

GRAD *Life*

VOLUME 13 2022



**UNI IN
THE WORLD**
TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION
IMPACT RANKINGS 2022

Celebrating leaders, innovators and influencers:
Anita Heiss AM and the Women of Western

INSIDE

NEW FRONTIER

FOR THE PEOPLE

SISTER ACT

RISE OF THE
SCREENAGERS

THE TRUTH ABOUT
LEADERSHIP

A WARM
WELCOME HOME



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

At Western Sydney University, we are deeply committed to making a positive impact in our communities. It was a particularly proud moment to have these contributions recognised recently when we were named number one in the world in the 2022 Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings, which you can read more about in this issue of GradLife.

Importantly, in this issue we highlight and celebrate the successes and contributions of women. We give centre stage to some of the women of Western Sydney University who are making incredible contributions in Australia and across the world. You can read about Astrid Perry OAM (p16), who is working tirelessly to advance the rights of migrants and refugees, Lisa Ronson (p14), who has been named one of Asia's most influential marketers for her work in helping to shape the image of some of Australia's most well-known organisations, and, Zahra Esmati (p20), who is living her dream in Australia's fledgling space industry.

These are just some of the women featured in this issue, all of whom have shared their experiences and insights into the worlds they occupy. Their resilience, determination and optimism for the future is inspiring.

With our sights firmly set on the future, we will continue to focus on changing lives through excellence in research, teaching and scholarship, and unlocking the potential of our students as change-makers and future leaders in the community.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue and recognising the achievements of our remarkable alumni.

Professor Barney Glover AO
Vice-Chancellor and President

NEWS

WESTERN ANNOUNCED AS 2022 WORLD LEADER FOR THE SDGS

Western Sydney University has been named number one in the world for its social, ecological and economic impact in the latest Times Higher Education (THE) University Impact Rankings.

"As an anchor institution we are embedded in the economic, cultural and social life of Greater Western Sydney – a region experiencing first-hand many of the sustainability and resilience challenges of the 21st century, including rapid urban growth, urban heat and entrenched inequalities. Beyond the region, many of our world-leading education and research programs and collaborative international partnerships are reducing inequality and addressing issues like food and water security around the world. Social justice, inclusive education, addressing inequality, environmental stewardship and resilience – these are all core to our mission. We are committed to delivering action in all these areas and fostering the next generation of thought leaders and civic-minded citizens who can solve these complex challenges."

Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Barney Glover AO.



The University placed 1st overall worldwide and 1st in Australia in the prestigious annual rankings, which assess universities on their commitment to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The rankings are based on universities' teaching, research, outreach and stewardship. This is the fourth year of the THE University Impact Rankings, with Western Sydney University topping the list out of more than 1,400 institutions.

Our SDG highlights include:

- 1st worldwide for SDG6:** Clean Water and Sanitation
- 2nd worldwide for SDG12:** Responsible Consumption and Production
- 3rd worldwide for SDG5:** Gender Equality
- 4th worldwide for SDG10:** Reduced Inequalities
- 5th worldwide for SDG17:** Partnership for the Goals

FUTURE OF STEM LAUNCHED AT WESTMEAD INNOVATION QUARTER

Western has launched a new strategy that will transform STEM learning, research and innovation in Western Sydney over the next decade.

Bringing the University's total investment in Westmead to \$700 million, Westmead IQ is an extraordinary commitment to world-class health, medical and education research located in the heart of Westmead that will deliver health, social and economic benefits for the people of Western Sydney.

Westmead IQ will springboard Australia's brightest minds from healthcare, industry and government to new heights of health and medical breakthrough. Leading edge technologies will create a new research ecosystem that will forge solutions to some of our most pressing health challenges through STEM-related innovation and commercialisation.

Three of the University's renowned research institutes – the MARCS Institute for Brain, Behaviour and Development, NICM Health Research Institute and the Translational Health Research Institute, and Transforming



Early Education and Child Health (TeEACH) – will reside in the world-class facility, alongside key tenant, CSIRO.

Professor Kate Stevens, Pro Vice-Chancellor STEM, said the University's longstanding partnerships and STEM-embedded learning facilities like Westmead IQ would help meet the region's growing needs, including through opportunities for postgraduate study.

"Western Sydney University is committed to supporting all students who wish to pursue a career in STEM, including empowering women and people from diverse communities to excel in their chosen areas," said Professor Stevens.

6

RISE OF THE
SCREENAGERS:
Misty McPhail →



10

IN PLAIN
SIGHT:
Dr. Anita Heiss AM →



WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Front cover:
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14

THE TRUTH ABOUT
LEADERSHIP:
Lisa Ronson →



16

A WARM WELCOME HOME:
Dr. Astrid Perry OAM →



18

SISTER ACT:
Paige and Brogan Anlezark →



Paper sourced from sustainably
managed forests.

20

NEW FRONTIER:
Zahra Esmati →



22

FOR THE PEOPLE:
Amy Morris →





GRADLIFE

FILM FEST

Misty McPhail and her partner Ross co-founded the Made in the West Film Festival with Jay Chapman to showcase Western Sydney creatives.

Rise of the **SCREENAGERS**

STORY BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTOS BY ANDREW MASON





LEFT TO RIGHT: MISTY MCPHAIL – BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS), 2014;
ROSS PAGE – BACHELOR OF COMMUNICATIONS (HONOURS), 2014

Representation matters.
You're more likely to aspire to do amazing things when you see people you relate to in the public eye, proud of who they are and where they come from.

This is especially true if you're part of an area or group of people underrepresented in the mainstream. Public representation of relatable people is an incredible source of encouragement and validation, and it can help overcome stereotypes.

Fittingly, in 2012 the Made in the West Film Festival was co-founded by Misty McPhail, Ross Page and Jay Chapman to showcase the creative talents of people living and working in western Sydney. The festival also offers internships and production work opportunities for Western students, including a TV series produced in the studio at Western's Parramatta campus.

Celebrating its tenth year in 2022, the festival is expanding thanks to sponsorship from the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University and support from Associate Dean (Engagement) Dr Rachel Morley,

Acting Dean Professor Matt McGuire, Dr Wendy Chandler and Professor Peter Hutchings. "Finding creative talent in western Sydney hasn't been a struggle for the festival – they're everywhere," says Misty McPhail, who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from Western in 2014 and is completing a PhD in 2022.

"The challenge for many creatives is getting their work seen. So Made in the West was born out of rebellion, really. We knew it was difficult for western Sydney filmmakers to put their films on screen because all of those screens were in the city. And we put a flag in the ground to show, actually, we're entitled to be creative right here in western Sydney, because there's a really fantastic creative community right here, right now."

"If you can get your film into Made in the West you're guaranteed to have 300 people watching it on a proper cinematic screen," adds Ross Page, who graduated with a Bachelor of Communication (Honours) from Western in 2014. As a filmmaker he's relished the many screenings at the festival over the years and observes that as the medium translates reasonably well online, he's pleased to see online audiences for the festival grow, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

HOW FESTIVALS CAN EMBRACE DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Coincidentally, McPhail's BA Honours work explored the effects of social and digital media on creative festivals. Well before the pandemic she'd applied some of this knowledge in multiple roles with the Sydney Writers Festival, including as Artist Liaison in 2013 and Volunteers Manager (a role she's held since 2017).

"I remember in 2014 at the Sydney Writers Festival we'd started talking about digital frameworks – not online events, more podcasts and other databases of content – and it started me thinking about whether it was possible to build a festival in an online environment."

McPhail saw parallels in how event managers described the ways people navigate festival spaces and the language of website architecture, design and digital user experience. So she decided to dive deeper into the digital realm with her PhD thesis work (Humanities and Communication Arts) at Western Sydney University.

"While everybody was at home during the pandemic some of the festivals were in a much better position to connect with audiences," she

“ I spent five years trying to convince people that a festival could take place online and now the world knows it's possible. ”

MISTY MCPHAIL

says. "But it doesn't always work if a festival tries to recreate the physical festival space in an online space, because there's a sense of distance for the audience, so you need to look at other ways to engage with people."

Some of the ideas McPhail explored before the pandemic have already been successfully brought to life in the Made in the West Film Festival in 2020 and 2021. She was very excited to see artists and audiences interact in what she calls "multiplatform communal spaces".

"Accessibility is the thing that ties it all together. So as long as you're fearless and comfortable with not being in control of the conversation, then digital spaces for festivals are amazing places to be."

say 'Right, you've got this time to get this done, then come back to tell me what you found'," she says. "I'm also very animated in how I present and committed to making sure it's enjoyable and we get to the end of it with some good grades."

McPhail says her passionate style of teaching was inspired by her PhD supervisor Dr Rachel Morley and Dr Milissa Deitz, who often paired up for classes in experimental reading and writing, and she has an especially vivid and fond memory of them delivering "an entire lecture in beat poetry, blowing everyone away with their excitement for the topic". McPhail's own highly interactive online tutorials are clearly well appreciated by her students, who nominated her for recognition at Western. In 2020 she was awarded a 2020 Covid Teaching Commendation for outstanding online learning.

tour with very little contact, and Misty was there through it all," he says. "It wasn't just me in the military, it was both of us dealing with military life. When Misty started to do her PhD I said, 'This is going to be great. I'm going to marry a doctor!' Looking at it from a relationship point of view, now it's my turn to support her as she does her thesis."

Page is incredibly proud of how McPhail's research continues to ignite people's imaginations about using digital technologies to enhance festival experiences and forge stronger connections between artists and audiences.

"Misty was ahead of the curve sparking people's interest: if you look at 2018, talking about digital spaces versus physical spaces seemed a crazy notion to some people. In 2020 it became a very reasonable notion – that's how fast these ideas are moving."



"We get to see the artists in their natural creative habitat, connecting with audiences and representing themselves as artists. We absolutely embraced our 80s-style 'Choose Your Own Adventure' interactions – and the bonus of allowing the audience to make decisions is you then have live research."

McPhail continues to cultivate these "Choose Your Own Adventure" sessions in her role as a part-time tutor and unit coordinator for the School of Communication Arts at Western, where she began teaching in 2018.

"I break things into bite sized parts of each project. I send them off for three, four or seven minutes – it's always a different time – and

PARTNERSHIP THROUGH LIFE

Before McPhail and Page began their university studies as mature age students, Page served in the Australian Army for 12 years as a Section Commander of Technical Support. Army life was extremely demanding, Page reflects, and he's very grateful McPhail was so understanding through those years and during his return to civilian life.

"The military life is very structured and unnegotiable – not just for you, but also your family. You can be away for seven months on

"What I can do is highlight what's happening that allows people to see something potentially they didn't see before," adds McPhail. "I spent five years trying to convince people a festival could take place online and now the world knows it's possible."



See this story come to life

Dr. Anita Heiss AM uses literature to show what it means to call oneself Australian.

*In*PLAIN *sight*

STORY BY KEVIN CHEUNG
PHOTO BY SALLY TSOUTAS

In her Honours year at university, celebrated Wiradyuri author Anita Heiss AM picked a book out of a campus library shelf and began to read. The book, 'Australian Aborigines', had the look and smell of a venerated reference journal.

And even though it was penned in the UK by a man who had nary set foot in the country, it contained a curious entry about an adventurer who went hunting with five Aboriginal people in the then new colony of New South Wales. During the journey, the Aboriginal people left the adventurer to his own devices for a short period of time – but only four returned. The adventurer concluded that they must have eaten the fifth.

It was in this moment Heiss decided to become an author. "I thought, 'This is just insane'," she recalls. "I realised that the recording of history is completely subjective. What's recorded by colonisers is very, very different to the remembered and recorded histories of the colonised peoples around the world."

To make her point, her first book, *Sacred Cows*, turned the tables on the white Australian way of life by delivering humorous takes on Luna Park, barbecues and ANZAC Day from an Aboriginal perspective. Not even the Vegemite logo, with its token splash of white amidst its otherwise Aboriginal flag colours, was spared. The subjectivity of recorded history is a recurring theme in the works she has published since.

Happily, the experience of finding an error-filled textbook about "Australian Aborigines" in the library did not take place at Western Sydney University. But it easily could have.

"I went through school in the eighties knowing more about Australian history in terms of Aboriginal people and our role in society today than my teachers," she explains. "There was very, very little literature on the shelves. There wasn't material in the lecture theatre. It's only now that Indigenous studies are becoming compulsory."

When Heiss completed her PhD with Western in 2001, she was the first Aboriginal person to do so, even though western Sydney has the highest concentration of Indigenous people in the country. It is a milestone she remembers with great pride and joy, but it was long overdue.

ABOVE: HEISS WAS APPOINTED A MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA (AM) THIS YEAR FOR SIGNIFICANT SERVICES TO TERTIARY INDIGENOUS STUDIES, AND TO THE ARTS.

WESTERN CALLING

Heiss' journey to Western began in Canada while she was on a four-month exchange program, working on native Kahnawake newspapers, including *The Eastern Door*. It was during this time the idea of learning how Indigenous publishing in Australia could work took root.

Within a week of returning to Sydney, she began making enquiries with local universities. "I remember the phone call vividly," she recalls of her conversation with Western's Postgraduate Office. "I said, 'Look, I've just gotten back in the country, and this is what I would really like to do'. And they made it very easy for me to get my application in, even though applications were closing in a couple of weeks."

"I'll never forget it because that first call, that first piece of communication, set the tone for my entire experience of studying at Western Sydney University. I felt so welcomed and cared for throughout my degree. I've always remained grateful for that."

She found a kindred spirit in fellow PhD candidate, Peter Minter, with whom she co-edited an anthology of Aboriginal literature in 2008.

The central figure in her PhD candidacy, however, was Professor Peter Kirkpatrick whom she remembers as an extraordinary supervisor.

"I really, really loved working with him. What I learned from him, apart from what I needed to get through the PhD, was how to be a good supervisor. He would say to me, 'You can say whatever you want to say, but you need to back it up.'"

"He turned my chapters around really quickly. At some point we lived in the same suburb, so I could just submit at a coffee shop instead of having to go once a month out to Western Sydney."

"I'm really eternally grateful that I did my PhD at Western Sydney University. I can't imagine, looking back, having it done it anywhere else."

FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH LITERATURE

Heiss has authored numerous books since her time at Western, painting a complex, modern picture of Aboriginal identity through historical fiction, non-fiction, children's novels and more. One of her seminal works, *Am I Black Enough For You?*, which followed the successful prosecution of columnist Andrew Bolt under the Racial Discrimination Act, continues to provoke conversation.



Photo: Supplied

Heiss' passion for creating literature through her Wiradyuri lens came in part from her realisation that Aboriginal people did not exist in the minds of many Australians.

"Aboriginal people didn't exist on the national identity radar," she explains. "There are Anglo-Australians, Chinese-Australians, Greek Australians, Italian Australians and all these other hyphenated Australians. And, of course, there are the 'real' Australians, who can trace their families back to the First Fleet. But nowhere did we exist on the radar."

Nothing could have illustrated this predicament better than a conversation she overheard between a Melbourne man and an American tourist while sitting on a plane at Mascot airport.

The American said, "I've been here for six weeks and I met a fourth generation Australian. Pretty good, isn't it?"

The Melbournian responded, "Wow, a fourth generation Australian: you just don't get any more Australian than that."

In that moment, Heiss looked across to her travelling companion, another prominent Indigenous Australian and Western alumnus, Michael McDaniel, to make sure he'd heard the same thing. "We looked at each other, and we were both like, 'what about 4,000th generation Australian?'" And in a brutally sobering moment, she realised "we didn't exist".

And so it was that Heiss approached the principal of La Perouse Public School, the late Paul Travini, with the idea of writing some books with the students. Although her aim was to put the children on the national identity radar, the project would become an inspiring example of the importance of representation.

The children were encouraged to draw upon their lifestyle and experiences living in La Perouse, and they were completely invested. "We voted on everything from the names of characters and teachers," she recalls of the 15-month creative process for their second book, which

“I want all Australian children to see diversity in the classroom. I want them to be able to see aspects of themselves and their lives on the pages.”



Photo: Supplied

included a trip to Bondi Beach to observe and take notes on everyday life. "They had worksheets, and I gave them tasks to show them what I would do as a writer."

Their first book, "Yirra and her Deadly Dog, Demon", tells the adventures of a young girl trying desperately to find a trainer for her naughty dog before she is forced to give it up to a new family. The sequel, "Demon Guards the School Yard", explores the value of caring for one's country.

"One of the greatest joys is to see that those kids were the first Australian children to co-author a novel," Heiss reflects tearfully. "You just see their self esteem soar in the classroom when kids of all cultural backgrounds are given the opportunity to be creative, and also speak about their life experiences in a way they don't normally see in

Australian literature."

"I want all Australian children to see diversity in the classroom. I want them to be able to see aspects of themselves and their lives on the pages."

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LITERACY

But not all children are so lucky as to even have books. The sad truth, she explains, is that many remote communities don't have a local library, and their classrooms are stocked with outdated, antiquated and irrelevant books – more so than the one she encountered as an undergraduate student.

"I believe every Australian child, regardless of where they live or who they are, should have equal access to books and particularly the resources they need to learn," says Heiss, who is a Lifetime Ambassador for the

Indigenous Literacy Foundation. In the last ten years, the Indigenous Literacy Foundation put more than 537,000 books into more than 400 remote communities – an accomplishment of which Heiss is proud to be part.

"If you can't read, you can't make decisions," Heiss explains very matter-of-factly. "Whether it's health, things to keep you safe, street signs, labels on food... I'm very passionate about the need to have literacy to make decisions in our lives. I just want every Australian child to have all the opportunities that I had."



See this story come to life



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*Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2021

Lisa Ronson's empathy for diverse human experiences drives her high-flying career in marketing and on boards.

The truth about LEADERSHIP

STORY BY STUART RIDLEY

Many of the best marketing campaigns share simple truths, matched with an attractive offer to motivate spending. But how do you know which truths and offers will appeal to customers?

Lisa Ronson, Chief Marketing Officer at Coles and named one of Campaign Asia Pacific's most influential and purposeful marketers in 2019 and 2020, says good marketing gets to the heart of human experience – something she began to hone during her studies at Western Sydney University in the early 1990s.

"I chose the Commerce degree with a Marketing major at Western because it covered more human behaviour topics than other universities," she says. "We learned a methodical approach to understanding consumers and that's something I've carried throughout my career."

"Without consumer insights, brands (and products) can fail in the market," Ronson explains. She remembers group assignments about huge FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) brands that completely bombed because apparently no one stopped to consider what consumers actually wanted.

Those group assignments also helped Ronson develop team skills, drawing on her innate curiosity and empathy to understand different people's personalities and find the best ways to work with their strengths and weaknesses. "In any role in your career you've got to recognise the diversity of human behaviours and capability, and work within a framework to get the best outcomes," she says. "For me, it's always about the people, and my proudest moments in my career are when I'm working with great teams."

DOUBLE STANDARDS AT WORK

Ronson graduated with Distinction from Western in 1994 and at 23 became Senior Brand Manager at Carlton & United Breweries (CUB). Her role included managing advertising, packaging, brand financials and consumer touch points for Cascade, Fosters and VB – products mostly consumed by blokes.

The workplace culture then was almost a throwback to the 50s, because it was mostly men. Perhaps, she reflects, the men thought their "banter" about women came from a good place. "They'd say things like 'Oh, you should wear a skirt more often'. Some of them might have thought they were being complimentary. But a lot of it was ill-intended. The double standards about how men and women are treated are horrific."

"One of the horrible things about what's happened in industries like film and TV, is that while it's being called out now, a lot of people would have known about it; and in politics, when you look at the behaviours Julia Gillard had to put up with only a few years ago – it's disgraceful and just unacceptable."

"So I am glad ill-intended behaviour is being called out and stamped out now, because it absolutely should, and I'm happy the world is embracing women leaders. That's the way it should be: some of the best leaders in the world are – and have always been – women."

MAKING WORKPLACES BETTER

Ronson's 20-plus years' experience as a senior executive spans the worlds of finance (Visa and Westpac), technology (Telstra), retail (David Jones and Coles) and tourism (Tourism Australia). She's served on industry boards such as the Global Banking Alliance for Women, Australian Association of National Advertisers

and Flybuys. She mentors upcoming leaders as patron of the Australian Marketing Institute's Emerging Marketers Program.

Advancing a career while raising children is challenging, she states simply. It's why she's strongly advocated for flexible work practices and ensured they're available for her teams.

"My son is 20 now (I can't believe I have a 20-year-old son!) and I had to take the flexibility, and make it work," she says. "I've had a lot of conversations about how you get the best out of your people when you support them to have a balanced life, and not have to hide huge aspects of their lives, like their family and relationships. In return you get loyal, happier and more productive team members. Because if you're happy, healthy and balancing life you're going to be more successful than not."

Equally importantly, Ronson is pleased organisations are making more effort to encourage people to be well, more human, and not put on some sort of armour when they come to work.

"In my career I've been told things like, 'Don't be so nice, don't lead like a woman, you've got to be hard'. I've always tried to be true to myself because it's really exhausting trying to be someone else."

"Regardless of where you are in an organisation or how senior you are, it's all about people: treat people the way you want to be treated. If you've got team members who are struggling with something, lean in and help them out – just be a decent person."

BUILDING TRUST IN A BRAND

Before Ronson became Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) as part of Coles' new leadership team in 2019, a nationwide Roy Morgan Net Trust survey

ranked the supermarket chain as one of the least trusted brands in Australia, along with all four major banks.

When she was tipped for the CMO role she met with the new team in the final stages of recruitment. During one of those sessions a head merchandise buyer was puzzling over why customers didn't know about some of the positive things Coles was doing.

"He was saying, 'Coles is doing the right thing while no one's watching, investing billions into things like humane meat supply chains and sustainability – why don't we tell these stories?'"

Ronson and her new team began sharing those kinds of stories and by the end of 2019, Coles was back in the top 10 most trusted brands in Australia and rose to the number two spot in 2021.

"Consumers care more than ever about where their food comes from and want to know businesses' environmental credentials," she says. "And I think it's great a lot more people are holding businesses to account – so I'm really proud we work as a great team together to make a difference for the customer."

Ronson believes one of the big responsibilities of leaders in any industry is to make a positive difference. She'd like to see more diversity in organisations' boards, including more women, people with disabilities and more representation culturally. As a mentor to future leaders, she also hopes to see more young people on boards.

"I think age diversity is important: we need some younger people on some boards because they bring a different perspective. Younger generations have grown up in a very different digital world to that of a lot of the older directors and can bring knowledge for how consumers now live their lives."

Since providing this interview, Lisa has left her role at Coles to pursue new career opportunities.



“ You’ve got to recognise the diversity of human behaviours and capability to get the best outcomes.

LISA RONSON

”



“There’s no point in just talking about these things without action. I’m very focused on making change happen.”

DR ASTRID PERRY OAM ”

Dr Astrid Perry OAM draws on her lived experience and extensive qualifications to drive positive change for immigrants and refugees settling in Australia.

A WARM welcome HOME

WORDS BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTO BY KEVIN CHEUNG

New migrants, and particularly refugees, can feel overwhelmed when they arrive in a new country they hope to call home.

Especially if they’re unsure how they’ll be treated. They’ve already made personal and financial sacrifices to leave another country and, in many ways they’re starting from scratch.

So it helps to have someone championing them as they create new lives. And Dr Astrid Perry OAM, Manager of Strategic Policy at Settlement Services International, has devoted her career to being that champion.

Australians might say they’re proud of their multicultural society, but it’s not easy for

migrants to get the same opportunities as people born here, reflects Perry. She knows this because her family has walked a mile (and thousands more) in migrants’ shoes.

Her mother grew up in Germany during the tail end of the Second World War and experienced bomb raids, so she moved to Switzerland, met Perry’s father and settled in Zurich.

“Both my parents sometimes spoke about the hardships their parents went through, though more often they spoke about how unfair it was that neighbours were struggling to afford basic things, that people didn’t have employment,” she remembers. “So I think those conversations about social justice issues influenced my long-term trajectory.”

She began her career in Switzerland, first as a

manager of residential care for orphans and abandoned children, then at a centre for girls with hearing difficulties. In her mid-20s, as is unremarkably common, she made a life-changing decision about her relationship at the time. It meant relocating to Australia and re-starting her career.

“As a migrant and non-English speaker I had to do a test,” she recalls. “My marks weren’t quite good enough to go into university but they were good enough for an Institute of Higher Education. I looked around for the nearest welfare-type course and that’s how I ended up studying at what is now Western Sydney University. It offered proximity, eligibility and the right kind of course. I really like that the course gave us applicable professional lessons, because the lecturers in social work bring their experience of being a social worker first.”

A STRONG CONNECTION WITH WESTERN

Perry remembers being in awe of the open spaces at the Bankstown campus and the friendliness of the people she met when she started her Associate Diploma in Social Welfare. She’d visited other universities, but in comparison to Western they felt too big, too imposing by design.

“I just loved the Bankstown campus. The trees were so beautiful; it was very peaceful; and unlike other places you could park and walk in!” she says. “And I loved the relaxed and multicultural atmosphere. For me as a new migrant, it was really my space; you felt comfortable with it immediately in your lectures and socialising on the lawns.”

One of her lecturers, Professor Mary Hawkins, made a wonderful early impression; she taught with heart and was adept at gently guiding students in the right direction. She was also prepared to listen to students’ problems and help them find a way through.

“I think that’s really important in university, because students have their doubts about whether they should stay – she was always really encouraging,” says Perry. “Mary had the

GRADLIFE

highest influence across all of my studies right through my BA (Honours) Sociology in the mid-90s and supervised my PhD (Sociology) in 2005, which was very good.”

Perry’s PhD focused on gender equity in schools, which is a major issue in many countries including, sadly, Australia. One of the big insights is that women are too often held back by social structures. So although girls tend to score higher HSC marks on average, exam success doesn’t play out in the long term for women.

“I’ve had several roles in my career focused on women,” she says. “Being a woman of diversity, I know there’s no point in just talking about these things without action. I’m very focused on making change happen.”

SUPPORTING MIGRANT WOMEN

After graduating from Western (the first time) Perry’s qualifications helped her land a management position supervising a migrant employment project. She was shocked by the politics of the sector and how some politicians exerted their (unfavourable) influence.

Later, when she became CEO of the Migrant Resource Centre she made sure communities – not political attitudes – influenced strategic decisions. She was then instrumental in founding the NSW Migrant Resource Centre Association (NSW MRCA).

“It needed to happen because the Howard government brought a competition policy in, that meant for-profit organisations could get involved in the refugee servicing sector. The tender process favoured large organisations, so we combined the 11 migrant resource centres in NSW.”

Every person who worked on the tender had a job dedicated to working with refugees, and, as Perry proudly states, they were all specialists in refugee servicing.

“It seemed ludicrous to let our work go and expertise go. And, certainly, we believed the refugees deserved better,” she adds. “I think we were a little bit of a thorn in the side of the government because we stood up for our principles, but were successful. Communities want to be heard and seen, they want input on the services they’re getting, and we wanted to help them get a better deal.”

Now as a strategy leader at Settlement Services International (SSI), which has grown to be an

800 employee-strong community organisation and social business, her major focus is on programs to support women escaping domestic violence. This can include helping women get their children and themselves away from the perpetrator, setting up a new home and delivering culturally-appropriate food to help them settle in.

SSI also provides a huge range of services to help families settle into schools, find jobs and connect with community groups.

“For women, often the focus was all about the men getting a job and that can leave women behind – it’s harder for them to integrate,” says Perry. “It can take a lot for women to negotiate all of that. Not only a new country and community, but importantly the wellbeing of their family.”

Perry hopes leaders in other organisations will champion inclusion policies to help migrant women – and all women – succeed. She recommends taking real action: foster mentorship, support flexible work practices and put in affirmative action policies around advancing women.

“The Gender Equality Index for NSW published recently shows we’re losing ground on a number of measures. So we have to be vigilant and keep that passion active,” she cautions.

In 2021 Dr Perry received the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in recognition of her many years of professional and voluntary service to the community. When asked about what the award means for her, she downplays any notion of status, and instead reflects on it being a public acknowledgement of the role advocacy plays in making social change happen.

“We operate as a collective, so these are not all my personal achievements, they’re achievements as a group and over many years,” she says. “What keeps us going are all the small wins, the heartening wins when something is resolved well for a family and you see them thriving. And there’s an incredible camaraderie among migrants because we have the same lived experience – it’s uplifting!”

There are lots of celebrations and there’s a lot of give and take because we know what we’ve been through.”



See this story come to life



LEFT TO RIGHT: BROGAN ANLEZARK - BACHELOR OF COMMUNICATIONS (HONOURS), 2014; AND PAIGE ANLEZARK - MASTER OF TEACHING, 2014.

Both are driven, both are Western graduates – but they’re heading in very different directions. Here, twins Paige and Brogan Anlezark tell *GradLife* about the steps they’ve taken to turn their qualifications into fulfilling careers.

SISTER *act*

STORY BY EMMA MULHOLLAND
PHOTO BY ANDREW MASON

PAIGE ANLEZARK

I always talk to Brogan about my classes but last year, when I was teaching remotely during the Covid-19 lockdown, she got to know every student’s name. We live together - in the same place we grew up in at Edensor Park - and, with both of us working from home, the house was like an office. Brogan was in the study and I was at the dining room table. Mum hated it.

But for us, it was like being back at uni, when we used to bounce ideas off each other. We did completely different degrees - Brogan majored in journalism and I did a Master of Teaching (Primary) - so the content was different but the principles were the same. She would run into my room with questions about referencing and I used to remind her when things were due. I’m a planner, she does everything at the last minute. But we’re both ambitious; I think we get that from our parents. They didn’t go to uni but they’ve always been driven.

I graduated in 2014 and at the time there was an influx of teachers and not enough work. I ended up driving to 20 schools in one day, handing over my resume and giving the same speech at every one - that’s what you had to do to get work. I can’t believe we had a strike last year over a teacher shortage; when I started out, I was so stressed about finding permanent work.

Eventually, I was offered a position at Bonnyrigg Heights Primary School, where I did my first practicum at 21. They knew I was a hard worker. About 90% of our students come from a non-English speaking background, and that’s what I’m used to. I live 10 minutes’ drive down the road and I love that I’m still immersed in the community I grew up in.

BROGAN ANLEZARK

We’ve always been competitive and I think that’s contributed to our success. Paige and I push each other to take that next step, but when we finished our degrees, she had a clear path and I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do.

While I was at uni, I’d been lucky enough to get a few internships through my lecturers and, because it’s the media, they throw you right in. When I was at the ABC, they said, “here’s some sound equipment. Go record what’s happening.” And I was like, “Oh, this is my worst nightmare”. I quickly realised it wasn’t for me.

So I did my honours year and by the time I finished, I knew I wanted something more corporate. I was accepted into the graduate program at Transport for NSW and it was the best thing for me. Since then, I’ve worked on various media teams, which has included assisting with the department’s response to the 2019/20 bushfires and the pandemic.

Today, my role is more strategic: it’s about connecting stakeholders, be it for a parliamentary enquiry or a government submission. Basically, it’s lots of problem solving. Paige still doesn’t understand what I do. When we were working from home, she told her class I’m a journalist, so her students think I’m a newsreader.

At work, people will ask me where I’m from and sometimes there’s a bit of, “Oh, western Sydney?” And I think that’s really unfair. I’m proud to be born and bred in western Sydney - I’ll fly the flag any chance I get. There are so many successful people here, and I would include us as two of them.

Interview has been edited for length and clarity.

GOING BEYOND GRAD ROLES

Getting your foot in the door is one thing, but the challenge doesn’t end there. Brogan’s number-one tip for female grads? “Take on any challenge that’s given to you - don’t say no,” she says. “There have been many times when Paige and I wanted to say no to things but we didn’t, and I think that’s really helped us.”

Paige adds, “don’t hide. I go for leadership roles at my school and I make sure I’m known. After all, what’s the worst that can happen? Someone might say no - or no, not this time.” Brogan agrees “That’s happened to me plenty in my career.”

Step two is to find “allies” in the workplace. “It’s not always going to be a woman,” says Brogan. “It’s just going to be a genuinely good person who cares about your career and your progression.” Paige’s first ally was a male teacher who supervised her first practicum. “I ended up bonding with him so well,” she says. “I still message him and ask him for advice. I think it’s important to remember that men can be champions for women.”

Lastly, pay it forward. Brogan just has taken on a new team member, a graduate in the same program she undertook seven years ago. “I know this is a big deal for her, so I want her to learn everything she can,” says Brogan. “Of course, there are always better ways to do things and programs can be better, but someone has to make that happen - and that can be someone like me.”



See this story
come to life



“ Just follow your dream no matter how difficult others say it will be.

ZAHRA ESMATI ”

Zahra Esmati chased her dream half way across the world and has her sights set on the stars.

New frontier

STORY BY KEVIN CHEUNG

When the Federal Government shut down its space program in 1996, generations of Australians who nurtured the dream of one day becoming an astronaut suddenly found themselves adrift.

That all changed in 2018 when the Government established an all-new Australian Space Agency in Adelaide, sparking an immediate boom in the space sector in our southern state. Zahra Esmati, who had graduated from Western with a Masters in Electrical and

Electronic Engineering, was well placed to charge head-first into it.

Esmati is an antenna engineer at Fleet Space Technology, where she designs antennae for satellites that transmit and receive signals from Earth. Their function is absolutely critical, given that all instructions and actions can only be carried out if they are communicated quickly and accurately.

It's a career she has dreamt of since she was in school. Before obtaining a bachelor's degree in telecommunications engineering in her native Iran, Esmati idolised Anousheh Ansari, a female electrical engineer who, against the odds, became the first Iranian in space in

2006. When Esmati came to Australia as an international student, she was determined to continue working in telecommunications. Her first challenge was finding the right place to continue her studies.

WESTERN CHARM

Despite having offers and scholarships from other universities, Esmati credits her decision to study at Western to a chance encounter with Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Barney Glover AO.

"It was Ramadan and I was at Iftar when I met him," recalls Esmati. "I introduced myself and

he was very supportive of me." "When you're talking with the Vice-Chancellor, and you know he's listening to you and cares about what you are saying, it boosts your energy to work harder. I really appreciated him for that." The Vice-Chancellor maintained that warmth and encouragement through the course of her studies. It's a sentiment that extended to her entire campus experience, where she thrived as a research student, often studying into the late hours of the night.

"I lived at the Penrith campus for around two and a half years, you won't be able to find a better location when it comes to commuting to the office," she says. "There are lots of student events where you can make friends from many different nationalities and get familiar with their cultures, which I found interesting."

"I believe feeling safe and comfortable comes first while you need to concentrate and study hard," she continues. "The research student/supervisor relationship is an important part of the master or doctoral studies process. Good supervisors can support students through the struggles of independent research and guide them towards productive, innovative and exciting careers."

That said, she has many fond memories of her supervisors, the late Dr Sergey Kharkovsky, who taught her the value of attending weekly meetings, writing regular reports and finding

the discipline to turn plans into reality. Like many younger students, she did not see the point of them, but Kharkovsky whipped her into shape. "He was strict," she laughs.

She also has a tremendous amount of time and gratitude reserved for Professor Bijan Samali, who supported her studies over the years. "Thank you for showing me how a great leader leads," she says.

A NEW LIFE IN ADELAIDE

Her most difficult move of all was relocating to Adelaide, which took place just as the Covid-19 pandemic began sweeping across Australia.

"I had to leave all my friends and moved to another city to start from scratch," she reflects. "But there was no stopping for me. Once I found a new goal to reach, there was no going back. I'm happy I made that decision."

Indeed, Esmati has well and truly dived head-first into a job she loves. Her days at Fleet Space are spent at the helm of high-frequency simulation software, creating, fabricating and then assembling different antenna for satellite and communications purposes. She is also part of the Seven Sisters Mission at Fleet Space to send nanosatellites and sensors to the moon to search for abundant, accessible water,

supporting NASA's Artemis program. "When you love what you're doing, you don't just go to work for the nine-to-five experience. At least that's not how it is for me," she muses.

Esmati comports herself with stoicism and reserve. She is pragmatic. She was prepared for the challenges of pursuing a career in STEM where women are often greatly outnumbered.

"You have to be strong. You have to be prepared to work hard and sacrifice," she says. Recalling her formative lessons with Dr Kharkovsky, she continues, "You have to have discipline and stand by what you believe is correct, no matter what."

Her advice to other women pursuing a career in STEM is "Just follow your dream no matter how difficult others say it will be and do not let anyone or anything limit your dream. Don't think about being a man or a woman, just concentrate on a goal, and work hard until you can mark it as 'done!'"

And to that end, Esmati still dreams of one day becoming an astronaut.

"I believe now that if you can imagine it, it will happen," she says. "When I was a child, imagining that I will work in space or become an astronaut one day, I knew it was probably impossible. But today, I can see step by step how I can reach that."



Amy Morris' 25-year career has come full circle since she graduated from Western Sydney University. She's now Western's Chief People Officer.



For THE People



STORY BY STUART RIDLEY
PHOTO BY ANDREW MASON

Teams thrive when their leaders are open about the challenges and opportunities the group is facing, and encourage an environment where everyone feels respected and valued.

Though big announcements are often delivered by CEOs, sports team captains and community leaders, typically behind every public leader is an accomplished "people person" advising them – an HR leader or Chief People Officer.

"Some of the best moments in my career are when I've worked with a leader to help them make a difference with their team and seen the positive impact and change," says Amy. She was appointed Chief People Officer at Western

Sydney University in August 2021 – 20 years after she graduated from Western with a Bachelor of Commerce (Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations).

She'd gained entry to Western through a cadetship at Sims Metal Management, an industrial metal and electronics recycling business, which paid for her to study for a Bachelor of Commerce/Marketing while also working full time.

"Western Sydney University was already ahead of the game with more flexible options for part-time students, so it felt like the easy choice," she says. "Other universities only had limited part-time offers, so unless you wanted to major in finance and accounting and had a cadetship with a "Big 5" Accounting firm (as it was at the time), the options were limited. So I'm glad Western gave me the opportunity. And I grew up in the area, so it was close to home."

MAKING THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES AT WESTERN

One of the many things Amy loved about studying part time at Western was meeting some incredible women who were senior leaders studying part time as mature-age students. After many conversations with her mentors, she made a big decision about her career and studies:

"I was halfway through my degree and one lady in particular encouraged me to think about putting myself forward for a job at P&O Australia as an HR and Training Coordinator. So I owe that to her. After the move from Marketing to an HR major, resigning from my first job (at Sims) was really hard – I cried to my boss – but it did build some resilience that helped me in my career."

"Some of the best moments in my career are when I've worked with a leader to help them make a difference with their team and seen the positive impact and change."

AMY MORRIS

"



Amy acknowledges it's not easy to find your vocation – a career choice and an organisation that you have a connection with, and can find shared purpose in is important – and so she encourages young people to explore lots of different opportunities and not be afraid to change paths.

"We have incredible people at Western Sydney University in our careers and education teams who help students understand the broad opportunities out there," she says. "One of the tips I've given my own children is to enjoy student life, soak it all up and get involved in campus activities – don't be in too much of a hurry to get out into the working world, because you'll be there for a really long time."

While her own university experience was part time across several years, Amy is very grateful she had a chance to study and work with some really experienced industrial relations leaders – and towards the end of her studies she jumped at the opportunity to do an elective in employee recruitment that gave her real-world experience.

"The university realised an opportunity and created a one-time subject that gave students the chance to interview volunteers for the Sydney Olympics, which was high volume and fast paced," she says. "We went out to enormous venues and interviewed thousands of people who would have contact with

Olympians, so they all had to be vetted. And then we wrote papers on the experience, which linked it back to our studies. I think it's a great example of the innovative and beneficial ways the University helps students develop skills."

BALANCING A GREAT CAREER WITH FAMILY LIFE

Before coming back to Western, Amy's 25-year career saw her heading up People and Performance teams across several industries undergoing significant change, including fast moving consumer goods (George Weston Foods), media and advertising (News Corp), telecommunications (Optus) and pharmaceuticals (Eli Lilly).

"The role and contribution of HR is critical for the organisational strategy and leadership team to be successful," she notes. "HR leaders guide and shape the culture of an organisation, working with leaders to ensure the vision is well articulated and executed. Just as important is supporting growth in leadership and the culture of an organisation, by embedding pragmatic and impactful talent management strategy and role modelling and leaning into the difficult tricky "stuff". Operationally, HR leaders are challenging how organisations plan and function, collaborating for the best outcomes."

If you get a chance to meet her, you'll notice Amy has a confident "can do" approach to her

work. Being fully present is important for her – but she's also not shy about acknowledging life as a parent with a busy career can be tough.

"I think it's good to see more women sharing stories about the juggling we do, having kids and having a career. I remember a leader I'd worked with putting up this fabulous post on LinkedIn saying, 'If I haven't got my camera on it's because there's 19 baskets of washing behind me!' For me, having a big job is what makes me tick, but it's not for everyone. You've got to do what's right for you and your family."

As her career has advanced, she's helped organisations she's worked with make progress for working parents too. She strongly believes taking time off for parental leave shouldn't impact your career and has guided policy updates for more favourable parental leave and superannuation, along with advocating and encouraging women who want to become leaders.

"One of the things I like about my work at Western is that the University supports people to reach their education and career goals, whether you study full time, or do it part time," she says. "We have strong industry partnerships, which give students access to a broad range of connections and opportunities across so many industries. The University opens doors for people, especially in western Sydney."

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