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Pioneering WA Geoscience teacher praised by her peers for key 'Australian of the Year' category nomination

A Perth geoscientist who has pioneered taking science out of the classroom into a hands-on, in-the-field experience – particularly for remote area schools – has been praised for her nomination among Saturday night's "***Australian of the Year***" awards in Canberra.

Ms Suzy Urbaniak was WA's nominee in the "Australian of the Year - Local Heroes" award category.

The 'Local Hero' award acknowledges extraordinary contributions made by Australians in their local community – with Ms Urbaniak currently making significant inroads into science education in WA's Pilbara region.

A former 2016 Prime Minister's Prize for Excellence in Science Teaching in Secondary Schools winner, Ms Urbaniak was WA's nominee for the 2020 Australian of the Year category title for her work in establishing and fostering a teaching program known as the Centre of Resources Excellence (CoRE).

CoRE encourages students to be equipped with the right skills and knowledge to take on a variety of career pathways in science and engineering so that the classroom is treated more as a workplace where students can focus on evolving as young scientists.

The program has also had the additional benefit of further empowering science educators on outcomes that can be achieved by adopting a different approach to a fundamental and necessary skillset for future generations, industry and technologies which will be increasingly reliant on modern-era science breakthroughs and developments.

Although she did not win the category's outright top honor, her nomination brought praise today from the peak body for Australia's 8,000 geoscientists — the **Australian Geoscience Council** (AGC). It said CoRE had brought relevance, excitement and aspiration into science classrooms across the country through its hands-on approach to Geoscience, a fundamental need in understanding the Earth and its importance to our past and future.

Ms Urbaniak said today CoRE is all about turning a classroom into a room full of young scientists, rather than students learning from textbooks.

"School and university textbooks teach theory but hands-on experience enables a student to get a real sense of inquiry, investigation and solution outcomes by better connecting the classroom environment directly with what is happening in the real world," Ms Urbaniak said.

"Critically, the future Australian science and engineering workforce is sitting in our classrooms today.

"CoRE is a philosophy, not just another STEM* program (* *A term referring collectively to the teaching of the disciplines within its umbrella – science, technology, engineering and mathematics*).

"Education is not about passing tests – life is not an exam.

"The current education system is no longer working satisfactorily. There is an urgent need to change our education system because the future is already here.

"At the end of the working life of the preschool class of 2020, these students will be seeing the beginning of the 22nd century.

“But right now, industry, parents, students and teachers are demanding change.

“Our current 19th century model for education is not ready for that future as we have not yet prepared our educators, schools and communities to support these young people to thrive, not just survive that future.”

Ms Urbaniak said the CoRE learning philosophy mapped a practical pathway for real-world learning and practical solutions to this national challenge.

“Young people the world over are finding their voice, and are calling for our current teaching ranks to join them and be braver in navigating a rapidly changing world, rather than be paralysed by inaction,” she said.

“As educators, it is up to us to build future skills, attitudes and attributes in our students focused on practical real-world learning and to embrace creativity and challenges to fixed learning methodologies.”

The AGC’s Past-President, Dr Bill Shaw, said today Ms Urbaniak’s nomination had drawn attention to the need for those bedding down Australia’s future national education curricula to ensure the inclusion of good basic science in all future policy settings.

“Science and technology will empower societal growth in what will inevitably be an even more rapidly changing world in the future,” Dr Shaw said.

“Taking science learning into a more enriched, hands-on and self-responsible environment will attract more students to these exciting professions and help ensure Australia has the skillsets to play a major if not leading role in what will be increasingly seamless global industries, careers and professions.

“Ms Urbaniak is to be applauded for her vision in establishing the CoRE program concept as a firm foundation on which those very objectives can be met and the AGC congratulates her on this well-deserved recognition.”

The vision of the AGC is to raise the profile of Geoscience to be recognised as one of the great fields of general science, with Physics, Chemistry and Biology.

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