

Winter 2026

BRIGHT SPARKS



2026 Fulbright New Zealand Awards



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THE TEAM



KATE ADAMS
PROGRAMME MANAGER
kate@fulbright.org.nz



PAUL ALTOMARI
PROGRAMME MANAGER
scholarships3@fulbright.org.nz



PENELOPE BORLAND
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



MELISSA BRAY
COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER
comms@fulbright.org.nz



MARGOT FRASER-JONES
CORPORATE SERVICES MANAGER
margot@fulbright.org.nz



PERSEFONI HARVEY
EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT
persefoni@fulbright.org.nz



LANA MIKHALCHUK
ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH COORDINATOR
lana@fulbright.org.nz



LAUREN SUMMERSELL
PROGRAMME MANAGER
scholarships2@fulbright.org.nz



**PENELOPE
BORLAND**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we move through another rewarding year for Fulbright New Zealand, I continue to be inspired by the calibre, curiosity and commitment of our grantees and alumni. Across Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States, they are advancing knowledge, building lasting connections, and strengthening the enduring relationship between our two countries through education, research and cultural exchange.

A particular highlight so far this year was our 2026 Awards Ceremony, held in June at the National Library in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. It was a privilege to celebrate an exceptional cohort of New Zealand and United States graduate and scholar award recipients, our Ian Axford Fellow in Public Policy, and three Distinguished Award in Teaching recipients.

Earlier in the year, we welcomed our incoming American grantees to Aotearoa, and it has been exciting to see them already making valuable contributions across universities, schools and communities. Their work spans an impressive breadth of disciplines, from bioengineering and sustainable materials to geology, public policy and the life sciences, reflecting the diversity and impact of the Fulbright programme.

We reached an important milestone for our organisation with the gifting of a new Māori name, Te Kura Tūmahana, by Fulbright alumnus and Board member Dr Rangi Mātāmua. The name beautifully reflects the exchange of knowledge, learning and treasured relationships

that lie at the heart of Fulbright. We are now working through the process of incorporating Te Kura Tūmahana into our identity, including updates to our branding and communications.

Beyond our programmes, our team has enjoyed reconnecting with universities, alumni and current grantees through outreach visits and events across the country. Internationally, it was great to reconnect in person in the US with colleagues from Education and Cultural Affairs and Institute of International Education as well as take part in the very successful Ian Axford Fellowship selections and associated events at the NZ Embassy in Washington D.C.

In this edition of Bright Sparks, we introduce our 2026 grantees, celebrate the achievements of our alumni, and share stories from across the Fulbright community, including the experiences of Fulbrighter Matthew Kereama. I hope you enjoy reading about your fellow Fulbrighters and the remarkable work they are undertaking. Thank you for your continued support of Fulbright New Zealand. Whether you are an alumnus, partner, supporter or friend, you play an important role in sustaining the connections and opportunities that make the Fulbright programme so enduring and impactful.

EDITOR'S NOTE

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of material in this newsletter, Fulbright New Zealand does not accept liability for any errors or omissions. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Fulbright New Zealand.
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Subscribe to the Fulbright NZ Newsletter
Email comms@fulbright.org.nz

PO Box 3465
Level 5, 26 The Terrace, Wellington
6140, New Zealand
Telephone +64 473 2065
Email info@fulbright.org.nz

www.fulbright.org.nz



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COVER: 2026 Fulbright New Zealand Award recipients at the National Library

LEFT: From left, Amelia Blamey, Nick Denton, Sarah Hunter, Thomas Marsland, Niamh Orr-Walker

ALUMNI NEWS



ELIZABETH BROADBENT

Congratulations to Professor Elizabeth Broadbent on receiving a prestigious Senior NOMIS Fellowship to Zurich. Elizabeth is currently a Professor of Health Psychology at the University of Auckland. Her work focuses on empowering patients and improving healthcare through innovative psychological interventions and emerging technologies spanning AI, robots, virtual humans, and embodied conversational agents designed to support patients and improve access to care.

In 2017 Elizabeth went to Boston on a Fulbright Scholar Award to research the design of companion robots to improve health at Tufts University in Boston.

Elizabeth will start her five-month fellowship in September.



BILL MANHIRE

Celebrated writer Bill Manhire was recognised at the 2026 Auckland Writers Festival as the festival's 2026 Honoured Writer for his immense contribution to New Zealand's literary landscape. Bill was the Fulbright Visiting Professor in New Zealand Studies at Georgetown University in 1999.

NICOLE EDWARDS

Nicole Edwards (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu, Taranaki) has been named an inaugural The NZUK Link Foundation Fellow. Nicole, a neuroscientist and lecturer at University of Auckland, will travel to the United Kingdom to advance research addressing inequities in neurogenomics and precision healthcare.

As a Fulbright grantee, Nicole conducted research at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard in 2020 where she explored single-cell sequencing and predictive modelling approaches to better understand cellular behaviour in disease.



CLEMENCY MONTELLE

Clemency Montelle recently became the first ever recipient of the Agnes Mary Clerke Medal by the Royal Astronomical Society outside of the UK. The award recognised her excellence in researching the history of astronomy and developing analytical tools for historical data.

As a Fulbright Graduate awardee, Clemency completed her PhD at Brown University in 2005, specialising in the history of mathematics. She is now a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Canterbury, where she also acts as a Fulbright on-campus representative.



CRAIG RODGER

University of Otago physicist Professor Craig Rodger is only the second New Zealander to receive a prestigious International Union of Radio Science (URSI) award.

The Karl Rower Gold Medal recognises over 20 years of world-class research in space weather and plasma physics, helping protect satellites, communications, and our power grid from solar tsunami.

The only other kiwi to win a senior URSI award was the late Sir Ian Axford in 1969, after whom the *Axford Fellowship in Public Policy* is named.





IN PRINT

Giving Birth to my Father by Tusiata Avia

Te Herenga Waka University Press

“My father has been chipping himself down since he arrived here, he is half man and half vessel, readying for the journey to Hawaiki. Giving Birth to My Father is about learning to live with a loss that at first seems too heavy to bear.”

Tusiata Avia traces her father’s final days. It tells the imagined story - the one of how things should go - followed by the story of what really happens.

Tusiata was awarded the Fulbright-Creative New Zealand Pacific Writer’s Residency in 2005.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The story behind Te Kura Tūmahana

Fulbright New Zealand has been gifted a new Māori name – Te Kura Tūmahana – marking an important milestone in the organisation’s ongoing commitment to honouring te ao Māori and reflecting the true spirit of the Fulbright programme.

The name was gifted by Fulbright alumnus and Fulbright New Zealand Board member Professor Rangi Mātāmua at the 2026 Fulbright New Zealand Annual Awards Ceremony, where he shared the whakaaro and cultural traditions that inspired its creation.

More than a translation, Te Kura Tūmahana is a name that captures the values at the heart of Fulbright New Zealand: the exchange of knowledge, the building of relationships, reciprocity between peoples, and the sharing of treasured experiences across cultures.

The name brings together two powerful concepts.

Kura carries multiple interconnected meanings. It refers to knowledge and

learning, a place where education is shared, treasured possessions—both tangible and intangible—and peace.

The second part of the name, tūmahana, comes from a traditional Māori practice associated with intertribal gatherings following the harvest season. Communities would travel to visit one another, sharing food, stories, knowledge and hospitality before exchanging treasured gifts as a symbol of respect, reciprocity and enduring relationships.

Professor Mātāmua said the name also recognises the lasting connections formed through the Fulbright community.

We invite you all to use Te Kura Tūmahana when talking about Fulbright New Zealand.

READ MORE: [*Fulbright New Zealand gifted new Māori name: Te Kura Tūmahana - Fulbright New Zealand*](#)



2026 FULBRIGHT NEW ZEALAND AWARDS

24 June 2026

The 2026 Fulbright New Zealand Annual Awards Ceremony was, as always, a memorable occasion, celebrating this year's outstanding New Zealand and United States Fulbright grantees.

As Fulbright New Zealand's premier annual event, the ceremony brings together our newest grantees with their friends and whānau, Fulbright alumni, partners and supporters. We were also honoured to welcome the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rt Hon Winston Peters, as we recognised the exceptional achievements of this year's recipients.

The ceremony marked not only the accomplishments that have brought these grantees to this point, but also the exciting opportunities that lie ahead and the lasting contributions they will make in Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States and beyond.

The 2026 cohort reflects the breadth and diversity of Fulbright's mission, with research spanning topics including AI-driven antibiotic discovery, security policy, robotics and Indigenous design.

The full 2026 Fulbright cohort is featured on the following pages.



TOP: 2026 grantees at the awards ceremony

BOTTOM LEFT: Elios String Quartet at the awards ceremony

BOTTOM RIGHT: Kahurangi Moeahu opens the awards ceremony



2026 FULBRIGHT NEW ZEALAND AWARD GRANTEES

The full 2026 Fulbright cohort is as follows.

FULBRIGHT SCIENCE AND INNOVATION GRADUATE AWARDS

Joey Back - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Joey will complete a Master of Science in Robotics at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Amelia Blamey - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Amelia will complete a Master of Economic Policy and Practice at Boston University

Nick Denton - From Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Nick will complete a Master of Architecture in Urban Design at Harvard University.

Sarah Hunter - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Sarah will research childhood bone and joint infections at Vanderbilt University Medical Centre in Nashville.

Thomas Marsland - From Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Tom will research artificial intelligence methods for antibiotic discovery at the Wyss Institute for Biologically Inspired Engineering at Harvard University.

Niamh Orr-Walker - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Niamh will research health psychology and breast cancer survivorship at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard University.

Nikki Singh - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Nikki will research the interplay of illness and identity for young adults living with autoimmune diseases at Stanford University.

FULBRIGHT NGĀ PAE O TE MĀRAMATANGA GRADUATE AWARD

Ebony Komene (Ngāpuhi, Te Arawa, Tainui) - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Ebony will be a Visiting Student Researcher exploring Indigenous nursing at Washington State University in Seattle and Indigenous Nurse Practitioner models of practice at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.



TOP: Carolyn Mavretish, Yitong Tseo, Dion Enari at the awards ceremony

BOTTOM LEFT: Ebony Komene with Grandmother Lesley at the awards ceremony

BOTTOM RIGHT: Anna Goldman, Julia Mansfield, Carolyn Mavretish, Yitong Tseo at the awards ceremony



FULBRIGHT NEW ZEALAND GENERAL GRADUATE AWARDS

Kaan Hiini (Ngāpuhi, Te Arawa, Te Rarawa) - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Kaan will be completing a Master of Transdisciplinary Design specialising in indigenous design methodologies at the New School in New York City.

Jovana Nedeljkov - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Jovana will complete a Master of Laws specialising in Competition, Innovation and Information Law at New York University.

Hansaka Ranaweera - From Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Hansaka will complete a Master of Laws at Harvard Law School.

Lee Richardson - From Waihōpai Invercargill, Lee will complete a Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design at Yale University.

Emma Sidnam - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Emma will complete a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing specialising in Fiction at the University of Tennessee.

Flynn Struckmann - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Flynn will complete a Master of Arts in Security Policy Studies at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Amy Weng - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Amy will complete a Master of Arts in Asian Studies specialising in visual cultures at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

TOP: Dion Enari, Pip Thomas, Riz Firestone,
Hamish McDougall, Luke Rowe

CENTRE: Thomas Marsland

BOTTOM: Mary Bluck, Rachael Kneepkens, Lili Kuchar



FULBRIGHT NEW ZEALAND SCHOLAR AWARDS

Lefaoali'i Dion Enari (Lepa, Malaela, Vaiala, Nofoali'i, Vaiusu, Safune, Saleaamua-Samoa) - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Dion will research Indigenous Dance as Physical Activity and Educational learning at Brigham Young University Hawai'i.

Riz Firestone - From Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Riz will conduct research and co-design a youth-focused type 2 diabetes prevention programme at the Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles.

Hamish McDougall - Will research a history of Nuclear-Free New Zealand at Georgetown University in Washington DC.

Pip Thomas - From Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Pip will research the career transition experiences of New Zealand student-athletes navigating US collegiate programmes. She will be at Illinois State University.

Sophie van Hamelsveld - From Ōtautahi Christchurch, Sophie will research the relationships between harmful algal blooms and antibiotic resistance at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

FULBRIGHT-NGĀ PAE O TE MĀRAMATANGA SCHOLAR AWARD

Luke Rowe (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Raukawa-ki-te-tonga) - His research project is titled: Ngā Uri o Māui: At the intersection of Indigeneity, men's mental health, and sport. Luke will attend the University of Hawai'i in Manoa. He is currently based at Te Whare Whakatupu Mātauranga at Te Wānanga o Raukawa.

FULBRIGHT DISTINGUISHED AWARDS IN TEACHING PROGRAMME FOR NEW ZEALAND TEACHERS

Mary Bluck - From Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Mary will investigate how indigenous playground play may be introduced into the classroom to accelerate learning.

Rachael Kneepkens - From Ōtaki, Rachael will research how we motivate and support disengaged students at secondary school.



Find more details in the 2026 Grantee Booklet:
<https://fulbright.org.nz/news-and-events/publications/#68-70-grantees-booklet>



2026 US COHORT WELCOME AND ORIENTATION

Earlier this year we welcomed to Aotearoa New Zealand our 2026 US cohort. Our orientation event was full of many smiles, for the incoming US cohort as well as those meeting and greeting the new arrivals. For our programme managers, Kate, Paul and Lauren they finally got to meet face-to-face with the individuals they'd spent months working behind the scenes to enable their smooth arrival and time in Aotearoa.

The welcome included sessions on New Zealand history and culture and an evening reception including alumni, friends, whānau and supporters of the Fulbright programme along with representatives of the New Zealand and United States governments. There was a walk to Te Aro Pā and a trip to Parliament as well as sessions on living in New Zealand.

The US cohorts included graduates, scholars, a teacher and an Ian Axford Fellow. Their study and research covers everything from bio-fabricated soft robotics to earthquakes to depression and anxiety in children.



The 2026 US Fulbright cohort is as follows:

FULBRIGHT US SCHOLAR AWARD

Kerwyn (KC) Huang - Professor of Bioengineering and Microbiology at Stanford University.

Xin Feng - Professor of Human Development and Family Science at The Ohio State University.

Tsione Wolde-Michael – Arts administrator, public historian, and curator from Washington D.C.

FULBRIGHT US GRADUATE AWARD

Carolyn Mavretish – From New Jersey, studying for a Master of Landscape Architecture at Lincoln University.

Stephanie Graham - Undertaking a Master of Museum and Heritage Practice at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington.

Julia Mansfield - Completing a Master's in Geology at the University of Otago, researching the Green Island Fault and its seismic risk.

Yitong Tseo - PhD candidate and bio-artist at MIT conducting research at the University of Auckland on biohybrid robotics.

Sahana Arumani - Researching leptospirosis with a focus on prevention and community awareness at Massey University.

FULBRIGHT DISTINGUISHED AWARD IN TEACHING

Lili Kuchar - From Berkeley, California, researching literacy practices in highly vulnerable communities.

IAN AXFORD FELLOWSHIP IN PUBLIC POLICY

Christine Pagen - based at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Wellington, researching international development cooperation.

TOP: Arrival of US cohort
CENTRE: Lili Kuchar
BOTTOM: Persefoni Harvey, Lana Mikhalchuk

FINDING HIS VOICE – MATTHEW KEREAMA

For Matthew Kereama, theatre has always been part of his life. Now, as a 2024 Fulbright New Zealand Graduate Award recipient, he is refining his craft at one of the world's leading performing arts institutions.



Matthew at the
Metropolitan Opera,
New York

Matthew is completing a Master of Fine Arts in Stage Directing at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Ranked among the world's top drama schools, Carnegie Mellon has produced generations of acclaimed artists, and Matthew is preparing to join their ranks as he completes his master's thesis alongside his final production.

Although he initially pursued opera, directing ultimately became the medium through which he found his artistic voice.

"I loved making work with my friends. There's something so collaborative and beautiful about bringing a production together and that brought me to directing. I loved singing but it wasn't my voice (when singing other people's songs). Directing is combination of all of my skills and I get to use my voice."

A pivotal moment came while he was acting in *The Tempest* alongside a young Māori performer who was new to theatre.

"He was struggling with a monologue, so we sat together and found what made him click. Then he delivered it perfectly."

The experience reinforced Matthew's passion for guiding others and creating meaningful performances.

Receiving a Fulbright award was the culmination of years of determination. After an unsuccessful first application, Matthew reapplied with renewed focus, driven by his ambition to study directing in the United States.

His artistic journey has also been one of strengthening his identity as a Māori storyteller.

"As an artist we're constantly trying to find our voice. I'm Māori, and it's only in the last 40 or 50 years that we've had Māori theatre companies. There are stories I want to tell and voices I don't often see represented in theatre and film. I want to help share those voices."

Before arriving at Carnegie Mellon, Matthew had directed opera and independent theatre productions in New

“There are stories I want to tell and voices I don't often see represented in theatre and film”

Zealand. During his studies he has directed Sophocles' Ajax and is preparing his final production of Alistair McDowall's X.

Since moving to Pittsburgh in August 2024, Matthew has embraced opportunities beyond the classroom. He has travelled throughout the United States, attending productions in New York, including Fulbright alumnus Eleanor Bishop's Heartbreak Hotel Off-Broadway and tenor Pene Pati's Metropolitan Opera debut. He has also connected with fellow Fulbright grantees, including Luke Elborough, who is studying at New York University.

Matthew says Pittsburgh has exceeded his expectations.

"It's a city that's reinventing itself. It's no longer defined by steel – it's becoming a centre for universities, medicine and artificial intelligence. It also has an incredible arts scene."

When he completes his degree, Matthew plans to return to Aotearoa to build on

the skills and perspectives gained through his Fulbright experience.

"My goal is to come back to New Zealand with new skills to tell the stories I want to tell."

He hopes to work with organisations including New Zealand Opera, Auckland Theatre Company and Silo Theatre while continuing to champion Māori stories on stage.

His advice to future Fulbright grantees is simple.

"Go to a programme that brings you joy and matches your talent. I still pinch myself when I'm at the Metropolitan Opera or looking out over the Pittsburgh skyline. It's an amazing experience, and it goes by so quickly. Graduate school is hard, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

SHARE YOUR STORY – CONTRIBUTE TO BRIGHT SPARKS

We love hearing about what Fulbright alumni are up to. Help us to celebrate your achievements and milestones, your research and experiences, travel adventures, and more.

Send us your articles, blog posts, photo essays or anything you'd like shared with the Fulbright community. We email Bright Sparks to over 2500 Fulbright New Zealand alumni around the world, plus friends of Fulbright in various sectors across New Zealand.

Email your ideas to comms@fulbright.org.nz



Goddess Athena



Ajax confides in his shipmates

FULBRIGHT NZ TEAM UPDATES

MELISSA BRAY COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

Kia ora and welcome to Melissa Bray our new communications manager. Melissa joined the team at the end of January.

Melissa comes to Fulbright NZ from Earth Sciences New Zealand, where she was immersed in science communications. Prior to that Melissa spent her time between Europe and New Zealand as the communications manager for World Rowing.

Melissa says, "I am delighted to be working for an organisation that is based on Senator Fulbright's principles. This is a critical time for international relations and to be part of communicating the work being done by Fulbright grantees and alumni is a privilege."

Great to have you on board, Melissa!



CAMPUS ADVISERS

Fulbright New Zealand has Campus Advisers stationed on all major New Zealand campuses. Our Advisers are all Fulbright alumni who are available to discuss their exchange experiences with students and staff, as well as to give basic information about our awards.

New to the team:



DR ALEX SHEGAY

A structural engineer with a passion for making buildings safer in the face of earthquakes, Alex Shegay has returned to the University of Auckland as a Senior Lecturer in Civil and Environmental Engineering. Originally from Auckland, Alex received a Fulbright-EQC Graduate Award in Natural Disaster Research, taking him to the University of Washington in Seattle to explore the seismic performance of high-rise structural walls as part of his PhD journey with The University of Auckland. Since graduating with a BE (Hons) in 2014, Alex has built an impressive international career, including four years working in Japan. He's now back at the University of Auckland and we are honoured to include Alex on our Campus Advisor team.

Details of all our Campus Advisers are available on our website. If you are based on campus and like the idea of discussing your Fulbright experiences with students and staff, and sharing information about our awards, please get in touch: ana@fulbright.org.nz.

WANT TO JOIN US FOR THE MORNING QUIZ?

If you are passing through Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington you are always welcome to drop by for a morning cuppa and the daily quiz. Drop us an email at info@fulbright.org.nz if you plan on stopping by and we'll make sure there's enough coffee in the pot.

FULBRIGHT NEW ZEALAND GOOD WORKS

Fulbright Good Works is a series of webinars that showcase the ongoing research and achievement of Fulbright NZ and US alumni. We welcome seminars of any nature, such as lectures, panel discussions, multimedia, storytelling, or performance. Seminars can be up to 60 minutes long and will be held virtually.

Interested? Email ana@fulbright.org.nz with a brief summary of what your presentation will be about and when you would ideally like to present. Please also include the year and title of your Fulbright award.



KNOW A FUTURE FULBRIGHTER?

Fulbright New Zealand offers a range of awards for New Zealand and United States citizens wanting to study, research, teach, or present their work in each other's country. Spread the word to anyone you think may be interested.

AWARD TYPE

Fulbright New Zealand General Graduate Awards
Fulbright Science & Innovation Graduate Awards
Fulbright-Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga Graduate Award
Fulbright NZ Scholar Awards
Fulbright-Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga Scholar Award
Fulbright Creative New Zealand Pacific Writers Residence Award
Fulbright Specialist Awards
Ian Axford Public Policy Fellowships*
Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Programme for NZ Teachers
Fulbright US Scholar Awards
Fulbright US Graduate Awards

APPLICATION DEADLINE

1 August annually
1 August annually
1 August annually
1 October annually
1 October annually
March annually
1 June Annually
April annually
April annually
15 September annually
9 October annually

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*Fulbright New Zealand Administers the Ian Axford Fellowships on behalf of the Ian Axford Board.