The Invergowrie Foundation

In the 1920s, private school headmistresses helped to establish a hostel providing instruction in cookery, household management, home hygiene, child welfare, laundry and needlework. The McPherson family donated their home, ‘Invergowrie’, to this cause in 1933.

More than 2,000 women were trained in “domestic science” at Invergowrie before it closed in 1973. Upon its sale in 1992, the proceeds were directed by the Association of Heads of Independent Girls’ Schools of Victoria into The Invergowrie Foundation, a trust that promotes and advances the education of girls and women and at RMIT helps women find their place in the “hard” sciences.

Alexandra Irwin completed her VCE in 2001 and worked as a dental technician before deciding that what most engaged her was science – something she had not pursued at secondary school. To make up the ground she completed a Certificate III. “The bridging course really gave me confidence in maths,” says Ms Irwin, who in 2006 was accepted into RMIT’s Bachelor of Science (Applied Science).

She also applied for a three-year Invergowrie scholarship open to women who are articulating from TAFE into an RMIT undergraduate degree in science, engineering or technology.

Ms Irwin is the only woman among about 20 students in her Physics program. “There are times when it’s hard,” she says. “The scholarship money really helps, especially when one book can cost $150. But the other thing is that I feel like I’m being supported as a woman in science. It motivates me. I want to do well for myself but also for The Invergowrie Foundation.”

Adriana Zekaj arrived in Melbourne with her parents as a refugee from Kosovo in 2002 with only a little English learnt from her schoolteacher mother. After six months at an English language centre she joined classes at Noble Park Secondary School and learnt of The Invergowrie Foundation Equity Admission Scholarship.

This award of $2,000 a year for three years is made available to a woman who enters RMIT from a government secondary school that has a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

With her father unable to work and her mother working part-time, Ms Zekaj says the scholarship helps her with books, stationery and public transport fares. It was especially a blessing in her getting established in her first year of university.

“We had a really old computer at home without an internet connection,” she says. “Without the scholarship we wouldn’t have been able to afford a better computer, which, when you’re studying, is practically indispensable.”

For Karen McAlear a three-year Invergowrie scholarship has made a huge difference in her return to study in her 40s after 18 years of psychiatric nursing.

“I’m working less than I used to but my childcare costs have risen,” she says. “Without the scholarship I don’t think I could have continued.”

Ms McAlear is enrolled in Applied Science (Psychology). She is determined to become a clinical psychologist. “In crisis nursing I have seen a lot of women who shouldn’t really be in hospital. With the right approach by a psychologist they might be able to get their lives back on track. That’s what makes me 110 per cent committed to this course.”

Invergowrie Chairman Dr Barbara Fary OAM says these three women typify those the Foundation is dedicated to helping.

“Invergowrie is based on the belief that woman and girls should aspire to be the best in every walk of life and in every area of education and work,” she says. “There is no reason they shouldn’t strive to be outstanding physicists, engineers and psychologists.

“Because RMIT has so strong a reputation for education in technology, it makes sense for the foundation to help young RMIT women make their mark in these sciences.”