Scholarship inspires top student to obtain PhD

FOR Daniel Taft, being awarded the Elizabeth and Vernon Puzey Graduate Research Scholarship from March 2006 through to August 2009 affirmed his interest in pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy.

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Daniel Taft will have his PhD conferred in March this year, in recognition of his research into having the cochlear implant (bionic ear) better mimic sounds so that users of the implant could achieve more realistic hearing.

The scholarship is funded from the Elizabeth and Vernon Puzey Foundation that supports students undertaking research in Science, Medicine, Dentistry, Health Sciences or Engineering and is jointly managed by the University of Melbourne and Equity Trustees.

As a younger student, Daniel was initially interested in studying medicine, but shifted his focus to engineering after visiting the University at Open Day. However, it wasn’t until Daniel’s final undergraduate year that he married his medical and engineering interests. “One of my PhD supervisors was a guest lecturer in one of my classes where he talked about the cochlear implant. After that I read Graeme Clarke’s book and decided to do my research on the implant.” Professor Anthony Burkitt was the guest lecturer who inspired Daniel down his research path.

Professor Burkitt remembers meeting Daniel as a final year undergraduate student. “Daniel was a very, very good student. He has an incredible aptitude for research. He is focused, organised and has an insight into the implications of his research.”

Daniel was also awarded the Dixson Scholarship in Engineering in June 2009. The Dixson Scholarship allowed him to focus on writing a journal article once his PhD was submitted and being considered by the examiners. The article has been accepted by Institute of Electrical Engineers (IEEE) Transactions on Biomedical Engineering journal. “The journal is an international publication which means that my research will be widely available to other researchers. It also gives me some professional recognition for my work.” No doubt Daniel’s work will also contribute to the University of Melbourne maintaining its reputation as a leader in the field of cochlear implant technology.

While the research has allowed Daniel to further his own career, it has also generated the potential to improve the hearing quality of thousands worldwide who rely on cochlear implants. “The distance between pure research and application is very close in Daniel’s PhD,” says Professor Burkitt. “Daniel worked with patients, using a studio at the Bionic Ear Institute to test the benefit of his ideas with cochlear implant users.”

Does Professor Burkitt see the results of scholarships on offer? You bet he does. “Scholarships are the lifeblood of research. It means the very best students can stay at the University of Melbourne rather than studying overseas.”