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AIMS@JCU Seminar Day 2026

Thank you to everyone who joined us for the 2026 AIMS@JCU Seminar Day.

This year's event was genuinely outstanding. The quality of the seminar presentations, speed talks, poster presentations and photography entries was exceptional, and it was wonderful to see such a high calibre of student research shared throughout the day. The presentations were engaging, polished and thoughtful, and really showcased the depth, diversity and impact of the research being undertaken across AIMS and JCU.



Across the day, students showcased an incredible breadth of research, spanning coral resilience, reef restoration, new monitoring technologies, water quality, microplastics,

marine biodiversity, Indigenous knowledges, conservation policy and Pacific reef and fisheries management.

There were also some memorable take-home messages along the way, including that corals really can come off the back of a truck (which is reassuring for Scotland, where corals are not exactly famous!); that poo matters, whether you are SpongeBob, a fish or a dugong; and that pruning, snipping and gleaning are not just gardening terms. Learning about the challenges of bringing together two different governance systems (Cultural and Western) also made those of us in the AIMS@JCU office feel a little better about our own efforts!

More seriously, it was a fantastic reminder of the strength, diversity and real-world relevance of student research across AIMS and JCU, and the important contribution this work makes to understanding, protecting and restoring tropical marine ecosystems.

Continued on next page

CONTENTS

AIMS@JCU Seminar Day	2
AIMS@JCU Scholarship Recipient Bios	4
QLD Tall Poppy Science Award	7
Research Director Report	8
AIMS@JCU Indigenous Undergraduate Scholarship: Student Testimonial	9



About the AIMS@JCU Newsletter:

This newsletter is produced regularly and distributed by email to AIMS@JCU members, AIMS and JCU staff.

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AIMS@JCU Seminar Day 2026

continued

Congratulations to our winners:

Seminar talks - first prize (\$1,500) | Sarah Ghobish; runner up prize (\$1,200) | Sean Asgari; people's choice (\$600) | Sarah Ghobish

Speed talks - first prize (\$1,000) | Lara Bau; runner up (\$800) | Seth Keep

Posters - first prize (\$800) | Rhea George; runner up (\$600) | Matilde Drake

Photography - Quantitative Marine Science (\$100) | Raf Rashid; Research Subject (\$100) | Crystle Wee; Research in Action (\$100) | Greta Zampa; Photomicrograph/Macro (\$100) | Greta Zampa; People's Choice (\$100) | Greta Zampa

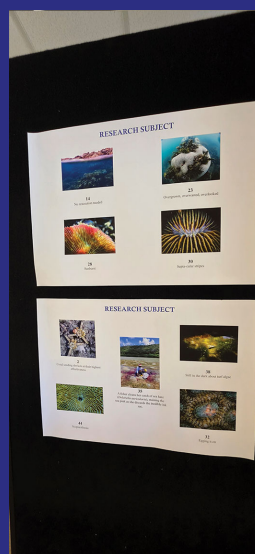
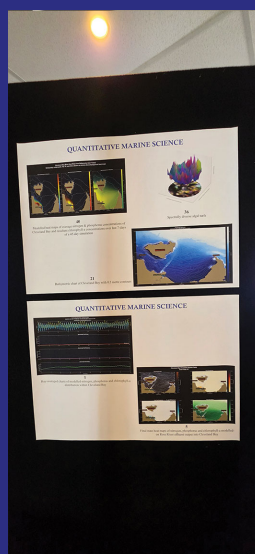
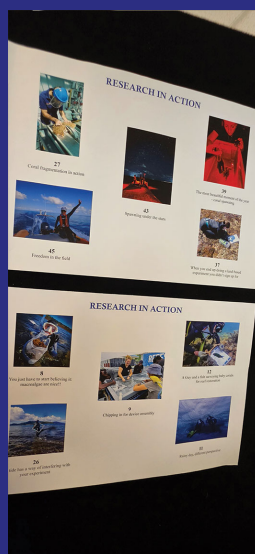


A very big congratulations to all presenters and our winners, and a special shout out to our undergraduate presenters. The standard this year was incredibly high, and you should all be very proud of the work you shared.

We would also like to thank our judges (Leanne Currey-Randall, Cathie Page, Sven Uthicke, Heidi Luter, Marina Santana, Muhammad Abdul Wahab, Tomas Leon Cortes, Adrien Marc, Gemma Galbraith, David Bourne, Ashton Gainsford, and

Alzayat Saleh), our chairs (Vanessa Haller-Bull, and Matthew Nitschke), our keynote speaker (Christopher Brunner), all of our presenters, our attendees, and everyone who contributed to making the day such a success.

This year we also included a networking session as a trial. It was fantastic to see such strong participation, from long-standing staff through to members who joined AIMS@JCU just last month, and to learn more about each other's research.



Kelsey
Kingsbury

Here are some testimonials about the networking session from attendees:

Dr. Alzayat Salah (AIMS@JCU Postdoc):

"The seminar day worked well, and the networking session was a good addition. Having dedicated time to talk with people across AIMS and JCU made it much easier to connect with researchers I would not normally cross paths with, and

AIMS@JCU Seminar Day 2026

continued

the conversations were more useful than the usual quick chat between sessions. Worth keeping for next year."

Dr. David Bourne (AIMS and JCU staff member):

"The AIMS@JCU Seminar Day provides a unique and valuable opportunity for students to present their work in a collegiate, supportive and friendly atmosphere, while also showcasing the breadth of research across the AIMS@JCU community. The networking session was particularly successful this year, encouraging people to interact across different research groups and step outside their usual networks and comfort zones. This created opportunities for new conversations, connections and potential collaborations, and added a really valuable dimension to the day."

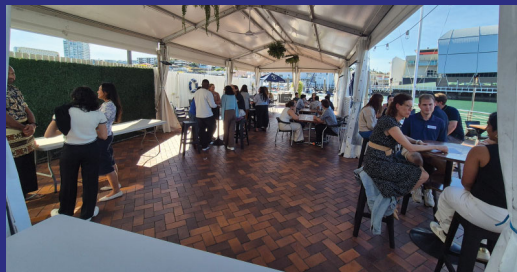
Dr. Andrew Johnson (AIMS staff member):

"I thought it was a great event, that provided opportunity for the most junior researchers to showcase their work through to more experienced post docs.

I think the networking session was a good innovation and a great way to meet and speak with others. The time was challenging as it was a little too short to speak in any depth. Longer times mean less transfer, but I think it might be better with longer times."

Dr. Cathie Page (AIMS staff member):

"I thought the networking session was great. I got to talk to everyone, I think. While I did have to ask a few people what they were working on, because I hadn't seen their presentations yet, I did think the mid-day timing worked well. Left to last and we would all have been a bit lazier."



Kelsey
Kingsbury

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2026 AIMS@JCU PhD Scholarship Recipient

Sophie Renton

Project Title: Genomic insights into maternally inherited Symbiodiniaceae in reef-building corals

Supervisors: Dr. Ira Cooke (JCU), Dr. Matthew Nitschke (AIMS) and Dr. Cheong Xin Chan (UQ).



Growing up in Townsville, Sophie developed an early connection to Magnetic Island and the wider Great Barrier Reef that led her to study Marine Biology at James Cook University. Her research experience spans coral reef ecology, scientific diving, molecular biology and genomics, with fieldwork across the Great Barrier Reef and Caribbean. Sophie is now completing a Master of Philosophy investigating genome evolution in coral-algal (Cnidarian-Symbiodiniaceae) symbioses. Her research developed a culture-free method to isolate vertically transmitted Symbiodiniaceae directly from coral eggs, enabling the genome sequencing of highly co-evolved and understudied symbiont lineages. She is particularly interested in combining field ecology and genomics to understand the evolution of coral-algal partnerships. Sophie is grateful to have received the AIMS@JCU Scholarship which has supported her work alongside her supervisors, Dr Ira Cooke (JCU), Dr Matthew Nitschke (AIMS), Dr Cheong Xin Chan (UQ).

Greta Zampa

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2026 AIMS@JCU PhD Scholarship Recipient

Ashoi Dantra

Project Title: Using reef-Associated Microbes and eDNA as Tools for Monitoring Great Barrier Reef Health

Supervisors: Dr. David Bourne (JCU), Dr. Patrick Laffy (AIMS), Renee Gruber (AIMS) and Dr. Yun Kit Yeoh (AIMS).

Growing up sailing, diving, and exploring the intertidal shores of my hometown, Mumbai, India, Ashoi developed an early interest in coastal marine ecosystems and the organisms that inhabit them. This interest, combined with a growing fascination with genetics, led her to James Cook University to pursue a Master of Marine Biology.

As part of her degree, Ashoi completed a one-year independent research project in collaboration with AIMS and JCU, investigating spatial and temporal variation in microbial community composition in response to river discharge in the northern Great Barrier Reef. Her work examined how shifts in microbial assemblages can serve as sensitive bioindicators of environmental change in reef systems exposed to terrestrial runoff, contributing to a growing body of research on microbial responses to environmental disturbance.

Ashoi is delighted to have been awarded the AIMS@JCU PhD scholarship, marking the next stage of her research career. The scholarship gives her the platform to investigate the findings of her Master's research further, exploring the role of microbial ecology as an indicator of reef stress, with the broader aim of improving predictive frameworks for reef resilience under changing environmental conditions.

Outside the lab, she can usually be found diving, sailing, playing football, and instructing dinghy sailing at the Townsville Sailing Club, where she also races club boats on weekends.



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Crystle Wee

2026 AIMS@JCU PhD Scholarship Recipient

Viliami Fatongiatau

Project Title: Long-term Monitoring Protocol for Tongan Coastal Fisheries Using ReefCloud.

Supervisors: Dr. Patrick Smallhorn-West (JCU) and Dr. Ashton Gainsford (AIMS).

Viliami Fatongiatau is a Senior Fisheries Officer with the Fisheries Science Division of the Tonga Ministry of Fisheries, with more than ten years of experience in coastal fisheries monitoring and management in Tonga. Coastal fisheries play a vital role in the livelihoods, food security, and cultural practices of Tongan communities. Close involvement with coastal communities and fisheries resources has strongly influenced the pursuit of further study to support the sustainable management of these important fisheries.

Professional responsibilities include leading the implementation of coastal fisheries monitoring programmes across Tonga. This work involves fisheries-dependent and fisheries-independent data collection, including landing monitoring and Special Management Area (SMA) monitoring, while working closely with communities and fisheries officers to strengthen fisheries data and management.

Currently pursuing a Master of Philosophy in Natural and Physical Sciences at James Cook University. The project focuses on developing a standardized monitoring framework using the ReefCloud platform to support long-term monitoring of reef fish and benthic environment for communities.

The research aims to strengthen Tonga's capacity to collect, manage, and analyze coastal fisheries monitoring data, contributing to improved fisheries management and ecosystem-based approaches for the sustainability of coastal fisheries resources.



Crystle Wee

Queensland Tall Poppy Science Award 2026

Dr. Gemma Galbraith

We're very proud of one of our fabulous AIMS@JCU Postdoctoral Fellows, Dr. Gemma Galbraith, who has been honoured with a Queensland Tall Poppy Science Award for 2026.

The annual Young Tall Poppy Science Awards, created by the Australian Institute of Policy and Science (AIPS), recognise outstanding researchers who combine world-class scientific excellence with a passion for public engagement and STEM advocacy. Held in each state and territory, the program honors the achievements of exceptional early-career scientists from all disciplines — supporting them to become role models, leaders, and science ambassadors. Gemma is one of 58 Tall Poppies awarded nationally this year and one of 12 from Queensland.

Gemma says “ It's incredibly humbling to be recognised in this way and to me reflects the amazing scientific opportunities and mentorship that I have been afforded in my career so far. I've been lucky enough to work with so many great people across AIMS, JCU and my wider collaborator network who have always encouraged my curiosity, backed me to try new methods, and supported me to come out of my shell for effective science communication. I'm blown away by winning a QLD Young Tall Poppy which I think will provide an incredible platform to elevate deep-reef research, advocate for inclusive STEM pathways, and ensure our discoveries drive real-world marine management.”



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Crystle Wee

Research Director Report

From Strategy to Synergy

Over the past six months, AIMS@JCU has been focused on shaping the future direction of the partnership. As part of this process, we delivered three workshops, bringing together researchers, students and professional staff from across AIMS and JCU to explore opportunities for future collaboration and impact.

AI and the Digital Ocean explored how artificial intelligence can enhance marine science through improved data integration, monitoring, modelling and decision support. Participants highlighted the importance of robust data infrastructure, responsible AI use, and collaboration between marine scientists and data scientists.

Strengthening Sea Country identified opportunities to position Sea Country as an Indigenous-led platform for research, innovation and workforce development, supported by Indigenous knowledge leadership, new partnership models and coordinated training pathways.

Blue Futures showcased expertise across aquaculture, restoration, offshore renewable energy and emerging technologies, identifying priorities including sustainable aquaculture, blue economy development, advanced marine monitoring and integrated social-ecological research.

Celebrating our researchers

June saw the return of the annual AIMS@JCU Seminar Day, once again highlighting the exceptional quality and diversity of research across the partnership. Students presented work spanning coral resilience, reef restoration, water quality, microplastics, Indigenous knowledges, conservation policy and fisheries management. Congratulations to all presenters and award winners, particularly our undergraduate presenters.

July also saw the successful delivery of the IERC Winter School, continuing our commitment to strengthening pathways into Sea Country careers.

New members and opportunities

We are pleased to welcome new AIMS@JCU scholarship recipients Md Shamsuddin (Shams), and Marilyn (Justice) Balfour and Haley Davis, who are co-funded through the GBRF program. We look forward to supporting their research journeys.

It was also wonderful to see strong AIMS@JCU attendance at the newly launched Indigenous Science Community of Practice, which aims to create a culturally safe environment for learning, knowledge sharing and elevating Indigenous Knowledge Systems. If you are interested, please contact the First Nations Innovation team (FNI@aims.gov.au).

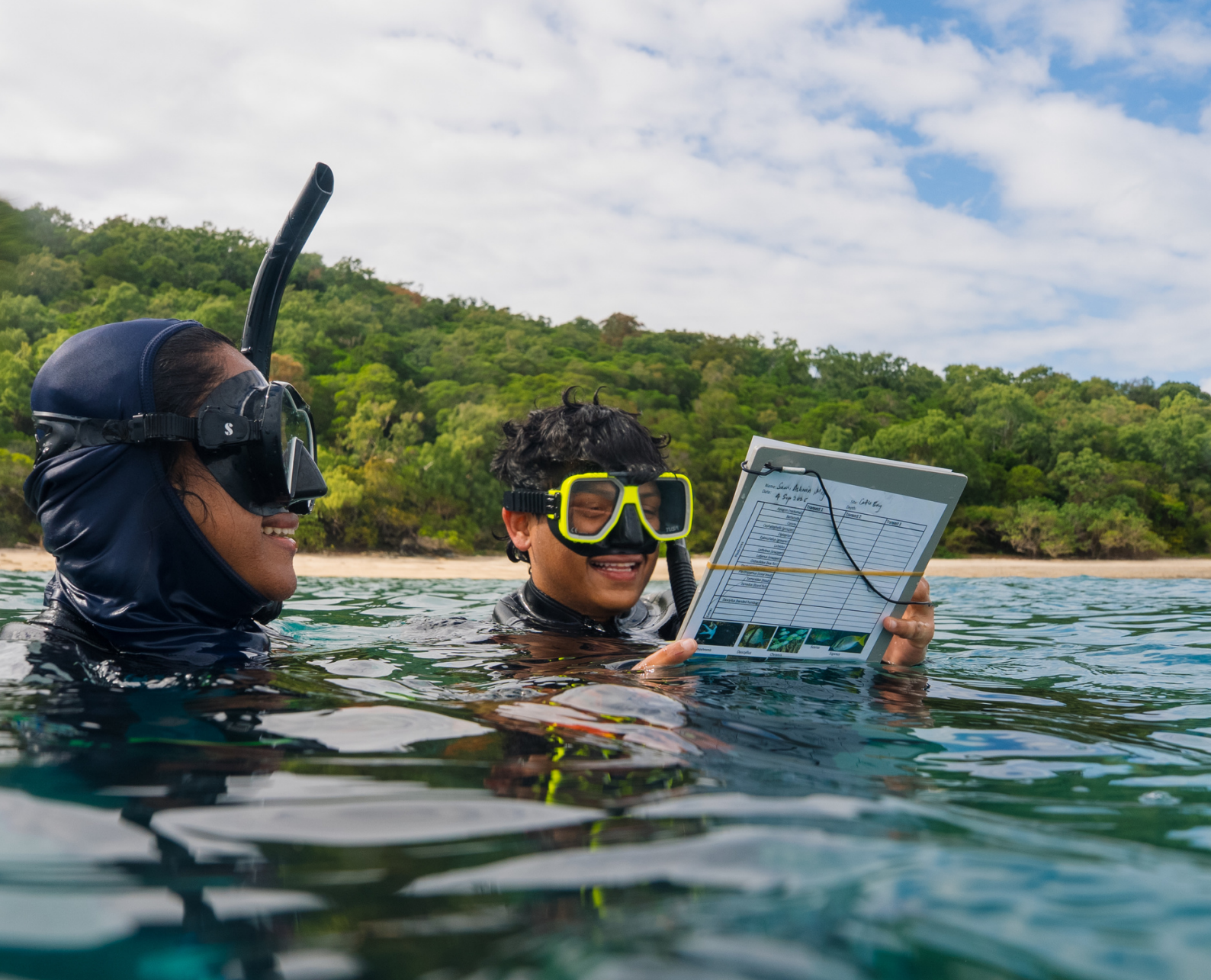
I recently attended the JCU Research Infrastructure Event, which showcased the breadth of facilities available to support research, including: Advanced Analytical Centre, Marine Aquaculture Research Facilities, Orpheus Island Research Station, Molecular Ecology and Evolution Laboratory and eResearch. If you are interested in learning more about these facilities, please get in touch.

Looking ahead, I am delighted to report that the upcoming AIMS@JCU R training course was fully subscribed shortly after opening. We also wish the very best to applicants in the second round of AIMS@JCU awards and to those applying for our 2027 scholarship program.

Cherie Motti, AIMS@JCU Research Director

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Kelsey
Kingsbury



AIMS@JCU

Indigenous Undergraduate Scholarships

Student testimonial: Leilani Hale

jcu.edu.au

AIMS@JCU



JAMES COOK
UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

2026 Scholar

Leilani Hale

Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science - 4th year
Townsville, Bebegu Yumba Campus



IMAGE Source: Leilani Hale LinkedIn

Academic Progress

This year I completed Biological Oceanography as well as Sensors and Sensing for Scientists, and am currently studying Evolution and Ecology of Reef Fishes, Problem Solving and Programming and Data Visualisation.

My favourite subject this year was Biological Oceanography because it was different from many of the subjects I had studied previously and was easy to follow and engage with. I have also really enjoyed Problem Solving and Programming, as I have a strong interest in computing science and find the content both enjoyable and rewarding.

Learning Highlights

One of the most interesting things I learned this year was the importance of phytoplankton to the marine food chain. I found it fascinating to learn how these tiny organisms play such a significant role in supporting marine ecosystems. An assignment I was particularly proud of was a group presentation project. Our group worked hard to develop a strong understanding of the topic, and it was rewarding to be able to confidently answer questions and demonstrate our knowledge.

Practical Experience

Although I have not yet completed a placement, I have elected to undertake one in Trimester 3 and look forward to gaining practical experience that will complement my studies. I also volunteered at the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS), contributing as an undergraduate voice to support the development of a new project.

Impact of Scholarship

The AIMS@JCU Indigenous Undergraduate Scholarship has made a significant difference to me this year. The funding has helped cover essential expenses including rent, travel, field trips, groceries and other living costs.

The support has also reduced the pressure of balancing work and study commitments. It has allowed me to focus more attention on my studies rather than worrying about earning enough income to cover day-to-day expenses.

Personal Reflections

This year has been particularly important as it is my final year of university. I have worked hard to stay focused on my studies and maintain steady progress towards graduation. One of the biggest lessons I have learned is to take things one step at a time and avoid taking on too much at once. This approach has helped me manage my workload more effectively and maintain a healthier balance between study and life.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, I am most excited about completing my degree and beginning my professional career.

Thank You

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to AIMS@JCU. Your generosity has had a meaningful impact on my university journey and has provided support when I needed it most.