

GRAD *Life*

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Sulinna Ong's journey to becoming the Head of Music at Spotify UK and Ireland

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Front cover:
Sulinna Ong, Head of Music at Spotify UK and Ireland.
Bachelor of Arts (Music), 2000.
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WELCOME

MESSAGE FROM VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT, PROFESSOR BARNEY GLOVER AO

The past 18 months have certainly been like no other. The pandemic has brought disruption and adversity to our lives and to the Western Sydney University community. I am proud to say that through this unprecedented situation we strengthened our resolve and we showed we truly care. The University remains committed to shaping and contributing to the future of our local and global communities.

Many of our alumni have also given us much to be proud of during this trying time. Thousands of you have stood on the frontline, delivering vital services in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in Australia and overseas. Our thoughts are also with those who are separated from family or friends, or adversely impacted by the situation.

At home, the population and infrastructure requirements of Western Sydney grow, whilst the pandemic adds layers of complexity to the continued social, cultural and economic development of this dynamic region. The University has similarly continued to grow and proudly taken a leadership role within our community.

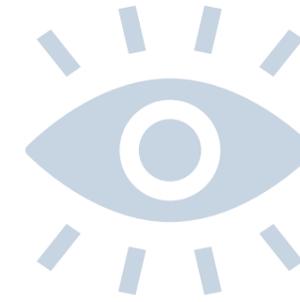
Western Sydney University has cemented its reputation as one of the world's top universities. In the latest Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings, we are ranked 6th in Australia and 17th in the world overall, for our social, ecological, and economic impact – placing us within the top 1.5 per cent of all institutions ranked this year.

In this issue of GradLife, you can read more about how the University has adapted and thrived despite the pandemic – through innovation and entrepreneurship in app development (p21), the creation of multicultural community hubs (p8), or the continued support of the arts (p10).

I hope you enjoy reading this issue and find inspiration in how western Sydney has grown and come together as a community during this most challenging time.



Professor Barney Glover AO
Vice-Chancellor and President



THE *eyes* HAVE IT

New research at Western could completely change the way we treat dementia.

WORDS BY LEANA HAMAD

A new study into Alzheimer's disease at Western Sydney University is being hailed a breakthrough in the research world as it allows for dementia to be detected and possibly treated up to 20 years before clinical signs appear in a patient.

The finding, made by the School of Medicine's Associate Professor Dr Mourad Tayebi and his assistant, Dr Umma Habiba (a PhD candidate in dementia research), has the potential to change the way dementia is detected and treated for the thousands of Australians who are diagnosed every year.

At the centre of their study is the finding that a specific set of rogue proteins, called "amyloid beta oligomers," can be detected in a patient's eyes 15 to 20 years before the appearance of symptoms associated with dementia. Critically, these rogue proteins appear before the disease has entered the brain. If an early detection platform can be created for these rogue proteins, such as a routine eye test, then it

would be possible to develop new therapeutic approaches for depleting the rogue proteins before the dementia becomes untreatable.

"This is a breakthrough in many ways," says Dr Tayebi. While these rogue proteins have been found in the blood before, their detection in the eye is the first of its kind. Dr Tayebi hopes to find the sufficient funding needed to conduct Phase 1 clinical trials, with the aim of developing an early detection platform.

If the goal of establishing an early diagnostic screen for Alzheimer's disease is successful, it would significantly change the way dementia affects our population. Dementia alone costs Australian families and the economy more than \$15 billion per year, with 28,300 people living with younger onset dementia and as many as 250 new people diagnosed per day.

CREATING A TEST

Whilst the detection of the amyloid beta oligomer proteins in the periphery is primitive, Dr Tayebi and Dr Habiba's research catalyses the need for clinical trials where a routine optometry eye test can be developed and methods to deplete these rogue proteins can later be explored.

Dr Tayebi has a clear vision of what this means for the medical world: it means implementing a new dementia eye test within the usual annual routine eye test. This screening will detect if the rogue proteins are present within the individual's eye and an optometrist can refer for a confirmatory test through blood testing. Through this test, signs associated with dementia, if present, can be treated before the disease truly takes hold and causes brain damage.

"The target population for Alzheimer's disease is 50 years of age", says Dr Tayebi. "If there is a positive test, there is a possibility to deplete these rogue proteins from the blood. The technology is advanced."

While Hereditary Alzheimer's can be an inevitable fate more many people, the target population for Dr Tayebi's findings are Sporadic Alzheimer's disease patients, who account for 85 per cent of Alzheimer's patients. Dr Tayebi is confident in his approach to decrease the numbers of those patients if funding for clinical trials pulls through.



“Introducing these routine eye-checks that could catch the disease before it impacts the brain could change the lives of millions.”

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
DR MOURAD TAYEBI

WHERE THE RESEARCH BEGAN

Dr Tayebi's research implemented the same approach used to detect an Alzheimer's-like disease in dogs; something he and his team call 'Dog'zheimer'.

"The dog is very important in the diagnostic context because dogs develop Alzheimer-like disease in a natural way," says Dr Tayebi.

The short life span of a dog allows for the timing of rogue proteins to be measured outside of the brain in a shorter time frame. In other words, Dog'zheimer allowed for the detection of Alzheimer's in the blood and eye before the rogue protein reaches the brain to cause extensive pathology and eventually death.



DR. MOURAD TAYEBI

THE NEXT STEPS

Dr Tayebi and his associates at Western Sydney University are one of two teams around the world who have focussed on these rogue proteins in the eye, with the other team located in Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles, USA.

Here on the Australian side, agreements have been made to conduct clinical trials at Liverpool Hospital; and Dr Tayebi's next immediate step is to secure funding for their Phase 1 clinical trial, Toxicity and Dosage Study, which requires healthy individuals. Meanwhile, Dr Tayebi's collaborators in Los Angeles will simultaneously conduct Phase 1 of this clinical trial to cross-validate the findings.

These clinical trials will hopefully result in the establishment of a routine eye test that can be performed at any optometrist.

"We want prevention rather than treatment... We want to detect the disease before it manifests into a disease," says Dr Tayebi. "Alzheimer's disease has reached epidemic proportions and represents a substantial health burden, affecting the quality of life of millions of patients and their families. Introducing these routine eye-checks that could catch the disease before it impacts the brain could change the lives of millions."

For Dr. Tayebi, this research is a testament to the world-class standards being reached by the teaching and PhD programs at Western Sydney University. In fact, Western's research environment has enabled Dr Habiba's contribution to the study to achieve international recognition: "Umma Habiba has been publicised internationally, in the UK, Italy and USA... As her mentor, I knew her studies would lead to this in the future".

CALL FOR SUPPORT

Dr Tayebi's research is in need of financial support. Although agreements are in place with Liverpool Hospital to conduct Phase 1 clinical trials, they still require financing before they can commence. These clinical trials will help translate the initial research found in animals to human beings and incorporate a routine eye test at a regular optometrist.

Western Alumni can support Dr Tayebi's research directly at a GoFundMe page dedicated to those clinical trials:

[gofundme.com/f/catchdearly](https://www.gofundme.com/f/catchdearly)

AUSTRALIAN DEMENTIA STATISTICS

The 2021 Dementia Australia Prevalence Data reveals that there are currently an estimated 472,000 Australians living with all forms of dementia.

This figure is increasing at a rate of 250 people per day, and is the leading cause of death of women in Australia (and the third leading cause of death of Australian men).

Without a major medical breakthrough, the number of dementia patients in Australia is projected to increase to 1,076,000 people by 2058.



THREADS *of* SOCIETY

A multilingual book shop in Western Sydney is challenging the way we think about multiculturalism, and two of our alumni are helping lead the charge.

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTOS BY ANDREW MASON

LEFT TO RIGHT: **AFAF AL-SHAMMARI**, BACHELOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, 2015; AND **APHRODITE DELAGUIADO**, BACHELOR OF DESIGN (VISUAL COMMUNICATION), 2009.

Stories are like magical threads woven through our social fabric, connecting cultures and ideas. Told well in words we understand, they elicit empathy and unity; told brilliantly, they can change lives.

Lost in Books in Fairfield is doing just that: it's promoted as "a kids' bookshop that speaks your language". Though it's much more than a multilingual book store (with titles in more than 70 languages). Launched in 2017 by Jane Stratton's THINK+DO Tank Foundation, it operates as a social enterprise to fund multilingual storytelling projects, a creative learning centre and, most importantly, a language exchange hub.

"Multilingual storytelling is important because it allows people to express their own identities, and at the same time learn from each other," explains Afaf Al-Shammari, Lead Community Connector at the THINK+DO Tank Foundation and leader of its Arabic Language Writing Academy, who graduated from Western Sydney University in 2015 with a Bachelor of Psychology.

"If we want the community to come close to each other, we need to be good listeners: hearing about each other's cultural heritages, people's challenges, desires and hopes."

During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, the store launched Lost In Books TV to bring joy and hope into people's homes – which you can see in a Google ad campaign featuring Lillian Rodrigues-Pang, a former Western staff member and Forked Tongues Multilingual Storytelling Lead at Lost in Books.

"From the first day I started at Lost In Books I felt celebrated for my multilingualism. Everyone is encouraged to express themselves and celebrating more languages means we're celebrating more perspectives and creating more connections," says Aphrodite Delaguiado, who graduated with a Bachelor of Design (Visual Communication) from Western in 2009 and worked as the Marketing and Creative Lead at Lost In Books in 2020*

Aphrodite speaks Tagalog, English, Spanish (and is learning Japanese). Her experiences as a migrant are a big part of her work and creative process, inspired by her university studies of the First Things First graphic design manifesto:

"Learning about First Things First in my first year of uni was a big lesson in design for purpose: I'd previously thought graphic design was just for advertising, but the manifesto is about using design for good – using it for socially responsible purposes."

Now running a creative enterprise of her own called Aphro, Aphrodite also draws on lessons from her time with community groups at Lost In Books, including homework clubs.

"Some of the parents who come to Lost In Books are learning English while trying to help their kids do homework, which can be very hard," she says. "Having multilingual groups forms bridges between cultures, while at the same time parents gain confidence to help their kids with homework."

Afaf remembers feeling overwhelmed because she didn't understand much English when she brought her young family to Australia from Kuwait in 1997:

"Starting a new life in a country with a different language and culture was challenging," she says. "Through my experience I became very interested in ideas and strategies to help people adapt to change and build a new life."

"So, once my kids were older, I started studying psychology at Western. The campus was conveniently nearby, but what really drew me to Western was that it has a really multicultural vibe: it was my first exposure to the wider community and meeting people from so many different cultures, and the tutors were very understanding of peoples' different experiences."

Now she applies her knowledge of psychology to helping women develop creative and communication skills in her community programs at Lost In Books.

She says the purpose of Lost In Books as a language exchange hub goes much further than giving people a place to practice a new language – which is important – it also helps people reconnect with the culture of their mother tongue.

"When you speak with people in their first language you're talking to their hearts," she says. "We want people to feel connected through their hearts to community. It starts with listening deeply to each other's stories so we can learn more from each other, and then shared connections and creativity grow into a real sense of belonging."

*Aphrodite is now working at Guide Dogs NSW/ACT.

“ If we want the community to come close to each other, we need to be good listeners: hearing about each other's cultural heritages, people's challenges, desires and hopes. ”

AFAF AL-SHAMMARI
BACHELOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, 2015



See this story
come to life

THEATRE *Interrupted*

Discover how our alumni have been leading the charge in theatre and the arts through the challenges of the pandemic.

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTO BY ANDREW MASON

At the height of their powers, Australians working in the arts and creative industries make us glad to be alive – or at least think differently about ourselves, our communities and the wider world.

Yet although the sector contributes more than \$110 billion to the Australian economy, it's viewed by some people as an indulgence during good times, rather than being important at any time.

"Maybe it's because of my background, but I wasn't encouraged to have a career in the arts," explains Joanne Kee, Executive Producer and Artistic Director at Riverside's National Theatre of Parramatta, who earned a Graduate Certificate in Management from Western Sydney University in 1999.

"My parents took me to a lot of performances, but they wanted me to get a job somewhere 'more solid' than the arts, like in finance. So that's why I studied management, which as it turns out, gave me a firm base for managing arts organisations."

"I was very impressed with Western Sydney University because it has always had a multicultural community – and it's been very dynamic, responding to changing times and people's needs. My degree has provided me with a rigor to my work, particularly when writing something like a strategic plan or a funding application."

Even in good times, arts organisations must make tough financial decisions about which jobs and creative works they can viably support. But Kee hadn't experienced anything quite as challenging as a pandemic during her 25-year career.

2020 started promisingly at Riverside's National Theatre of Parramatta, with a couple of successful shows such as Jesus Wants Me



SARAH BARNES

for a Sunbeam and Lady Tabouli, plus the True West playwrighting festival. Then COVID-19 forced the theatre to close its doors until late Spring.

"We had risk management plans to help manage our commitments and cashflow, and these included postponing some shows until 2021," Kee says. "We decided it was really important we continue to support our creative community, so we adapted our Creative Hello program, to help people in Western Sydney's arts community connect online."

She says the arts sector can be incredibly resilient, though it desperately needed better funding support during the pandemic. On a positive note, she's immensely proud that despite lockdowns and theatre closures the Theatre funded and developed a new show called Queen Fatima, which premiered at the Sydney Festival in January 2021.

"We want to share stories that resonate with people, especially in Western Sydney," she says. "So, I'm really proud that audiences, artists and people in our industry have really engaged with us."

Sarah Barns, co-director at media and arts practice ESEMProjects, echoes the same pride in western Sydney's creative scene. Like Kee, she took an alternative route into the arts, focussing her studies on digital communication, architecture, and sustainable development.

After stints at the CSIRO and the ABC working on digital strategies, she was awarded a post-doctoral fellowship at Western and completed her Urban Studies Foundation Postdoctoral Research: Smart Cities and Platform Urbanism in 2018.

"What was really interesting to me was the cohort of people at Western, who had innovative approaches to thinking about places and spaces, and how digital technology is changing our relationship to cities," she says. "I was really fascinated by the opportunity to engage more with western Sydney, because I was highly aware through my previous work of just how much transformation was coming to the area."

Barns and her team at ESEMProjects kept busy during 2020 developing a large-scale interactive video installation in three dimensions called Storybox Parramatta, produced in partnership with Western Sydney University and the ABC.

"We're overwhelmed by the level of community and creative interest in Storybox," she says. "We've loved the way contributions from Western have responded to storytelling in this format. It makes my day being able to enable community creativity and to see so many perspectives shared in a public space."

"Although COVID gave us a kind of digital fatigue, there's also recognition that digital is more central to our lives than ever. So, it's important we think more creatively about the integration of digital into physical fabric of public spaces – not just for ads – because it's much nicer using screens to engage with people's stories."

“ We want to share stories that resonate with people, especially in Western Sydney... I'm really proud that audiences, artists and people in our industry have really engaged with us. ”

JOANNE KEE

GRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN MANAGEMENT, 1999



See this story
come to life

COVER STORY

HER *own* BEAT

From Penrith campus to the Head of Music at Spotify UK and Ireland, Sulinna Ong's journey is an inspiration for everyone at Western.

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY

Sulinna Ong has devoted most of her career to sharing the universal language of music since graduating with First Class Honours with a Bachelor of Arts (Music) from Western Sydney University in 2000.

She's proven highly adept at deploying technology and marketing intelligence to help people find the perfect music for any moment, whether as General Manager of artist management company The Family Entertainment, which took Kasabian to global success, Chief Marketing Officer at social media tech startup WholeWorldBand, and now as Head of Music at Spotify UK and Ireland.

"Music and technology have always been the two great and constant loves of my life," she explains. "I didn't really have the skill level to make a career out of the performance side, but I knew I wanted to make music and technology the way I earned a living. I was constantly told I had to pick either of these two things, and I knew that at some point, they would converge, and I wanted to be in the centre of it."

Ong says her career path has been quite instinctual, driven by her enthusiasm for learning about new technology and new music, sometimes to the bafflement of her parents, who didn't know anyone who worked in either the technology or music industries.

"Like most Asian and Middle Eastern parents (her father is Chinese, her mother is Persian), they both come from cultures that really value formal education," says Ong. "My folks wanted me to get a law, medical, or engineering degree. Understandably they were concerned about my desire to pursue music, which is not the most stable of careers, but they knew I had my heart set on it."

Music was Ong's constant during a fairly nomadic childhood: she was born in the UK, the family went to Iran to settle but had to flee because of the Iranian Revolution, and ultimately came to Australia.

"I was a very nerdy, self-contained kid because we moved around a lot, and I felt like an outsider because I was biracial," says Ong. "Having a childhood home was foreign to me. But it also provided me with a real sense of adaptability. And as a woman of colour in a male-dominated sphere, my identity has always been a really important part of my experience."

"My team (at Spotify) is one of the most diverse team across the business, and possibly in the industry. Diversity is really important to innovation because different people bring different experiences – and that's how you can push boundaries."

CAMPUS LIFE AT WESTERN

In her last year of high school, Ong was exploring a photography exhibit in Darwin when she met the renowned photographer and academic, Emeritus Professor Des Crawley.

After listening to Ong talk about her interests, he asked about her plans for university: she explained she didn't want to do a traditional music degree at a conservatorium, nor did she intend to join an orchestra because she was mostly interested in popular music.

Professor Crawley told her: "You should consider the university (Western Sydney University) where I'm a professor. We have a new course, which really addresses all the things that you're saying. It's about popular music and I think you really should look into it."

So the next time Ong visited Sydney, she explored the Penrith campus and Western's new courses, and was pleased to discover it offered all the things Crawley had told her about:

"Music technology was incorporated in the degree in the Bachelor of Arts, which at that time was pretty unusual," she says. "And the university itself really expanded my world as a young adult. It introduced me to new music experiences and people."

Ong had felt stifled at high school, where she'd often been told she was 'difficult' because she questioned the status quo, always wanting to know why things couldn't change.

So campus life at Western Sydney University was a revelation: "It was one of the most carefree and experimental times in my life, which really gave me a lot of confidence," she remembers fondly. "All the optimism, curiosity and vitality of youth in a university environment where free and critical thinking is encouraged and rewarded."

"I met some of my close friends I still speak with now while sitting on the grass between classes, including people studying other degrees," she adds. "And my longest friendship is actually with Professor Crawley. Even after I graduated and moved to the UK in 2003, we kept in touch. I actually spoke to him in April (2021) to wish him a happy birthday (he's in his 80s now). So that's a friendship that has endured for 27 years!"

MIND-EXPANDING LECTURES (AND LOTS OF GREAT GIGS)

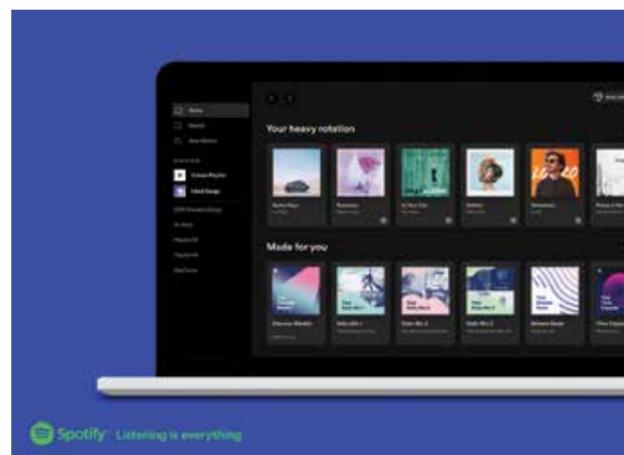
The first year at university can be eye-opening for many students, especially when they've just entered young adulthood. As Ong describes it, you have all the new freedoms and benefits of being an adult but generally none of the heavier responsibilities that come later in life.

"I was completely green. I had a strong calling to be involved in music in some way, though I didn't know how," she says. "If I could go back, I'd probably also do a Bachelor in Computer Science and learn programming along with music."

One of the great things about being at a campus far from the city centre, notes Ong, is that her social life congregated at university, whether hanging out on a lawn and meeting new people between classes or discovering new friends and tunes at gigs on campus featuring many of the students' bands.

Still, she credits her honours thesis supervising lecturer, Adjunct Associate Professor Sally Macarthur, with really expanding her musical mind:

"Sally introduced me to music and composers from other cultures and genres I never even knew existed, like Musique concrète and Karlheinz Stockhausen, which really changed the way I thought about creative output," she says. "I also think the ability to discuss art in a critical way is so important to the work I do now."



Images: Supplied

GRADLIFE

A TEENAGE MUSIC FAN'S DREAM COME TRUE

Ong recalls the music industry being in full panic in the early to mid-2000s. The youth market had changed its go-to way of building music collections from home-taping (recording directly from the radio or their friends' collections) to downloading pirated tunes online. Traditional record stores were in rapid decline.

"Working on the record industry side at that time, it really felt like a light had been switched off overnight," she says. "The music industry was in freefall for about 15 years. Labels' budgets were slashed, people were being made redundant."

Glossy music and pop culture magazines also struggled. Music fans didn't want to pay for words on a page about their favourite artists or scenes when they could access so much more for free on the internet.

But the best magazines had one thing going for them – at least for teenagers – they gifted glorious glossy posters to put on your bedroom wall.

"As an outsider, music provided a form of escape and really was an outlet for experimentation, creativity, and of course, rebellion. But if you told me as a teenager, 'You are going to work with this artist one day whose poster you have on your wall', I would never have believed you. It was just beyond my realm of comprehension."

So it's not surprising, given her star-studded career in the music industry, she's a little reticent when asked to name some of the artists on her teenage walls:

"It feels kind of unfair to call them out one by one," she begins. "I mean, I have a broad range of musical taste and I've been really lucky to work with so many great artists. And I also get to work with some really talented up and coming artists right now who I'm super excited about."

YOUR NEW FAVOURITE SONG

A tiny sample of some of the artists Ong has worked with so far reveals cross-generational favourites like The Rolling Stones, Debbie Harry, Madonna, De La Soul, Wu Tang Clan, plus new-millennium hit makers Jay Z and Dua Lipa.

The first time Lou Reed called her on her mobile, she thought a friend was pranking her. Luckily she didn't hang up, because the person who wrote evergreen hits 'Walk on the Wild Side' and 'Satellite of Love'

wanted to talk about a rare and very specific piece of equipment he needed for a festival performance. Record producer Bob Ezrin told him to call her because 'Sulinna can always tackle a problem and solve it'.

"The one thing every artist I've worked with has in common is they want their music to be heard by people," says Ong, adding that while some artists had fought very public battles against peer-to-peer music technology (Metallica vs Napster for example), she and others in the industry worked hard to promote a better alternative:

"When I saw the advent of mobile applications and peer to peer file sharing, I knew this was the start of where it was going to go," Ong remembers, adding that back in 2000 when she graduated from Western Sydney University, smartphones and apps were still several years away.

"I don't think anyone predicted just how much the digitalisation of music would change the industry, but I felt it was going to get to a point where it would go mainstream and would be legalised. Now, hundreds of millions of people pay for music living in the cloud rather than physical products."

Ong reports the income earned from streaming helped reverse the recorded music industry's freefall, becoming its largest source of income from 2016 onwards. Music streaming (and music videos online) can quickly help build global audiences for artists outside the mainstream who previously wouldn't have had much exposure when the music media's gatekeepers were so few and powerful.

"Back in the days of the dominance of MTV and more traditional media, there were only a few outlets and decision makers choosing who would be on high rotation, or even playlisted and promoted," she says. "I think streaming has really changed that and given many more artists the opportunity to reach more people."

For example, when Korean boyband BTS topped the US Billboard album chart in 2018 and become the fastest group since the Beatles to earn four US #1 albums, fans of the group quickly 'discovered' and embraced other K-pop stars via Spotify's recommendation system and curated playlists.

Spotify's discovery tools make it easier for listeners to explore new genres and artists, and equally, feature spots on a program called RADAR can give a huge boost to emerging talents.

"Spotify's RADAR programme is focussed on new and developing artists, so we're constantly looking for fresh talent we feel will connect

with an audience, and we provide them with editorial and marketing support to help develop their careers," she says. "Spotify for Artists gives artists and their teams access to a lot of data to help them understand who's listening and where."

Knowing where the fans are is really useful for the business of music itself, whether the artist is just starting out or finds themselves once again in the zeitgeist.

Thanks to a new generation of fans using social media like TikTok to share their love, bands like Boney M and Fleetwood Mac are enjoying a resurrection of their popularity all over the world.

"It's hugely rewarding being able to remind people of a song or an artist they love and doing it at the right time that might trigger a memory," says Ong. "Helping people discover music, especially when you connect someone with a new favourite song or artist that they don't know yet, is just such a universal pleasure."

SULINNA'S ADVICE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF STUDENTS

ENJOY THE DIVERSITY AND VIBRANCY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

"Compared to other institutions, Western is a young university. And what I like about that, and what ran through the course of my experience, is that there is really a great diversity of people at Western. The people I met and the people who taught me expanded my experiences of the world. And there's definitely more of an entrepreneurial spirit, because it wasn't bogged down in the conventions and history of older universities."

KEEP LEARNING AND BUILDING ON YOUR STRENGTHS

"It's important to be realistic about your strengths and follow through on developing them – it's about being accountable. That doesn't mean you can't be ambitious: confidence is good, but this must be backed up by knowledge and results."

VALUE YOUR EDUCATION

"I think education will always be an excellent way of elevating yourself and opening up more opportunities in life. Just remember it's an enormous privilege to be able to go to university – don't take it for granted, make the most of it!"

Civic MINDED

Craig Chung's leadership is a journey of community values from Western to the City of Sydney.

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTO BY ANDREW MASON

Having owned a number of pubs in his career, Sydney City Councillor Craig Chung knows a thing or two about how people in a community come together. And while many may perceive politics as a difficult subject to brooch in polite company, he believes that many of the topics people label 'politics' are actually more about 'community'.

Chung is a fourth generation Chinese Australian, with strong family connections to Sydney dating back to 1882 on his mother's side. His dad immigrated to Australia at seven, not speaking any English, though his commitment to study saw him win a Commonwealth Scholarship to Sydney University.

At 82 years old, his dad still practices as a GP, and his mum works alongside him in the practice. Both parents taught him hard work is something to be proud of.

"Some of the values I have today about hard work and education come from my parents. And I've always been interested in the public service and advocacy side of the community," explains Chung, who enthusiastically got involved in politics in 1988 while studying for a Bachelor of Arts from the Macarthur Institute of Higher Education (now part of Western Sydney University).

He was elected a member of the Student Representative Council and then the National Union of Students, working alongside other political hopefuls such as Penny Wong, Natasha Stott Despoja, and Luke Foley. When the Institute amalgamated to become the University in late 1989, Professor David Barr (CEO of Macarthur), encouraged Chung to take a position on the Academic Board and mentored him in the fine art of working with committees.

"I really threw myself into campus life and made a lot of great friends, including Shane Alvisio who was a great advocate for sporting activities (later a member of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games organising team and Chung's groomsman)," he remembers.

"I was with him trying to get some inter-campus rivalry going in sport, even though sport was not my regular thing. I just really enjoyed organising the budgets and events side: we even managed to get a few rounds of the Student World Cup rugby at the Bankstown (Milperra) campus."

But it wasn't all fun and games being a student organiser: in 1991, Chung invited Federal Minister for Education Peter Baldwin to explain the introduction of HECS to a group of angry students. Then in August that year, he was one of around 500 students who made their views loudly known outside a nearly \$1000-a-head "Higher Education Summit" at the Hotel Nikko in Kings Cross attended by leaders from the education, government and business sectors.

"My university years were formative years of becoming really interested in public policy and advocacy," he says. "We mounted a protest with a whole lot of other campuses down at the Hotel Nikko, where we knew all the vice chancellors were meeting. And afterwards, Brian Smith, the Vice Chancellor at the time, called me because he was quite upset with a news article that appeared that I suggested he gives back half of his salary. But you know, we've moved on, I'm over 50 now and we moderate our views."

Chung admits while he has always been passionate about getting involved in the communities he's part of, he didn't start out as a great scholar. Like some teenage boys, he felt he just didn't fit in at the selective high school he attended, and he didn't achieve a great HSC result. So, he travelled for a few years before he applied for a place at what is now Western Sydney University.

"My advice for young people is the HSC is important but it's not the end of the world. There are options," he says.

"One of the things I love about Western Sydney University is it offered a generation of students in Western Sydney the opportunity for education, which otherwise may never have been there for anybody in their family.

The University was so supportive, we had a lot of people there ready to help us succeed."

"It turns out it was one of the best decisions I've made, because I really enjoyed my university studies and I've had a lifelong association with Western Sydney University since."

Pursuing a double major in Psychology and Communications was prescient, as he's drawn on his knowledge of both extensively in his business and political careers.

He remembers some group assignments being tough – "That hasn't changed for students, whether you're there in 1988 or 2021, but I think they're good because they make you work with people you've never worked with before" – and his first big exposure to partisan dynamics in a big group was a video assignment he remembers fondly as part of the Communications course.

Chung's group was given the task to market a red liquid, which they called 'Jesus's Strawberry Sauce at the Last Supper'.

"You can imagine for some people that didn't go down so well, but for others it did," he says. "It was a great experience, and it was my first big challenge where some people didn't like the work we did, even if the quality was good – but you know, as a politician you've got to get used to the idea that not everybody's going to like the work you do, even if it's good."

After completing his first of three university degrees (Chung returned to Western in the 2000s, graduating with Bachelor of Laws in 2005 and a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice in 2007) Chung joined Hotel Partners and successfully revitalised several old pubs, restoring their status as dynamic social hubs in their local areas.

During an early foray into party politics Chung joined the Democrats because some the party's values and ideas resonated with him. But during an overseas trip with his friend John Brogden (who would become leader of the opposition

“ Put yourself in the shoes of the other person and try to understand their motivation. I think we need to remain grounded, look for things we have in common and find ways to collaborate. ”

CRAIG CHUNG

in NSW in 2002) he was persuaded to change allegiance and joined the Liberal party. He was elected to Ryde City Council in 2012-2016, then City of Sydney Council in 2016.

Like Brogden, Chung knows it can be very challenging trying to put forward change-making ideas when you're not in the majority group, but it can be done:

"If you want to achieve in politics you have to draw on all your capacity to build relationships, to work with people and try and find ways in which you can get positive outcomes," he says. "I'm especially really proud of the work I've been able to address homelessness here in Sydney. Homelessness is high on the agenda for a lot of community members and it's not just about a roof over people's heads."

"It's a complex issue often involving family violence, mental illness and substance abuse. So I'm proud that I've been able to collaborate with the private sector and with Wesley Mission to get a project off the ground for a new, affordable housing complex in Glebe, particularly for women over 55."

Chung is also proud of the work he's doing on Sydney's plan for 2030, strongly promoting ideas that can help make Sydney a 'Global, Digital and Smart City'. He believes the key to its success will be leveraging data and technology to plan and deliver social, economic, environmental and liveability outcomes to the community.

"The community aspect is so important because although we come from all different walks of life, we share a lot of the same interests," he says. "Put yourself in the shoes of the other person and try to understand their motivation. I think we need to remain grounded, look for things we have in common and find ways to collaborate."

"You'd be surprised that people who sit at polar ends of a political spectrum can be the greatest of friends outside politics. So you might not agree on everything but try to find the things you can agree on because that will make life easier – and a lot more fun."



▶ See this story come to life

CREATING AUSTRALIA'S *New Authors*

An exciting new generation of writers from Western are adding their diverse voices to the Australian story.

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTOS BY ANDREW MASON

Writing can feel as natural as walking for some people: it's an instinctive practice that takes you wherever you want to go, sometimes into exciting new territory.

That yearning for adventure motivated author Maryam Azam's reading and writing practice from an early age. Her first book, *The Hijab Files*, was published in 2018, a few years after she graduated with Honours in Creative Writing from Western Sydney University in 2014. She now teaches English and hopes to inspire more young people from diverse backgrounds to write.

"I've always admired the way writers could make you feel things and think about things in different ways," she says. "Especially when you find connections with different characters – I really wanted to have the same impact on readers myself."

Though if you don't have an instinct to write, you can still share stories that move people's hearts and minds. It just takes a little practice, explains Rawah Arja, author of the young adult book *The F Team* published in September 2020, who graduated from Western with a Bachelor of Arts in 2009, followed by a Master of Teaching in 2010, and teaches creative writing in schools and workshops.

"I never wanted to be a writer, I don't have this magical story like so many writers about how they filled up notepads and read a lot when they were young," she admits. "The first time I properly read I was 16, and only because my high school teacher was like: 'You have your HSC coming up and you need to respond to texts. You can't rely on the internet for the rest of your life.'"

Arja found many of the students she mentored felt the same about reading and writing: they just weren't interested. She says that's not surprising, because as a teenager there weren't

books about her experiences, apart from one which came close: *Looking for Alibrandi*, which she describes as a revelation because for the first time she felt her voice mattered.

Unfortunately, the students she met at Punchbowl Boys High didn't have a *Looking for Alibrandi* for their generation, and often when Lebanese people are written about in the press they aren't represented fairly.

"The media paints pictures of us that make the whole community look bad," she says. "So one day when I asked my 12 to 13 year old students what stories would motivate them to read they said to me: 'Miss, would you write a book? About us, and sport, and can you make it funny?' And that's literally how I fell into writing because I saw a need."

Azam too saw a need for diverse stories to be told: she was one of the founding editors of the student newspaper at Western and formed a writers' group. The school's then Head of Program, former Pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor James Arvanitakis arranged for her to do a summer internship with Giramondo Publishing, which is based at Western, and through the publisher she joined a civil rights writing group run by Western Sydney Author Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad.

Giramondo published *The Hijab Files*, a collection of poems by Azam about life as a Muslim woman in western Sydney doing 'all the ordinary things' while wearing the hijab.

"Normally if I go to the beach, for example, I'll go to Brighton because I feel more comfortable there," she says. "Though I remember going to Bondi with uni friends – a group of us hijab wearing girls – and we had people stop and take photos of us while we were just swimming and enjoying ourselves at the beach. And I found it so strange."

"Eating curry, praying, and wearing the hijab is normal to me. I didn't see it as something to write about when I was young; because I never saw those things in what I read. Then Mohammed Ahmad taught me that it's worth writing about characters like myself because of the potential to make an original contribution to knowledge, and that's what good literature does.

Arja's young adult novel *The F Team*, also published by Giramondo, is about a group of Lebanese boys at Punchbowl Boys High who are made to play on a football team with white boys from Cronulla, an area internationally notorious for racial violence that escalated in December 2005.

Still, the book is often funny, and engagingly juggles themes such as teenage crushes, family conflicts, social friction and the consequences of choices made in the heat of the moment.

She lost count how many times her book was rejected by publishers and was often told it would be better if it was predominantly about girls and aimed at girls.

"But I'm very stubborn," she retorts. "And I believe if you actually provide boys with literature they relate to, then they will be readers."

"We need more stories about people's personal experiences outside the dominant culture," she adds. "I wrote from my memories of growing up Muslim, a minority in the Western world. If you're Arab, you're always the bad guy in every movie, so I wanted to write a book for those kids who feel they're not good enough, that they don't belong. Because they do matter, and they can be proud of where they come from."

“It's worth writing about characters like myself because of the potential to make an original contribution to knowledge, and that's what good literature does.”

MARYAM AZAM
BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS)
CREATIVE WRITING, 2014



Azam says the fact she didn't read about people like her growing up almost discouraged her from putting herself into her stories, because she didn't feel recognised. Thankfully, her peers, mentors, and teachers at Western changed her mind.

"I felt really recognised at Western, through things like the Aspire program that fosters high achievement," she says. "Western helped me connect with people from a lot of different backgrounds, with a lot of different industry experience. I think my high school peers – who mostly went to uni in the city – felt like they were just a number, even though they were high achievers in their own right."

Azam's favourite subject was critical discourse analysis, which she says taught students to pay attention to not just what is said and how it is said but also the power imbalances behind conversations and the written word.

"One of my most challenging subjects was Analytical Reading and Writing (now part of the Foundations of Academic English unit of study)," says Arja. "We really had to go deep into a work and dissect it – and I'm glad I did it, because it really taught me a lot about writing."

When these women teach writing, they're not teaching the craft of writing to start with – that comes later when the students are ready. Instead, they try to make writing as fun as possible, so the students don't notice they're learning the foundations of writing.

"As an English teacher I want to expand what's considered Australian literature, because we're a much more diverse community now, it's not all about beach culture or the sunburnt countryside," explains Azam. "So I encourage students to write about things they're actually interested in, and really try to put some of their own experiences in the stories."

Arja says she tells her students: 'You're in control of your story. You have the power'. "And it's really nice to hear back from students who say, 'I never thought I could actually write until you told me I could write about anything I like'," she says. "The best advice I can give is be real and passionately write about what you know and where you come from – because your story does matter."

“ The best advice I can give is be real and passionately write about what you know and where you come from – because your story does matter. ”

RAWAH ARJA
BACHELOR OF ARTS, 2009
MASTER OF TEACHING, 2010

DRIVEN *by* NECESSITY

How the women of Western are innovating healthcare with mobile technology.

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY



A quiet revolution is taking place in healthcare, and it is as much the result of human ingenuity as the omnipresent mobile technologies driving it.

Virtual consultations have been all but accepted by the public as a way of life, and it took a global pandemic to accelerate their adoption. However, as three Western Sydney University graduates demonstrate, many of the clever inventions for healthcare apps happened well before COVID-19. It just happened to be

the perfect time for these apps to enter the mainstream.

The three alumna featured here – Laura Simmons, Marianne McGhee and Stephanie Mascarenhas – entered the app development space to improve healthcare management with readily-available technology. They're not technologists, though they don't need to be. What matters most in an app is how easily people can access the right information.



HELPING OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PATIENTS STAY ON TRACK AT HOME

Laura Simmons (above) participated in a lot of sport as a kid, from first-grade hockey to cross-country running, ski racing and junior representative basketball. This keen interest in sport later motivated her to study physiotherapy at Western Sydney University.

"I remember enquiring about the physio course at an open day and the lady asking: 'How good are you at science and maths?'" recalls Simmons.

"So I told her, 'They're probably not my strengths, but I love biology and problem-solving'. And she suggested I apply to OT (Occupational Therapy). I'd had my heart set on doing physio, but during the first year of OT at Western I was converted."

During the practical experience of her Bachelor of Applied Science Occupational Therapy at Western, from which she graduated in 2012, Simmons discovered she was more attuned to working with young people than geriatric patients. She admits it's probably because she prefers to be creative and not to have to slow down.

"In my third year practical I was supervised by Alex Aguet, one of the amazing occupational therapists who inspired me to work with kids," she says. "During this experience I was able to support so many different kids to participate in the classroom. Seeing the impact OTs can have in the real world is such a rewarding feeling."

"I'm glad I had to redo one of the research units because it taught me more about understanding evidence in healthcare and applying it to decisions for patients."

MARRIANNE MCGHEE
BACHELOR OF NURSING, 1997



STREAMLINING OPERATING THEATRE SAFETY

Marriane McGhee always wanted a job where she could look after people, though she had a false start in her career before she enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing at Western Sydney University, graduating in 1997.

"My parents were quite poor, and they just thought I'd become a secretary. So after high school I ended up with a job in Australia Post, which was quite good money in those days," she remembers. "But I kept thinking 'I'm not feeling fulfilled in this job. I really want to help people.'"

McGhee started her nursing career at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital "just to solidify that's where I wanted to go in life" and then applied for the nursing course closest to home, at Western's Bankstown campus. She was especially impressed with the evidence-based approach to nursing taught by people who had extensive healthcare experience in hospitals.

"In some ways, I'm glad I had to redo one of the research units because it taught me more about understanding evidence in healthcare and applying it to decisions for patients," she explains. "We need the evidence to support what we're doing to optimise our patient outcomes – and it's also needed to support innovations in the market."

McGhee launched an innovation of her own called ScrubUp in 2015 after twenty years as a nurse because she saw a lot of inconsistencies in the on-the-job training nurses were given when preparing to work in the operating room.

"Medical Science at Western was a great foundation for my career because it opened my eyes to so many different lines of work."

STEPHANIE MASCARENHAS
BACHELOR OF MEDICAL SCIENCE, 2013



GIVING PATIENTS SMARTER WAYS TO MANAGE THEIR HEALTH

Stephanie Mascarenhas was inspired to study medical science at about the age of seven, after her family's frequent travels took them to India and she was shocked by the lack of health care available for much of the population.

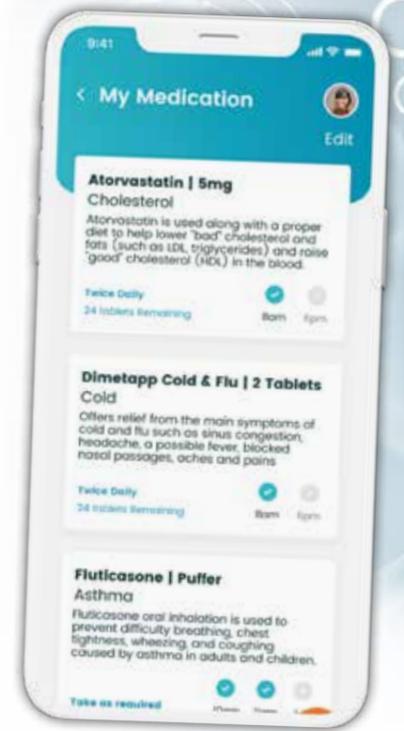
"It really pulled the cord in my heart and from that moment I wanted to dedicate my life to improving people's health," she says.

A little more than a decade later she was studying Human Biology Health and Disease at the University of Toronto, Canada when the travel bug bit her again.

"I wanted to see what's out there in the world and challenge myself," she says. "I watched a promotional video about life in Australia and I was sold right away, then Western Sydney University was the first university I checked out. I looked at the medical science course and the prospects of career work after it and knew this was the one"

Mascarenhas studied for a Bachelor of Medical Science, specialising in Human Bioscience, and was awarded as a high achiever with membership in the Golden Key International Honour Society, an international organisation that helps students develop leadership skills and access grants.

"Medical Science at Western was a great foundation for my career because it opened my eyes to so many different lines of work," she says. "The anatomy studies with cadavers was incredibly eye-opening, though I remember



thinking 'Wow, this is something very few people in the world experience', so I was really grateful to be at such a great university."

As she'd hoped, Western opened career doors on her graduation in 2013, with a clinical placement at Westmead Hospital through the university's network: "It's like a direct dripline into the healthcare field from university," she describes, adding that Western's diverse student culture built her confidence talking with people from all walks of life.

"As a Clinical Scientist at Royal North Shore Hospital I spoke to thousands of patients about their health, so good communication was a very important skill – it's also what motivated me to create a health management app. I wanted to make it easier for people to keep track of every aspect of their health from medications to appointments."

Since February 2020, Mascarenhas has balanced her work as a Clinical Scientist and Researcher at NSW Health with extra studies in blockchain and entrepreneurship to build Handy Health, an all-in-one health management app that will be available on Google and Apple's respective app stores.

"My aim is to empower all people to live rich, meaningful lives by taking away the stress that comes from managing complex health needs," she says. "I really want people to feel confident to make their health better – my goal is to have the app fulfill that childhood dream of helping all people, especially the poor, access better healthcare."

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