorship”.

Maria sees a similar coarsening of conversation in the US today.

“I heard Donald Trump’s daughter-in-law, who’s now co-leading the Republican Party, say, this is a battle of good versus evil. That’s a war frame used when militants want to actually destroy their foes. How can democracy function if you hate and want to destroy your fellow citizens?”

Maria says the 1987 repeal of the ‘fairness doctrine’, which obliged US broadcasters to present differing views on controversial

issues, plus new laws allowing mass media consolidation, sparked the rise of outlets that focused on “emotive and contagious” messaging, including talk-radio shock jocks. Then the internet turned up the heat.

“There has been such a proliferation of messages that are insulting, dehumanising, denigrating and calling one side or another the enemy.”

She says democracy is first and foremost “an idea”, so it is upheld when people agree that it’s valuable, but it can fall apart if people lose faith in it or when some parties actively seek to destroy it.

If democracy’s going through a rough patch, what about some of the other shared concepts that make the world go round? ‘Human rights’ and the ‘international rule of law’ are, like democracy, big ideas whose value rests on how seriously they’re taken by participants. Are these ideas also in trouble?

Associate Professor of Law Treasa Dunworth specialises in international peace and security. But ask her if the current international order – the conventions, treaties, pacts and diplomacy that nations use to interact with each other – might be under threat like democracy is, and she’ll tell you that’s not really the right question.

She’d argue the international order as it has stood since 1945 – centred on the United Nations and a galaxy of related organisations – has never worked that well for much of the world: “It really privileges the economically and militarily powerful states.”

When attempting to resolve international differences, vast power sits with five permanent members (the ‘P5’) of the UN Security Council: China, France, Russia, the UK and the US, each of which can veto any Security Council resolution.

“So, we have a situation where, as things stand right now, Russia vetoes resolutions

condemning its actions in Ukraine, and the US resists resolutions calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.”

The P5 have had that power since the UN’s foundation in 1945, when 51 founding states, including New Zealand, gathered in San Francisco to figure out a charter for a better post-war world. (New Zealand voted against the veto power but lost.)

“So, we can see that the United Nations’ legal order isn’t all-of-a-sudden broken. I would argue it was never really fit for purpose.”

Even beyond security issues, says Treasa, poorer countries are locked into global trading and economic systems “that they just can’t navigate their way out of”.

It’s not as if Treasa wants to burn down the entire UN universe. “I think it’s valuable to have a standing institution where we have people on the payroll to translate documents and to do interpretation and to have a meeting room that’s big enough.”

But she’d like to see change. On the day she talks to *Ingenio*, Treasa has been preparing a lecture on international peace and security for her senior students. She says they tend to start the year convinced that what’s needed to end conflicts such as those in Gaza or Ukraine is more law, another treaty, another commission, another rapporteur.

“Three weeks into term, they’re all in utter dismay – they now know international law can do very little about these conflicts.”

Yet the trick, says Treasa, is not to push them into a black hole of despair and cynicism. Instead, she wants them to look critically at situations, and think about how the underlying systems might be changed or worked around.

“I want them to be hopeful. If they’re the new generation coming, we cannot destroy them and give them no hope. Because no hope ends up burning down playgrounds at Parliament.” ■

“We can see that the United Nations’ legal order isn’t all-of-a-sudden broken. I would argue it was never really fit for purpose.”

– Associate Professor Treasa Dunworth, Faculty of Law



Associate Professor Treasa Dunworth hopes students will examine situations critically and think about changing systems.
Photo: William Chea



Professor Janice Rymer on the campus of King's College, where she teaches. Photo: Louise Chunn

Janice Rymer: *lifelong focus on women's health*

A chance meeting at Middlemore Hospital drew Professor Janice Rymer into her specialist fields in women's health. She sits down with Louise Chunn at King's College London to talk about her journey since.

"I'm glad I made my decision, and that women's health is getting the priority it deserves."

– Professor Janice Rymer, King's College London

As Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Dean of Student Affairs at King's College London, and a consultant gynaecologist at Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, Janice Rymer has many claims on her time.

But right now, as well as meeting the needs of patients, students and administrators, Janice is playing a tense waiting game. Her husband, Roger Jones, former professor of General Practice at King's and, until recently, editor of the *British Journal of General Practice*, has spent the past seven months in hospital, after contracting septicaemia from a spinal operation. He is still being ventilated, but "amazingly his spirit is positive", she says.

In her King's College office, filled with books and photos, she is happy to talk about her life and work since leaving the University of Auckland in 1981.

Janice and her older sister Judy were born in

Australia, as were their parents. The family's first New Zealand experience was when her father, John Rymer, became principal of Christchurch College in 1966. After four years, they moved to Auckland, when he was offered the high-profile role of Anglican Dean of Auckland, in which he stayed for the next 21 years.

He is well remembered for his role in the completion of Holy Trinity Cathedral in Parnell. As noted in his *NZ Herald* obituary: "Had it not been for this man, so strong in his beliefs and convictions, the building with its two distinctive – and some would say unrelated – halves might still be far from its present state of completion."

Sporty, academic and focused, Janice thrived at her secondary school, Diocesan School for Girls. She remembers the decision to enrol in medicine at the University of Auckland was almost made for her, and she graduated in 1982 with a MBChB before adding a diploma

in obstetrics and an MD in 1994. “If you were quite bright at my school, there wasn’t much debate about it.”

And if she hadn’t? “Probably physical education of some kind. My mother played tennis for Australia, and I played hockey for the University. I just loved it.”

She stays connected with her alma mater through the UK Friends of the University of Auckland group.

Janice chose her specialty fields, obstetrics and gynaecology, after a chance meeting with registrar Rosie Thomson at Middlemore.

“She pointed out that obstetrics is really exciting, and generally positive. And then you have gynaecology, where there’s a lot of surgery involved. Plus, in hospitals it’s largely old people, whereas with obstetrics and gynaecology, it was largely young women. And I thought, ‘Yes, that makes sense’, so I did it.”

Another influence at the time was Professor Dennis Bonham, who urged her to sit her specialist exams as soon as she could if she wanted to be taken seriously.

“So I did, and he was right. I was also helped by the fact that New Zealand’s clinical training was excellent, so when I came to London, I did a research degree on osteoporosis and HRT. That put me in line for an academic career, as well as a clinical one.”

After two years as a registrar in New Zealand, Janice went to the UK to get a wider range of experience, as many doctors did at the time. After an initial post outside London, she was employed at Guy’s, which then merged with St Thomas’. The trust that runs them is one of London’s most prestigious teaching hospitals, but, like all NHS institutions, is under increasing budget and waiting list pressures. How to address the degradation of the NHS is one of the hottest topics in UK politics.

Janice, 65, is no longer involved in obstetrics; her specialisations are endometriosis, a painful disorder that is difficult to diagnose and has devastating effects on fertility, and menopause. She also has a small private client list, but teaching takes up the larger part of her time.

Just as she is saddened by the erosion of the NHS, she is also concerned about medical students: who gets into this competitive field, how they train, and where they end up.

“I think we could select our medical students better, making it a graduate degree so you would get people who were more mature and motivated. I think this might help with weeding out those who just want to go into The City or get into business. There’s also a real move away from setting up as partners in general practice, with people preferring just to be employed. This isn’t good, either.”

While cognisant of the need to cut back on the brutal 120-hour weeks that junior doctors

endured in her time, she fears the effects of EU regulatory changes that, for example, set maximum working hours per week.

“Because of limitations on hours, I get a different person turning up to operate with me each week. So, how can I train someone? And how can I be a role model? The registrars have nobody to bond with, to help support them when there has been a difficulty.”

Janice is pleased that women’s health, which has always been neglected, is now getting more attention.

“It’s easier to talk about the whole business of their gynaecological health with another woman.”

– Professor Janice Rymer

“We’re all more vocal about it now, but it’s still lagging behind. We don’t get as much operating time as other specialities, and there are terrible delays in diagnosis – seven years for endometriosis. But one good thing is there are more women coming into the area of obstetrics and gynaecology. Patients feel reassured by that. It’s easier to talk about the whole business of their gynaecological health with another woman.”

There have been many changes in the world since Janice was told, in Whangārei in the 1980s, that she was a good surgeon but the problem was, she was a woman.

“I realised then it was just going to be an uphill struggle if I went for general surgery. So, I’m glad I made my decision, and that women’s health is getting the priority it deserves.”

Though perhaps not everyone has received the memo. Recently, Janice had a young male medical school student in her office after he wrote a much-shared social media post in which he mocked the idea of women’s rights. As she trenchantly pointed out, every female patient, teacher and doctor could legitimately refuse to engage with him. He only very narrowly escaped being thrown out of King’s, and he certainly won’t want to be seeing any more of Professor Rymer.

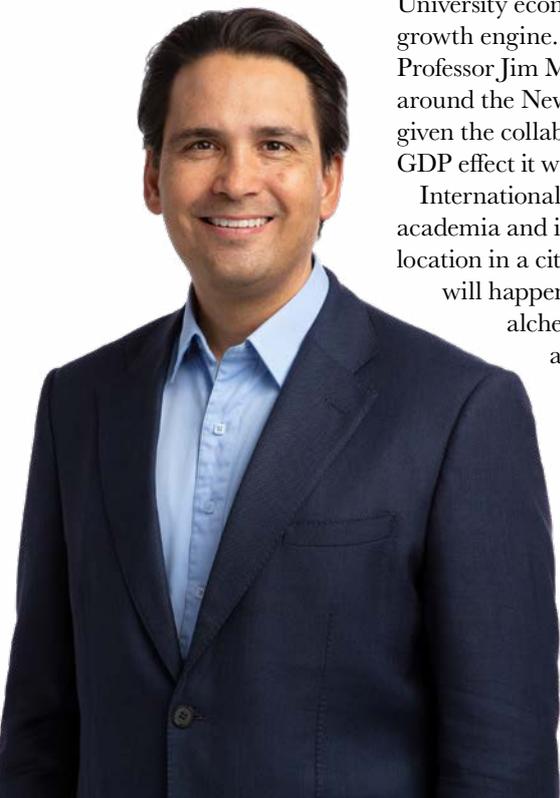
When she’s not insisting on the best from students, or operating to relieve women from pain, Janice leads a full London life. She lives on the Thames, near Tower Bridge, and runs along it regularly. She and Roger also have a house in the Cotswolds, but London is the place for her.

As she says, “Who wouldn’t love it?”

STAYING IN SYNERGY

“If you bring academia and industry together in one location in a city, economic and social magic will happen.”

This article reflects the opinion of the author and is not necessarily that of Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland.



What do you think of when you think of universities? I think of science and humanities, of deep study, learning and collaboration, and of broadening oneself through stress, perspiration and, every now and then, moments of joyful inspiration.

I also think of romance and a time of life that I suppose, subconsciously, I'd often like to get back to. Yes, I worked hard at my courses and my part-time jobs as a student. I also met my wife Natalie – we got married at the end of our postgrad years quite literally at university, in a college chapel followed by a common room party. No one thought it would last, but we showed them, three kids and nearly 20 years on.

Of course, there are other ways we can conceive of universities than those I've mentioned, including through an economic lens.

The University of Auckland is the country's number one university and one of New Zealand's biggest employers and economic units. Post-Covid, when thousands of employees and tens of thousands of students came back to the office and lecture theatres, I noticed from my workplace on Symonds Street what a difference this foot traffic made to improving the situation around crime and antisocial behaviour, as well as boosting economic vibrancy. Having more people out and about, working, purchasing and socialising, was a game changer. Our city needs its big university.

There are wider ways to conceptualise the University economically, as an enabler and growth engine. One example is the work Professor Jim Metson is doing with colleagues around the Newmarket Innovation Precinct, given the collaboration it entails and the future GDP effect it will surely have.

International evidence shows if you bring academia and industry together in one location in a city, economic and social magic will happen. Auckland needs this kind of alchemy if we're to see the growth and productivity gains required to attract talent and meet our people's aspirations for higher living standards.

I'm fascinated by the

thought of a med-tech hub – think academia, public health professionals and businesspeople partnering on telemedicine, wearables, analytics and diagnostics to improve health outcomes. This is a sector worth a couple of billion dollars to New Zealand and it's already headquartered around the Grafton/Newmarket area, where all the essential ingredients are present: a great hospital, a top university with a med school, the Auckland Bioengineering Institute, plenty of start-ups and even the odd mature business, such as Orion Health, to create a successful ecosystem.

I believe the University of Auckland can lead on this and take the health-tech sector to greater heights, even world renown, in niche areas of excellence.

Intellectually speaking, the University is also a place of exciting diversity. Its academics and students are considering everything from how we think about a particular fictional text or a statute, or a bridge or a stem cell. We should also look on it as a centre of economic dynamism. This is true for our city centre, for exciting growth opportunities such as health technology and also in terms of birthing our people into the kinds of careers that will lift economic growth, productivity and living standards.

Finally, when we think of the University of Auckland, we need to ensure that academia, students and business are better connected and understand the deep value each can bring to the other, in an integrated holistic sense.

This is why I have invested so much personal time into getting to know people in the Business School and other faculties. Academia can lift business's sights above the day-to-day grind to what is truly possible. Business can ground academic work in a pragmatic reality that may allow it to fly faster and more effectively.

What would be great would be for many more students, and even staff, to intern or move into business roles for periods in their careers to put theory into practice. Or, how about successful businesspeople swapping their corporate lives for a time to learn, research and teach in university departments?

Let's work together as a city – university and business – to fulfil some of these ideas.

The Honourable Simon Bridges has a BA/LLB (Hons) from the University of Auckland. The former MP for Tauranga and National Party Leader is now the CEO of the Auckland Business Chamber and Chair of NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi.

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

We meet the five recipients of the University's 2024 Distinguished Alumni Awards, who range from a swashbuckling conservationist to a trailblazer in Māori education.

Beaming into the Taumata ceremony from his boat off the coast of Costa Rica while conducting patrols for illegal fishing, Pete Bethune admitted his was not a “normal job”. But the conservationist wouldn't have it any other way.

“When you get to work on stuff you believe in, it's really hard to go back to what you might consider a normal job,” says Pete. “When I look at the outstanding people who I work with, or the people who I admire, they all have a cause or something they stand for, and it leads to them having a much richer life.”

The Earthrace Conservation CEO was among the Distinguished Alumni recognised in 2024 at Taumata, which was held at the ASB Waterfront Theatre on 6 April. Tech entrepreneur Mitchell Pham, pioneering Māori educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and theatre director and artistic director Simon Phillips were also honoured, as was the Young Alumna of the Year, financial education entrepreneur Simran Kaur, of *Girls That Invest* fame.

Broadcaster Jack Tame hosted the event, interviewing the recipients he collectively described as “beacons to follow”. Here's more of what they told him on the night.



Vice-Chancellor Professor Dawn Freshwater welcomed those attending Taumata.

Photos: Richard Ng

MITCHELL PHAM, ONZM BCOM 1994 (BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS)

Among his many achievements, World Class New Zealander and ONZM Mitchell Pham holds the unlikely distinction of being the 1997 Australasian ceroc dance champion.

And perhaps even more unlikely is what spurred him to dancefloor success.

“I have no rhythm,” admits the technology entrepreneur. “So it became a challenge to learn some rhythm – and along the way you win an international championship.”

Mitchell encountered challenges early in life, escaping post-war Vietnam as a 12-year-old.

His perilous journey to New Zealand included being shot at by border guards, running out of food, fuel and water, and being stranded at sea. But he recalls arriving in New Zealand with a sense of possibility.

“I was really excited that I had made it that far. The next thing is the next thing – you keep going.”

A successful technology innovator and entrepreneur, Mitchell is a co-founder and director of CodeHQ, director of EasyCrypto and chief digital officer of TradeWindow.



While he initially considered an engineering degree, business won out for the son of serial entrepreneurs.

A former NZTech chair, Mitchell is also a well-known technology industry leader and connector, who says the Kiwi tech industry is bolstered by the efforts of more than 1,000 volunteers.

Having seen huge advances in the sector over more than 30 years in business, he says it now needs to focus on meeting society's environmental challenges, and engaging more globally.

Ultimately, he says, whether creating a technology solution or learning to get some rhythm, opportunity arises from solving a problem – or “never wasting a good setback”.

Watch the video:
tinyurl.com/DAA-mitchell



Watch the video:
tinyurl.com/DAA-pete

PETE BETHUNE
 BE 1990, DIPCOM 1997, BSC WAIK. 1987,
 MBA MACQ. 2005
 (ENGINEERING)

While others may celebrate their annual turn around the sun with family or friends, blowing out candles on a cake, Pete Bethune's recent birthday involved an armed incident with pirates.

The conservationist beamed into the Taumata ceremony from his boat off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, where he and his crew were conducting patrols for illegal fishing in a 'lawless' but marine-protected area.

"They tried to run us over, there were spear guns pointed at us, there were shots fired. In the end, they scarpred," he says. "But it's the nature of the beast. You don't win all your

battles ... we'll come back for another day."

The CEO of Earthrace Conservation, which he founded in 2011, has spent decades raising awareness of environmental causes and protecting species, but he describes his shift into environmentalism as an evolution.

Ironically, he began his career working in oil exploration, and it was while producing a thesis looking at alternative fuels for road transport as part of his MBA at Macquarie University that he switched on to the sustainability potential of biofuels. It led to the building of the *Earthrace* trimaran – powered by biofuels made from waste cooking oil – that he and his crew sailed around the world.

He's since been stabbed in the chest in Brazil, attacked by pirates in Colombia, imprisoned in Japan, and almost lost his leg after being bitten by a venomous snake. But Pete insists such adventures are a byproduct of, not a motivation for, the work he does.

"When you get to work on stuff you believe in, it's really hard to go back to what you might consider a normal job. I call it a cause. When I look at the outstanding people I work with, or the people who I admire, they all have a cause, or something they stand for, and it leads to them having a much richer life. For me, that is certainly the case."



Watch the video:
tinyurl.com/DAA-simon

SIMON PHILLIPS
 BA (1979), DIP ACTING, TOI WHAKAARI:
 NEW ZEALAND DRAMA SCHOOL (1980)
 (ARTS)

Reports of the death of live theatre, reckons Simon Phillips, are greatly exaggerated.

"Audiences replenish and get to a point in their lives where contemplation of life, as opposed to the alcohol-infused living of it, becomes a more interesting thing."

While in these hyperconnected days Simon admits live theatre doesn't provide the only opportunity for audiences to 'contemplate life', the theatre and artistic director is renowned for his ability to draw the crowds.

He began his theatrical career as an actor,

but soon landed his first directing gig leading a production of *Oliver!*, at age 21, when Sir Ian Mune had to pull out to take on a film job.

A former artistic director of the State Theatre Company of South Australia and the Melbourne Theatre Company, Simon has become the leading director of musical theatre in Australia, developing stage productions of classic Australian films *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* and *Muriel's Wedding*.

He also worked with Andrew Lloyd Webber to reimagine a production of the composer's *Love Never Dies*. Simon recalls how the musical theatre legend "openly wept with joy" at the resulting production, which emerged out of a difficult process (and led to perhaps the most impressive video cameo of the Taumata ceremony, from Lloyd Webber himself, singing Simon's praises).

And while the cost of living crisis may be putting further pressure on the theatre business, Simon maintains investment in the arts should be a priority, for the sake of a healthy society.

"We've been waiting for a long time on this side of the world for governments with true visionary understanding of what it will do to a culture to irrationally support the arts, far more than they deserve on any level. It can only pay off; it always pays off."

LINDA TUHIWAI SMITH

CNZM, FRSNZ

BA 1975, DIPTCHG ATC 1975, MA (HONS)
1987, PHD EDUCATION 1996
(EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK)



While at university in the 1970s, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, Tuhourangi) was asked to make a stark choice: be successful or be Māori.

“That’s what it felt like we had to do. We were given direct messages like ‘Leave your Māori stuff at home’. I was told ‘It must be the white side of you that got you into university,’” she recalls. “Those messages were cruel and mean. They put off a lot of people – and they made people like me more determined.”

Today, however, young Māori no longer have to face that choice. “When I watch young Māori, they want the world ... and we need an education system that makes that possible. When I was educated, it didn’t make that possible; in order to get that part of the world, you had to sacrifice this part, and we don’t need to do that anymore.”

Linda has played an outsized role in this transition as one of the most influential

researchers in Māori and Indigenous education. Her 1999 book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* is considered a definitive work in Indigenous studies.

So how, asked Jack Tame while interviewing Linda at Taumata, does it feel to at times be recognised and celebrated by the very systems that she has critiqued during her career?

“Great,” says Linda – today a distinguished professor at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiarangi in Whakatāne – who says her work focuses on acknowledging and respecting knowledge of all kinds.

“All cultures have knowledge, all cultures have a way of protecting that knowledge, preserving that knowledge and transmitting that knowledge. The challenge that we have in New Zealand and in other countries is how, in our respect for knowledge, do we make sure we respect other forms of knowledge.”

Watch the video:
tinyurl.com/DAA-linda

YOUNG ALUMNA OF THE YEAR

SIMRAN KAUR

BOPTOM (HONS) 2019
(MEDICAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES)



A self-confessed “nosy child”, Simran Kaur early on began hunting out the kind of information that would spur her to success in the financial world.

“I would hang out with my friends who had nice houses, and I would say to them, ‘This is so lovely. What do your parents do for work?’

“Just a mixture of practical learning and being a really nosy kid have worked in my favour.”

Founder of the globally successful *Girls That Invest* podcast and media company, Simran has built a massive platform demystifying the investment world for women and helping them build financial independence. She launched the podcast at the onset of the pandemic, and within a couple of years, it was the most popular business podcast in the US, Canada and New Zealand.

However, it was optometry, not business and finance, that she studied at the University of Auckland. The idea for *Girls That Invest* hit, she says, after she began working as an optometrist and was curious about what to do with her earnings. Learning about investing herself

led to sharing what she learnt with friends and colleagues.

Despite the apparent incongruity between optometry and financial education, Simran says the former has helped with the latter. As an optometrist, she had to connect with patients in a way that would spur them to action – for example, if they needed to do more to manage their diabetes.

“If I can encourage and inspire millions of young women around the world to invest, it’s come from showing them that ‘Hey this is how I do it, this is the way it works’. But also ‘These are the actions you need to take, and you need to be able to trust me when I say what I say’.

“That came from being an optometrist and saying, ‘You need to take the diabetes medication.’”

Watch the video:
tinyurl.com/DAA-simran

Make a nomination for
2025’s Distinguished
Alumni Awards at
auckland.ac.nz/daa

Watch the full
ceremony:
tinyurl.com/DAAS-2024

SHOULD WE BE WORRIED ABOUT THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK?

The Doomsday Clock has become a metaphor for how close humanity is to self-destruction. Three experts from the University share their views on whether this ticking timepiece is anything to worry about.



Nick Thompson

HOPE IS VITAL TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY

There's a church in West Auckland that has its own doomsday clock. Under the digital time-display it flashes warnings of Jesus's imminent return. At the church's gate, a sign reads, 'Watch the Middle East. God is'. I often wonder whether the people issuing these warnings know of the thousands of confident but failed doomsday prophecies that litter two millennia of Christian history.

To be fair to this church, it's far from the only group looking for some purpose or direction in the baffling chaos of events. By global measures, New Zealand is not a very religious country, but I suspect most of us think of our lives and times as though they had some kind of narrative arc. For example, we might speak of the 'right side of history' as if future generations will see things our way. Or we might talk gravely of the 'lessons of history', assuming that we can agree on the meaning of the past. And even when we can agree, those imagined lessons may no longer apply because next time is never quite the same as last time.

No matter how carefully and expertly we gaze into the past or future, the horizons of our own time and space constrain our vision. The only doomsday we face with any certainty is our own death. We can't be sure when that will come or that it will provide our individual story with a tidy and satisfying ending.

Apocalyptic movements reassure their members that the passage of time is more than 'one damn thing after another'. For those of us who are not members, apocalypticism's revenge fantasies, polarising rhetoric, coded language, and conspiracism may seem baffling and repellent. But apocalypticism also offers people hope. Most of us don't subscribe to that specific brand of hope, but we probably need some other. Without hope, it is hard to see how we respond effectively to a world that looks more unstable than it has for most of our lifetimes. In the absence of any other kind of hope, apocalypticism will seem increasingly attractive to those who have not already opted for cynicism or despair.

Dr Nick Thompson is a senior lecturer in Theological and Religious Studies.

The writers' views reflect personal opinions that may not be those of Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland.

What do you think? Have your say. **Facebook:** UoAAlumni
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Catherine Qualtrough
**THE ROLE OF SPACE
EXPLORATION**

In the expanse of the cosmos, humanity faces a critical moment reflected by the Doomsday Clock, currently set just minutes to midnight. This symbolises the growing existential threats confronting our planet.

From a space perspective, the concerns highlighted by the Doomsday Clock extend beyond terrestrial boundaries, encompassing potential cosmic threats such as asteroid impacts. While unlikely, these events could have catastrophic consequences, emphasising the need for vigilance and preparedness. However, the clock primarily reflects concerns about human-induced catastrophes, such as warfare and climate change.

Despite these challenges, space offers reasons for optimism. As a spacefaring species, humans increasingly have the capability to mitigate existential risks through technological advancements. For instance, ongoing research aims to develop technologies to potentially mitigate the threat of asteroid impacts on Earth, while hundreds of orbiting Earth observation satellites provide valuable data to monitor and understand our changing planet.

Climate change, a contributing factor in the current Doomsday Clock setting, underscores the importance of these efforts. From satellite-based climate monitoring to renewable energy solutions inspired by space exploration, space insights help address this challenge.

The collaborative nature of space exploration also serves as a hopeful model for addressing global challenges. Despite geopolitical tensions, nations have come together to pursue ambitious space missions, and initiatives such as the International Space Station exemplify how diverse nations can collaborate.

Nevertheless, it's essential to acknowledge that space is not a panacea. While space exploration provides us with invaluable insights and tools to help safeguard our planet, we must also recognise that there is no backup planet for Earth. By continuing to explore and understand the cosmos while prioritising the preservation of our home planet, humanity can chart a course towards a sustainable future.

Catherine Qualtrough is a research operations manager in the Faculty of Science.

“We must also recognise that there is no backup planet for Earth.”



Tim Mulgan
**CONFRONTING THE
THREAT OF EXTINCTION**

Suppose you knew the world would end 200 years from now. How would that affect your plans, your values, your life choices? It's a tricky question for future philosophers and anyone – living in a world facing unavoidable imminent extinction – trying to make sense of their lives.

Popular debate asks how much we should pay now to reduce future risks of human extinction. This presupposes that extinction is always the worst result. This debate is important. But I think we should also take a step back and ask exactly why extinction would be bad. If humanity really did have only two centuries to live, what might those centuries be like? Would it matter now that the end is coming soon?

American philosopher Samuel Scheffler argues that “most of us would find the prospect of humanity’s imminent extinction unbearably depressing”. This reveals the importance, in our everyday lives, of the assumption ‘that others will continue to live after I have died’. We need future people whose culture, traditions, values and projects are connected to, and descended from, our own.

I agree that our present projects presume a human future. But is this an essential feature of the human condition, or merely a contingent feature of the particular traditions we have inherited?

Could we prepare our descendants to flourish at humanity’s end, even if we cannot imagine flourishing there ourselves? Could people living at the start of the slowly ending world initiate an intergenerational ethical transformation so that later generations can still find meaning without relying on (further) future people? If our inherited values will not make sense to future people, can we pass down values that will?

That’s a lot of questions, I know, which of course is the essence of philosophy.

We do not, so far as we know, live at the start of a slowly ending world. But we do inhabit a world facing an increasingly uncertain future. Perhaps we can better face our own challenges by imagining people confronting the starker threat of imminent extinction.

*Tim Mulgan is a professor of philosophy in the Faculty of Arts. His new book is **Philosophy for an Ending World** (Oxford University Press).*

For other opinions on the subject and a poem, see auckland.ac.nz/taking-issue-doomsday

**STANDOUT
START-UPS**

Some high-powered companies to come out of the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship include:

Alimetry: Providing digital healthcare diagnostics devices.

Kara Technologies: Helping the Deaf community via its hyper-realistic signing avatars.

StretchSense: A global leader in motion capture technology.

Green Spot Technologies: Ferments and upcycles natural food byproducts.

Toku: Its platform scans the eye to detect disease, such as the risk of kidney disease in diabetics.

Wayve: Accelerating self-driving car technology. In May, it announced it had raised \$1 billion from investors.

Kitea Health: Building micro-implantable medical devices.

Hectre: Developing horticultural industry management software.

Above, right: Tom Batterbury, Phil Thomson and James Corbett have grown Auror, kickstarted at CIE, into a global success story.



A HEAD FOR BUSINESS

Some of New Zealand’s most exciting start-ups were sparked by a University entrepreneurship competition. James Fyfe checks in on the Velocity programme, 21 years on.

Kiwi tech company Auror is a name now known around the world, with its retail crime-fighting solutions used by more than 100,000 retailers and 2,500 law enforcement agencies globally.

In 2023, the firm was named New Zealand’s Supreme International Business and it has come a long way since it got its start at a University of Auckland programme just over a decade ago. For 21 years, the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship’s (CIE) Velocity programme has been fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among students and staff at the University. Along the way, it has helped launch some of Aotearoa’s most groundbreaking start-ups – companies like Auror.

In fact, since inception, the centre has worked with 30,000 students and staff, and at the time of writing CIE alumni had raised \$1.4 billion in capital and created 3,260 jobs, delivering products and services in 182 countries.

This success was recently recognised when Velocity won an award for best student engagement in the Asia-Pacific region from CASE, the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

For Darsel Keane, CIE’s director, the driving motivation for Velocity is both simple and

extremely ambitious: “We want to cultivate the innovative and entrepreneurial talent that creates a better New Zealand and world.

“If you have an entrepreneurial mindset, when you see a problem, you respond in an entrepreneurial way to that – and what that typically means is that you delve deeply into problems, reframe them as opportunities and take action to solve them.”

At the heart of Velocity’s lofty goal is its \$100k Challenge, a competition where budding entrepreneurs pitch their ideas for a chance to win cash prizes and a helping hand to turn their idea into reality. Each year, a handful of the best entrants are also invited to take part in CIE’s VentureLab – an intense half-year incubator programme designed to give participants the concrete skills needed to secure seed money and deliver their first product.

Auror was runner-up in the 2012 competition, and James Corbett, who co-founded the company along with Phil Thomson and Tom Batterbury, says the programme was “incredibly beneficial”. It allowed the trio to validate their idea and access mentors and experts to help them develop a business plan.

“It’s incredible looking back and seeing how much of the plan we created in that programme still holds true today,” says James, who was named

“It’s incredible looking back and seeing how much of the plan we created in that programme still holds true.”

– James Corbett, Auror co-founder

on the University’s 40 Under 40 list in 2023.

Auror is one of many start-ups that got their break at CIE; centre alumni have started more than 276 ventures since 2003, and others include Zenno Astronautics, a space flight systems company, and Kami, an ed-tech firm named by *Time* magazine as one of the world’s most influential companies of 2022.

One reason CIE was so valuable, says James, is it “gave me real practice in thinking outside the box and testing ideas – a crucial skill when creating a business”.

Velocity – or Spark as it was initially called – was established in 2003 in the wake of Catching the Knowledge Wave, a 2001 conference where the country’s political and economic leaders of the time decided New Zealand needed to pivot away from its dependency on agricultural exports and become a high-value knowledge-based economy. Originally a student-led initiative aimed at getting people on campus excited about entrepreneurship, the programme eventually led to the creation of an official university learning centre in 2009 with the birth of CIE.

And while the main focus of CIE is to help potential entrepreneurs like James turn their ideas into successful companies, another priority is to embed an entrepreneurial mindset in the University. Darsel believes cultivating this mindset will help turn more valuable university research into concrete business opportunities and prepare students for an increasingly uncertain job market.

In keeping with CIE’s overarching aim of using entrepreneurship to better society, Darsel also hopes the centre will equip more talented young problem solvers with the skills needed to tackle some of our big environmental and social challenges.

“If every single student leaves this University with an entrepreneurial mindset and capability, then I think that would be completely transformative for this country.”

Darsel Keane says Velocity cultivates a mindset that sees problems as opportunities.

Photo: Sav Schulman



STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Frustrated by constantly combing through her kids’ hair for nits, CIE alumna Kate Ricketts (above) founded a company that makes it easier for parents to get rid of lice eggs.

Her product, ISpy Nits Glo-Powder, is a hair powder that makes the critters’ eggs glow in the dark under a UV light. Not only does it make it easier for parents to get rid of latent eggs invisible to the naked eye, but it’s also a way of getting children excited about science.

Kate, who runs ISpy Nits while also working full-time at the University of Auckland as a Schools and Community Outreach Manager, says the idea to make nits glow in the dark came after she read an article on the potential of anti-theft powder to fluoresce insect exoskeletons. Having previously worked as a vet nurse, she remembered using a similar technique to search for ringworm in animals.

“I suddenly thought it might work on head lice. So I ordered some [anti-theft powder] off the internet and chucked it on my kid’s head – and it worked.”

After a bit of trial and error in her garage – using her two young boys as guinea pigs – Kate realised she was on to something.

Although nits can be treated with special shampoos (ISpy Lotion is included in the nit kits), if any eggs remain after treatment, the lice can quickly return. By coating and fluorescing the eggs, ISpy Nits Glo-Powder makes it easier for parents to find and remove any remaining eggs.

Kate says making nits glow in the dark changed everything for her children, particularly for her eldest child, who is neurodiverse.

“It reframed everything for my son because suddenly it was not ‘sit down so I can pull these out of your hair’, it was more like ‘hey, let’s look for glow-in-the-dark bugs’.”

Kate says CIE gave her the confidence and skills to turn her idea into a viable business. After making the final of the 2022 Velocity \$100k Challenge, she won the social category and a place in CIE’s VentureLab, where she learnt about everything from intellectual property law to accessing seed money.

The company is also working with schools to remove the stigma around nits and to help use an outbreak as a learning opportunity, so children can learn about insect life cycles, for example, and the science behind biofluorescence.

Megan Fowlie talks to three alumni forging a path in different parts of the world.

BRITTANY HUNT

Lausanne, Switzerland

“It has been so natural to find myself helping people to overcome their struggles.”

Switzerland’s natural environment is stunning, but Brittany Hunt misses Kiwi beaches.

Brittany Hunt is conquering mental health troubles from the top of the world. The Switzerland-based mental health and addiction therapist is head of the quality, research and innovation department at Clinic Les Alpes, a luxury private rehabilitation centre for addictions and mental illnesses where she works with extremely high net-worth individuals.

“It has been so natural to find myself helping people to overcome their struggles. I love the humanity we can find in truly connecting with each other and working through the hardest parts of life together.

“Once the door closes, you’re just with another human being. Addiction and mental health do not discriminate, and there is no amount of power, or money, or influence that protects you or makes you less vulnerable.”

In 2013, Brittany began a Bachelor of Health Sciences, then completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Health Sciences in 2019.

“The more classes I went to and the more I learned, the more passionate I became about public health, health research and policy. Instead of treating one patient at a time, I felt inspired to influence systems, research and policies that would improve the lives and

treatment experiences of whole groups of people long term.

“In my current role, I use evidence and research to inform creative practices and solutions to improve patient experiences in treatment and maximise their positive outcomes in long-term recovery. I am very engaged in research, contributing to the field and international body of knowledge. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Switzerland seemed like a good place for Brittany and her French fiancé to work – she in English, and he in French.

“Now that I’m here, my life has become so full. I really love the work I do, I’m on the Swiss national netball squad, and Switzerland is so international – I have many friends from all over the world.”

Switzerland’s natural environment is stunning, but there are still some things the landlocked country can’t match.

“The two things I miss the most are the beach and the Kiwi vernacular. Not being able to speak without having to avoid slang, tone down my accent, or explain jokes really reminds you how far from home you are,” she says.

“The same goes for removing te reo Māori from my language. That has been a big adjustment.”



KYA RAINA LAL

Suva, Fiji

From downtown Suva, Kya Raina Lal has an expansive view out to the Pacific Ocean. Graduating from the University of Auckland in 2015 with a Bachelor of Arts in Pacific Studies and an LLB and a Master of Laws in 2016, the barrister works predominantly in criminal litigation.

She says it's a field quite different from her original passion for environmental and climate action law pursued during her university studies.

"Here in Fiji, we don't have the luxury of specialising," she says.

After schooling and university in Auckland, Kya joined the family firm in Fiji, Lal Patel Bale Lawyers.

"My mother, stepfather and aunt are all lawyers. My siblings have just joined the practice. Initially, when I joined in 2016, we had two branches; now we have four. It's very much all hands on deck, constantly.

"There are many great things about my current role. We do everything – civil and criminal, all the way to the Supreme Court. In that sense, compared with my peers in

New Zealand, I have a wide scope of practice."

She enjoys criminal litigation. "I spend a lot of time in prisons, with people whom society is quick to write off. Working alongside those communities, seeing how they can better themselves and how we can assist them, is very rewarding."

Kya points to the Pacific Islands Law Students Association, the Tuākana network and other Pacific students as critical in her academic development. "That sense of community was very important. It began in 2010 during my undergraduate arts and law degrees and continued right through my masters."

Besides family, Fiji's weather is a drawcard. "I absolutely love having a much more temperate climate and the easy access to the ocean.

"There are a lot of things I do miss about New Zealand. For me, it's the convenience – how easily accessible things are – but I do not miss Auckland winters in the slightest. There was a running joke that I looked like the Michelin Man. For six years I had a puffer jacket on – permanently."



Kya Raina Lal loves Fiji's easy access to the ocean.

"Seeing how they can better themselves and how we can assist them is very rewarding."

RAM NARASIMHAN

Bengaluru, India

Running a business was such a drive for Ram Narasimhan that he cast aside his plans to do a PhD in engineering. Now he is living his dream in Bengaluru, the Silicon Valley of India, in a leadership position in a Big Four firm.

After completing a Master of Engineering (Hons) at the University of Auckland in 2007, Ram jumped at the chance to learn more about the business world through a one-year Master of Business, specialising in new ventures and entrepreneurship.

"I was very interested in being a techno-functional business-oriented guy. I wanted some sense to the numbers."

The associate partner at KPMG's Lighthouse, a centre of excellence for data platforms and analytics, is tasked with management consultancy, growing the AI business, and solving client problems using data analytics.

"Problem solving is one of the most important things I learnt from the University of Auckland days. That has helped me tackle any challenge – and building solutions in AI requires a lot of teamwork, a lot of thought processes – and I enjoy that in my job.

"I have very fond memories of the professors and the programmes in Auckland – and you see,

after 20 years, where it actually took me."

After graduating, Ram worked for household names: Vodafone, Air New Zealand and KPMG. Finally, in 2017, the tastes and sights of his hometown of Bengaluru pulled him back.

"Indian cuisine is a delight to any food lover, and there are festivals galore, combined with an affordable lifestyle and rich history, and the known faces, friends, family all within one kilometre – I love being back."

On top of that, India is an epicentre for entrepreneurs, investors and corporates wanting to expand their business.

India's dynamic job market with its huge talent pool, especially in Bengaluru, motivates Ram to stay on the sharp edge of business transformation innovation, especially with the advent of generative AI.

There's much he misses about New Zealand's natural landscapes but, connected to lifelong friends through LinkedIn, Instagram and the like, he never feels too far away.

"The community support is still there."



Living in Bengaluru helps Ram Narasimhan stay at the sharp edge of innovation.

"Problem solving is one of the most important things I learnt from the University."



Allan Martin will attend the Pan-American Masters in Ohio in July.

“The idea that tertiary education stops at the age of 25 ... is ridiculous.”

– Allan Martin

GOLDEN GRADUATES

Golden Graduates are those who graduated from the University 50 or more years ago, along with graduates aged 70 or over.

TRAINING FOR GOLD AGAIN

Allan Martin has enjoyed a hugely varied and successful career. He tells Megan Fowlie what continues to drive him, well into his 90s.

Allan Martin farewells me from his Warkworth home with, “Do a PhD, it will be liberating!” At 97 years, Dr Allan Martin, OBE, husband, father, farmer, pilot, ferry skipper, Doctor of Philosophy, television broadcast pioneer, CEO, director, track and field athlete, and newshound, is a strong advocate for lifelong learning.

Allan recalls the 1970s and 80s, working toward his Education PhD and, before that, teaching and examining for the International English Language Testing System. From a populist viewpoint, Allan came to tertiary education late – although it’s nearly 20 years since his doctorate was conferred in 2006. His thesis was entitled ‘Older adulthood, education and social change’. He was 80, the oldest doctoral graduate that year.

“The idea that tertiary education stops at the age of 25 when you have 50, 60, 70 more years of living ahead of you is ridiculous – and a tragedy that governments haven’t provided for, and universities haven’t pushed for.

“Late in life, mental acuity becomes more important than the physical. I am a great believer in physical fitness – but the demand to keep going on springs from the brain.”

The eight-time World Masters Games gold medallist, who has another 18 golds from the New Zealand-Australia Games, is training again. This time for the Pan-American Masters in Ohio in July.

“Assuming I live long enough!” he laughs. He’ll be 98.

Allan competes in the 100m, 200m, 400m and now the javelin and discus. “I’ve never done discus before. My granddaughter suggested I switch from long jump.”

In the 1930s, growing up on a gorse-strewn farm outside Whangārei, with apple trees, garden vegetables and fresh milk, Allan believes the Martin family weathered the Great Depression well. He attended a one-room school, then boarded at Carruth House at Whangārei Boys’ High School until the Second World War. Labour was short and with the untimely death of his father and, later, his older RAF bomber brother missing in action and then a prisoner of war, Allan, aged 15, ran the family dairy farm.

His recollections are of teenage independence: a car, a driver’s licence, a job and “getting up to all the things teenage boys got up to ... and broadcasting, yes!”

In 1987, Allan received an OBE for his services to New Zealand broadcasting. It was a career that began when an old high school and army mate, Bob Irvine, recruited Allan as a local radio announcer in between milkings.

Radio took him to Australia, then to Mozambique. He met and married Joy in the grandiose tree-lined white avenues of the capital Lourenço Marques, now Maputo. Next, on to the UK producing London’s first commercial television channel.

Enticed back to New Zealand, he worked in daily news alongside Alan Morris at the NZBC, becoming chief producer and spearheading local shows *Town and Around* and *Compass*. By the late 1970s, coaxed across the Tasman, he received a Logie Award for current affairs production and became head of ABC public affairs television.

It is his time as director-general of TVNZ with which he is most pleased.

“A pinnacle was when the top ten programmes were homegrown.

“Public service is vital to the country, a great means of expression, debate, conversation. It is important in developing a certain standard and stability, a narrative, if you like.”

Allan is now creative director of Ideaschannel.net, working with Dr Mike Minehan, a former colleague, on “a selection of what we think are the best news services in the world, the best science, arts, free education, opinion and ideas”.

He suggests people are hankering for context, searching for stability of ideas and leadership.

“Thinking about this century, there’s been incredible change – and, for the next generation, with AI here, I think there will be such very great change and challenge on the horizon.”

TIPS...TO COMBAT LONELINESS

Loneliness is isolating, but it's something that many of us experience at some point. Professor Ngaire Kerse has seven practical tips to help us all feel better connected.

Professor Ngaire Kerse



1 Recognise that loneliness is very common
Some 60 percent of all people are lonely at any one time and about five percent experience persistent loneliness that interferes with life. Some feel lonely in a crowd, while others are isolated and unable or unwilling to contact others. It's important to realise loneliness is an emotion that doesn't simply equate to 'being alone', as some people need alone time for well-being. Given that feeling lonely may actually be a universal experience, thinking 'what can I learn from this?' may offer some distraction for a time.

2 Make the most of current relationships
Most people do know others, and often those other people may be lonely at times, too. Reaching out to people can seem like a mountain to climb, but often other people are as keen to get together as you might be – and talking about the issue can be very helpful. Making connections – whether with family, friends or new acquaintances – takes time and energy, but even small interactions can make a difference, so contact of all kinds is important.

3 Be kind to yourself
Self-care is important, including eating and sleeping well and exercising regularly. Treating yourself is also important. Few people are used to doing things just because they enjoy them, but boosting self-worth can help loneliness, and avoiding self-blame is essential. Treat yourself as you would a friend who was in need. Mindfulness and meditation are great ways to do this, as is spending time in green spaces. Taking a little time to seek out the parks and walks around you can help and, even better, ask someone to walk with you.

4 Try something new
For younger people, this could involve joining a school club or sport, and for older people taking part in community events, joining a reading group at the local library or maybe aligning with a cause you feel strongly about, even protests. Trying something new is also good for brain stimulation and might connect you with like-minded people.

5 Find volunteer opportunities
Assisting others, providing care and support, and contributing to society are all good for our well-being and usually entail contact with others. Those who volunteer have a higher quality of life and maintain that status over time in older age. For young people, contributing through volunteering helps gain valuable experience as well as the good feelings that come with contributing. Like-minded people will probably be involved as well, so volunteering creates further opportunities for connections.

6 Rethink downtime
Some think that working more can offer a way through loneliness, but we all need downtime to recuperate and rest. If that leads to loneliness, then use your downtime to connect with friends, plan events or join group activities. There are many ways to engage with others, so be creative and productive in your downtime. Online connection is okay, and many people do use online contact to alleviate loneliness.

7 Seek professional help
Loneliness can be a consequence of circumstance, or a symptom of a psychological problem, such as depression. If you don't have enough energy to reach out to others, or the 'oomph' to try something new over an extended period, you may benefit from seeking the advice of your general practitioner or nurse practitioner. Counsellors are also available through primary care or privately, so seek professional help if needed.

Professor Ngaire Kerse, MNZM, is the Joyce Cook Chair in Ageing Well and Director of the University Research Centre for Co-Created Ageing Research in the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences.

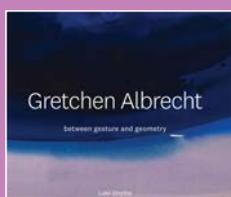
AWAKENING ASSOCIATIONS

Luke Smythe tells Adam Dudding how he drew on his long association with Gretchen Albrecht for his extensive book on the artist.

—
Dr Luke Smythe has brought his book on Gretchen Albrecht 'up to the minute'.

"I probably laid eyes on as many of her works as it's possible to lay eyes on."

— Dr Luke Smythe



GIVEAWAY

We have one copy of *Gretchen Albrecht: Between Gesture and Geometry*, 2nd edition (Massey University Press, \$85) to give away. Email ingenio@auuckland.ac.nz with your name and address and 'Gretchen Albrecht' in the subject line. Entries close 31 July.

You could argue Dr Luke Smythe started researching his first book when he was nine years old. It was the mid-1980s and his parents took him and his cousin to a studio on Auckland's Quay St to look at some paintings by their friend Gretchen Albrecht.

"My parents asked us for our opinions, and I pointed to one and I remember just going 'I like those colours'. And my parents got it."

The work – two huge, glowing quarter-circle panels, one purple, one green, butting together to form a distinctively Albrechtian hemisphere – became part of Smythe's childhood. It was called *Colloquy (2) (Reflection)*.

"I can still see the painting kind of floating on the wall in the dining room."

Three-and-a-bit decades later, the artwork also ended up in *Gretchen Albrecht: Between Gesture and Geometry*, an extensively illustrated monograph in which Luke traces his friend's life and work: inspiration in a high-school art class; studies at Elam art school; the critical and commercial success that continues today, in Albrecht's 81st year.

Now the 2019 book is back in a revised edition that expands on the 1970s section ("Gretchen happened to find a number of paintings in storage") and brings it up to the minute ("She has made a significant amount of work in the past four years").

Luke is speaking from Berlin, where he's researching a book on painter Sigmar Polke, but he's about to return to Melbourne, where he lectures in art history at Monash University. He has a BA from the University of Auckland, an MA from Columbia and a PhD from Yale: his thesis became the basis of a 2022 book on Gerhard Richter.

The Albrecht book, though, will always be a career pinnacle. Writing it took nine months, but it had been "percolating" for years. In the 2000s, Luke spent years cataloguing her work, "so I probably laid eyes on as many of her works as it's possible to lay eyes on".

Albrecht is important as a female artist who achieved great success in a man's world. What's striking, though, is the early support she received from male curators and artists, including Hamish Keith, Colin McCahon and Gordon Walters.



"That needs to be part of any history of women's art, right? In a world controlled by men, some women benefit from the assistance of men, who aren't always out to keep women down. And she succeeded by dint of hard work."

Albrecht's art is "very beautiful, and people respond to that". But Luke also wants to be clear about its importance in the broader history of abstract art.

"By the mid-20th century, there was this movement called Formalism, which maintained a painting was only shapes and colours on the flat surface, and don't you dare say that they look like something because that would be a Philistine response."

By the 1970s, says Luke, such 'pure' abstraction was catching on in New Zealand.

Yet as Albrecht embraced abstraction through the 1970s, her work still held connections to ideas, words and objects in the world – what you might call 'impure' abstraction.

Yes, there were landscapes in the horizontal layers of her 1970s 'stained acrylic' works; yes, there was a conversation taking place on the Smythe dining-room wall between the two halves of *Colloquy (2)*.

This was bold. "Gretchen may have been the first person to part company with what had become the orthodoxy of Formalism in New Zealand. She wasn't being antagonistic; she was just going to do what she felt she wanted to do," says Luke.

"People couldn't go on forever pretending that abstract paintings don't awaken associations, but Gretchen really embraced them. That's what makes her important."



Gretchen Albrecht

FAMILIAR FEELING

Madeleine Gifford highlights a favourite piece from the University's art collection of more than 2,000 works.

Since it was installed in March, I've been taking the long way back to my desk to spend time with Ammon Ngakuru's *Alphabet Painting (Bone in the Throat)* (2022). Hanging on the newly renovated mezzanine in the University's General Library, the painting is one of a thematic group of three acquired in 2023, making up the *Alphabet* series (2022-2023). Although the compositions are unique, a complete alphabet has been incorporated into each, depicted in scrawled letters that both float and sink into their respective painterly surfaces. *Alphabet Painting (Bone in the Throat)* was the first of the trio to be painted and is arguably the most intriguing.

Ammon Ngakuru (Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāpuhi) (b.1993) holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Elam School of Fine Art. His artistic practice encompasses a unique mode of storytelling through a deeply personal language of complex symbolism that is portrayed across his paintings, mixed media and sculptural works. His approach to painting has been described as dreamlike and ambiguous, with imagery that typically poses more questions than it gives answers.

Alphabet Painting (Bone in the Throat), then, is classic Ngakuru. Although modest in scale and largely muted in palette, the painting is both potent and haunting. Focal to the composition alongside the alphabet characters is a mottled cardigan with its sleeves outstretched, floating upon the canvas surface as though it has been bewitched. Lying near the bottom is what appears to be a pair of jeans, depicted in a striking cobalt blue. Ngakuru frequently paints in a flattened style; the foreshortening technique employed for the jeans is a subtle way to interrupt and draw the viewer's eye downward, almost directing us to read along the path of the alphabet characters above.

The clothing items are commonplace but feel laden with meaning, given their prominence. Most of us will have a favourite cardigan or pair of jeans – treasured and well worn. It's unclear why these objects are significant to Ngakuru, though their presence evokes a feeling of familiarity.

Taking another step to break the painterly fourth wall, five matching buttons have been neatly stitched onto the canvas in the place



of the cardigan fastenings, with a sixth larger button on the jeans. These and the painted forms all emerge from a misty wash of greys, greens and light ochres, almost like they are being summoned from the ether beyond.

When I first saw *Alphabet Painting (Bone in the Throat)*, it reminded me of another painting in the collection that is considerably larger in scale: Seraphine Pick's *Untitled (The Dress)* (1994-1995). This work similarly elicits a ghostly quality, most comparatively through the white dress that hovers in the middle of the work in the same fashion as Ngakuru's cardigan. Pick previously said the painting recalled her sickness with bronchitis as a child, incorporating depictions of everyday objects as symbolic fragments of memory.

We know the memory Pick is referencing, but whether Ngakuru is exploring a particular memory is open to interpretation. It is curious that he, too, has used items of clothing for his symbolism, alongside the letters of the alphabet. Letters are most often written in alphabetic sequence when one is first learning to write. Perhaps the cardigan and the jeans are tactile fragments of memory from Ngakuru's childhood in the 90s, which is referenced throughout his practice. Is he grasping at memories teetering on the edge of his consciousness, or does the 'bone in the throat' allude to something more solid behind the inscribed letters that is deliberately left unsaid?

The *Alphabet* series, and other works from the University's collection, can be found on level one and the mezzanine of the General Library.

Ammon Ngakuru.
Alphabet Painting (Bone in the Throat). 2022. Acrylic on canvas.



Seraphine Pick. *Untitled (The Dress)*. 1994-1995. Oil, pencil and crayon on canvas.

Madeleine Gifford is the Art Collection Adviser at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland.

See pieces in the University of Auckland Art Collection at artcollection.auckland.ac.nz.

THROUGH THE LENS

William Harding.
Captain Nathaniel
Flowers and wife
Margaret, with a dog,
8 February 1878,
quarter-plate collodion
silver glass negative
(106 × 82 mm)

Alexander Turnbull
Library, William James
Harding collection, 1/4-
005003-G

Photography arrived in Aotearoa in the early decades of colonisation, recording and manipulating moments of place and time.

Shaun Higgins and Catherine Hammond, both University alumni, have sleuthed their way through the image collections of Auckland War Memorial Museum, Alexander Turnbull Library and the Hocken Collections to answer who first engaged with the camera here, and when and why.

They explore, for example, what a glass plate negative can tell us, or why you would sit for up to 45 seconds for an early daguerreotype.

Here the editors of *A Different Light: First Photographs of Aotearoa*, which digs into such territory, talk with Megan Fowlie about the book, and what it uncovers.

What was the spark that led to this book?

The inspiration for *A Different Light* germinated in a conversation at the close of another photography exhibition, *Being Chinese in Aotearoa*, discussing early photographs, seldom displayed and with multiple perspectives.

What big question did you set out to answer?

We set out to experience early photography in Aotearoa: what it looked like, its wonder and meaning. Rather than the story of individual photographers, our focus became closely tied to its social impact, the photograph as a tool of colonisation and the complex impact for Māori, examining how we can look past one narrative and see another.

What do these photos tell us about ourselves?

While it was a time when we were encouraged to say 'prunes' rather than 'cheese' – to be serious and still – many aspects of photography are the same today: a desire to alter our image beyond how we appear, and to document our lives. These images tell us about human interaction with technology – the rapid global rise of photography, its democratisation, its use, and misuse – that has many parallels today.

What did you find most satisfying in creating this publication?

Working across the three enormous collections. Together, they hold around 10 million photos. Even for the 19th century, we had many thousands of potential images to show. Then, exploring them in more detail during conservation preparation for imaging and display let us look behind the cases, see the



plates inside and further try to solve some of the mysteries around their creation.

Why document this?

As we proceed through the digital 21st century, we look back on collections from the past and how we might revisit them. Memory institutions keep safe these moments, but as time progresses, our own perspectives shift, and we can continually look back with new questions.

What do you find most tantalising about the collections and the images you accessed?

The bursts of colour from a time of largely monochrome imagery. We call it black and white, but it is shades of brown, sepia, even cyan, and then all the brass, gold and velvet that accompanies them in cases and frames. The photographs themselves hold, more than visible at first glance, people, not necessarily miserable, but simply sitting for a long time in a Victorian setting. They are complemented by the burst of colour that challenges our perception of the black and white age.

How are we misled by photographs – and does *A Different Light* aim to set the record straight?

Since the beginning, photographs have been manipulated – from the moment someone chooses what to place in the frame, to retouching the image, to creating new montages. The book shows some of these examples and allows the reader to think about what is real and what is false. Does the camera lie?

Shaun Higgins and Catherine Hammond work at Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum, where Shaun is pictorial curator and Catherine is director of collections and research.

WIN

We have one copy of *A Different Light: First Photographs of Aotearoa* (Auckland University Press, \$65) to give away. Email ingenio@auckland.ac.nz with 'A Different Light' in the subject line by 31 July.

TELEVISION TRIUMPH



English alumna Dianne Taylor talks about her hit TV drama, *After the Party*, starring Robyn Malcolm.

How do you deal with accolades like “the best TV drama New Zealand has had”?

With a bit of surprise to be honest, but also huge relief. My only goal was to write something that wasn't total shite, so anything else has been a bonus. The critical response has been gratifying, but what's amazing for us is the people who want to talk about it. That tells us that they've connected to it at a deep level.

What made you so passionate about this script?

What made this experience different and deeper was our process of building and evolving the character of Penny over quite a few years. Robyn and I knew we wanted to create a middle-aged female character who didn't have to be likeable. You see the results of that approach way too often, particularly with older female characters who have to be charming or quirky to be acceptable. We wanted to build a character who didn't care what people thought of her. She's angry, flawed, stubborn and blindingly honest – like the women we actually know and love. Knowing that Robyn would play Penny meant I could really push her character and people would still engage because, well, she's Robyn.

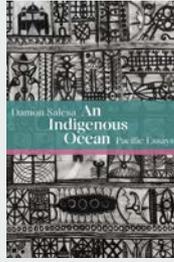
In production, you used other writers, too. How was it to let go of your baby?

Excruciating, but that's the difference between writing a film and writing TV drama. When a TV show is green-lit, it's usually off the back of a pilot and a story outline, so there's still a lot of work to be done before production. There was no way I could write six episodes in six months, but I was lucky to be able to bring in a bunch of amazing writers who could take drafts off my hands. I now understand that's a gift.

When did you take up screenwriting?

I didn't come to university until I was 32. Prior to that, I'd worked in advertising and dabbled in screenwriting. I came wanting to study English and was lucky enough to get into Witi Ihimaera and Albert Wendt's creative writing programme and loved it. At the same time, I was broadening into film studies and quite a few philosophy papers. In my final year, Associate Professor Shuchi Kothari (Faculty of Arts) began teaching screenwriting, and I jumped in. By then, I felt I was more of a screenwriter than a novelist. Shuchi and I then collaborated on *Apron Strings*. Little by little, I let go of my day job.

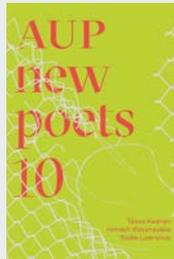
Full Q&A: auckland.ac.nz/dianne-taylor-q-and-a



An Indigenous Ocean: Pacific Essays

This book, by alumnus and former Pro Vice-Chancellor Pacific Professor Damon Salesa, recently won the General Non-Fiction prize at the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. It's a selection of essays on subjects from race and migration to Pacific studies and empire.

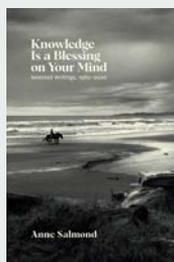
Damon Salesa, Bridget Williams Books, \$50



AUP New Poets 10

Edited by award-winning author Anne Kennedy, who has held fellowships at the University of Auckland, the IIML and the University of Hawai'i, *AUP New Poets 10* features Tessa Keenan (Te Ātiawa), romesh dissanayake and Sadie Lawrence. These new voices explore race, indigeneity, gender, history, neurodiversity, love and loss.

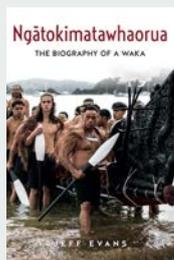
Edited and introduction by Anne Kennedy, AUP, \$30



Knowledge Is a Blessing on Your Mind: Selected Writings, 1980–2020

Distinguished Professor at the University of Auckland, renowned anthropologist and author of numerous books, Dame Anne Salmond gathers her key writings from over 40 years on the Māori world, cultural contact, Te Tiriti and the wider Pacific.

Anne Salmond, AUP, \$65



Ngātokimatawhaorua: The Biography of a Waka

Creative writing alumnus Jeff Evans' book is about legendary waka *Ngātokimatawhaorua*, which is connected to the craft that brought Polynesian navigator Kupe to Aotearoa and is the longest waka taua to be built in modern times.

Jeff Evans, MUP, \$50

Full story auckland.ac.nz/jeff-evans-ockhams



The Edge of Light: New Dawning

This is the first book in a young-adult, speculative-fiction trilogy by Master of Creative Writing graduate Melanie Dixon. The story explores themes of climate change and biodiversity loss through the eyes of a group of young scientists living in a futuristic Lyttelton.

A.M. Dixon, One Tree House, \$27



The Fatter Sex

This feminist memoir of academic-turned-stand-up comedian Sacha Jones confronts women's battles with diet, weight and body confidence in modern Western societies. Sacha is a former ballet dancer, has a PhD in political theory from the University of Auckland (2009), as well as qualifications in creative writing.

Sacha Jones, Umbilical Books, \$49



Environmental Defenders: Fighting for Our Natural World

How a small group of lawyers (including Auckland law alumni Andrew Brown KC and Stephen Mills KC) and scientists from the Environmental Defence Society took on the government and development interests.

Raewyn Peart, Bateman Books, \$80

CONNECTION POINTS



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HELP OUT

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Want to help those new to our shores navigate work life in Aotearoa? If you're based in Tamaki Makaurau and have at least three years' experience working in New Zealand, you can support our international students through the University's Workplace Insights Programme. By sharing your career journey, you'll give international students a deeper understanding of New Zealand's work environment and culture. With a commitment of just ten hours over the course of the programme, this is the perfect opportunity to try out mentoring. Fill in the form at auckland.ac.nz/WIP and we'll be in touch with details of the semester two programme.

CONNECT & DEVELOP SERIES

Tools to help you grow in the new world of work

CONNECT AND DEVELOP

YOUR CAREER

Delivered by alumni who are experts in their fields, Connect & Develop is a series of free career development talks. Register to attend live webinars and watch recordings, and look out for details of our first on-campus Connect & Develop event planned for August: auckland.ac.nz/connect-and-develop



ATTEND

RAISING THE BAR

Thinking and drinking – it's an unbeatable combination. For one night only, hear 20 talks across ten Auckland bars at Raising the Bar. On Tuesday 27 August, you can hear top University academics present on thought-provoking topics – but tickets sell out fast. Head to rthevent.com/auckland to make sure you're in the loop when tickets go on sale.



SAVE ON

THEATRE TICKETS

As one of our University of Auckland alumni, you receive a 20 percent discount on Auckland Theatre Company (ATC) tickets. From a stage adaptation of the hit film *Red, White and Brass* and Australian playwright David Finnigan's *Scenes from the Climate Era* to the West End sensation *Girls & Boys*, there's sure to be a show to suit your tastes. Find out more at auckland.ac.nz/benefits.



MEET

A BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Booklovers have the chance to meet *New York Times* bestselling author (and alumna) Nalini Singh at the University book club's September Author Talk. Book club members can join the event, while also connecting with more than 800 readers across the University community to discuss up to five books a year. It's free to join, and book club members receive a 15 percent discount on selected books from the University of Auckland bookshop, UBIQ. To find out more, head to auckland.ac.nz/bookclub



MENTOR

OUR STUDENTS ONLINE

Alumni-Connect is the University's easy-to-use, online flash mentoring platform that connects current students and alumni. Take the next step in your career, grow your network and have a significant impact on current students by signing up: auckland.ac.nz/alumni-connect



BUILD

YOUR HOMETOWN COMMUNITY

The University of Auckland alumni community is truly global. To ensure our international alumni can connect with other graduates, and relevant opportunities, we rely on an invaluable network of Volunteer Alumni Coordinators (VAC). If you live outside of Auckland and are interested in joining or setting up a VAC network, get in touch: alumni@auckland.ac.nz



BE IN TO WIN

BY UPDATING YOUR DETAILS

Make sure you stay in the loop and get invited to events in your hometown – no matter where that is – by keeping your address and email updated. Bonus: if you update before 31 August 2024, you'll automatically go into the draw to win one of five pairs of Sony WH-1000XM4 noise-cancelling headphones. Head to alumni.auckland.ac.nz/update to update your details.



LISTEN

TO RESEARCH AND REASON

This podcast, exploring research and perspectives from the Faculty of Arts, is a fascinating listen; one recent episode focuses on how Dr Chris Wilson and his team researched the online postings of the Christchurch terrorist, and discovered he'd been posting anonymously about his plans four years before the attack. It's an ideal listen for those wanting to gain a deeper understanding of the past and present, and learn how we can build better, more informed futures: nzpod.co.nz/podcast/research-and-reason

FROM
SELF-DOUBT
YOU...



TO I CAN DO
ANYTHING YOU

Maisie,
Graduate Diploma in Teaching

Become what's possible,
find postgraduate you.
auckland.ac.nz/studyPG



FOR
EVERY
WORLD