ConASTA 73 – SCIENCE IN AN ERA OF RAPID CHANGE

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY.

Brisbane July 7-10, 2026.

When I said in my poem that this year it was Brisbane's turn to shine, I wasn't wrong! Brisbane did shine in many ways! And it was a blast.

But first I wish to thank the following organisations for their part in making this conference happen, and to those who helped me get there. Modern Teaching Aids (MTA), for their wonderful, generous sponsorship of the STAR Week competition which enabled me to attend the conference – thank you, I am truly grateful. Also, Science Education Technicians Australia, (SETA) for promoting the competition all over Australia and for making me feel welcome during my time there. Appreciation and acknowledgment to STAQ and QEST for their terrific organisation and contributions that made the conference a huge success, and for being so friendly.

I'd also like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to LABNETWEST Inc. and Tranby College for their generous contributions, support and encouragement, which also enabled me to head east and experience ConASTA 73 – thank you.

The conference for me began on Tuesday afternoon with an optional excursion to the University of Queensland. It was a pleasant ferry ride upriver to St. Lucia, where the university is situated. And what a beautiful university it is. Situated along the Brisbane River it's green and leafy, and it has a mix of old buildings and new facilities. The majestic Great Court sits at the heart of the campus with its sandstone pillars and impressive carvings – it was as amazing sight.

There was a definite buzz in the air as we entered the auditorium, joined by students who were taking part in the university's science leadership development program. It was great to see so many young budding scientists and I wish them all well in their chosen science careers.

After the official welcome we had the keynote speakers, including Warwick Bowen who is a passionate and knowledgeable man. Ordinarily, the sheer mention of the word 'quantum' in a sentence, would make my eyes glaze over! But he spoke about Quantum Technologies and how this new technology is changing the world and its applications in areas such as life sciences, food production, medicine, IT and health. It was quite fascinating to listen to. His end message was that 'molecules are far more complex than we thought' – after listening to his talk, I think there's a lot of truth in that.

The rest of the afternoon was spent at various sessions throughout the university – all interesting and delivering useful information, resources and tips which can be implemented into the classroom and school. The afternoon ended with an evening welcome reception and some happy and excited socialising. I felt that it was going to be a great conference.

The next day was the first official day at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre. It began with an official Welcome to ConASTA 73. While in the auditorium I was asked, as a West Australian, if I would take part in the Acknowledgement of Country. I was happy to be involved, along with other representatives from each state and territory. It was quite a spiritual and unifying ceremony, and I felt privileged to take part in it.

The venue was impressive, the layout meant it was easy to get around and find the rooms where the workshops we being held. The exhibitors took up two floors, which is a lot of pens to collect! There were many interesting and new booths to discover the latest developments in teaching and research, and plenty of friendly and knowledgeable reps who were more than happy to talk. So much was on offer, such as resources, samples and demos, worksheets, booklets, links to websites, and plenty of ideas to take back into the school environment. No shortage of info to take away, plus lots of friendly and knowledgeable reps. It felt like we needed an extra day just for visiting all the exhibitor's booths.

One of the keynote speakers presenting at the conference was Matt Dodds. This man oozes passion for teaching science and he's a true science guru. He stated that being there, regardless of what our jobs were, meant that we were 'with our people', and it was true! We were amongst our own kind – science geeks and proud! It was a great feeling.

There were so many varied sessions and presentations over the next few days which involved so many topics and issues, way too many to mention them all. Each presenter had resources, tools and further information available, with lots of tips and tricks for teachers and technicians to take back to their school. From the Emu in the Sky session, which was insightful and enjoyable, the mini-museums that gave lots of ideas that won't break the science budget, the Roo-ver Lunar Rover where you can turn your whole class into space mission scientists, to 'Where's the Bilby", and Schoolyard safaris – they all offered clever and fun ideas, especially for the younger students that will allow them to engage and get involved with science. For the older students there were plenty of workshops that showcased many careers and lines of study, from agriculture to the Great Barrier Reef to recycling – all important areas of science and all leading to great careers.

The Radiation Safety session proved a great way to get all the safety issues explained and have all your questions answered, straight from the experts. The SETA Forum was also a good way of meeting interstate technicians. We had a general discussion about the issues we face but in a friendly and casual atmosphere, and it was great to talk about various issues that we all seem to encounter and to swap information.

But for me, who once was a hopeful teenager who wanted to go into space, the highlight was the keynote by our very own astronaut, Katherine Bennell-Pegg, Australian of the Year 2026, and Australia's first astronaut to train under our flag. What a remarkable Australian, with such passion and dedication! Her presentation

was amazing; it showed various aspects of her training at the European Astronaut Centre in Germany. We were all mesmerised! Katherine was one of only 25 people out of 22,500 to pass all the training stages successfully. She gave us a terrific rundown on the training and the pathway to get there. On thing is for sure - I know now that I would never have made it as far as she did. But I can live with that!

Katherine also spoke about the importance of space travel, which incidentally, isn't just a joyride in a rocket. The ISS (International Space Station) is basically a big science laboratory orbiting around our planet, doing amazing things the whole. It has been shown that a way to increase STEM uptake in education, is to have a space mission, such as the recent NASA Artemis II mission. So, we know that there are some keen would-be astronauts out there.

We should all be proud and get behind this amazing Australian and help get her into space, which is where she deserves to be. At the end of her session, she left us with a well-known saying – that 'the first person to walk on Mars is likely to be sitting in a classroom right now'.

To me ConASTA 73 was a wholesome, incredible and inspiring science experience, and I totally enjoyed all aspects of it. Brisbane put on great weather, the venue was outstanding, the catering was more than sufficient and the facilities were terrific - it was easy to find where you had to go, so you couldn't get lost if you tried and everything just seemed to flow nicely.

And now that the 'golden Bunsen' is up in the NT, my thoughts are turning to ConASTA 74 in Darwin next year. If you get the chance, consider going, it's a great experience and I highly recommend it, plus the weather will be wonderful up there!

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