Catch a Rising Star: Women in Queensland Science

Edited by Dr Maggie Hardy

1st Edition
Acknowledgement of Country

We respect and acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we live and work. We recognize elders past, present, and emerging as custodians of knowledge.

Cover Images

The images on the cover (clockwise from the top left) are as follows: Dani Barrington, processing wastewater samples in the field; Elecia Johnston, cutting fresh samples of meat from different crustaceans to purify allergenic proteins; Jacki Liddle, selfie with a life space heat map, generated from GPS data showing how far a participant has travelled in a week; Maggie Hardy, on Fraser Island with the first funnel-web spider she ever collected; Jacqui Byrne, taking an electroencephalogram (EEG); and Megan Saunders, shown underwater photographing a sea turtle. All photos are owned by the photo subject.

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Introduction

Where are science and technology’s women role models? And what are their stories?

To answer questions about education and careers in science and to increase the visibility of traditionally underrepresented scientists, more than 30 women scientists working in Queensland visited regional communities to talk about their research and their journey into science. In this book is a letter to our teenage selves from each scientist.

At each stop, there was a panel-type event open to the public, and then one or more school visits to talk with students about higher education and careers in science. In this way, we hope to open doors for members of the community to hear firsthand from researchers about Australian science, and plan the seed for others to consider careers in research and technology.

Science isn’t just about working in a laboratory or behind a computer. Science is all around us, from agricultural drones used to monitor conditions for crops and livestock, to wifi (a great Australian invention), and hopefully in the future tradies printing 3D parts from their workshops.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Locations Visited in 2016</th>
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<td>Atherton</td>
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<td>Bundaberg</td>
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<td>Mt Isa</td>
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<td>Brisbane and surrounding suburbs</td>
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<td>Toowoomba</td>
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Interacting with our communities, who do so much to support Queensland science, is a key part of our jobs as researchers. Our goal is to build relationships between women scientists and regional communities in Queensland.

About the Program

The *Catch a Rising Star: Women in Queensland Science* is co-organized by Mathilde Desselle and Maggie Hardy. The program provided a two-day training workshop in Brisbane in addition to the regional community visits. We are grateful to Rebecca Bates, Head of Curriculum at Kowanyama State School, Nicole Sherlock, Principal at Kowanyama State School, Education Queensland, and the Kowanyama community for their support of the program. This Inspiring Australia initiative is supported by the Australian Government as part of National Science Week.
## The Teams

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<tr>
<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Atherton</strong></td>
<td>Kaylene Butler</td>
<td>@kayleontologist</td>
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<tr>
<td>(18–19 August 2016)</td>
<td>Emily Furlong</td>
<td>@em_furlong</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jacki Liddle</td>
<td>@jacki_liddle</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Brisbane and suburbs</strong></td>
<td>Bec Colvin</td>
<td>@bec_colvin</td>
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<td>Paloma Corvalan</td>
<td>@CorvalanPaloma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Diana Lucia</td>
<td>@diana_neuroPhD</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sohinee Sarkar</td>
<td>@sohineee8</td>
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<td><strong>Bundaberg</strong></td>
<td>Dani Borg</td>
<td>@DrDanBorg</td>
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<tr>
<td>(16–17 August 2016)</td>
<td>Gwen Iacona</td>
<td>@gdiacona</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Caitlin Kuempel</td>
<td>@cdkuempel</td>
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<td>Lynn Nazareth</td>
<td>@nazareth_lynn</td>
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<td><strong>Charleville</strong></td>
<td>Jennifer Allen</td>
<td>@JennyAllen13</td>
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<tr>
<td>(16–17 August 2016)</td>
<td>Elecia Johnston</td>
<td>@leesh111</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Danette Langbecker</td>
<td>@DHLangbecker</td>
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<td><strong>Emerald</strong></td>
<td>Tarni Cooper</td>
<td>@TarniCooper</td>
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<td>(14–15 August 2016)</td>
<td>Carly Kenkel</td>
<td>@DrCarlsHorn</td>
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<td>Amie Khosla</td>
<td>@the_amieK</td>
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<td><strong>Kowanyama</strong></td>
<td>Kathy Andrews</td>
<td>@kandrew07141156</td>
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<td>Megan Saunders</td>
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<td>Anne Swinbourne</td>
<td>@AnneSwinbourne</td>
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<td>Tracy Ainsworth</td>
<td>@CoralTrace</td>
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<td>Honor Hugo</td>
<td>@honor_hugo</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meaghan Smith</td>
<td>@M3aghanKate</td>
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<td><strong>Longreach</strong>&lt;br&gt;(16–18 August 2016)</td>
<td>Emma Gagen</td>
<td>@EmmaJGagen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Johana Tello</td>
<td>@JOHANATELLO</td>
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<td>Robyn Cumming</td>
<td>@DrRobynCumming</td>
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<td><strong>Toowoomba</strong>&lt;br&gt;(14–15 August 2016)</td>
<td>Jacqueline Byrne</td>
<td>@jacquelinebyrne8</td>
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<td>Vanessa Lussini</td>
<td>@VLussini</td>
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<td>Alison Peel</td>
<td>@ali_bat</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Organizers</strong></td>
<td>Mathilde Desselle</td>
<td>@mathildedesselle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maggie Hardy</td>
<td>@DrMaggieHardy</td>
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The Organizers

Mathilde Desselle

Dear Mathilde at age 13,

Hello from age 31! Sorry to say you haven’t become a professional cow girl! But your life has turned out to be really awesome, and believe it or not, you have become some hybrid scientist/manager for a drug discovery program. Your curiosity will pay off!

I know you’re doing well at school, but that you much prefer to be around horses or mucking around the farm. Mum and Dad are telling you that you can become what you want if you work hard enough for it. Grandad would love you to become a mathematician and an engineer like him. Maths aren’t really your thing, but biology is. Still you don’t quite know what you want to be… Maybe a vet?

In a few months’ time, Mum and Dad will take you to Paris to visit the National History Museum (you love animals and dinosaurs, so you will have a great time!) You will look at the fossil of Lucy, our most famous early human ancestor. That day you will decide that you want to understand how living organisms are evolving and adapting, and to share your passion with others. You will end up studying biotechnology and business. Grandad will pass away from a bacterial infection a few weeks after you receive your international economics Masters degree.

You will travel from the shores of a small coastal town in Northern France, lived in the United States and in New Zealand, and have settled in Brisbane, Australia. You are now looking for the next antibiotic to stop people dying from infection caused by deadly bacteria that have become resistant to existing drugs. You are traveling the world to explore microbiology and chemistry laboratories, and presented your work at a huge conference in San Francisco just a few weeks ago. You are also a bit of a “nerd” in 2016, loving new technologies like 3d printing or drones.

It will not be an easy journey, and as you always have doubted yourself a lot, you will be questioning your ability to become the woman you want to be. You will fall in love, but your marriage will break. However it will make you a stronger and kinder person, and you will always aspire to make a difference. Fortunately, your parents and little sisters will be pushing you no matter what, and you are going to meet inspiring friends, teachers and mentors who will believe in you when you won’t and help you along the way. You will also become an advocate for girls’ education and women in life sciences. My advice to you: don’t listen to those who tell you you’re not good enough to succeed. Rather prove them wrong. And keep riding horses, for they bring you wonderful surprises and adventures.
Maggie Hardy

Dear Maggie at age 13,

Hello from age 34! Your natural curiosity and thirst for life hasn’t abated, and has seen you move from Boston to Honolulu across the Pacific to Brisbane in beautiful sunny Queensland, Australia. Your life has turned out to be pretty much the adventure you were hoping for and you’ve become a scientist like you always wanted.

After volunteering at a local aquarium with the fish (especially sharks!) and invertebrates, you developed a keen interest in all things invertebrate – you always have been an advocate for the underdog. After earning an undergraduate degree in biology (with a double minor in chemistry and gender studies), you moved to Honolulu for your MSc in Entomology, the study of insects.

And working with insects is still awesome! So many great scientists started out as entomologists: Charles Darwin, Alfred Kinsey, and E.O. Wilson, to name a few. Getting a broad background in a fundamental science has been a smart move for your career and opens doors for exciting collaborations. You looked for new insecticides from Australian spider venoms, found some, and filed patents the same year you received your PhD in Chemistry. Now, your research is focused on discovering new chemistries from the venom of native Australian spiders, like the funnel-web spider and tarantulas.

By the time you read this letter, you will be a rape survivor. As tragic as child sexual violence is, you will heal, slowly, and turn your experience into a powerful force. You will become an advocate for survivors of sexual violence and receive a place on the Advisory Board of a wonderful child protection charity in Australia, called Bravehearts.

And know that by the time you’re my age, you will have a wonderful life. You are surrounded by a supporting, loving family who encourages your search for knowledge and is unconditionally supportive of your career in research. Your children are hilarious, and your husband is a flawless gem. Your parents and brother back in the United States are still very close to you and involved with everything happening with you halfway around the world with you in Australia, thanks to the wonders of modern technology. By the time you have trekked through all those degrees you’ll find the adventure has only just begun.

And in 2016 you’ll find yourself working with an amazing, inspiring group of women in Queensland to bring science to regional communities.

My advice to you: keep doing what you love, and follow your instincts and your own curiosity. You’ll find your gut instinct is often right. The adventure is never over.
Dear Kaylene at age 13,

Hello from 10 years in the future (age 23). I would just like to say congratulations. Congratulations on getting into the accelerated math and science program at your High School. Right now you’re probably telling anyone who asks that you want to be a palaeontologist. Congratulations again! You did it! You have achieved your lifelong dream of becoming a palaeontologist and are currently studying kangaroo fossils.

After finishing high school you will move from Rockhampton to Brisbane to study geology at University. You will ultimately instead choose to major in zoology, a different pathway to palaeontology, because this major focuses on the evolution and biology of the animals you want to study. You will still take a lot of geology subjects to make sure you learn everything you need to know to be a palaeontologist. During your undergraduate degree you will start volunteering at a museum and actually get to work with real fossils for the first time. This will only make you more excited to continue your study. Volunteering will also give you a great appreciation for just how diverse and unique Australia’s fossil history can be. Ultimately, you will choose to study extinct kangaroos instead of dinosaurs because you will become fascinated by marsupial evolution. You still love dinosaurs though. Eventually you will graduate with a Bachelor of Science majoring in Zoology and first class honours in Geology.

In 2016 you will find yourself in the third year of your PhD. You’re currently studying an extinct group 20 to 10 million year old extinct fanged kangaroos. You absolutely love the fact that one of these species is called Balbaroo fangaroo. At this stage you have also formally described a new species of 20 million year old kangaroo which is not a fanged kangaroo but is instead related to modern kangaroos we see today.

By the time you read this letter you won’t yet be used to hearing words like ‘girls just aren’t good at computer programing’ or ‘women just don’t succeed in science’ but you will hear this in the years to come. You will hear it from your fellow high school students and from people you know quite well. Despite this, you will have support from your parents, friends and many of your teachers. This, and your love of science, will drive you to stay on the science path and constantly remind you that you can be a palaeontologist. My advice to you: Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do it. Just keep that love for science and follow your dreams. You will get there. Now go and watch Jurassic Park again, as inaccurate as the movie is, your love of both science fiction, and science in general, was what inspired you to pursue your career in the first place.
Emily Furlong

Dear 13-year old Emily,

Hello from almost 10 years in the future! Firstly, I’m sorry to say that you are not on the path to becoming a world famous actress or archaeologist like you’d hoped. Instead, you are doing something that you could never have imagined… SCIENCE!

In just over a year’s time you’ll step out of your comfort zone and sign up for a program that will set you on the path to where you are now. You’ll discover a passion for science and after finishing school, will go on to complete a Bachelor of Science, achieving first class honours and a University Medal. Your undergraduate results will gain you a scholarship to undertake a PhD in structural biology and biochemistry (Google it - I know you don’t know what that means), which you are currently just over a year through.

Your PhD work centres on a group of bacterial proteins, which you can think of as machines that help to create the weapons bacteria use to infect people. You are interested in understanding how these proteins work and what they look like. To do this, you use many techniques but particularly protein X-ray crystallography. You are still fascinated by crystals, but now instead of just collecting them, you are growing them, shooting them with an X-ray beam and using the data they provide to look at the atomic detail of cellular machines. You really are doing some pretty cool stuff!

You are slowly growing to accept yourself and overcome your anxiety, self doubts and perfectionism. Some days are better than others and you’ve come to the realisation that you are not alone; everyone has battles to fight. If you’ve learnt anything over the last 10 years it’s that people need other people and having a good support network is worth more than you realise. Hold onto those people that encourage you to step out of your comfort zone and have faith in you when you have none in yourself.

You have lived out of home for just over a year now but are still incredibly close to your family. It may have taken you a while but you have finally realised how important it is to maintain a work-life balance and cultivate a variety of interests.

Always remember that you are much more capable than you give yourself credit for.

Keep doing your best and what you love but push yourself to try new things; you never know where they may lead.
Dear Teenage Jacki,

Hello from you in proper adulthood. Unfortunately this is not due to any amazing time travel invention – just old fashioned self-reflection. So I am here to tell you to hang in there – and that you are right about quite a few things, and wrong about some too. While we don’t have time travel, we do have some very useful technology which makes everyday much easier – things I probably can’t explain properly in a short letter given that you don’t even know about the internet! But you will using some of these technologies to make people’s lives better - and I know that will be important to you.

You are absolutely right that school days are NOT the best days of your life. Although it is a saying and some adults insist that it is true – it is definitely not the case for you (or many others!). Life after school just keeps getting better and better. But school is necessary – so focus on the learning and the friendships, and power through to get to the good parts of life afterwards!

So you are probably really interested about what kind of career decisions you ended up making. You were adamant that you wanted to get in there and help people in your work. And you do. Occupational therapy was a fantastic choice for your studies and you love being focused on the individual and what they do that makes life meaningful for them. Problem solving and adapting things so they can keep doing those things with health conditions and disability is challenging and creative and wonderful.

Perhaps not surprisingly, you still have questions and desire to find out whether there are better ways of doing things, or making a difference. This leads you back into research to try to solve problems that your clients face. And you find you really enjoy the process of discovery and assembling evidence to build a clear picture. Your research involves working with people living with health conditions, and you love the process of finding practical answers within the complexity of the challenges of everyday life. You work with people with neurological conditions, and older people and their family caregivers. You help tell their stories, measure their challenges and find ways of helping to keep life meaningful for them. This uses the things you have loved: being creative, drawing evidence together, using structured, logical approaches, and writing.

So what were you wrong about? Well, believe it or not, you do actually use statistics in your everyday job. So your mutters in maths class were wrong – but guess what – when it is your own data and your question you are answering, it is much more interesting! And the public speaking thing? Yep – you have to do that too after school – sometimes to big crowds, but you find you don’t mind it too much, especially when you care about what you talking about!

So keep going – life gets better and better – and I didn’t even get to tell you about the wonderful kids you have! Just wait and see!
Hi Bec at age 14,

I’m writing to you from the future, when I’m more than twice your current age. Hello! A lot has happened in the meantime, but you don’t feel like you’ve changed much at all. You’re still in Brisbane, but have had some great adventures in Australia and abroad, and you’re planning for more big adventures soon. Great news – you finally have a dog, as you’ve always wanted, and he is wonderful. You have a loving partner, backyard chooks, and a big vegetable garden.

Just like now in high school, you will stay uncertain about where you fit between social science and the physical sciences. But that’s okay! You end up being an ‘interdisciplinary’ scientist, where you bring together perspectives from environmental science, psychology, and political science to understand why people disagree about the environment. In high school, you will love learning in Modern History about the Franklin Dam in Tasmania and this will influence the choices you make about studying at University.

In between school and the end of your PhD you’ll do a few different things. You’ll become a manager in a department store, and do some office work before you know you are sure you want to study. You’ll study Environmental Management and learn all about the challenges of maintaining a healthy environment and happy people. You’ll also take a life-changing journey around Tasmania where you see snow for the first time – and love it. You’ll become fascinated by the way people’s values and identities affect their relationship with the environment. And you’ll still love animals. Through your PhD you’ll present your research in the United States, and do some great research with people in Tasmania.

Just like now, you’ll stay a bit silly and a bit different, and you’ll still have great friends around you who are different from you and each other, but you all care for each other just the same. Sometimes you’ll still doubt yourself, but you’ll have learnt that everyone does this, and you’ve got a lot about which you can be thankful and proud. And by the way, you’ll still love being the centre of attention in the middle of a room of people.

My advice to you is to enjoy life and be confident in yourself. You’ll have great fun on the way to your career in science, and a great time once you’re there too. You’ll make some mistakes, but you’ll learn from them. You’ll work through some challenges with your health, and that will be thanks to support from your family. Even if you doubt it at times, things will all work out and you’ll be so pleased with where you end up!
Dear Paloma at age 13,

I’m so proud of you already. You are still a child at heart, but in many ways you are mature beyond your years. As your primary school classmates are continuing in the Swiss public school system, you are switching to an English-speaking one. I still remember the giddiness we felt the night before – so nervous yet so excited! I cringe at the thought of our handmade “business cards” that we planned to hand out to the people we met, but I also find it adorable.

The four years of high school in front of you will be some of the most important in shaping your life. You will have fantastic teachers that will be great inspirers and mentors, will find an outlet for your competitive nature in all your sports teams, and will learn to navigate within the hierarchical social world around you. People will try to label you, but you don’t fit into any stereotype. Paloma is a teacher’s pet, a tomboy, a party girl, a nerd, a “make-out machine”. People label you in so many ways that you think you must be acting out these different roles, but really you’re just being you – and you are a whole amalgamation of things.

I’m sure you won’t find this surprising, but your parents are going to get a divorce soon. You’ll welcome their separation, as it’s something that should have happened ages ago, but you’ll still feel torn up inside. You’ll get caught in the middle of their messy battle, and start shutting yourself off from your family. You’ll throw all your passion, thoughts and time into school and extra-curricular activities. Your free hours will be taken up by sports, organizing events, working on the yearbook, socializing, and keeping up with Southpark, that you are constantly distracted. It made you into a really good student with a diversity of experiences – so I guess it was a pretty good coping mechanism!

When you get to University, you’ll start to realise what they mean when they say “just a big fish in a small pond”. To do well, you’ll have to put the effort in. You’ll learn this in your second year, and start buckling down. You’ll have the coolest, nerdiest friends who will be your ‘library buddies’, and together you’ll pull a ridiculous number of all-nighters. Somehow, these are some of my fondest memories of my undergraduate. Don’t get me wrong, the party nights were wild too! It’s just that some of the hardest times are some of the best times, because it makes you appreciate the strong social support of having a tight network of friends.

Since I was your age, I haven’t stopped being a student, and in some ways, I never want to stop! Constantly acquiring knowledge and learning new skills is so motivating and feeds our hungry curiosity. That’s the best part about being in the Sciences: our knowledge is constantly changing and growing and we adapt our thoughts so quickly with new evidence. The path in front of me is unclear, but I feel secure in the knowledge that I am moving forward and have so much to explore. I’ve lived by the motto, ‘happiness is a journey, not a destination’, and so will you.
Dear Diana at 13,

You’re almost 30 now, and you’re on a different path than you thought you would be, but don’t panic - you’ve made the right choice. Remember when you were growing up, and your goal was to be a doctor? Your weekends were spent reading books about biology, and the human body, and it was these books that became the crux of your teenage years. Fast forward sixteen years and you’ll see that you didn’t study medicine, but you’ve found another career that you are passionate and inspired by. A career, that challenges you and makes you want to answer the hard questions. You always had that natural curiosity to ask questions about the world, to understand the riddles of the universe and to ask how things work in nature. As it turns out, medicine wasn’t the best way to answer these questions for you: science was.

After high school you took a slight detour with your studies and travelled for a year. You weren’t ready to go to university and the gap year turned out to be one of the best experiences of your life. When you returned to Australia, your determination to study science was still strong. At this point you still wanted to study medicine and enrolling in a Bachelor of Biomedical Science was the natural stepping stone to this. However, you decided to also toy with the idea of adding an honours year to your degree and experience research. Spending a year as an honours student would become the catalyst for changing your career path from medicine to science.

After your honours year, you take some more time off to travel the world and make the most of your early twenties. When you return you enrol in a PhD and study neuroscience. It’s during your PhD that you realise that your passion for science is also mirrored with your passion for communicating science, and changing the perception of science to the public. You begin to see that men outnumber women in most sectors of employment for science and engineering, and that there is a continuing bias against women in science. You see that people’s biases often stem from repeated exposure to stereotypes that portray women as less competent. To begin chipping away at this stereotype you become passionate about school outreach. You devote your time visiting regional and rural schools around Queensland. Your goal is to not only empower young girls to follow a path into science, but encourage all students to understand the basic foundations of science with the scope of creating a more scientifically literate society.

You’re close to 30, and you have achieved more than you imagined, and you’ve only skimmed the surface. Your thirst for knowledge and passion for life will not waiver, and you will continuously move the goalposts to realise your new aspirations. My advice to you: keep following your instincts, and always surround yourself with people that will inspire and motivate you.
Dear teenage Sohinee,

Hello from your future self about to turn the big three-O. If I remember correctly, you probably think that all the fun things in life are practically over by now. But let me tell you, “You’re just getting started!” You will be surprised to learn that not only am I writing to you from across a decade and a half, but also an ocean away.

As you finish high school in India (don’t worry about the results, you will graduate with top honours) and are still reeling from the loss of a dear childhood friend to diabetes, you are torn between your two loves: science and English literature. Trust your gut and stick with science. You will have no regrets and guess what, you will become a published author—just not in the way you might have envisioned! You decide upon an undergraduate degree in Biotechnology at the beautiful Manipal University and sure, this will be the first time you are going to be away from your beloved hometown and friends whom you have known since you were a toddler, but the coming years will be some of the best in your life. You will learn about everything from physics to physiology with majors in microbiology and biochemistry and there will never be a dull moment. You will make new friends, experience different cultures from all over the world, take part in a zillion extra-curriculars and somehow manage to squeeze in a gold medal at the end for graduating top of your class. But do not get complacent and work hard for that medal (competition will be tough) because it will open up possibilities you would never even dreamt of.

You academic record will open doors for you and you will take one that leads you Australia. Convincing mum and dad to let their only child go so far away from them will take some time, but the prestigious scholarship that you are awarded from the University of Queensland for postgraduate studies will finally win them over. While you wait and prepare for your departure, you will be very fortunate to spend the last few months with your grandmother, who will go from a malignant liver cancer diagnosis to passing away in that short time. As you leave your home for a second time with a heavy heart, you take comfort that you have chosen to embark upon a career where your work can touch many lives.

As I stand on the cusp of another decade in ‘our’ life, I realise that while things have not always gone according to plan, the journey has been pretty amazing! Sure, the economy is struggling and funding for research is scarce, but I have learned to adapt and improvise. I am finally making a niche for myself in my profession and even thinking of starting a family. My only advice to you is to work hard and keep your mind open to new possibilities, the rest will take care of itself!

P.S.: Most people now call you Sho since your name can be quite a tongue-twister and frankly speaking, it takes too long to spell it out each time you order coffee!
Dear Teenage Danielle,

Greetings from 2016! So you know how you’re a dreamer, muse over endless possibilities, and continually think that there must be something… more? There is. For you, it’s science and it’s helping people. And I guess if you think about it, it always has been.

You leave Bundaberg and move to Brisbane to complete your undergraduate. You learn to stand on your own two feet. You lose some old friends, but gain many more. A few good eggs remain as your closest buddies to date, and you feel grateful for their support and friendship. You are successful in a work-placement internship during your undergrad in an industry you do not know much about. While you figure out quality assurance and microbiology is definitely not for you, you meet a very special person, who one day will follow you overseas, become your biggest advocate, and ask you to be his partner for life. Make sure you apply for that internship ok?!

You go on to finish an honours degree, your first real research project which is in Tissue Engineering and Biomaterials. You ask a lot of questions and you learn. Never be afraid, or embarrassed to ask questions. You meet more people and make new friends. Based mainly on your desire to travel and experience different cultures, you apply for a spot on an international PhD program in Germany in Regenerative Medicine. Your parents are petrified. You tell the person you have been seeing for four years that you want to do this. You get in. He decides to follow you. Your parents finally calm down. You have the best four years. You meet people from all over the world and make new friends. You are awarded your PhD in Islet Transplantation and head back to sunny Queensland, after a quick detour to Sicily and Malta! Note – S.A.D is a real disorder, look it up and learn to deal with it, it will make those German winters a lot easier.

In your post-doc you get to continue in Diabetes Research. You are excited that you have been given a chance. You work extremely hard. But you suffer from depression, anxiety and have your first panic attack, once you realise how hard this business can be. Don’t take it personally. You will though. There is a bright side. You learn to think about life’s problems in different ways and understand why and how people communicate the way they do. You grow and become more confident. You meet even more people, you cry but you laugh harder, and make incredible friends. You have a support network and people care about you. You realise people are just trying to get by, just like you. So trust your gut. Continue to work hard, remain honest and kind. Keep smiling. I promise you will get to know remarkable, like-minded people, where together you can and will make a small difference in this world.
Caitlin Kuempel

Dear Caitie at 13,

Remember when you told your 5th grade teacher you wanted to be a marine biologist? Well, that’s exactly what you’ll do. A PhD will always be in your sights, thanks to a loving, strong mother who finished her PhD when you were 8 years old. The path that you take to get there—and by there I mean Brisbane, Australia, pursuing a PhD in conservation science at the age of 27—you could not have ever imagined.

In high school, you will play a different sport every season (swimming, basketball, soccer) and spend your summers lifeguarding with your friends at the neighbourhood pool. You will succeed in most everything you do, in large part due to your hard work ethic and your deep rooted perfectionism. Your dream to get out of Iowa for university will be the first you don’t achieve, and you’ll cry on the way home from a school visit in Washington D.C. when your mom tells you that it’s just not something you can afford. You’ll quickly realize this was a blessing in disguise and you will enjoy every second of your university experience in Iowa.

After switching from pre-medicine to environmental science, you will complete an honours project in coral palaeontology and you will decide to pursue marine science for your career. Your love for the French language and travelling will lead you to take an extra year of uni to study in France where you will travel Europe and meet one of your best friends. Upon return, you will struggle with which aspect of marine biology to specialise in, so you will pursue a masters degree through the Three Seas Program, spending 3 months in Boston, MA, Bocas del Toro, Panama, and back to where your love began, Friday Harbor. Little do you know that Panama will become a very special place, where you will end up living for ~2 years. It's in Panama where you will be forced to find yourself, forced to learn to let things go, and finally be at peace with the person you are. On the same night you will also meet the love of your life, who will move with you to Australia after knowing you for <6 months.

Unfortunately, through all of this success you will have some very dark moments when you are sad and unable to see all that you’ve accomplished. Depression will be a big part of your life and you will often doubt yourself and be stuck in moments of the past. Luckily, you will learn to recognize it and you will have strong, accepting people by your side that will help you get through the bad times and look forward to the good.

Some advice: always remember to be kind to yourself! You deserve and have earned every opportunity that has come your way. Learning how to teach yourself is one of the hardest but most rewarding skills you will learn. Don’t get caught up with perfection or comparing yourself to others. Never stop learning, live in the moment and be confident because you are a much better person and scientist than you think.
Gwen Iacona

Dear 14 year old me,

The past 23 years have taken you places you never dreamed that you would go. I know at the present you don’t really know what it is that you want to do with your life but you think that you want to work with animals. Or better yet, end up with a job where you can ride your horse in the woods and look at plants. Well, guess what. You did have that job for a bit! And now, you don’t necessarily work with animals specifically, but you and a large group of very smart and dedicated people are figuring out how to stop wild animals and plants from going extinct all over the world.

When you first went to university you wanted to study architecture because you were interested in sustainable development and liked building things. However, after your first field biology class you were hooked on science and it has been your passion ever since. This passion has led to lots of exciting adventures. You have visited Costa Rica, fallen in love with fire maintained savanna ecosystems after studying plant ecology in them in Georgia, worked on ¼ of the protected areas in Florida, measured trees in the beautiful Appalachian mountains, and ended up in Australia where you live now.

If you want some advice from the future, it is don’t ever get tired of learning new things or exploring. You are lucky because you always have believed that anything is possible if you work hard enough, and you are not afraid to chase the things you want. This strategy doesn’t always work out as planned. But by asking for what you want, the worst response you can get is no, and often the result is unexpected and exciting.

In the next few years, you will face difficulties and heartache and loneliness in the pursuit of scientific excellence, but the path is worth it. Just keep on doing what you find fun and interesting and the next opportunity will bring new joy. Remember you have an extensive support network of family and friends who are always there if you need them.

Good luck with everything! Your life will be fun and wonderful and you will always feel lucky that you get to live it!

Love from 35 year old me
Dear 13 year old Lynn,

This is Lynn from the future! I am 27 now and live in Australia! It was just last year at school on Geography day that you stood up on stage and spoke about the continent of Australia. Little do you know that one day you will actually call this beautiful country your home!

Around this time, you realize how much you love Biology. You have been learning at school about various processes like respiration and circulation and absolutely love how the human body works. You make plans about studying medicine which unfortunately won’t work. But not studying medicine will be the best thing that happens to you. You will feel lost and confused about your future and then take up a degree in Biotechnology because dad suggests it might be a good idea. You will forever remember your first day at University, where the lecturer tells a packed class, ‘If you chose this degree for money, you will hate every minute of it, but if you chose this degree because you love science, you will love it!’ At that very minute you know, deep within your heart, this was the right choice.

Your undergraduate degree will only deepen your thirst for knowledge. You will learn about some amazing discoveries in the field of biology, discovery of the structure of DNA, cloning of the first mammal and learning about them will give rise to a dream, the dream of being like one of these great discoverers, the dream of understanding how the human body works, using this understanding to contribute to humanity, the dream of being a scientist!

This desire will make you do the unthinkable! You will leave home, your family, friends, everything familiar behind in India and travel to Australia all by yourself, to do your Masters in Biotechnology at University of Queensland. I won’t lie to you; living in Australia by yourself won’t be easy.

You will face everything, right from floods to which you will lose all your belongings, unemployment, heartache, loss of your father, but every setback will only propel you furtherer. You will learn to love and accept yourself. You will learn to see that you are beautiful and you are created with love. And the best part of all, you will be a Neuroscientist! You will work at a wonderful lab at Griffith University and actually make some amazing discoveries. You are surrounded by wonderful people, who love you, believe in you and see the potential in you.

From that shy girl, who has no confidence in yourself, you will blossom into a strong woman who loves pushing her boundaries. And this will lead you to being a part of the Catch a rising star program, where you will meet other inspiring women and travel to regional areas to share about your work!

So hang in there, continue dreaming big and don’t forget to let go and have some fun!
Dear Jenny (at age 16),

Please don’t freak out, but you are nearly 30 now. I do have some good news though. You know how everyone chuckles and rolls their eyes when you say that you’re going to study whales when you grow up? Well the joke is on them – you actually do it! You attend the University of Miami to get an undergraduate degree in Marine Biology with a double minor in chemistry and psychology. Afterwards you’ll do several internships where you get some amazing hands on experience with animal husbandry and education before deciding research is definitely for you.

Remember Zeppelin, the whale that you adopted from the Cetacean Research Unit when you were 7? The one whose picture is hanging on your bedroom wall? You will get to meet her one day. When you graduate university, you will get a job with that organization as a whale watch naturalist. You will get paid actual money to go on whale watches, tell people about whales, and collect scientific data. You will see Zeppelin on one of your trips and move some of the passengers to tears with how excited you get while telling everyone about “your” whale. You’ll even get a tattoo of her fluke, which Mom is not pleased about at all.

Your next move will be to Scotland, where the accents are just as amazing as you think they’ll be, to get your MRes in Marine Mammal Research. You will fall in love with Scotland and with the topic of whale research that your career will become focused on: cultural transmission. Eventually all of your hard work will pay off and you’ll move to Brisbane, Australia (think weather like Miami but accents like Scotland). You’ll undertake your PhD studying the cultural transmission of humpback whale song. It’s going to be incredibly difficult, and you are going to feel giving up at times. You just have to remember the most important thing: Dad will HAVE to call you Dr. Allen when you finish.

Being a woman in science won’t always be easy. You’ll often be the only woman working on boats with captains, crews, and deckhands who don’t always treat women very well. Your butt will get pinched, your body will get commented on, and they will assume you can’t lift anything heavy. There will even be one captain who openly harasses you for several weeks. Don’t be afraid to speak up and tell them off. Stand your ground, be confident, and know that you are going to be very good at what you do. You’ll have discovered that your field is full of women who are just as passionate about science as you are. Not only will they be your peers and colleagues, but they’ll also become your mentors, inspirations, and your closest friends. Keep your dream in sight and stay single-minded to the point of recklessness with your pursuit of it. It’s an amazing adventure.
Dear teenage Elecia,

I am your future Elecia writing back in time to say g’day and give some advice. First of all let me say the future is great! The world has changed a lot in the past 15 years. Things move faster, technology is smarter and everyone is more connected. I know you are extremely curious about what the future has in store, so without giving too much away, here are a few snippets… you can go shopping without leaving your bed, cars can drive themselves, and the virtual reality that you’ve seen in movies has just become a reality. Unbelievable right??! Well it’s true, so get excited!

Actually you have always been a curious person; full of so many questions and always searching for answers. I guess this is what will naturally lead you down a specific career path. Try to guess what it is. In what career would you investigate complex problems and make new discoveries in the pursuit of understanding and the betterment the world? I think you probably guessed correctly; did you guess scientist? Yes, you became a scientist. Science is huge in the future! Thousands of new discoveries are made every day. These are extremely interesting and inspiring so I know you will enjoy reading about all the exciting research that’s going on. There is so much out there though that it’s going to be hard to keep up. That’s one small issue in the future. There is so much information readily available that you can’t possibly read everything! There are many fields of science that interest you, I bet you are wondering where you will fit. Well sorry buddy but this one I will keep a secret. You need to have some surprises along the way. All I will say is follow your passion. Your curiosity will lead you far and wide. Ask questions, find answers and spread the knowledge to all.

What about the people in your life you ask? Well now you’re just prying. But if you must know, you are surrounded by amazing people who love you. Many of them you haven’t even met yet… and your special someone is right in the mix too. Spend time with your loved ones for it is these connections that render you whole. Make people smile, make people laugh, because nothing is better than turning a frown upside-down.

Speaking of upside-down… you may develop an addiction to standing on your hands. I urge you to start practicing handstand drills and techniques now. Mastering handstands takes far longer than you think. And don’t worry, seeing the world upside down will never get old! You will be quite good at spreading your addiction to others too. Handstands seem to make everyone happy!

Keep smiling, enjoy the outdoors, travel, and most of all, stay curious. That’s my advice for now.
Danette Langbecker

Dear teenage Danette,

Hello from the other side of 30 (and by the way, your thirties are really not that old)! There are so many things I want to tell you about your life and who you will become.

At your age, you are drawn to so many different things academically. From me to me, it’s okay to be interested in all of them, and having a diverse range of ideas will only help you become a well-rounded person and help you succeed once you find your path. What you will become is a public health researcher, looking at ways to improve the health and well-being of populations, particularly people with cancer. This will allow you to do what you always wanted, to help people, but also let you be constantly reading and writing and thinking, which is you in a nutshell. You will spend your days investigating what problems people with cancer and other diseases are experiencing, and coming up with new ideas and testing them to see if they work. And when they do, you’ll see them be implemented around the country and overseas.

You won’t have a simple path to get there though. You will go through a few years where you won’t feel like you’re on any sort of path. By now, your mum will have told you hundreds of times not to become a nurse like she is, and you feel fairly sure that you don’t want to be changing bedpans or dressing wounds. You don’t want to become a medical doctor either, with that responsibility of someone’s life or death in your hands. So you will try out a few career paths on the way to finding this. You will do volunteer work in a nursing home, a veterinary clinic, and a school, among others, and each of these experiences will open your eyes to what’s important in life. You will travel the world, going to parts of Asia, Europe and America. You will especially love spending time doing volunteer work in developing countries, where you will feel you are making a different to individual people, but this will also reinforce your desire to help on a “bigger level,” and your research will let you do that.

And oh, the things your research will let you do! You will earn a PhD in psycho-oncology, which is at the intersection of public health, psychology and nursing, and you will spend your days talking to people experiencing cancer and those who care for them. You will also become active in advocacy, fighting for policies and practices that support those less fortunate than others, and that ensure everyone has the opportunity for the best health possible.

By the way, right now you’re probably horrified at the thought of having to talk to all the different people I’ve mentioned here, but you do overcome the social anxiety that you’re currently experiencing. By the time you’re my age, you will be married to someone who gets you, and have many more good friends than you thought ever possible. You’ll find a community of people where you feel understood, and you’ll have confidence in yourself, in your career and personally. So hold your head up high and reach for the stars – you never know, you may just catch one!
Dear Tarni at age 13,

Hello (habari yako!), from your future self at 31 years old! By my age you will have become a veterinarian and worked in a surgery like you are dreaming of now, but your understanding of what a vet can do will have grown into a picture of pursuing One Health for humans, animals and the environment. You will have lived in East Africa and worked with family farmers in four countries: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Vietnam! You will even pick up a little Kiswahili, which you’ve always loved the sound of.

During secondary school you will have amazing opportunities to develop leadership skills – Say yes! You will grow from being introverted around strangers, to being comfortable talking to anyone and everyone, from new friends to the Governor General. There will be tough times too. Your mum will get cancer when you are in year 12 and have to have a complex surgery and radiation treatment. For a while you will feel like your world is caving in and your teachers will worry. Your mum’s prognosis will be poor, but her amazing doctors and her body will conquer the cancer anyway! You will make it through too. As a perfectionist, you will be upset that you don’t get straight into veterinary school but you should be excited – Your life is so much richer for the path you take! In your first year of Science at the University of Melbourne there will be a geography subject on offer, called Famine in the Modern World – Take it girl, it will change your life! You will learn about the deep complexities of poverty and rather than feel overwhelmed, will feel motivated. You will develop a systems approach to looking at problems. This is a strength.

You and friends will set up a One Health interest group at university and will be surprised by the amazing professionals who will volunteer their time to speak to you. You will increasingly focus on facilitating participation of farmers, giving them more of a voice in research.

Your early twenties will blow you away and thinking of them at 31yo will still give you a lump in your throat – Cherish those years. By 31 you will have a wonderful partner and be completing your PhD combining many of your passions – Communication, One Health, social justice and food security. You will be annoyed by being told you are ‘career-driven’, that’s not you at all; You are driven by many causes! You will love volunteering, providing veterinary care to the pets of people experiencing homelessness in Brisbane and being involved with a smallholder farming NGO. You will wish the possums would stop eating your own garden’s vegetables. Don’t let anyone put you in a box, you are wired to enjoy many things and connect them creatively. You thrive when you are working for a cause – so dream big and get one, or some…
Carly Kenkel

Dear fourteen-year-old Carly,

This year, your best friend Jessica brought you along on her family vacation to Hawaii. You swam with dolphins and now you’ve modified your life goal from veterinarian to studying marine biology and becoming an animal trainer at Sea World.

People will tell you you’re crazy. Your uncle will try to talk you out of it, convinced that you’ll never make a career out of such a life choice. But your parents will be insanely supportive and you’ll stick to your guns and enroll at LIU’s Southampton College as a marine science major. In your freshman year you’ll take a 3-credit work experience class where you’ll volunteer as a tech at a marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation center on Long Island. Spoiler Alert 1: You’ll discover you hate animal care. Your sophomore year, you’ll try working as an aquarist. You’ll learn quite a bit, but you won’t love this either. Don’t lose heart – your in-class course work and labs will be fascinating. There is so much more to marine science than you ever imagined.

The road to graduation won’t be easy. After two years of small classes, friendly interactions with your professors and labs on the water, your small liberal arts college will close its doors and you and your classmates will be unceremoniously dumped on the doorstep of the large, impersonal State University an hour down the road. Spoiler Alert 2: It’ll be heart-breaking. But it will also be the best thing that happens to you during your undergraduate career. At Stony Brook, you’ll found the marine science club and discover the glory of paid summer internships. You’ll land the REU that shapes your future career as a coral biologist, finally discovering the branch of marine science that you love and getting introduced to your future PhD mentor.

And you’ll never look back. In spite of your Uncle’s dire warnings about “never making a living” you’ll win a Fulbright Fellowship that pays for you to live and work in Thailand for 10 months, you’ll earn a PhD without spending a penny on tuition, you’ll be awarded a postdoctoral position with two+ years of funding in Australia (!!) and after all that, you’ll be offered a tenure-track faculty position in the Marine Biology Department of a tier one University, with a great salary, benefits and start-up package.

Along the way you’ll meet people who will become your life-long friends and collaborators. You’ll dance with your husband who, though it seems impossible now, will be even more supportive than your parents. And your passion for marine science will only grow stronger. Don’t think you’ll never fail – Spoiler Alert 3: Stanford will never accept you as a student, no matter how many times you apply. You’ll spend time writing proposals for many positions and fellowships that you won’t win. But keep in mind you’ll never win those you never strive for. Keep living your life like there’s no tomorrow. Jump at every experience that comes your way. Speaking as someone who knows, you won’t regret it. Don’t be afraid. You can do it all. I’m rooting for you.
Dear Amie at 13,

You have a big year of changes ahead of you! You just started high school, you’re going to make a bunch of new friends, your mum just got married and you just moved into a new house. There’s a lot going on! This year will be the first time you experience true depression, and I regret to say it’s not the last. That’s not to say it’s something you will continually battle with but by the time you’re 24 (us now) you will have gone through a few big phases of it that you have pulled through with flying colours. So don’t fret!

I know at this stage in your schooling you are unsure about what you want to do when you grow up unlike many of your peers and you take solace that you have time on your side. Between now and the end of school you toy with the idea of being a high school maths teacher, human rights lawyer, aerospace engineer, doctor, electrician, freelance journalist, fashion designer- just to name a few. Your interests are broad and varied and they will remain that way. You have always enjoyed mathematics but have shied away from the other sciences in a bid to differentiate yourself from your brother and mum- both of which are still passionate scientists.

Alas you go on to study maths and chemistry at university which you tell yourself is ‘different enough’ to your brother so as to appear to be just copying him. By the time second year roles round, you’ve had a taste at some introductory physics courses you chose to do as electives and you’re involved with the Advanced Studies Program in Science (ASPinS) and have had your first taste of research during a Summer Research Program. It’s at this point you start thinking seriously about physics and decide to do a research project in condensed matter physics.

You finished you double degree and go on to complete honours in condensed matter physics, not something you ever knew much about but turns out it’s perfect for your interests. Honours is a very challenging year for you both academically and personally and it does take you sometime to truly be yourself again. You will battle with depression and anxiety but you do come out of it relatively unscathed and all the stronger for it. And that basically leads you to now, you’re less than six months into a PhD and you’re slowly starting to manage your time better and enjoy having weekends as just weekends- not additional study/work days.

You’re very lucky to be working with two supervisors who are very supportive of you. You still have a bit of a way to go to feel confident in yourself and the work you do but it’s something I hope will come with time. All in all life at 24 is pretty sweet! I encourage you to explore all the opportunities presented to you more importantly have fun! You’ve got a good run ahead.
Dear Teenage Self,

About now a close family member will tell you that maybe science is not for you and that maybe you should do something a bit more mainstream. Don’t listen! It all turns out well and you have no idea what an exciting ride you are in for. Persevere (listen to the chemistry tutor!) and go for it.

I know how much you love to write and be creative – well guess what? You will end up doing exactly what you love, just not quite the way you expected! You are a published author, but the things you write about are perhaps not quite as you imagined. Malaria parasites and drugs are your dragons and other worlds. Your creativity comes into play in designing exciting new experiments to test the ideas you and your students come up with. It’s not *Lord of the Rings*, but it’s definitely cool and cutting edge! At 45 you are running your own laboratory focused on malaria research and loving it.

Being born in Malaysia and having parents in the Air Force means you are used to moving around. By the time you are my age you will have continued to travel the globe and enjoy new cultures and experiences. When you finish your PhD and move to Germany for a year, you end up staying for four years and even consider staying forever. Remember all those Indonesian language lessons as Saturday school – well you can’t remember much but you will be pleased to know that you can now speak German!

Teenage-self enjoy the years ahead of you. Have fun living life, making mistakes, and also have faith that you can achieve your goals. Your life ahead is interesting, challenging and filled with science, a great husband and a fantastic daughter who keeps you on your toes managing and coaching netball.
Dani Barrington

Dear Dani aged 15:

Greetings from 30! It’s pretty amazing up here. By now you have a career and a reputation for working on water, sanitation and hygiene (what we call WaSH) in developing countries. AND you are about to marry your soulmate! Yeah, I know, vomit-worthy right? But he is your ultimate partner in crime, you always have one another’s backs and you have so much fun together that everyday together makes your heart smile.

I know high school sucks. It is rubbish that even though you live in the metro area you have to study some subjects by distance education because your school doesn’t offer them. And being bullied for being smart, overweight and having a lisp – I know that some days it feels like everyone is against who you are as a person. But trust me IT GETS BETTER!

Things have only gotten better since high school. You navigated university following the topics you were interested in, and by having the guts to talk to Anas about your aspirations you scored a three month internship in The Netherlands, which is when you also realised how much you love research and wanted to do your PhD. During your PhD you got to travel all over the place, for work and fun, but all of them were adventures: going on safari in Africa with Sissy, road-tripping in the US with Hannah and Alanna, being part of a conference on Engineering, Social Justice and Peace in London. And at the end you got selected to go to Nepal to work! And it was amazing and changed your life, it taught you who you are as a person and what you want to do with your life. Then you came back to Australia and MADE THAT STUFF HAPPEN!

It wasn’t all smooth sailing. Your depression reared its ugly head a few times, often to do with boys taking advantage of you – although at the time you of course thought it was just “boys being boys”, on reflection you know that that kind of disrespect is not acceptable. When times got really tough, you’d punish yourself for being so “stupid”. But you worked through it and figured out that who you are and what you stand for is what’s important, and that if you did end up with a partner he needed to be someone who loves and respects you for exactly who you are.

You’ve also learnt that it is heartbreakingly common for women to be abused by their partners, and that this is why many women are homeless. With this knowledge and your interest in the menstrual hygiene part of WaSH, you are on the Board of a charity called Share the Dignity, which tries to help these women out at least a little bit by providing pads and tampons to shelters and poor communities.

At thirty, you’re not entirely sure what your next step is, but there are lots of opportunities coming up. Although you’re worried about where you and Mat are going to live, you’re also both excited about your next adventure. You know that the important thing is that you remain happy in your personal life and never let it fail because of work stress.
Megan Saunders

Dear Megan at age 13,

I am writing to you from Brisbane, Australia, at age 37. By now you are a marine biologist studying coastal ecosystems at the University of Queensland, Australia. You have a beautiful family including a kind, intelligent, motivated and supportive husband, and a curious, active, and charming 18 month old son, and extended family in Canada and elsewhere in Australia.

As a teenager in Vancouver, Canada, you will complete high school in French Immersion and play soccer. A lot of soccer – sometimes 8 games or practices a week! You will compete all around Canada and the USA. Soccer will help to keep you on a good track in life. You will be interested in becoming a marine biologist because of summers spent at the family cabin on the coast, but you will be advised that there are no jobs or money in this career. Stubbornly, you will ignore that advice and do a degree in Marine Biology at Simon Fraser University.

After your degree Marine science will provide opportunities to live and work in Australia, Central America, Alaska and remote areas of Canada. You will then move to Nova Scotia, Canada to complete a PhD in Oceanography at Dalhousie University. You will study invasive species in kelp forests diving in the cold waters off Nova Scotia. It is so cold there that sometimes the ocean freezes over! After your PhD, warmer climates will lure you to Western Australia. You will experience incredible adventures on Ningaloo Reef and spend two months at sea on a research vessel in the Indian Ocean. It is not all smooth sailing, though, and there will be long hours and frightening storms. During your time in Perth you will feel acutely far from home, family, and friends, and you will doubt your career path.

New opportunities will arise, this time in Brisbane, Australia, where you will move for a research position at the University of Queensland to study the impacts of sea-level rise on coasts. The day after you move to Brisbane there will be a massive flood which destroys much of the city – a rocky start to life in a new city, and an interesting experience to start research program on rising water levels. In your mid 30s you will slow down your career ambitions for the time being to put your family first. This is a challenge for you, because you are ambitious and have made many sacrifices for your career. You will continue to work part time at the University of Queensland studying how pollution from land affects coastal marine ecosystems.

A career in science offers many rewards. There is a lot of job flexibility, it is creative, and there are wonderful travel opportunities. Contrary to the advice that you were given as a teenager, there are actually jobs and money in fields like marine biology. But you will have to work hard and be prepared to move great distances. It is also worth keeping in mind that scientific training can help you learn critical thinking, which is useful in other types of careers.

Keep in mind that challenges can make you stronger and help you become a better person.
Anne Swinbourne

Dear Teenage Me,

About this time you are onto your 5th school which will turn out to be the last one you attend. All the moving around between schools means that there are quite a few gaps in your knowledge, particularly in maths. However you are pretty confident in your abilities and despite being much younger than the other kids in the class you still come up the top in exams.

Right now you want to be a vet and you are about to start working in a vet surgery looking after the animals. Pretty soon though you will realise that the thing that you are really interested in is animal and human behaviour. Figuring out what makes people and animals do the things they do. So you decide to do psychology. You will go to the University of NSW which is close to home and fall in with a group of people who turn into lifelong friends. While too busy having a good time to really throw yourself into your studies you perform well enough to set you up to do anything you are interested in at the end of your undergraduate degree.

What interests you is research. You will spend the next 3 decades investigating and examining questions that you find fascinating. While the questions and issues under inspection change, having learnt the methodology of science you can adapt it to all the situations. You meet and form friendships with some of the most intriguing and intelligent people around.

Most importantly you are never, ever, ever bored.

Some of your friends earn far more than you do and, indeed, ever will. But over time it becomes apparent that you are phenomenally lucky in that everything you do and get paid to do is something you love. You go places that many people will never go. You have conversations most people will never have. And you get paid to do it. Not everyone has that luck.

So my teenaged self, my message is that everything will be fine. Actually because you keep asking ‘Why?’ and you keep pushing the envelope everything will be more than fine. It will be great.

Never lose the attitude.
Dear Teen Tracy,

I just have some simple advice based on a timely reminder – Do you remember when your science teacher told the class the answer is always……..KEEP IT SIMPLE. Well remember that because it applies to more than just remembering chemistry calculations – KEEP IT SIMPLE is something to stick by and things work out.

So my advice to add is “don’t over think it, keep it simple.” Just stick to a few simple things and enjoy what you do, and do it because it brings meaning to your life, that is the only way you can find the path that is the right one right for you. No-one else is thinking about whether you are doing the right thing, in the right time, in the right way, for the right goals, to get the right outcome. You are the only one who is really thinking about all that. That is because no matter what anyone tries to tell you, there is no right way, there is no right time, there are no right goals, and if you keep it simple the outcome you get maybe very different to what you would have thought as “right” at the start. Be open to the possibilities that are out there in the world, there are a lot, and trust your instincts for what fits your life, goals and dreams.

Be open to possibilities, be kind, be honest, be happy. Don’t compromise these simple things, no mater what happens along the way, because nothing will be perfect, nothing will be what you imagine is right, no amount of over thinking beforehand will help at all, and if you can accept that, then that is where the “right” actually is.

Keep it simple.
Hi me at 15!

This is you, just 25 years later. I know what you are thinking: wow you’re old! Nah, not really. I still have that irrepressible urge I know you feel: to help people. You feel that deep down you have a responsibility to do so. Well that feeling hasn’t gone away.

But right now you are restless and wondering when life is going to start. You want to do so many things, to make your mark on the world, but you feel trapped. You drive yourself hard to achieve in school to please your parents, who’s opinion you listen to above all others. You conscious of your weight and every piece of food that goes into your mouth. Relax! Your body turned out ok. After 4 kids. But more about that later.

Your Mum has gone back to school and this has made an impression on you. She has got you interested in science, taping documentaries on the discovery of DNA and insulin. These stories intrigue you, but you are setting your sights on being a medical doctor rather than a boring scientist.

Well I can tell you first hand that science is not boring! It is intriguing and actually well suited to your enquiring mind. I have become a doctor (of science) and work as a scientist on cancer, first of the colon and then of the breast. Your career takes you from Melbourne to Brisbane and you have met some amazing scientists who have inspired you. You know how you love English and creating writing? Well this comes in handy down the track – writing scientific publications. You enjoy this and are getting better at it.

I have had those aha moments that you love in those documentaries, just on a smaller scale. Your ego has not abated: I still think I will win that nobel prize! I am still driven, like you, but I have learnt (the hard way) to pace myself. My drive now comes from the need to please myself, to see what I am capable of. I do a lot of daydreaming – about ideas, facts, theories – I love mulling over these like they are precious jewels.

Yes, I did mention all those kids, didn’t I? Well you will meet a great guy in about 4 years, who you will marry around 4 years later. You fight and compete with him, but love him dearly. He is your rock and a loving and funny Dad. You love your kids to bits and love talking to them about science. Most of all you love to see the light go on when they have their little “aha” moments. You sign up for any opportunity now to talk about science to children, because you know, just like your Mum did with you, that these things will make an impression on them.

So things work out ok – but if I could leave you with one important piece of wisdom before I travel back to 2016 – don’t worry so much about what people think! Don’t be afraid to get it wrong - make your own path and enjoy the journey.
Meaghan Smith

Dear Meaghan- at age 14; year 2004.

Your teenage years aren’t easy. I apologise for that. I apologise for stealing your innocence and putting you into confronting and (at times) dangerous situations. They were not ‘rites of passage’ - they were stupid mistakes, but lessons nonetheless. I apologise for your relationship breakdowns with your home and family, tarnishing your reputation and for losing direction while searching for ‘acceptance’ - or whatever it was…

But, here we are… Welcome to your 26th rotation around the sun. Year 2016.

By the age of 26 you can stand proud and confidently tell people you work in a job you absolutely LOVE and for the first time feel ‘home’. You have met a man you absolutely adore- who loves and admires you equally as much. You have travelled the world and experienced magical moments you once only ever dreamed of! You have seen the Aurora Borealis (northern lights), you’ve stood within ice caves of Europe’s largest glacier, you’ve swam in the world’s clearest water, explored the Great Barrier Reef and marvelled at the beauty of foreign cultures, history and sciences of life! You’ve graduated with honours and are pursuing a PhD! You are acknowledged by your peers and have travelled internationally to share your research with scientists from all corners of the world! You are surrounded by passionate and intelligent people encouraging you to strive for a life of fulfilment and feeding your hungry curiosity. By the age of 26 you have direction, feel purpose and acceptance. By the age of 26 you feel ALIVE.

Your intelligence, integrity, ambition and intuition have guided you through - and you emerged a very much admired, loved and happy young woman (go you!).

My advice to you from age 26: You are capable of making change, you are strong and you are a skilled educator and leader. Listen to your surroundings and the people within it- they have powerful voices and wisdom to share. Despite the fear, uncertainty and dangers- the world is an AMAZING place! Explore it! Above, below and beyond! Every opportunity that arises, take it and RUN! The world is the best classroom you’ll ever learn from!

Science has provided you with a platform and your passion and place in the science world has its calling. Continue to listen for it- and chase it. It’s a special gift to have- a life you truly love.
So you’re 19 and you’re travelling around Australia with your boyfriend and you’ve just been snorkelling on a little rocky outcrop at Cable Beach in Broome, north-western Australia. Floundered around on the surface trying unsuccessfully to duck dive, wanting to get down deeper for a better look. You don’t know it yet but that just changed everything. You’ll finish travelling around Australia and arrive back in Perth in time to gather your things and head to Townsville to study marine science at James Cook University. You won’t be able to remember exactly how you knew that James Cook University was the only place in Australia you could do a degree in marine biology (at the time).

They’ll be great years learning your craft, what a lot of fun and camaraderie and passion, learning to SCUBA dive, discovering that you don’t get seasick, and oh that first dive trip to the Great Barrier Reef. You will win the prize for the top performing undergraduate, and you’ll see your dedication and hard work pay off as you move into an Associate Lectureship in that same department that you were so recently a student. But you won’t fully appreciate until years later how fortunate you are, with jobs scarce and many wanting them. Then the PhD years, all those long 3-week field trips to Lizard Island, four SCUBA dives a day every day for three weeks, coming back much skinnier and fitter, brain swirling with the new knowledge gathered, each field trip pushing the edges of human knowledge further.

Then, when the last field trip is done you’ll say goodbye to your field sites that you’ve monitored so thoroughly for three years, pack up your things and move to Hong Kong, where a new chapter begins: writing the thesis. That will be a hard, lonely time, far away from your colleagues and supervisor, but you’ll keep your eye on the long term benefit. What an odd place for a coral reef ecologist to do a postdoc, where the ocean is crazy polluted and corals are scarce. You’ll learn to dive with sharkpods to repel sharks, getting jolts each time you touch the boat. Seems daft now, your 55 year old self does not approve of your 35 year old self taking risks like that, but the others were doing it too! You won’t enjoy surfacing in a sewage slick — try not to do that thing where you automatically take the mask off and wash your face in the seawater.
Three years in Hong Kong end suddenly and you’ll find yourself back in Broome, teaching environmental science at the University. Strange, you won’t feel the burning urge to go back to that bommie on Cable Beach where it all began. Perhaps it’s because you are pregnant, busy starting a new chapter. You’ll soon find yourself arriving in Fiji to take up a 3-year lectureship at the University of the South Pacific with a 4-month old in tow, trusting him to a beautiful Fijian nanny, power walking home at lunch time each day to breastfeed, then rushing back to work. A political coup will come in May 2000 and Fiji will be plunged into lawlessness, many of your expat colleagues will leave Fiji, but you won’t. You’ll suffer power cuts every evening as it gets dark, feeding the 1-year old in the dark, but it won’t be cold and you’ll be on the amazing Fijian coral reef in the morning, back in the office in the afternoon, your office right there on the water front with a little jetty and boats. It will be both paradise and hell.

The day you leave Fiji will be the start of by far the most challenging chapter—becoming a sole parent, on duty 24/7, no days off, no nights off, with a 3-year old entirely dependent on you. You won’t be able to work, and the true vulnerability of women will really hit home. And you will think that your career is over, but through the years you’ll get your independence back in tiny, child-sized steps. It will be a magical time, the rewards amazing and life-enriching, and there’ll be no doubt that it’s worth it and you are blessed. When he starts prep you will start part time work, a little bit of teaching biostatistics will evolve slowly into four part time jobs at James Cook University, Cairns, adding up to full-time employment. But then along will come the Global Financial Crisis, and those jobs will evaporate.

Then the current chapter begins. You will answer an ad for Assistant Collection Manager at a museum in Townsville, and before you know it life will have done another big circle and you’ll be back working in marine science in Townsville. That will be a short term contract, you will supplement it teaching mathematics as an Associate Lecturer at James Cook University, and so will become one of the few people to have been a lecturer in two separate departments. Several uncertain years will follow, of short term contracts, government grants, frugal times in between, in limbo, waiting for a career to re-ignite. This will feel like the hardest time ever. You will be committed and have belief and it will pay off when you finally achieve a permanent position as Collection Manager and researcher. Finally, ecstatically, you will be back where you love to be, in research, pushing the edges of knowledge.

I can’t help you with what comes next, but I just wanted to say that whatever it is, you’ve proven you can cope. I expect great things from you in the next chapter.
Dear 13 year old Emma,

I’m writing from the future to let you know that everything works out OK! So you can stop worrying and stressing out. That strong work ethic you have is great and it stays with you into the future, but work isn’t everything. You’ll learn later how much better you perform when you aren’t working to live up to others expectations, but are just trying to be the best you. So try and relax a little and enjoy the journey, taking each day as it comes.

You won’t imagine it now, but you will get a scholarship to a boarding school and you will study all the sciences and geography and graduate top of some of these classes. Your keen interest in nature will only develop further through field trips and assignments and you will go on to study environmental science (microbiology and chemistry) at university. I am very glad you choose to follow your heart rather than do a degree just for the sake of getting a job.

During a summer research project at uni looking at the bacteria in wastewater treatment plants you first experience the thrill of discovering things that no one else in the world yet knows and of helping to solve real-world problems. From that point onwards you are hooked, and you go on to make a career out of research – out of asking questions and solving problems! Although you think now that your future is closely tied with your small country town, your life turns out to be a much bigger adventure than you could ever have imagined. You travel the world through your career, you learn foreign languages, live overseas and make wonderful friends.

I wish I could tell you that life is all smooth sailing, but that is not true. There are many long hours and big days along the way and you will even have a sleeping bag in the lab to sample your cultures throughout the nights. There are also challenges associated with living in a foreign country, with a foreign language, as a single woman. Health crises in your immediate family mean that you end up juggling carer responsibilities for both your parents. And, you will never, even 18 years on, fit the mould of the ‘average’ woman in your demographic, which can be tough… But don’t let any of these things bother you, because there are also many grand adventures along the way in your life as a scientist. To give you just a glimpse: you will spend two weeks at sea, sampling from the bottom of the seafloor in the Black Sea, Mediterranean, Marmara Sea. You will spend time in Brazil, collecting samples in the iron ore areas on the edge of the Amazon jungle with howling monkeys around and with safety instructions about jaguars!

You have an incredibly abundant life in the future, so if I could give you one piece of advice for right now it would be: stop comparing yourself with others. The things that make you ‘different’ right now are the very things that are valuable in your future as a scientist and they are unique abilities given to you. Everyone person on earth has different skills and interests. Embrace yours wholeheartedly, and see where that takes you!
Dear Johana Paola at your teenager days.....

This is you an older but wiser version of you talking..... You are 36 but still being the same crazy, curious and always ready to learn little Johana.... You now live a little far away from home in a country you call home the last 12 years: Australia.... Yes I know you must be thinking that is your love for the marine life that brought you here... and yes you are right.

At this moment you are really happy you are Doctor Johana as you and your grandfather always dream about, hasn’t been an easy road but it has been totally worthy. You came to a far far away land; you worked hard to learn a new language, a new culture, a live by yourself. Through the process you realise that follow your dreams implies a lot of sacrifices and a lot of tears but if you really believe in what you dream and you believe in yourself and never give up saying every day I can do it… You will.

You are now working in neuroscience, did you imagine that??? I’m sure you didn’t but now your career is an amazing mix of your loved marine biology and other sciences that you love now too. Now you combine chemistry, biology and medicine together and you love it. And guess what?? You love teaching right?? Now you have the great opportunity to share your love for science with other, you encourage others to see how beautiful nature is, how amazing is this crazy science world, you even have your own students which you try to support and help to reach their own goals and dreams.

You don’t have kids yet but you girl have been in many places around the world and you can say you have friends from almost everywhere, and your family and friends love you so much and they are so proud of you. So if you see you have doing pretty well, that little girl with a big dream have achieved so much and when the night come and she sleep in her bed, she closes her eyes and whisper to herself.... Keep dreaming and follow your heart, if you dream you can do it you are half way there...
Hello younger me!!! Umm, where do I start? Firstly, keep at it! Enjoy high school. This period will see you make many lovely friends and develop a love for science! Things to note: be care when playing with hydrochloric acid, you will burn your school uniform, which your mother will not like. Also, listen to your physics teacher, he is mad but also a genius!

After high school you will go onto Uni, where you will do a Dual degree, Psychology and Neuroscience. You will discover the Uni bar, where you will have many laughs with friends, but don’t forget to still go to your 8am lectures…. You will learn a lot! Somewhere along the way you will decide you love all things ‘Brain’ related. The brain is amazing and there is still so much to be discovered, so go for it!

You will also go through phases where you need a break from Uni. That’s fine - take time off, and go out and explore the world. You will still be learning, but in a different capacity. You will learn about yourself, other countries, cultures, and people. You will also learn a language! This is again hard work, but like with anything - start at the beginning and be persistent. Being bilingual is marvellous and this will even come in handy in your scientific career, where you will translate German text for neuroimaging research. Embrace your curiosity and thirst for new things, discovery, knowledge, and adventure, and always keep putting yourself out there and learning! You are nurturing your mind.

Travel aside, you will also need to work very hard at uni! Your Honours year will be one such year where you will feel overwhelmed and well out of your league, but you will get your First Class Honours! This year will give you an opportunity to learn many new skills, meet amazing scientists and make wonderful networks, which will last for years to come !!!

You will also start a PhD project. I am going to be totally honest with you, you are me after all. This will be a very challenging time. You will have many setbacks- you will change your supervisors multiple times, you will change your project and your program. Alongside of this, you will be hospitalised for months, and have regular emergency department visits. You will need 4 operations, ~8 months of sick leave, and have a great number of restrictions placed on you. But you will come out the other end. Focus on your health. Rest, take care of yourself, breathe… This will be two very trying years, but you will fight your way back up, in all aspects of your life, including your physical health….
Before you hit 31, you will have had your final operation, your MPhil dissertation will be completed and you will have (multiple) great jobs that you genuinely love! Everything from being a research assistant looking at healthcare and education…. being a youth worker to young people in residential care… being Project Manager of a Dementia Research RCT….and you will be a science ambassador for UQ, doing science education/workshops in rural communities. Your life in general will also be pretty amazing! You will go on regular adventures: camping, climbing, surfing, hiking, and you will have visited over 50 countries!!! You will have the most wonderful of friends and the richness of these experiences will make you smile and truly happy….

So in short, my advice to you is: keep on, keeping on! Be positive, smile, laugh and believe in yourself. Work hard, but don’t overdo it! Do the things that you find interesting and inspiring, and never stop learning! Things have a funny way of working out.
Vanessa Lussini

Dear Vanessa at age 13,

Hello from age 27. In 14 years you have achieved a lot: you have finished school, you have a bachelors degree, almost finished your PhD and you have travelled a lot of the world. You might think by this age that you would have got a job or even bought a house but you will soon realise that there is a lot more to life. Do not compare yourself to others, everyone has different goals and that is fine. Your achievements can not be compared.

Of course school is important but the true gift you will get is the mates you meet there. They will support you through a lot and they will keep you grounded. They are really like your second family. It is ok that you have no idea what you want to do when you finish, because no matter how old you get, you still won’t know how to answer that ridiculous question. The world is continually changing so hopefully so will you. It is important to always be ready for change and be able to accept it because that will open an million opportunities. Find what you love doing and do it until you don’t love it anymore.

The one thing I am truly proud of is your ability to always say yes. Never change that! It will result in meeting some amazing people along the way and some great stories. You never know what it will result in but life shouldn’t me planned. Although sometimes you need to learn where to draw the line and that is something where we still struggle.

Research can be hard. It has long droughts, with no success and little recognition. You will have moments where you don’t know if the chemistry isn’t working because you aren’t smart enough or because it will never work. You don’t know if you should give up now or try a little harder because you have already invested so much time. But every drought makes you stronger, emotionally and mentally. You don’t become a good research when everything works. You will never learn your strength and determination. But i can tell you that when it works, there is nothing more satisfying. You are either the first person to think of it or you were the most persistent. You can be the first person in the world to make something, determine something, or show something and that is unparalleled to any other feeling. Be proud because you have achieved a lot of this, just don’t doubt yourself and your abilities because you will prove a lot of people wrong. If it was easy, someone would have already done it.

Vanessa trust your instincts and you will always be impressed with what you can achieve. You are your only but harshest critic but that is ok. Your strength will always get you through and your amazing family and friends will always back you up.
Dear Alison at age 13,

I’m writing to you from 24 years in the future. Things have turned out a little differently to what I thought when I was your age, but your future holds lots of adventure, travel and fulfillment.

You’re desperate to be a vet when you ‘grow up’, and I’m pleased to say that your dreams came true! But I think that you don’t realise at the moment that a vet can be so much more than someone who does annual check-ups on your pets and treats them when they are sick. The skills you’ll gain during your veterinary degree and in the two or three years you spend working in veterinary practice are much broader than that. You found it really hard to choose between alternative paths of being a clinical veterinarian in a zoo and following a research path by doing a PhD, but in the end you decided that your veterinary skills, along with your passion for wildlife and problem-solving, were best suited to a career in research. Along the way, you learn that difficult, life-changing decisions come up occasionally, and you can feel paralysed with an inability to choose between two or more options. These decisions are hard because they are equally good, and sometimes you’ll need to take a leap of faith and know that you’ll end up happy in either life. Opportunities are like buses – there’ll always be another one coming.

Things have a way of working out in the end. Your PhD enabled you to fulfill your childhood dream of travelling around Africa, and spending 8 years living in England also allowed you to do plenty of fun exploring around Europe! You met your wonderful husband in England, and together you’ve had two sons – one born in England and one in Australia. Working in research tends to do this – travel is a big component, whether it’s for field work or sharing your research at conferences, or moving institutes between your PhD and each position after that. You’ll find it hard to be away from where you grew up, and your parents, but they are loving grandparents and will jump at any opportunity to come visit! You will be so passionate about your work, willing to make sacrifices for it, and so will find it really challenging to balance working in research part time while being a mum. The support of your loving family will be so important in providing balance in your life, and perspective on what really matters. You’ll come to realise that sometimes you have to plough into your work, and other times are better to step back and focus on family life. There are no rules and everyone is different – you’ll need to find what works best for you.

You’ll maintain your love of being immersed in natural environments, observing wildlife and their natural behaviours. You’ll look forward to instilling that into your own children, and will fight for the preservation of the planet so that all its natural wonders are available for their children to enjoy as well. My advice for you is to enjoy the ‘now’ without worrying too much about the future. Instead, be curious and trust your intuition about what really gets you excited – take up opportunities that inspire you, but don’t be afraid to let some go if the timing isn’t right.