

The Rhodes Scholarship:

One junior doctor's journey

Sophie Parker

Third Year Medical Student
 Dunedin School of Medicine
 University of Otago

Sophie Parker is a 3rd year medical student in Dunedin. She has previously completed a BSc in biochemistry and has an interest in neuroscience research.

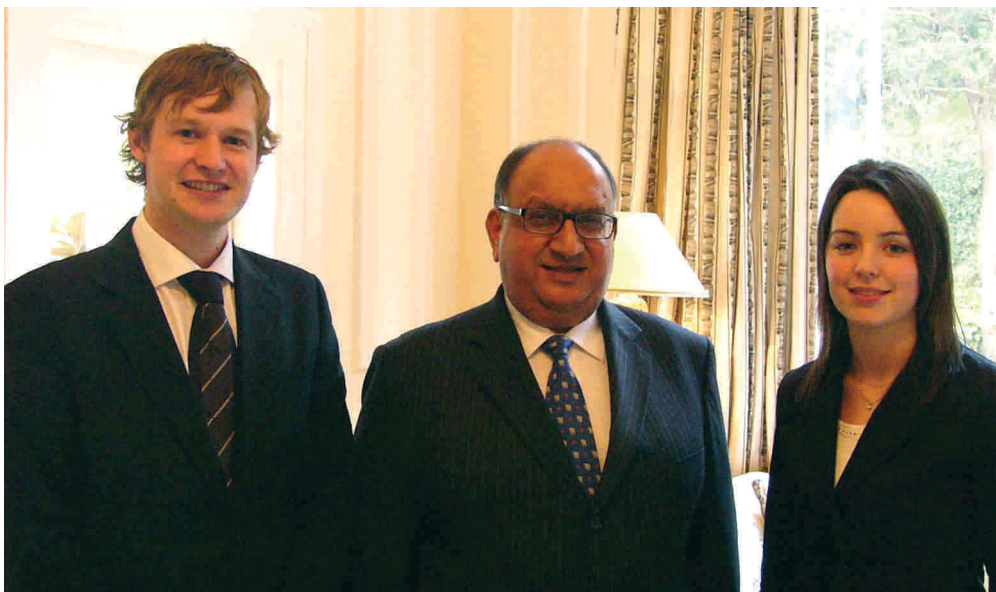
Rhodes Scholarships are awarded annually to three of New Zealand's highest achieving students. This year, the New Zealand Rhodes Scholarships were awarded to Jesse Wall, Amanda Gilbertson and Julia Matheson. Mr Wall, from Palmerston North, is completing an LLB from Otago University while Ms Gilbertson, from Hamilton, is currently completing an MA in Anthropology from Victoria University of Wellington. Dr Julia Matheson, from Dunedin, has completed an MBChB with Distinction from Otago University and will commence her postgraduate study in Oxford in September this year. I had the privilege of talking to her about the Rhodes Scholarship, her achievements so far and her future plans.

History of the Rhodes Scholarship

For over a century, Rhodes Scholarships have supported thousands of exceptional students from many countries in their ambition to study at the University of Oxford. Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world, and has an outstanding reputation of academic excellence. The Scholarships are funded by the Rhodes Trust, which was set up by the Will of Cecil John Rhodes in 1902. Cecil Rhodes, a British philanthropist,

spent much of his life expanding British imperialist interests in Southern Africa. He was Prime Minister of the Cape of Good Hope from 1890-96 and made his fortune in diamond mining in South Africa. A student of Oxford himself, he envisioned that the Rhodes Trust would help educate future world leaders, because it was his view that the unique environment at Oxford encouraged "broad views and personal development". He specified in his Will that the Scholarships were for countries in the British Empire, as well as the USA and Germany, because he saw these countries as advanced nations capable of bringing "peace, progress and prosperity" to the world. Times have changed, and the Scholarships have expanded: Rhodes Scholars are now selected from Australia, Bermuda, Canada, Commonwealth Caribbean, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica, Kenya, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa and neighbours (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland), USA, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Scholarship was only made available to women in 1977, and since then has been awarded to over 500 women. Currently, there are approximately 90 Scholars selected worldwide each year.

The Rhodes Scholarship is an award for two years postgraduate study, but can be held for only one year, or extended to three years in the case of study towards a doctoral degree. As well as University and College fees being paid by the Trust, Scholars receive a monthly stipend to cover living expenses. They are also welcome at Rhodes House, a beautiful mansion built in 1928 as a memorial to Cecil Rhodes. The House contains a dining hall, gardens, a library, study areas and many other rooms – all available to Rhodes Scholars.



(from left) Jesse Wall, another Rhodes Scholar, the Honourable Anand Satyanand, Governor-General, and Julia Matheson [photo courtesy of Otago University]

Rhodes Scholar profile: Dr Julia Matheson

Julia attended high school at Columba College in Dunedin. In her final year, she was both Head Prefect and Dux, and attained an A Bursary with 6 scholarships. She is a talented musician and enjoys playing piano and cello. Julia graduated from Otago Medical School at the end of 2006, and was awarded the Emily Hancock Siedeberg Memorial Prize for the female student with the highest overall performance in all years of the course.

In her elective at the end of her trainee intern year, Julia was one of 50 students successful in securing a 6 week placement at the Radcliffe Infirmary at Oxford. Surgery is a particular interest of Julia's, and her project at Oxford allowed her to develop her skills with work in plastic and reconstructive surgery. She also built up knowledge in this area, spending time in theatre and clinics, as well as meeting numerous consultants. During this time, Julia stayed in Balliol College at Oxford. This college is made up of a mix of residents studying various different subjects, many of whom were international postgraduate students. As well as being a nice change from always being around medical students, Julia found that she was exposed to different ways of thinking, and described how this allowed learning to continue outside the classroom. Her time at Oxford made her see that it was a "unique, special place" and that she would enjoy pursuing further study there.

Commonly, a student wishing to study at Oxford will approach a potential research supervisor via email or through contacts in New Zealand. Medical research at Oxford has a wide scope, encompassing themes such as cancer, cardiovascular science, infection and immunity and neuroscience. Julia will be working in the areas of clinical oncology and colorectal surgery. Her research will focus on the genetic aspects of colorectal cancer, rates of which are particularly high in New Zealand. This research is expected to take three years and will enable her to complete a doctoral degree, known as a DPhil. Julia will start at Oxford in September this year, and is currently working at Dunedin Public Hospital as a House Surgeon. Although Julia likes to travel, she always enjoys coming back home. Her long term plan is to have a career in surgery in New Zealand.

Information for aspiring Rhodes Scholars: The application process

There are several conditions of eligibility to consider when applying, and these are outlined on the New Zealand Vice-Chancellor's Committee (NZVCC) website. An important one for medical students to keep in mind is that applicants must not have passed their 26th birthday by the 1st of October in the year for which they are elected. Candidates must also be New Zealand citizens or British subjects.

In his Will, Cecil Rhodes outlines four standards by which to judge candidates. These are:

1. literary and scholastic attainments;
2. energy to use one's talents to the full, as exemplified by fondness for and success in sports;
3. truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship;
4. moral force of character and instincts to lead, and to take an interest in one's fellow beings.

The New Zealand guidelines to application state that "proven intellectual and academic ability of the highest standard" is the first quality required of applicants. They also point out that "Sporting prowess ... is not essential if applicants demonstrate in other ways the physical vigour which will enable a Rhodes Scholar to make the effective contribution to the world around him or her which Mr Rhodes clearly expected in expressing the hopes that a Rhodes Scholar would come to 'esteem the performance of public duties as his (her) highest aim.'" The Will also clearly states that selection of Scholars will in no way be influenced by race or religious opinion.

Applications for the Rhodes Scholarship are due on the 1st August. Among the required documents applicants are asked to submit, particular importance is placed on the personal statement. This statement outlines a candidate's general interests and activities, the proposed course of study and future work intentions, as well as stating why the candidate wishes to study at the University of Oxford. Another key component of the application is six letters of reference, of which at least three will be written by people under which the applicant has studied. Other referees may outline a candidate's sporting or cultural achievements.

In New Zealand, The Scholarship is administered by the Vice-Chancellor's Committee. This committee decides which candidates are selected for local interviews. Last year, 57 applicants were selected locally. After local selections have taken place, national ranking occurs and a handful of candidates are selected for interviews in Wellington.

Although the application process can seem daunting, Julia's advice is to not let this intimidate you. For her, assembling her application material then going through the interview process was a "huge learning curve" and very beneficial. Her opinion is that even if you are not successful in your application, simply the experience will be valuable, as you are gaining skills that can be used in your future career, especially in areas such as job interviews. Her advice to prospective applicants is to get onto the application as early as possible because it can take a considerable amount of time. Julia also points out that there are many scholarships out there. For example, another scholarship similar to the Rhodes is the Woolf-Fisher, a New Zealand based scholarship, which allows successful applicants to study at the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge.



The inspirational Oxford campus