

GRAD *Life*

VOLUME 15 2024



Fighting the Good Fight

Master mediator shows the way

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LEADING WITH KINDNESS

LESSONS ON CONNECTION

CHAMPIONING DIVERSITY

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WORLD**
2022 | 2023
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IMPACT RANKINGS

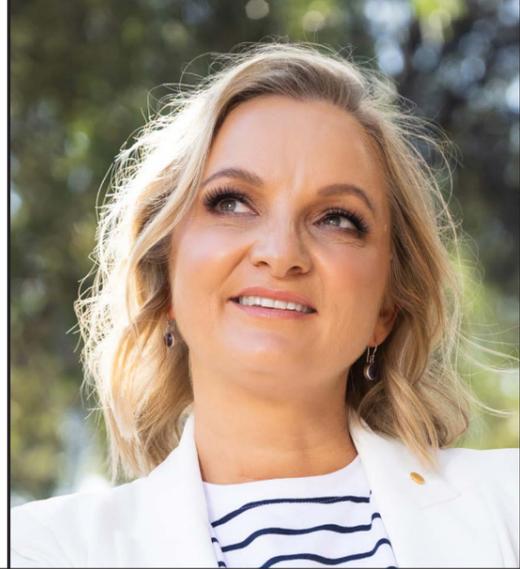
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WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY



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Editorial board:

Katrina Lobley, External Lead Writer/Editor
Charmaine Marlow, Associate Director
Alumni, Employer Collaboration and Projects
Maya El Hajjar, Alumni Relations Manager
Alicia Duong, Alumni Project and Event Officer

Design:

Vonn Layug, Western Design Team

GradLife enquiries:

Email: alumni@westernsydney.edu.au
Website: westernsydney.edu.au/alumni

Alumni Team, Office of People
Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith NSW 2751
Australia

Paper sourced from sustainably managed forests.



WELCOME

MESSAGE FROM VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT, DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR GEORGE WILLIAMS AO

At Western Sydney University, we believe education has the power to transform lives, and our alumni are a testament to this fact.

Just as education changed my trajectory, I want the same for our students. We are determined that our students will graduate with the Western edge – the skills, knowledge, leadership, determination, and capabilities to take on the world.

This issue of GradLife features the stories of our alumni who are carving out a name for themselves in their chosen professions and blazing their own paths. As Western Sydney University ambassadors, they demonstrate to all of us what is possible.

Brett McGrath, who is on our cover, is one of the youngest presidents of the Law Society of NSW. Brett is a master mediator, helping families resolve their disputes. As a teenager, he saw firsthand how families can move on with their lives after divorces are settled when he attended a conciliation conference with his mum and her lawyer.

Proud Yui woman and award-winning ABC marketer Siobhan McGeown shares how she grew up with a mother who, through example, showed how pivotal higher education was to her own life, passing on this valuable lesson to her daughter.

And we feature Elie El-Khoury Antonios, who is in the final stages of earning his PhD after completing a Bachelor of Social Work and a Master of Research, all at Western Sydney University. Born with cerebral palsy, Elie lights up the room with his outgoing personality as he advocates for people with disabilities.

Our people are our priority at Western Sydney University, and it is inspiring for all of us to see our wonderful graduates progressing in their careers and helping to shape the future of our region..



Distinguished Professor George Williams AO
Vice-Chancellor and President



GRADLIFE

NEWS

WESTERN SCORES HAT-TRICK ON SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT

Western Sydney University this year pulled off the remarkable feat of becoming first in the world to top the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings for three years in a row.

Competing against more than 1900 higher education institutions from 125 countries, Western placed first overall in Australia and internationally for its social, economic and environmental impact in the prestigious annual rankings.

The THE University Impact Rankings is the main global ranking system that comprehensively assesses universities on their commitment to the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These SDGs, which include areas such as education, affordable and clean energy, gender equality, health and wellbeing, climate action, sustainable cities and communities, and responsible consumption and production, were the focus of the 2023 issue of GradLife.

Rankings are based on universities' teaching, research, outreach and stewardship. Universities are scored on how they perform against four of the 17 UN goals. One of these goals – which examines how a university establishes partnerships to put sustainable development into practice - is mandatory. The rest of the score is determined by three of the remaining 16 goals in which the university performs best, allowing each institution to showcase its strengths.

Western's top placing was determined after it scored first in the world in gender equality, third in the world in life on land and fourth in the world for climate action and responsible consumption and production, as well as the mandatory category of partnerships that promote the SDGs. It was also named eighth in the world for reduced inequalities and ninth in the world for clean water and sanitation.

The university's Decadal Strategy Sustainability and Resilience 2030 showcases more than 50 long-term actions that put policies into practice, with Western on track to meet its completion targets by 2030.

Via research projects and programs, it's also tackling both local and global issues such as urban heat, housing sustainability and affordability, climate resilience and food and water security.



FIRST STUDENTS SETTLE INTO NEW WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY INDONESIA CAMPUS



Just a few months ago, Western Sydney University Indonesia's first undergraduate students settled into lecture rooms to begin an exciting new chapter.

Their modern University campus is located in Pakuwon Tower in the heart of Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city after Jakarta and East Java's provincial capital. The campus offers five Bachelor programs in high-demand fields: Business (Applied Finance), Data Science, Information and Communications Technology, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. An official opening will take place in early 2025.

Professor Deborah Sweeney, Western's Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President, Research, Enterprise and Global, said opening the University's first stand-alone campus in Indonesia was a milestone. Western, she said, was pleased to bring its renowned educational standards and innovative teaching methods to Surabaya. "Western Sydney University will deliver world-class education to a key economic hub in Indonesia," Professor Sweeney said. "Through a focus on teaching, research, entrepreneurship and community partnerships, we'll provide our students with high-quality, globally recognised undergraduate degrees.

"Our study programs at Western Sydney University Indonesia, Surabaya campus have been designed to meet the needs of employers and future jobs that align with the region's strengths, supporting local economic transformation."

The campus will also feature Western's Launch Pad tech start-up incubator that fosters a world-class innovation and entrepreneurship support ecosystem. With its focus on digital skills and sustainability, the campus perfectly aligns with Western's ethos. The Indonesian campus will offer internationally recognised degrees in a world-class, student-centred and technology-driven study environment.

For more information about applications for the September 2025 intake, scholarship opportunities and information webinars, visit westernsydney.edu.au/indonesia



BRIDGING THE GAP

An innovative space within a shopping centre allows Western to connect with the diverse Fairfield community on a deeper level.

WORDS BY KATRINA LOBLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALLY TSOUTAS

Committing to making education accessible to all is one thing – but what does that goal look like in practical terms? In vibrant Fairfield, Western Sydney University has opened an innovative space on the ground level of a shopping centre to bring university closer to this culturally, socially and economically diverse community.

All are welcome to step inside Fairfield Connect, an inviting 1000-square-metre University outpost within Fairfield City Central. Fairfield Connect manager, Ampha Mammone, says since the hub opened in May, it's welcomed students, professionals and community members eager to engage in learning and personal development.

"The hub, which provides study spaces, computer facilities and access to resources, is designed to support students – particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – as well as people who may face barriers to accessing tertiary education," she says. Its study spaces, she says, have been particularly welcomed by those living in multigenerational and extended-family households.

Yet the hub is much more than a quiet place to hit the textbooks. "While education is at the core of Fairfield Connect, our mission extends beyond the classroom," says Ampha, who also networks with local schools so students know the hub is there for them. "It's evolved in that we're connecting more with the community and finding out what

they need and what they want. Opening up this centre has really given [this community] renewed hope."

Fairfield Connect is a centre that offers support and fosters the aspirations of both students and the broader community. It hosts informative and inspiring sessions for parents and students highlighting opportunities across Western's 13 campuses, and highlights initiatives that promote mental fitness and personal development. Through these resources, the centre improves mental health and wellbeing, builds skills and creates pathways for refugees, migrants and disadvantaged groups.

The centre also hosts standout programs such as Refugee, New and Emerging Communities (NEC), which helps refugee and migrant students overcome barriers to higher education through targeted outreach and engagement, showing them that tertiary education is within their reach.

It also hosts Launch Pad, which fosters entrepreneurship by providing mentorship and resources to help local entrepreneurs and students develop

business ideas and to fuel their innovation and professional growth. By hosting programs such as NEC and Launch Pad, Fairfield Connect has established itself as a vital resource for educational and professional development.

The hub is part of a bigger picture. A pivotal recommendation from the Australian Universities Accord was to open more university study hubs, like Fairfield Connect, in regional and outer metropolitan areas to help make higher education more visible and accessible for all Australians.

Ampha says Fairfield Connect embodies Western's vision of creating spaces that don't just serve students but uplift entire communities. "We're proud to be part of this mission and look forward to welcoming more people to our hub as we continue to grow and evolve," she says. "It's given people a new perspective on what's possible here in Fairfield."

At a glance

Fairfield Connect facilitates many programs, including Western's Future Student Engagement initiatives. These include a program that helps students from refugee, new and emerging communities to overcome barriers and see tertiary study as an achievable goal. Another program, PATHE (Pasifika Achievement to Higher Education), creates a culturally supportive environment that nurtures Pasifika students' aspirations.

Then there are school engagement programs, which include the Fast Forward initiative. This guides students from Year 9 onwards through various educational crossroads, from subject selection to career aspirations, helping them stay committed to higher education.

Fairfield Connect also runs an Academic-in-Residence program. Academics, drawn from various disciplines, lead workshops, are available for consultations and

collaborate on community-based research projects. The hub can also point prospective students towards The College, a pathway provider that helps open up higher education to all.

The centre is poised for more growth, with plans to evolve into a Suburban University Study Hub pending the outcome of a funding application. Once confirmed, the hub will serve as a comprehensive educational resource offering state-of-the-art facilities and tailored academic support that meets the Fairfield community's needs. Planned services include access to computers and high-speed internet, private study spaces and academic support such as literacy and numeracy assistance, exam preparation and career guidance. The Study Hub will welcome any student studying at any Australian tertiary institution.

Fairfield Connect is open from 7.30am-8.30pm weekdays and from 8.30am-4.30pm on weekends.

Queen of kindness

Film producer and disability advocate Tracey Corbin-Matchett has taken her passion for helping others to new heights.

WORDS BY KATRINA LOBLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WENDY CHUNG

For disability advocate Tracey Corbin-Matchett, kindness and inclusion are everything. The Sydney film producer vividly remembers a pivotal moment at school where she and several classmates who couldn't afford to attend school camp felt ostracised.

"I thought that was so unkind that the school did not find a way for those kids from families that couldn't afford it to go to that camp so everyone could have had that shared experience," she says. "It clicked for me. I was like, 'If I ever have the power to change things, I'll always find the kind thing to do'."

Tracey discovered she indeed has the power to change things for others. Although she had a tough start – growing up in public housing, enduring family violence and being kicked out of home while completing her undergraduate degree – she's made such a difference to so many that, in 2023, she received an Order of Australia for services to people with disability and the arts.

These two passions perfectly intersect in her role as CEO of Bus Stop Films, a national profit-for-purpose film school and production company that raises the profile of people with disabilities and other marginalised groups. Through the medium of film, it delivers programs and enacts change for hundreds of people living with disability.

Many people who meet Tracey don't realise she also lives with disability. As a hard-of-hearing person, she wears

hearing aids. "I likely had hearing loss my whole life but I only started to notice it in my late 30s/early 40s," says Tracey, who also has scoliosis and a mild form of spina bifida.

Tracey took a zig-zag journey to the role that now makes the most of her skills and passions. "I first enrolled in a Bachelor of Applied Science in Food and Nutrition out at Hawkesbury," she says, "but sometimes you have to try something to realise it's not a good fit for you." While reassessing her future, she worked as a storytelling fairy at children's birthday parties.

"Then I went to my passion, which is helping others, and did a Bachelor of Arts in Welfare Studies, majoring in family violence and child and family services, at [Western's] Bankstown campus at Milperra [the equivalent degree today is a Bachelor of Community Welfare]. I loved it - it was like going to a big high school. I really enjoyed my time at uni and I learnt lots."

She started work at Housing NSW, where she contributed to frontline community work and policy development in the ministerial team. Then at Legal Aid, she was State Manager of the Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance program. Just two floors away from her Legal Aid office was Screen NSW – and the rest, as they say, is history.

Her projects there included She Shoots, a program aiming to boost the number of women in camera and sound roles. "Filmmaking is traditionally a very male-

dominated sector," says Tracey. "We always like to think things are getting better but ... it's still a slow process." Through her work on the inaugural round of Screen NSW's Screenability program, which supported creatives with a disability, she met Genevieve Clay-Smith, a dynamo who had co-founded Bus Stop Films. Tracey joined Bus Stop in 2017 and took over from Genevieve as CEO in 2019.

When it comes to promoting gender equity in the film industry, Tracey walks the walk. When Bus Stop recently produced a cervical cancer screening campaign "we wanted to commit to authentically crewing that up, and with the casting, so we had an all-female cast and crew," she says.

She also flexed some muscle when asked to feature in an episode of ABC TV's *Tony Armstrong's Extra-Ordinary Things*. "I agreed to do the show if they employed a person from Bus Stop Films, which they did," says Tracey, who showcased a profound letter she received as a child from Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

"One of our Bus Stop Employment members, Joel, worked on the post-production of the show and he's since gone on to further employment with Fremantle and other production companies," Tracey says. "Our mission ... is for people with disability to have equal access to work in the screen industry so it was a great outcome."

Read all about it

Curious what Prime Minister Bob Hawke wrote to Tracey all those years ago? Track down a copy of the letter in the pool room at The Bob Hawke Beer and Leisure Centre in Marrickville in Sydney's inner west or see the original at Canberra's National Museum of Australia where the *Extra-Ordinary Things* exhibit is showing until February 9, 2025.

LEGAL EAGLE *flies high*

*President of the Law Society of NSW,
Brett McGrath, found career inspiration
in his own family's story.*

WORDS BY KATRINA LOBLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALLY TSOUTAS

Seeing your parents split when you're a teenager can be life-changing. For Brett McGrath – 2024 President of the Law Society of NSW – this instructive moment shaped his future career.

"They ended up getting to the point where they went to court," says Brett, who grew up in Menangle in south-west Sydney. "For some reason I went with my mum and her lawyer, and I attended the conciliation conference. That's very unusual but the good thing about that is they settled that day. So I saw it happen firsthand and, the minute it settled, everyone moved on with their lives. At an early age, I got to see behind the scenes and [see] that once a settlement is reached people can move on and be much happier once that occurs."

Brett didn't jump straight from high school into a law degree, though. He had what he calls a false start, trying on an arts degree for size, but left after six weeks because it "didn't feel right". His next role took him behind the counter of a Sydney bookstore. "I think everyone should have a stint in hospitality or retail," says Brett. "If you're working in those forward-facing roles with the general public, you have to learn interpersonal skills. They will help you immeasurably when it comes to the law."

Eventually, Brett and his life-long buddy, Anthony Gordon, cooked up a serious career plan. "He said, 'How about we [study] together then we know we can get it done?'" says Brett. "We did one year of arts at Wollongong Uni then we got

enough marks to go wherever we wanted but we chose Western Sydney. We're local boys and [law] was offered at the Campbelltown campus."

They took nearly every class together and were admitted as solicitors on the same day (nowadays, Anthony is partner in charge of Marsdens Law Group's Camden office and is President of the Macarthur Regional Law Society). At Western, "the teaching staff were outstanding and it was a really practical course", says Brett, who finished his legal studies in 2012. "It set me up very well for practice and it gave me appropriate expectations as to what practising the law would be like." He also came away with enduring friendships and relationships.



A high-flying year ... as part of his role as President of the Law Society of NSW, Brett McGrath introduces co-Chair of the Law Society's Indigenous Issues Committee, Danielle Captain-Webb, and international authority on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, Dr Terri Janke, during NAIDOC Week at the Law Society's premises in the heart of Sydney's legal precinct.

Winds of change

Brett McGrath is a familiar face to many of Western's law students and graduates. Before taking up the role of the Law Society of NSW President, he was a sessional lecturer at Western for eight years. During that work, he recalls, "we were talking after class one time and a group of [students] said no one from Western will become a judge".

He was quick to point out that "times are changing". "It's a young law school comparatively and people generally don't go to the bench until they're usually 40-plus," he says. "It's an age thing ... it's generational change. Imad Abdul-Karim is the first Western graduate to be appointed a magistrate and there are a number of others coming through."

Brett is also an example of this change-making: he's the first Western graduate to be President of the Law Society of NSW (with 200 staff and more than 30,000 members, it's one of the world's largest state law societies). Despite juggling those duties with legal work and his role on the board of United Way Australia (a not-for-profit that delivers Dolly Parton's Imagination Library), he still finds time for play. He regularly travels with his American partner Keith Peyton, finds time to swim laps and on most weekends returns home to visit friends and family in Camden.

It's the opposite of how some people perceive lawyers. "I like having a full life," says Brett. "A lot of people say [about my Instagram photos], 'I'm glad to see you're getting some downtime and that you're enjoying life'. Then they ask, 'What travel tips do you have?'"

At Marsdens Law Group, Brett's mediation and dispute resolution skills came to the fore. After working at national law firm Gadens, those skills were further refined at the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, where he rose through the ranks to become a Senior Judicial Registrar and Director of National Registrar Operations (Dispute Resolution).

"Finding out why [clients] think they want a certain outcome is important," says Brett. "I'd say to them, 'There's no perfect outcome for children of separated parents and ... any outcome you generate is going to be far better than what a stranger like me comes up with'. I'm happy to referee but they have to understand there's no satisfaction in having someone who's not involved in their lives making determinations for them. If they own [the decision], it's more likely to stick as well."

Brett enjoys dispute resolution "because you're able to sit in that confidential space". "If they know it's not going to go on the record, they're likely to open up a lot more - it creates that safe space for that to occur," he says.

In 2023, Brett returned to Marsdens as partner in charge of its family dispute resolution department. However, there's been limited time for that work as he accepted the full-time, one-year role of President of the Law Society of NSW for 2024 (at 39, he's one of the organisation's

Brett McGrath, right, addresses a meeting of the Law Society's Regional Presidents in Kingscliff on the NSW Far North Coast.



youngest presidents). It's a busy job, entailing everything from speaking to the media on legal issues, giving speeches, officiating at ceremonies and advocating for his profession.

One of the profession's newest challenges, he says, is the burgeoning use of artificial intelligence (AI). "There are issues with AI at the moment in that it hallucinates," says Brett. "An attorney in New York put forward a case with all these case citations and the other side, the opposing counsel, had never heard of these cases. AI had hallucinated them - it had generated a case reference and citations but they were all made up."

Little wonder, then, that the Law Society of NSW has established an AI taskforce comprising experts from legal technology companies, ethicists, academics and the judiciary. "We're looking at providing education around maintaining your ethical obligations," says Brett. "It's got great potential for a lot of those admin tasks - a lot of efficiencies will be gained from AI - [but we're] highlighting that we need to be transparent with the use of AI, particularly with clients, the courts and each other, and we need to be accountable for it as well."

Brett's also seen first-hand how technology and online courts (a development fast-tracked by the pandemic) have benefited his regional peers. Travelling around the state as part of his role is "eye-opening", he says. "You realise the struggle of regional practitioners and the expense they have of coming into the city if they have a major issue, and the expense to clients," says Brett, who's bounced around NSW enough to reach platinum status with Qantas. "I know the layout of a Dash 8 like the back of my hand now," he says, with a grin.

Women rise up

The Law Society of NSW licenses and co-regulates the state's 43,000 solicitors, comprising nearly 40 percent of the profession nationally. Part of the organisation's ongoing work is to support what McGrath calls "the remarkable shift in gender in the profession". "Some 65 percent of law graduates are now female," says McGrath, who jokes that "as a male president, I'm an endangered species". He says: "The next frontier is going to be the leadership roles in partnerships in those large law firms."

During 2024, he helped celebrate the bicentenary of the NSW Supreme Court and acknowledge the centenary of Marie Byles' admission to practice. "That was an important milestone to recognise," he says of NSW's first practising female solicitor.



The Centre for Western Sydney examines the region's big issues and crunches data to advocate for a better deal.

WORDS BY KATRINA LOBLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALLY TSOUTAS

If anyone knows western Sydney, it's Dr Rhonda Itaoui. The director of the Centre for Western Sydney – the University's vehicle for regional thought leadership and evidence-based advocacy – grew up in Merrylands and has been with the University since her undergrad days when she worked at Western's call centre.

"My first proper job was providing course advice and information, which still comes in handy today," says Rhonda, who is the daughter of Lebanese immigrants who arrived in Australia more than 40 years ago. "I can tell anyone where to go at the University. I still use that knowledge today - it's great."

Her western Sydney roots not only inspire her work but also her commitment to the region. "I understand, on a deep level, the potential this region has and the strength of its people," says Rhonda. "I bring that lived experience into my leadership and into the vision, objectives and activities of the centre. That's an authenticity I'm really proud of - one that comes through in our work."

That work is wide-ranging. The centre has delivered research into topics such as women's participation in the workforce, the region's arts scene, anti-racism initiatives and the economic transformation of the region. It also regularly stages events with government and other regional partners. To mark NSW Premier Chris Minns' first 100 days in office, for instance, the centre hosted an event at the University's Parramatta City campus to hear the Premier outline his vision for the region. The centre's research also informs the University's strategies, which are squarely based on the region's needs.

"It's important that the region's future is determined by those from western Sydney," says Rhonda. "We have really rich talent and skills ... we're cultivating that pipeline and we need to ensure the



Dr. Rhonda Itaoui

region is home to high-quality jobs that match the talent of residents."

So how does the centre determine the region's needs? "We take the pulse of the community through a vast range of methods," says Rhonda, who spent some of her student years completing a prestigious scholarship that took her to UC Berkeley in California where she conducted PhD fieldwork on Islamophobia. "We deliver social research for key projects, surveys, focus groups – and collaborative advisory groups that bring together different stakeholders across the region to drive positive change on key issues. We try to cover a range of concerns, from stakeholders who make policy decisions to those engaging with the community directly."

"We listen and learn from the community about their needs, the challenges they're facing and how to leverage their strengths and aspirations for the future. We also evaluate how Western engages with the community and marry those two considerations: what the community is seeking and requires from the University and then how the University should best deliver."

The centre also presents key findings at state or federal Budget luncheons held in western Sydney that are hosted by regional advocates like Business

Western Sydney and the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue. "At those, we advocate for the key economic priorities of western Sydney," says Rhonda. "We're outlining actions for the government, industry and the University ... to ensure the region is economically thriving in the future and determining who is responsible for driving that forward."

"We're advocating that funding needs to keep up with the growth of our region and the diverse needs of our population. That's when we can truly unlock our unlimited potential."

Reading the signs

The centre's work on western Sydney's economic transformation will inform student skill and course development. Dr Rhonda Itaoui says: "We will be identifying the skills of the future and informing at a strategic level how the University delivers on courses, teaching and learning to ensure our students are ready for the future jobs and industries in western Sydney."

THE ULTIMATE — CONNECTOR —

University taught Elie El-Khoury Antonios more than a few lessons about life and thriving in the workplace.

WORDS BY KATRINA LOBLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALLY TSOUTAS

Elie El-Khoury Antonios loves nothing more than making new connections, socialising with friends, working out at the gym – and cheering on his beloved Sydney footy team, the Canterbury Bulldogs.

While the Doggies' fortunes have been erratic in recent years, Elie's are on the rise. Born with cerebral palsy, he brings his lived experience, vast expertise and sunny disposition to his role as a senior policy officer within the disability sector. "My work has always revolved around advocating for people with disabilities," he says.

Elie is also in the final stage of earning his PhD after completing a Bachelor of Social Work and a Master of Research – all at Western Sydney University. For his first degree, he chose Western's Milperra campus. "The disability support there was quite amazing compared to all the other unis I looked at," says Elie. "I use a wheelchair and whatever I needed they could accommodate – they could give me a note-taker and had accessible facilities I could use. So that was an easy decision because everything was already set up so I could access the campus."

He completed his Master of Research at the South Parramatta campus while much of his PhD work, which explores how to accommodate students with physical disabilities on placement in the human services field, was done online. "Where I work is near a Western Sydney University campus so it's like the Uni is never going to leave me," says Elie with a laugh.

Yet Elie admits it was a shock when he first arrived at uni. "At school, I remember it was always teachers saying, 'Can three

people join Elie's group because he's by himself up the front'," he says. "When I got to uni that rarely happened and it was a huge shock to my system. The hardest aspect of my undergrad degree was making friends and meeting people. What helped were the mature-age students in my degree who were really supportive and really nice. I also connected with other students with disabilities, which helped too."

Elie's outgoing personality and deep resilience also paid off. "I had a drama background [from high school] so I always enjoyed doing role plays at uni and in the workplace as well – it was a great way to meet people and connect with them," he says. His three siblings also helped him to "shake things off". "It's the Lebanese mentality of you work hard and treat everyone fairly," he says. He also welcomes questions people might have about his disability. "If people ask me about it, I'm very open ... which I think people find refreshing," he says.

Being a diehard sports fan who loves cheering on and supporting the underdog in any contest contributes to his resilience, he says, and fosters the mental toughness required to perform under pressure and in complex work situations. "In those pressure moments at work, I refer back to experiences at school and uni to guide me on how best to respond," Elie says.

He's all about promoting inclusion – and the many ways, big and small, that people can help make that happen. "At school, one kid asked if I wanted to play handball," Elie recalls. "I was like, 'I don't really know how to play but I might as well give it a shot' and the students modified the game so I could use my

wheels instead of my hands. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that was the best example of disability inclusion because it wasn't a teacher forcing it upon people – it came from the students themselves."

Elie also experienced a pivotal moment when he worked on a University Orientation Week stall and connected with a representative from a disability organisation. "I got sunburnt that day but that contact led to my first regular job out of uni," he says. While his first job, initially as a public policy officer then as a corporate and public affairs advisor, gave him valuable insights into the disability sector, "it was more the soft skills like how to communicate with different people" that proved life-changing.

"On my first day, I was sitting next to the finance team and this guy randomly said to me, 'Let's go have a coffee'," Elie recalls. "I was like, 'I've never done this before but okay, let's do it!' By having that opportunity, it made me more comfortable to extend that same invitation to others. We became good friends and I really adopted his approach. I call it the art of the coffee catch-up because now it's second nature. That's something I've kept going since then."

Before issuing an open invitation to the GradLife team to join him for a coffee (or an iced chocolate, his usual order) one day, Elie – who says his biggest hobby is "being social" – takes a moment to share his life advice. "I'd say to new graduates with a disability in the workplace to be really proactive – don't be afraid to go up to people and say hi."

RAISING THE BAR

Proud Yuin woman Siobhán McGeown's single mum taught her valuable lessons. Now an award-winning TV marketer, she is mentoring the next generation of diverse voices.

WORDS BY KATRINA LOBLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY WENDY CHUNG

Ask marketer Siobhán McGeown who's her greatest influence and she doesn't miss a beat. "I grew up in Sydney's Seven Hills/Blacktown area to a single mum," says Siobhán. "She was such a role model in terms of resilience and tenacity, and has been such an inspiration for my life and my career. I had a great childhood surrounded by lots of love but my mum didn't have a lot of spare change; she sold our family home so she could start her own education."

Her mum headed to university to study teaching when Siobhán was 12. This made a big impression on her daughter. "She was the first person in our family to attain a Bachelor degree," Siobhán proudly says of her late mother. "Any money my mum did have went into my Irish dancing - I competed at the world championships in North America for Irish dancing."

Siobhán's teen years turned tumultuous, though, as she juggled Year 12 studies with caring for her mother, who'd become unwell. Post-high school, she started a policing degree at Western's Werrington campus. She fell in love with the university experience but switched to a Bachelor of Communications. "I did

a marketing subject, which was my least favourite of all of them, and now I've landed in marketing and I absolutely love it," she says.

While still studying she heard about an internship at the ABC (Australia's national broadcaster) through a University Facebook group and landed the gig. Her advice to fellow students is to "get an internship before it's compulsory [as part of your course]. That got me in the door before [my peers]".

At the ABC Siobhán has thrived, rising to the role of marketing manager (screen) where she develops strategic marketing plans and content campaigns to attract audiences across ABC TV and iview. Her achievements include launching the first season of the hit animated TV series *Bluey*, and marketing other shows as varied as *You Can't Ask That*, *Utopia*, *Fisk* and *I Was Actually There*. Her achievements haven't gone unnoticed, with B&T naming her a marketing winner of its 2023 and 2024 30 Under 30 awards.

So what qualities set her apart from her peers? "I have a great strategic mind-set," says Siobhán. "I think I'm one of the most tenacious and resilient people.

Those key moments in your life shape you as a person - how could they not? I have the ability to let the little things be little."

A Women in Media scholarship helped hone that skill. "I learned a method to put a timer on [if I was dwelling upon an issue]," Siobhán reveals. "At first, I got 24 hours to feel bad about it then it's like, 'I don't feel bad about it any more'. I had time to feel my feelings and honestly it does work. Now I don't allow any more than four hours."

She's also busy working on big-picture issues as part of the ABC's Bonner Committee - an advisory group of 12 people which advises ABC management on Indigenous issues - and mentoring others, especially those from diverse backgrounds. "My unique selling proposition is that I grew up in Blacktown to a single mum, I'm a proud Yuin woman and, in order to market and speak to all Australians from all different backgrounds, you need diverse backgrounds sitting at that table. [Increasing the diversity of voices] is something I'm passionate about now in terms of my leadership legacy at the ABC."

THE W FACTOR

We love hearing our graduates' success stories. This year, we asked alumni to share how studying at Western paved the way for their success.



Dr Yi-Chen Lan

Doctor of Philosophy - Computing and Information Technology 2004
Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) - Computing and Information Systems 1998

Western is the cornerstone of my personal and professional transformation, leading me to become a university president in Taiwan. It equipped me with critical thinking, leadership skills and a global perspective, all essential in shaping institutional vision. The University's diverse academic environment and emphasis on innovation and inclusivity broadened my knowledge and prepared me for leadership.

Isabel Stepanik

Master of Research 2020
Master of Arts (Psychology) 1996
Bachelor of Social Science 1994

Western enabled me to reach my full potential - I have a meaningful career as a prison psychologist. Arriving in Australia from Peru, I'd found certain doors closed. I spoke to the Psychology Department head about doing a Master's, aware my English wasn't great. Her response - "Isabel, please apply! We need people like you in this country" - amazed me and changed my life. Doing my Master's degree has inspired me to help others to study towards their dreams.

Vishnu Kumar Ramakrishnan

Master of Business Administration (International Business) 1995

Studying at Western gave me a strong foundation in international business and strategic thinking. The focus on practical learning and global perspectives provided me with crucial skills in market analysis and cross-cultural communication. After relocating from Australia to Indonesia where I work in marketing, I've travelled to more than 30 countries on business. Western's diverse curriculum and experienced faculty broadened my understanding of global markets and offered hands-on experience.



Pallavi Verma

Master of Information and Communications Technology (Advanced) 2019

Receiving the Dean's Medal in my Master's at Western builds on my achievement as a Gold Medallist in my Bachelor's from overseas and has shaped my career in ICT. The supportive faculty, diverse environment and exciting opportunities for students helped me build a strong network and a global perspective. Education has equipped me with resilience and confidence. Western's focus on practical learning and community engagement allowed me to excel in my field.



Amy Bonnici

Bachelor of Business 2021

University provided me with many skills beyond the "textbook" skills such as communication, networking, collaborating in groups, deadlines and being in a professional environment. It also gave me the opportunity to meet many people, opening many doors in my career as a content producer. It also introduced me to lifelong friends who shaped who I am today.



Monica Moti

Bachelor of Psychological Studies 2021
Diploma in Criminal and Community Justice 2018

Education transformed my life by providing a deep understanding of human behaviour, equipping me with skills essential for talent acquisition, mental health support and job coaching. My Bachelor degree honed my ability to analyse emotional and interpersonal dynamics, which is crucial in my career. Western paved the way for my professional success by offering a blend of theory and practical application, fostering critical thinking and connecting me with a network of professionals.



Dr Zewdneh Sabe

Doctor of Philosophy 2019

After graduating, I worked in development and research across Africa and later became a post-doctoral research fellow in the UK. Now a research fellow based in Nairobi, I coordinate activities across East Africa. Western's rigorous environment and diverse research opportunities equipped me with the skills to address global health challenges, particularly in health and migration.

Jaydon Spagnol

Bachelor of Business (Marketing) 2022

Western is a catalyst for transformation. Education gave me critical skills in strategic thinking, market analysis and communication. My degree provided a strong foundation for understanding market dynamics and consumer behaviour. Western's rigorous curriculum and practical approach offered real-world experience and valuable industry connections, helping me transition from a general manager to a brand manager.



Gabrielle Talbot-Mundine

Master of Business Administration 2024
Graduate Certificate in Business 2022

Education has empowered me with critical thinking, leadership and resilience. The University's focus on practical learning helped bridge the gap between theory and real-world application, paving the way for my success as a leader in the field of Indigenous employment. I have developed the tools and knowledge to build a career where I can make a positive impact both professionally and culturally.

Vuthy Ol

Master of Teaching (Birth-5/Birth-12) 2023

As an early childhood teacher, I'm deeply committed to making a positive impact in the lives of children. Western has been an essential part of my journey: The high-quality learning outcomes and experienced lecturers truly prepared me for my profession. Education unlocks a broader perspective of the world, making it the most valuable wealth one can possess.

Alicia Catherine Eaton

Bachelor of Cyber Security and Behaviour 2024

Western equipped me with critical thinking, problem-solving skills and a deep understanding of cyber security principles. I now use this knowledge to protect digital assets and combat cyber threats. Higher education has the power to unlock potential, ignite passion and pave the way for success. It inspires students to dream big, achieve their goals and make a meaningful impact in their chosen fields.



Shelja Touri

Bachelor of Social Work 2009

Western's inclusive learning environment equipped me with critical thinking, empathy and leadership skills. I moved to the US where I lead a non-profit organisation focused on diversity and equal opportunity. Western's emphasis on real-world experience ensured my degree remains relevant globally, opening doors to a diverse network and allowing me to make meaningful contributions to the sector.



Ryan Zeppa-Cohen

Master of Nurse Practitioner (Mental Health) 2023

By completing my Master's, I secured a position as a nursing director in an area I'm passionate about. The study helped me become a better clinician and constantly improve my clinical practice. Higher education gives people more choice and autonomy over their career and its trajectory. While stressful at times, it helps you grow as a person.



MD Khan

Master of Science (Honours) 2012
Master of Computing (Software Engineering) 2004

Studying at Western as an international student gave me a strong foundation through its industry-focused curriculum and supportive community. Being part of the Western family gave me valuable insights into people and cultures while the hands-on learning and mentorship shaped my growth in the information technology industry. Higher education unlocks your potential, equipping you with the foundation for success.

Dr Christopher Cheng

Doctor of Philosophy - Culture and Society 2023

At Western, I found a research haven that reignited my passion for history and heritage through the China-Australia Heritage Corridor initiative. With exceptional supervisors and a serene campus, I thrived. Western helped me rebuild my professional identity, empowering me to tackle challenges with creativity and resourcefulness.

James Paul Scholtens

Graduate Diploma of Education – Secondary 2002
Bachelor of Health Science – Personal Development, Health and Physical Education 2002

After moving from Canberra to Sydney to study physical education teaching, I met amazing people and had fantastic lecturers and tutors. My teaching pracs were baptisms of fire but I now look back on them fondly and appreciate how they shaped my teaching style. I'm still teaching 25 years later with the same passion and enthusiasm as my first day.

**Joelle Marie Hewitt**

Bachelor of Health Science 2024

Education allowed me to change careers and pursue my dream job as a health education officer. It has equipped me with essential work-ready skills, which I was able to immediately put into practice. Knowledge provides access to many locks but hard work is the key to opening them.

Maryana Ziyad Khoshaba

Diploma in Business Extended 2024

When I came to Australia in 2022 as a refugee, people told me it's impossible for me to study at university because I didn't go to high school in Australia. When someone from Western said it was possible, it was one of my happiest days. As a University student ambassador who can speak Assyrian, Arabic, Kurdish and English, I now help other students from different backgrounds while completing my own double degree.

Vivek Rathod

Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) - Mechanical 2022

Education has equipped me with critical thinking, problem-solving skills and the ability to adapt. Western played a pivotal role in achieving my professional goals – I am now a mechanical design engineer based in Sydney. Its emphasis

on a well-rounded education, combined with its focus on practical, real-world applications, gave me a solid foundation in both theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience.

Youssef Abi-Khattar

Bachelor of Business – Computing and Information Systems 2007

Education has lifted my spirit, self-confidence and self-esteem, opening doors for opportunities that have earned me further respect and options. I live with physical disabilities but the support I received from my family and University staff allowed me to graduate and establish a career with one of Australia's Big Four banks.

**Khanh Nguyen Quoc**

Master of Business Administration 2024
Bachelor of Business (Management) 2022

Higher education extends beyond knowledge acquisition; it kindles a passion that transforms individuals, turning students into leaders, thinkers into innovators and dreamers into achievers. Western's MBA program fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability and lifelong learning. These skills help me as a tech recruiter in Vietnam to analyse information, challenge assumptions and devise solutions to complex issues.

Jagath Jeewantha Jayasekera

Master of Business Administration 2005

To fund my MBA journey, I sold my car – a difficult and emotional choice as I was unsure what the future held. Nineteen years later, it's clear this decision to pursue higher education opened countless doors for me. It became the key to global corporate opportunities, leading to CXO-level roles and enabling me to make a meaningful impact as a research scientist and business consultant.

**Olaoluwa Daniel Dawodu**

Master of Engineering 2018

Western has been the bedrock of my life in Australia. It equipped me with the knowledge and discipline required to navigate the Australian engineering industry, moving from being an employee to self-employed with my own engineering company. This is true living, thanks to knowledge acquired from Western.

Adam Rawson

Bachelor of Communication 2019
Associate Degree in Creative Industries 2015

After leaving school in Year 11 and becoming a university student in my late 30s, I found it difficult to fit in at first – I had impostor syndrome. Eventually I found students I could connect with and directed a short documentary. Studying at university has given me confidence and the chance to believe in myself. It doesn't matter if you're a school leaver or an older person – just follow your dreams.

**Dr Asha Chand**

Doctor of Philosophy – Communication and Media 2012
Master of Professional Communication 2000

My father was a farmer and cane-cutter, and couldn't read or write. I worked with him on our farm and witnessed the struggles associated with a lack of education. Western opened a new world of opportunities for me – I'm now thriving at the University as Associate Dean International (South Asia) and a senior lecturer in journalism.

Lounging with purpose

One of the most popular spots at the Open Day held during the year at Western's Parramatta South campus was the Alumni Legacy Lounge.

More than 300 alumni, often accompanied by family members and their guests, visited the welcoming space on Sunday, June 30. There, they reconnected, networked and reminisced while relaxing and enjoying free refreshments. They could also collect a small gift from the Alumni Team.

Almost half of those who dropped by also added their mark to the Alumni legacy wall. Here, they could make a career wish and also mention why they like to stay connected with their University. They also gave valuable feedback about the topics they're most interested in hearing more about. These ranged from networking and events to career development opportunities and support, alumni benefits and perks, mentoring partnerships, and job offers for students and alumni.

Some 50 alumni took the opportunity on the day to receive advice from one of three onsite career consultants. During 15-minute conversations, alumni could ask questions about maximising their career opportunities and receive advice about suitable post-graduate studies. These broad-ranging discussions covered subjects such as interviews and personal branding, writing resumes and cover letters, job search techniques, career transitions, career assessment and progression, professional development and upskilling, continuous learning and postgraduate studies.





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