



Acknowledgment of Country

Victoria University (VU) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners of the lands on which we learn, work and connect.

We recognise the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our campuses stand, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that First Nations Peoples have cared for Country, shared knowledge and sustained cultures, languages and communities for tens of thousands of years.

We are grateful for the knowledge, leadership and perspectives that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples bring to our university community. Through our commitment to Protecting Country, we recognise our shared responsibility to care for the places, relationships and knowledge systems that sustain us all.





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Why this Report?

We are the beneficiaries of Indigenous Eldership and the principle of Protecting Country. As we continue to learn and work on — and with — Country, we recognise and honour that responsibility.

For more than a century, VU has been shaped by a commitment to equity, opportunity, and community impact. From Melbourne's west to global partnerships and research, our work is grounded in creating meaningful change beyond our campuses.

This first VU Impact Report brings together stories, lived-experiences and evidence of that impact — told through the people and communities connected to VU.

Ultimately, we measure success not by looking inward, but by the difference we make in the lives of others.

Hannah Singleton
and Jessica Harrington





Built on trust

HOW A LONG-STANDING PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN VU AND THE WESTERN BULLDOGS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION IS CREATING PATHWAYS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS MELBOURNE'S WEST.

The west of Melbourne is one of the fastest growing regions in Australia — rich in diversity, community and opportunity, but also facing significant social and economic pressures as its population expands rapidly.

In communities changing this quickly, trusted local institutions matter.

For decades, VU and the Western Bulldogs Community Foundation have worked in — and alongside — communities across the west.

Today, the partnership supports programs spanning health, leadership, inclusion and education, creating pathways for local young people both inside and outside the classroom.

“The west is incredibly diverse. Incredibly resilient,” says Hannah Singleton, General Manager of the Western Bulldogs Community Foundation (WBCF). “There’s so much strength here that doesn’t always get recognised.”

Operating from Whitten Oval in Footscray, the Foundation delivers hundreds of community programs each year across Melbourne’s west and regional Victoria.

“The programs that we run are really about empowering our communities to become agents of change in their own communities,” Hannah shares.

“It’s a bit of a Trojan horse,” Hannah reflects. “We might bring people in because of the Bulldogs, but once they’re there, we can have deeper conversations about health, leadership, gender equity.”

For newly arrived migrants involved in the Team Up program, sport is often a gateway into community life.

The familiarity with the Bulldogs helps create environments where people feel comfortable participating — including communities that can sometimes be harder to reach through traditional services or institutions.

“How do you talk to a group of older men about healthy masculinity?” she asks. “We’ve been doing that for years — and we can, because we’ve created a safe space through the club.”

For newly arrived migrants involved in the Team Up program, sport is often a gateway into community life.

“They might not know anything about footy, but they trust the environment,” Hannah says, pointing to the 350 students from Western English Language School who participated in the program in 2025.

In the same year, more than 860 secondary students also participated in the Foundation’s Schools Program, supported co-designed and delivered in partnership with VU. Through workshops focused on leadership, mental health, social impact, intercultural understanding and employment readiness, the program helps young people build confidence and see new possibilities for their future.

Beyond school programs, the partnership also creates opportunities for VU students to gain hands-on experience in community settings.

In 2025, over 70 VU students undertook placements with the Foundation across multiple disciplines, contributing directly to workshops, mentoring and community programs.

“They bring lived experience,” Hannah says. “Many of our students are from the west themselves.”

“When participants see someone just a few years older who shares their background, that is just a game changer. They start to think: I could be like them.”

Jessica Harrington, Account Coordinator, Major Partnerships at VU, sees the benefits of VU student placements firsthand.

“The Foundation understand the student cohort coming through. They provide a really safe learning space for them,” she says.

“They’re in the room, making an impact. It gives them confidence, exposure and a real understanding of community work: something you can’t replicate in a classroom.”

For some students, placement leads to employment.

WBCF has developed employment pathways allowing students to continue working with the organisation after their studies. Seven VU graduates secured employment with the Foundation in 2025.

The partnership has also created opportunities for closer collaboration between research and practice. “It changed the way I think,” Hannah says. “The conversations we were having with researchers has shaped how we measure our work, and how we better understand our communities.”

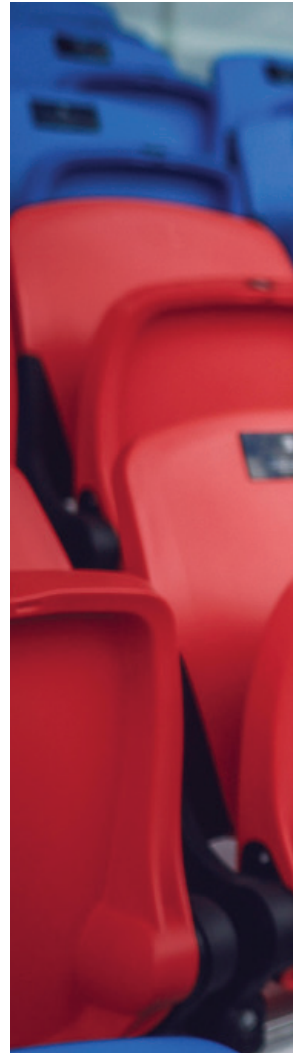
But as Hannah points out, some of the most important outcomes are difficult to measure.

“Connection. Belonging. The confidence to speak up,” she says. “You see it in the room; the smiles, the conversations.”

As the partnership continues to evolve, both organisations remain focused on the communities that shaped them.

“There’s never a sense of ‘that won’t work,’” says Jessica. “It’s always, ‘how could we make this work?’”

“There’s always something new,” Hannah agrees. “Because both organisations are so embedded in the community, the opportunities don’t run out.”





Hannah Singleton

860+
secondary students

participated in WBCF school programs in 2025

70
placements in 2025

Students access learning
opportunities through programs
and placements at Whitten Oval

VU, Bulldogs and WBCF continue
to support pathways in education,
sport, and community leadership



Megan O'Shea and team

Restoring native grasslands in Melbourne's west

PROTECTING ONE OF VICTORIA'S MOST ENDANGERED ECOSYSTEMS
— AND CHANGING HOW PEOPLE SEE THE LANDSCAPE AROUND THEM.

It doesn't look like much at first — a stretch of grassland in Melbourne's west with no obvious mark of significance, edged by roads and housing. But this is one of the last remaining fragments of the Victorian Volcanic Plain — an ecosystem that once covered a third of the state. **Today, less than one per cent remains.**

At VU's St Albans campus, the Iramoo Native Plant Nursery is working to restore and protect the grassland. Thursday is the busiest day, with some volunteers heading out to the reserve to collect seeds and remove invasive species, while others stay behind sowing, sorting, and transplanting seedlings. Plants move slowly through the process from seed to pot to landscape.

"It's a very tactile thing," says Angus Parker, staff member at Moondani Balluk (VU's Indigenous Academic Unit) and nursery assistant. "You're working with your hands. There are no machines."

For many, that's part of the appeal. The work is calming, careful, and grounded in the physical world, which is a nice contrast to the pace and abstraction of everyday life.

"You're learning a lot about grasslands, you're learning a lot about plants," says Sarah Wood, Moondani Balluk staff member and nursery assistant, who first came to Iramoo as a student. "It's almost like an escape for a lot of people. They get to come to the nursery, they connect with community, and they feel like they're contributing to a good cause."

Established in 2000 the nursery sees hundreds of volunteers take part in nursery activities throughout the year. "We're really blessed with our volunteers," says Megan O'Shea, who heads up the nursery. "A lot of them are young and they're really diverse: culturally diverse, gender diverse, neurodiverse. It's a beautiful place provided by VU, and we're all helping to make it this nice, gentle, productive space."

Plants grown at the nursery are returned to the grassland, part of long-term effort to restore what has been lost over many years.

It's ongoing work, and it's rarely straightforward.

"I think of it as stewardship of the land," says Megan. "Understanding what the season is doing and working out what's the best thing to do when."

The work is also shaped through collaboration with Traditional Owners — grounded in practical exchange, rather than theory.

Over time, this has meant developing and refining methods. “There’s a lot of weed control, returning native grasses, and then more recently we’ve started trying to increase the biodiversity by adding in lots of wildflowers,” says Megan.

“In the last 10-15 years, we’ve really bumped up the number of plant species that are out on that reserve.”

Much of the work has been shaped by trial and error. Seeds behave differently, and sometimes even small variations in light, water and placement can determine whether the plant survives.

“You think you can just grow them,” Megan says. “But they’re very sensitive. If you don’t get it right, they won’t perform.”

The work is also shaped through collaboration with Traditional Owners — grounded in practical exchange, rather than theory. Teams from Wurundjeri’s The Narrap Unit (an Indigenous land management team specifically focusing on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people) work alongside the nursery and land management team, sharing knowledge and learning through the process of restoring the site.

“Most recently we were fortunate to be involved in Moondani Balluk’s Aboriginal Dietary Practices Project,” says Megan. “We started growing species of food plants that are relevant to the area — most of which we weren’t familiar with, so we’ve been figuring that out with guidance from Wurundjeri people living in Melbourne’s west and then feeding that knowledge back into the project.”

For Megan, the long-term goal is clear: “It would be great to restore the grassland and be able to hand it back to Wurundjeri. To return it in a better condition.”

The significance of Iramoo’s work isn’t always obvious for others. Grasslands are often overlooked and seen as empty or even neglected.

“I think that a lot of people don’t realise that we even have native grasslands and wildflower areas in the west of Melbourne,” says Sarah. “They might think grasslands and think of the Savannah in Africa, or a far-away disconnected place, but we have them right here.”

“People look at these spaces and think they’re just unkept spare land,” adds Angus. “But unkept doesn’t mean useless or without worth.”

Part of the challenge is that they don’t look like what people expect nature to look like.

“It’s not an easy thing to appreciate,” he says. “I was in the same boat for many years.”

But what’s here is rare...and at risk of disappearing.

“We care about the Great Barrier Reef and the Amazon rainforest,” Megan says. “But these grasslands — right next to where we live — are just as important.”





From language learning to early childhood education

HOW LEARNING ENGLISH AT VU OPENED THE DOOR TO A NEW CAREER AND PURPOSE.

When Yanfan Huang first arrived in Australia from China, her focus was simple: support her family and build a stable life for her children. At first, she assumed she would need to take whatever work she could get.

“I sent my resume to everywhere I could,” she says. “But then I would think to myself: is this really how I want my career to be?”

“I decided, no way. I don’t want to waste my time. I want to aim high and have a colourful career. I want to work in a job that I am passionate about.”

The first step was learning English. VU felt like a natural place to start: the Sunshine campus was within walking distance to home, and her husband had already successfully completed his English as an Additional Language studies there.

One course led to another. Yanfan progressed through Certificates II, III and IV in English language studies before enrolling in Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. She later completed a diploma and is now studying a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education.

The transition wasn’t easy.

“I failed my first assessment during my Cert III in Early Childhood Education” she says. “It made me question whether I belonged in the classroom.”

Instead of giving up, she began building her own systems to keep up — translating notes into Mandarin, creating portfolios for each subject, and seeking support whenever she needed it.

“The most important thing is that teachers are there to help you,” she says. “They’re always available and they’re incredibly patient. They helped me build confidence and understand what I needed to be doing.”

She also credits VU’s broader support services, including the Learning Hub, VUHQ and library staff with helping her succeed.

“All of these resources are so amazing,” she says. “VU is incredible in this way.”

Over time her confidence grew. So did her ambitions.

She found herself drawn to early childhood education not just as a career path, but as something deeply personal. “My philosophy is that a golden childhood will support you for life, but a negative experience in early childhood will take a lifetime to heal,” she says. “My number one motivation is ensuring I’m the best parent for my two children, but I also want to have a positive impact on other children. The best way I can do that is by becoming a teacher.”

During her placement at an early learning centre, Yanfan’s calm and thoughtful approach stood out. Before completing her Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, she was offered casual work at the centre which she undertook while continuing to study.

At the same time, she became a source of encouragement for other students navigating similar challenges — particularly those studying in a second language or returning to education later in life. She often shares her study strategies, helps classmates from a range of language backgrounds understand the coursework, and encourages students who are struggling with confidence.

“I shared my experience of struggling at the start, and how I kept going for my children,” she says. “She told me later that it helped her feel less alone and to stick with it.”

VU Ranked #2 in Victoria for Higher Education student experience in 2025





Yanfan Huang

Professor Clare Hanlon



Victoria University research strengthens women in sport

VU RESEARCH IS HELPING MAKE SPORT MORE INCLUSIVE
AND MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN.

When Professor Clare Hanlon was teaching primary school PE three decades ago, she noticed a pattern. The boys played while the girls hung back.

“Parents talked about their sons’ sport, not their daughters,” she recalls. Years later, working in sport management research, she began seeing the same imbalance repeated across the sporting industry itself.

“Every senior leader recommended for me to interview was a man,” she says.

For Clare, these experiences sparked a line of questioning that would come to define her career: who sport is designed for, who feels like they belong, and what needs to change to make participation more equitable for girls and women?

Today, as a leading researcher at VU, her work focuses on barriers that are often dismissed as small or insignificant but can have a major impact on participation and retention in sport.

Much of that work begins by listening to the experiences of girls and women themselves — asking what helps them feel comfortable, supported and able to stay involved in sport.

The research has also challenged the assumption that improving participation always requires major structural change. In many cases, the barriers are surprisingly simple — and so are the solutions.

In many cases, it’s the uniforms.

White shorts, for example, were repeatedly raised by girls and women who felt anxious about playing sport while menstruating. Other participants spoke about ill-fitting uniforms, limited clothing options, or environments that did not feel designed with them in mind.

Clare’s research found these issues could directly affect confidence, comfort and long-term participation, particularly during adolescence — a period when many girls disengage from sport altogether.

“When I started looking into why there were so few women in leadership roles, the reasons became very clear. There was also very little research and funding in this field, and I was determined to knock down those barriers,” Clare says.

Clare and her collaborators developed an industry Insight Guide to help sporting organisations, government, and disability providers better support participation.

The findings have influenced change across schools and sporting organisations.

Some have introduced darker uniform options, while others have broadened clothing choices to better support comfort, cultural needs and participation. National and state sporting bodies, including Football Australia and Netball NSW, now reference the research in formal guidelines.

Even at elite levels of competition, the conversation has shifted. AFLW teams such as the Western Bulldogs have moved away from traditional white shorts in response to growing awareness around player comfort and confidence.

Western Bulldogs AFLW player Elisabeth Georgostathis says the impact of those changes is immediate.

“For a long time in sport, things like uniforms weren’t even questioned. You just wore what you were given,” she says. “But something as simple as changing shorts can make a difference to how confident and comfortable you feel on the field. You can just focus on playing and enjoying the game.”

A similar pattern emerged in Clare’s research into menstrual equity in sport, conducted in partnership with advocacy group, Share the Dignity.

The response has been practical. Local councils and sporting venues have begun installing free period product dispensers, while some clubs now include menstrual products in first aid kits and provide better education around menstrual health and participation.

“We heard about increased comfort and confidence. Girls are more willing to participate and to keep playing,” Clare says.

As the research gained national attention, it also exposed other gaps in participation and inclusion — including the experiences of people with disability who menstruate.

In response, Clare and her collaborators developed an industry Insight Guide to help sporting organisations, government, and disability providers better support participation.

The work forms part of a much broader shift taking place across women’s sport.

Participation and visibility are increasing, investment is growing, and conversations that once sat on the margins are becoming mainstream.

As Clare points out, though, the momentum did not appear overnight.

“This isn’t just the ‘Matildas effect,’” she says, “It’s decades of advocacy, grassroots work, bravery, and leadership coming together.”

From community clubs to national bodies, change has been driven by many forces — players, families, advocates, philanthropists, volunteers, and influential figures like Dr Susan Alberti AC — a long-time VU Women in Sport advocate.

The next set of questions is already emerging. How can investment in women’s sport better reach grassroots participation, not just elite competition? What conditions are needed not only to bring women into leadership, but to ensure they stay? Which sporting environments are genuinely succeeding in retaining girls and women over the long term — and why?

“If there’s one lasting impact, it’s that girls and women, regardless of background, have equitable opportunities to play and build careers in sport and know they belong,” says Clare.





Dr Susan Alberti AC

Professor Clare Hanlon

VALUE OF VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Victoria University **contributes \$818 million** each year to the Western Melbourne economy, supporting jobs, increasing productivity, and strengthening local industries.

\$818m
added to regional GDP

2,360+
jobs supported

\$333m
in wages generated

\$225m
in investment

\$443m
increase in household
consumption

Source: VU Centre of Policy Studies, 2026

Where this value comes from



Economic activity

- \$266M → University spending in the region
- \$217M → Induced business activity across the region
- \$77M → Indirect taxes
- \$47M → Student spending

Productivity impacts

- \$175M → More productive local workforce
- \$36M → Research and technology improvements

Flow-on effects

74,000+
higher education
graduates since 1992 →

90,000+
VET qualifications
delivered →

27,000+
graduates working in
Melbourne's west →

**Building
the workforce**

Why it matters

Victoria University's impact reflects investment in people, skills and industries — strengthening the productivity and resilience of Melbourne's west.

52,656
students in 2025 (75% in
Higher Education, 24% in TAFE)

17,786
graduates in 2025

60%
of Victoria University publications
were coauthored with international
collaborators, with peers in 39.5%
of all countries

67%
of Victoria University's research
publications were Open Access



- Victoria University researchers' work was cited **1.55 times more** than the global average
- Victoria University had **725 research publications**
- Victoria University researchers co-authored **434 publications** with peers in **77 countries**

SOCIAL IMPACT

Victoria University contributes to stronger communities through education, research, partnerships and pathways that create opportunities across Melbourne's west and beyond.

INPUTS What VU brings	ACTIVITIES What it enables	OUTPUTS What is the result	IMPACT What changes because of it
- 52,656 students in 2025 - 2,563 staff across teaching, research and professional roles - \$671 million operating revenue - A dual-sector model connecting TAFE and higher education - VU Block Model® - First Year College - Two flagship research institutes and two research centres - 40+ year partnerships across health, education, sport and community sectors - A diverse student and staff community representing more than 100 countries	- Industry-connected learning through placements and partnerships - Pathways from TAFE into higher education and employment - Flexible online and postgraduate learning through VU Online - Co-located education and industry through Flipped Campus - First Nations-led education, research and cultural leadership through Moondani Balluk - Applied research addressing health, climate, infrastructure and community resilience - Workforce-aligned training across health, education, trades, digital and care sectors	Students & pathways - 17,786 graduates in 2025 - 40,000+ placements annually - 42% of VU TAFE students studying for free - 76% of TAFE-to-HE pathway students from equity backgrounds - 13,589 international students studying at VU campuses - 310,000 alumni worldwide - #2 in Victoria for student experience Research & innovation - 725 research publications - Research cited 1.55x the global average - #6 globally for Sports Science - 434 internationally co-authored publications across 77 countries Partnerships - 19 major partnerships - 8 Flipped Campus partners	Expanding access and opportunity • More equity and first-in-family students succeeding in tertiary education • Lower barriers between TAFE, university and employment • Greater participation reflecting the diversity of Melbourne's west Strengthening workforce capability • More locally trained workers entering priority industries • Stronger pathways into health, education, mental health and community services • Industry-connected learning improving graduate readiness Research shaping policy and practice • Research influencing policy, infrastructure safety and emergency management • Partnerships accelerating solutions in climate, health and community resilience • International collaboration extending research impact Stronger communities • Greater access to education, wellbeing and community services • First Nations knowledge and history preserved and shared • Increased connection, resilience and participation



Douglas Gomes

Rethinking disaster risk research: prevention, response, and resilience

FROM POWERLINE SAFETY TO DISASTER RESILIENCE, OUR RESEARCHERS ARE HELPING COMMUNITIES BETTER PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE.

Natural hazards are becoming more frequent — and more complex.

Across Australia, communities are facing growing risks from bushfires, floods, storms, and other climate-related events, placing increasing pressure on infrastructure, services, and communities.

Celeste Young

At Victoria University, researchers are tackling the challenge from different angles: working to prevent disasters where possible and strengthening how systems respond when they occur.

For Dr Douglas Gomes, Industry Research Fellow at VU's Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities, the work begins with a specific point of failure in Australia's energy network.

Across regional and rural areas, 200,000 kilometres of Single Wire Earth Return (SWER) powerlines carry electricity over long distances. They are efficient — but vulnerable.

"If a conductor breaks and falls into vegetation, it can start a fire," he says. That risk has already had devastating consequences. The 2019 Kilmore East fire on Black Saturday was linked to a failed electricity asset, resulting in more than 100 deaths, 2000 homes lost and \$4 billion of damage.

Despite widespread reforms, this failure point remains.

"There's currently no reliable way to detect that type of break," Douglas says.

Over the past eight years, Douglas and his team have been working with industry and government partners to develop technology that identifies a broken conductor before it reaches the ground, cutting the power in the critical window where ignition could occur. "We've tested it on real networks, in real conditions, over multiple years," he says.

The system is now moving towards commercial deployment, with trials expanding across networks in Victoria.

It has also helped reframe approaches to recovery — from community vulnerability to community capability, and the role that connection, knowledge and local decision — making play in recovery.

For Douglas, the value of the work is straightforward: “Victoria’s last bushfire season was the worst since 2019-2020 Black Summer,” he says. “These fires have huge costs economically, but also in terms of the potential loss of life, and environmental impact, with millions of tonnes of CO2 released. If we can prevent even one of those events, it’s worth it.”

But preventing disasters is not only about infrastructure failures. It’s also about understanding how risk spreads through communities, institutions, and decision-making systems long before an emergency unfolds.

That’s where the work of Ms Celeste Young intersects.

Her work focuses on how risk is understood and managed across systems: how decisions are made, how responsibilities are shared, and how communities function under pressure.

“We tend to treat risks as separate, but that’s not how they play out in reality,” Celeste says. “You’ve got an engineering risk, for example, and that has ramifications all the way through the system. It ricochets off into other risks.”

A failure in infrastructure can quickly cascade — affecting communication, access to services and people’s ability to respond.

Over more than a decade, Celeste’s research has contributed directly to how risk is managed at a national level. Her work on risk ownership — clarifying who is responsible, accountable, and who pays — has influenced national disaster risk reduction policy and informed key government reports on systemic disaster risk.

Other projects have changed how risk itself is defined - reframing issues such as social connection and inclusion as core risks — embedding them into planning, governance and funding priorities.

It has also helped reframe approaches to recovery — from community vulnerability to community capability, and the role that connection, knowledge and local decision-making play in recovery.

At the community level, this work has changed the conversation.

“What matters is whether communities can actually function under stress,” she says.

“You can have all the buildings and infrastructure in place, but if people aren’t connected with each other and don’t communicate, things never go well.”

Moving away from reacting to disasters towards understanding and managing risk more holistically is already influencing how governments, agencies and communities prepare for what comes next.

Douglas sees that change playing out as well.

“The potential for change, even from a small group, is much greater now,” he says. “There are tools and technologies that allow you to engage people and scale that impact... so I feel like the chance to make a difference is much higher.”

Celeste agrees. “What gives me hope is the people we work with,” she says. “The emergency management sector is full of incredibly dedicated people, and there’s a growing awareness and appetite to reduce risk.”

She has seen that shift firsthand. “I’ve been working in this space since 2011, and I’ve seen real change — I know it’s possible.”

For Celeste, it comes down to something simple. “Systems don’t change on their own — people decide what matters, and they act on it.”

“Everything we need to solve this problem is here. All we need to do is use it.”





Celeste Young

From placement to practice

HOW HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE IS HELPING STUDENTS BECOME THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS OF TOMORROW.

Emma Tong knew she wanted to work with young people, but beyond that, she wasn't sure what it would look like in practice. That changed during her placement at headspace, Orygen in Melbourne's west.

“As soon as I started, pretty much from day one, I was like, yes — this just feels right. Like a fish in water.”

At the time, she was studying social work at VU. The placement ran full-time over three and a half months. It began with orientation and observation: listening in on calls, sitting alongside clinicians, before gradually shifting into practice.

“You can learn a theory... but actually using it on a human being is a whole different level,” she says. In the early weeks, she watched how experienced staff worked: how they listened, how they responded, how they handled situations that didn't follow a script. Then she began making calls herself, at first under supervision, then independently. By the end of the placement, she was running sessions on her own, with support nearby if she needed it.

This transition — from learning about the work to doing it - is exactly what placements are designed to enable.

At Orygen, a VU partner co-located at the Werribee campus, students are treated as part of the team. They move across different settings (schools, clinics, group programs) and work alongside

experienced clinicians as they build confidence and capability.

“We provide a really well-rounded placement,” says Alison McRoberts, Clinical Implementation Lead at Orygen, who works across headspace centres in Melbourne's west and north west and coordinates student placements.

Students arrive with technical knowledge, she says, but the reality of the work is more complex. “I often tell them that it's not as neat as what you've been taught.”

At headspace, students are part of the service. They support intake, run group programs and work directly with young people and families. In doing so, they increase the number of people the service can reach.

“We would not be delivering the number of programs and quality of programs without the students,” Alison says.

The impact of that work is visible when it stops.

“When Emma finished her placement last year, we noticed it straight away - there was a big drop in the number of young people we were seeing, just because of the work she had been doing.”

In services already under pressure, that difference matters. Demand continues to grow, particularly

in Melbourne's west, where many centres are working in areas of incredible unmet demand.

“There's massive shortages across the state,” Alison says. Meeting that demand depends on a steady flow of graduates who are ready to step into the work. “This is how we grow our workforce,” she says. “Four out of five of our headspace managers were former students.”

This connection is particularly important in Melbourne's west. Many of the students coming through are from the same communities they end up working in; something Alison says makes a real difference in practice.

“VU students understand the community because it's where they live — often its where they grew up — and where they studied. And so they know the issues, and they know how best to engage with people in the community. You can't put a price on that.”





Emma Tong

This transition — from learning about the work to doing it — is exactly what placements are designed to enable.

Students bring local knowledge, familiarity with schools and services, and an understanding of the pressures facing young people and families. In a setting where trust matters, that can shape how quickly support happens and how effective it is.

A few months into her first role at headspace Melton, Emma is already part of that system. She works across intake, assessment and ongoing support, often in situations where there are multiple pressures on a young person and their family.

“If we can upskill the families, automatically the young person’s world will improve,” she says.

For Emma, the work comes back to something simple. “For a lot of young people, they don’t have that safe adult to talk to... just making sure that that space is safe and they feel heard... is so important.”

Her move into the role came directly from placement. “I didn’t really apply anywhere... I was approached,” she says. “I didn’t hesitate. I knew I wanted to come back.”

For Alison, that progression is the point. Students gain experience in real settings, and services build their future workforce, which is something that will only become more important as demand continues to grow.

“It’s not optional. Without students coming through, we won’t be able to meet demand.”

For Emma, the work stays grounded in the day-to-day. “I love getting to know different humans and their stories,” she says.

80+
student placements at Orygen and headspace

500 hours
of supervision per Social Work student

VU’s partnership with headspace, Orygen is helping to address workforce demand in youth mental health



Athraa Yousif

Helping Victoria University students take the next step to employment

FROM STUDENT TO STAFF MEMBER, ATHRAA IS HELPING OTHERS NAVIGATE THEIR OWN EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY.

When Athraa Yousif arrived at VU, she was looking for a different way to learn. What she found was a career pathway she hadn't expected — one that would eventually see her helping other students take their next step.

"I felt a real sense of community here," she says. "More than anywhere else I'd studied."

Athraa Yousif first came to VU in 2021 as a Bachelor of Psychology student after struggling to find her footing at another university.

"It was big lecture rooms, thousands of people, and I felt lost," she says. "I had so many questions, but I never felt like I could ask them."

Teaching had always been the path she'd imagined for herself, but the experience left her questioning whether university was the right fit at all. After leaving university, Athraa completed qualifications in community services, where smaller class sizes gave her a glimpse of what study could feel like when it works. She later began working in a school setting, supporting students as a counsellor.

She loved helping people, but adds "I wanted to understand more about the psychology behind it — why people think and behave the way they do, how you support them in different ways."

It was a conversation with a friend that pointed her towards VU — a friend who had been one of the first cohorts to experience VU's Block Model.

"She loved it. And as soon as she explained it, I thought — that's exactly what I need."

By then, Athraa had already explored different study pathways and discovered she thrived in smaller, more personalised learning environments. Working as a school counsellor had also deepened her interest in psychology and understanding how best to support others.

At VU, she found the learning experience she'd been looking for.

That sense of connection became a defining part of her experience, opening up opportunities she hadn't expected.

"The structure just worked," she says. "You focus on one unit, you have assessments each week, you get feedback straight away and apply it to the next one. It felt like you were constantly progressing."

"The classroom sizes meant you actually knew your lecturers," she says. "You could ask questions, you could talk about your future, your career pathways. I was always picking their brains about how they got to where they are."

That sense of connection became a defining part of her experience, opening up opportunities she hadn't expected.

In her first year, Athraa applied for a casual role as a peer career advisor in VU's Careers Hub.

"I thought, why not just try?" she says.

She worked in the role alongside her studies, helping other students navigate resumes, applications and job searching.

"I realised it still had that same element of helping people," she says, "but through a different lens."

Athraa reflects on the support she was given by her Manager, who gently pushed Athraa out of her comfort zone and nurtured her professional development.

"It felt like someone could see my potential and was helping me get there. Little things like that really helped build my confidence early on in my career."

"Now I can jump into any job coaching session I deliver and think, okay — what are we working with today?"

For Athraa, that experience captures something fundamental about what it means to truly thrive in a university environment — academically, personally and professionally.

"It changed my thinking — I started to wonder what other opportunities there could be at VU that I could tap into."

In 2024, after completing her degree, Athraa successfully secured a full-time role as an Employability Consultant at VU.

By the time she walked across the stage at her graduation ceremony in March 2025, her VU colleagues from the Careers Hub were right there, alongside her family and friends, cheering her on.

"It felt like I had another community there supporting me," she says. "Not just as a graduate, but as a peer, a part of the team."

Today, her work centres on helping students navigate one of the most critical transitions in their lives: moving from study into employment.

It's work that blends everything Athraa has learned — her background in psychology, her experience in community services, and her own personal journey.

"There are different challenges for everyone. There's confidence, there's identity, there's not feeling like you belong," she says.

"A lot of the work we do is helping students recognise what they already bring."

For Athraa, who arrived in Australia from Iraq a decade ago, one of the most powerful of these skills is language. Fluent in four languages, she has seen firsthand how being able to communicate across cultures can be a huge advantage in employment.

"I'll have students ask before they even come in — do you speak Arabic?" she says. "And when I say yes, you can see the relief straight away."





They feel understood. They feel safe. And that builds their confidence in everything else — what they put on their resume, how they present themselves.”

It’s also a perspective she actively encourages students to embrace as a strength.

“A lot of young people don’t realise that speaking another language is a skill employers value,” she says. “When they start to see that, it changes how they see themselves.”

Athraa recalls working with an international student who had recently completed her studies in early childhood education but had been struggling to find work.

“We worked on her applications, her interview skills, her confidence,” she says. “And after months, she sent me this long email saying she’d gotten her dream job as an educator.”

“You see the impact quite quickly,” Athraa says. “And that’s what makes it so rewarding.”

There’s a pattern in her story, one that mirrors the experience of many at VU — whether studying, working or both. Someone opens a door. Someone sees potential. Someone encourages you to step just slightly beyond what feels possible.

And then, you find yourself in a position to do the same for someone else.

For Athraa, that’s what defines a thriving place to study and work.

“It’s community and opportunity,” she says. “I came here looking for a different way to learn. I found a place where I could help others find their own path.”

“I’ll have students ask before they even come in — do you speak Arabic?” she says. “And when I say yes, you can see the relief straight away.”

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Bringing wellbeing to every campus

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS TO CONNECT, CONTRIBUTE, AND THRIVE.

Most workplace wellbeing programs sit slightly outside everyday life — something people are encouraged to access when they are stressed, overwhelmed or running on empty.

At VU, thrive* takes a different approach. The award-winning program brings staff and students together through hundreds of free activities held across campuses throughout the year — from creative workshops and physical activity to social and community-based sessions.

For Tracy Hoare, Information and Communications Technology Coordinator of Training and VIP Support, it started with a painting class.

“It’s not something I’d ever done before,” she says. “I just thought — you know what? That sounds fun.”

What followed was not part of her role, but it quickly became part of how she experienced work.

“I had a box of craft items at home that I hadn’t used in years,” she says. “I offered to donate it and the Manager of thrive* said, ‘well, that means you should run a class.’ So, I was kind of thrown into it.”

“I do a lot of training as part of my role, so I’m used to standing in front of people, but this was different,” she says. “You get to know people in a completely different way.”

Participation, rather than just attendance, sits at the centre of thrive*. Many of the activities are designed and led by staff and students themselves, creating opportunities for people to share interests and part of themselves that might otherwise stay invisible at work.

“I actually led an activity before I participated in one,” says Wouter van Dongen, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Science. “I was asked if I could run something, and I thought — I love birdwatching, so let’s do that.”

For Wouter, thrive* has changed how he experiences the university.

“I live in Central Victoria, and I used to just come in, teach and drive all the way back again. I felt like one small cog. Thanks to thrive* I know more people. I feel more connected. It’s changed how I see myself in the university.”

Many activities bring staff and students together in the same space, outside of formal teaching and learning.

“When I went to university, the lecturer would come in, talk to you for an hour and then get out again,” Wouter reflects. “You never had that connection.”

“thrive* is a great leveller... we’re all doing the same activities together,” he says. “I think it’s really important and I think it’s valuable.”

For April Vocale, Senior Manager, Student Complaints and Integrity Office, the impact shows up in everyday interactions.

“My first exposure to thrive* was when I was looking for a way for my new team to get together and socialise outside of our office,” she says. “It’s helped all of us to create connections with people around VU, so that we can now pick up the phone and chat rather than everything being very formal.”

Wouter van Dongen





April Vocale

Tracy Hoare

For many participants, the value of thrive* is that it makes space for people to be more than their job title.

"I felt like I was part of something wonderful, part of a community," she says. "And then when I saw the opportunity to contribute to that and create that feeling for other people, that was a real pull for me to decide to run a session."

For many participants, the value of thrive* is that it makes space for people to be more than their job title.

"A lot of workplaces say, 'bring your whole self to work', but VU actually means it," April says. "Bring your whole self. Bring the part of you that makes cards or does birdwatching or bring a part of you that other people might not know."

"What delights me is that so many people that work here have these amazing hidden talents or passions," she says.

"It's a very safe space for them to come forward and share their passion with others," Tracy adds. "And I also feel like it's really good for our mental health."

Sometimes, it's as simple as having somewhere to go during a difficult day.

"If I'm having a really stressful time in a project, I will go and seek out an activity," Tracy says. "I need to be able to walk away from it for an hour and just go and do something that's not work."

"To be able to do that during work hours is a whole other level."

1,712
staff participated thrive* in 2025

86%
reported improved happiness at work

Silver Award
QS Reimagine Education Awards 2025
(Nurturing Wellbeing)

A different path into AI

HOW A NEW LIFE IN AUSTRALIA LED TO AN UNEXPECTED FUTURE IN AI.

When VU student Sia Shi first arrived in Australia from China in 2022, everything felt unfamiliar. “It felt like I had stepped into a TV show,” she says, laughing. “It was the first time I’d been to an English-speaking country.”

Even everyday conversations took some getting used to. “The accent was a shock,” she says. “Like, ‘What’s up, mate?’ It’s very funny.”

While she had strong written English, speaking confidently in day-to-day situations was much harder.

“At first, real conversation — everyday speaking — that was difficult.”

At the same time, Sia was stepping into a new discipline, beginning a Master of Applied Information Technology at VU.

Her background was in law and human resource management, and she had worked as a product manager in the technology sector.

“I understood the industry,” she says. “But coding was new to me.”

Rather than starting from scratch, she was building on skills and experience she had developed in a different part of the technology ecosystem.

The adjustment was intense.

“The beginning was the hardest,” she admits. “There was stress from language, from learning coding, from everything happening at once.”

What helped most, she says, was feeling supported early.

Learning advisors supported her with academic writing and communication, while lecturers teaching through VU’s Block Model® were approachable and accessible.

“I could ask them for time. I would say, ‘Can I have 30 minutes? I have questions.’ And they were always supportive.”

“That kind of support gave me confidence to continue,” she says.

As her confidence grew, so did her interest in research.

Within two years, Sia completed her Masters degree. Soon after graduating in 2025, she began a PhD in artificial intelligence.

Research had not been part of her original plan.

But through research units and a thesis option embedded within the course, she began seeing a different pathway for herself — one that brought together technology, ethics and the questions that had interested her throughout her earlier career.

“I really liked the research,” she says. “It made me start thinking about what could come next.”

Encouraged by her lecturers she began considering a future in artificial intelligence research.

“For me, it felt accessible,” she says. “It didn’t feel out of reach.”

After graduating in 2025, Sia began a PhD focused on the use of AI in aged care, exploring both its potential and the ethical questions surrounding its use.

“It’s not just about building a technical solution,” she says. “It’s about asking: does it create social good? Is it ethical? Is it efficient in the right way?”

Her background in law, human resources and technology has shaped how she approaches the field. “I see a problem and I want to solve it,” she says. “But I also think about people and systems.”

During her studies, Sia also became involved in student leadership and mentoring programs across the university, taking on roles including Student Ambassador, Student Life team member and IT Program Assistant.

“All of these roles gave me the opportunity to grow,” she says. “To build confidence, to learn faster.”

Through VU’s Women in Tech community, she found opportunities to connect with other students, mentor peers, and speak publicly about her experiences studying in the field.

“In my classes, maybe fewer than one-fifth of the students were women,” she says.



Sia Shi

After graduating in 2025, Sia began a PhD at Victoria University focused on the use of AI in aged care, exploring both its potential and the ethical questions surrounding its use.

Sia

“We need more women in these spaces. Different voices and perspectives shape how technology is built.”

Most recently, Sia secured a Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) Student Experience Initiative Grant to lead a project bringing together students from technology, health and community services to collaborate on solutions for the aged care sector.

“I want students to connect with industry, to hear real voices and understand real problems,” she says.

“This is just the starting point.”

For Sia, learning has become less about reaching a finish line and more about continuing to build towards what comes next.

“I am always learning,” she says. “That’s the most important thing.”

“I want to create something that helps people. To do good with technology and leadership.”



**CONTINUE EXPLORING
VU'S IMPACT**

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other publications.



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UNIVERSITY**

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