

The University of Western Australia has welcomed a tenacious Vice Chancellor

The Go8's deputy Chair – and its 2019 Chair – Professor Dawn Freshwater, is the 18th Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Australia (UWA).

Professor Freshwater arrived in Perth late in 2014 to take up the position of UWA's Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor. "I interviewed, was offered the position later that day as I was heading back to the airport. I said yes immediately".

She was soon engaged in a roots and branch organisational and cultural restructure. When the then UWA Vice Chancellor Professor Paul Johnson resigned in 2016 Professor Freshwater became acting VC, and in April 2017 she was announced as the next VC – giving her both the responsibility and authority to develop and implement her widespread strategic vision.

The "new look" for UWA is being watched with interest by the Perth political and media fraternities. Curtin University aims to nip at UWA's heels in a city

where University competition for students – undergraduate and post graduate, domestic and international – and research funding, in particular that which partners with industry, is fierce.

The competitive environment Professor Freshwater is leading within, and the vast changes she is implementing, make her backstory all that more fascinating. Some of her closest colleagues at the university comment that all the discipline and stamina that can be attributed to her success as a marathon runner is being put to good use as a 'transformative VC' in Perth.

UWA ranks 93rd in the QS world rankings. Perception would suggest – in the same way that polling indicates the UK community does not realise Oxford University takes more than 60 per cent of its students from state schools – that a Go8 University would not be home to a Vice Chancellor who left school at 15, but that is exactly what Professor Freshwater did, and was at work at 16.

Go8 universities are Australia's leading research-intensive universities, and all highly ranked globally, with seven in the world's top 100 universities. Professor Freshwater's pathway from a 15-year-old without her A levels, to Vice Chancellor within the Go8, is therefore an exemplar for everyone who believes in the conquering force of excellent tertiary education, equity, and mentoring.

my secondary education. Being 'clever', and understanding what I could achieve, was not something I was aware of at the time."

Her chosen career was mental health nursing. That choice was to open her mind in more ways than one. First, she found aspiring peers were accepted because they already had A levels. "I was different. I had

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She grew up in the UK midlands, and says she had no understanding that she did in fact even "have a brain". "None", she says, "certainly not when I left school. I had parents with multiple illnesses and I was the eldest child. My family situation meant I had to join the workforce, so I did when I could, and without completing

to first study and then pass an entrance exam before I could be considered." It was an educational 'them and us' light-bulb moment; as was discovering that she could put her mind to serious study and pass exams well.

Within her chosen discipline, Professor Freshwater found reason to "find out more"

through involvement where she could contribute to change and progress. Her career path has always been one of driving and embracing change. She became heavily involved in ways to improve mental health care in prisons, and in ways to reduce suicide in young males, two passions, and an expertise, that have stayed with her, and which have led to her being involved in advising on the development of a new prison in WA. She also found she could make the difficult decisions nursing demanded of her at a young age. But it wasn't enough.

"I was young, and, also by then had a young family, but I was encouraged by those senior to me that I had more to give, and that tertiary education was my pathway. I undertook part-time under-graduate study which I saw as a way of advancing what I could do (to help others through research and program delivery) rather than what it could do for me," she says.

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But she is frank in admitting that looking back she does wonder how she managed it. "It was



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squeezing every minute out of every day, and being very disciplined with time and concentration.”

Having completed her degree, she then was motivated to complete honours, while continuing the job, mother, study balancing act. “Again, I have a lot to thank mentors for. My supervisors suggested my honours thesis would make a fantastic PhD study. It was a risk. It was more juggling but I have always been willing to take the risks that lead to the next step, such as moving from the UK to Perth in 2014, so I agreed to take on a PhD, and so continued the balancing act of family, job and study.”

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The journey from PhD to Vice Chancellor was to be equally as unplanned as that of a 15-year-old school leaver to a doctorate. What was never to alter was the parallel passion for improving health outcomes and program delivery and, gradually, an understanding of the importance and impact of a ‘social licence’ in the corporate lexicon.

As a result, in WA Professor Freshwater works closely with a range of Corporates on their social licence, and sees this

research-intensive Universities that became known for their impact medical research, and was engaged in international collaborations, leading to development of NICE guidelines. This was the “ideal job” she says. A job she loved so much because of its focus on health outcomes, that she never considered leaving. But she was approached, out of the blue, to take a head of school role at the University of Leeds.

“Again a mentor encouraged me to ‘go for it’,” she says. “I had not understood that I had the capability to develop and drive strategy but others had seen that in me. Again it was a risk but I did find out at Leeds that

sit on the Research Excellence Framework Panel for the UK’s Higher Education Funding Council. “And I had as a mentor a Vice Chancellor who really believed in me and worked to instill in me the belief that I too could one day be a VC.”

Then came the biggest risk of Professor Freshwater’s career. “When I was approached to apply for the Senior Deputy VC’s position in Perth Australia, the VC urged me to grasp the opportunity mainly, I have to be honest, as the training ground to return to a VC’s position in the UK at a Go8 level university.”

But as Professor Freshwater says, “I took the risk, I grasped the opportunity, but he was not to know that I would also fall for UWA, WA and Australia – and that fondness continued to grow.” She decided to remove her security net, selling her UK property rather than renting it out; leaving her flock of sheep on the Yorkshire Dales.

Now her daughter and grandchildren are also in Australia, and she has, as a current priority, the development and implementation of the UWA’s decadal Vision 2030.

In January 2019 Professor Freshwater becomes Chair of the Go8 which represents Australia’s leading research-intensive universities. It’s a pinnacle appointment within a marathon career.

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work as an invaluable tool where universities can offer assistance and “do good, add value” to the community they are part of.

In the UK the doctorate enabled Professor Freshwater to lead research teams in

I had been that closet strategist, and I loved it.”

That success led to being offered a Pro Vice Chancellor position – driving organisational effectiveness and the opportunity through that position to also