HUGH Possingham is a world-renowned conservation scientist, a Federation Fellow and the author of more than 150 academic papers. He’s also an award-winning supervisor to 14 PhD students.

“He can give you brilliant ideas,” explains Emily Nicholson, who finished her PhD under Professor Possingham at the University of Queensland a year ago. “And he gives them to you three to five years ahead of the field. So at the end of your PhD, the idea is still cutting edge.”

Possingham’s group, which brings together ecologists and mathematicians, uses empirical data and mathematical models to solve ecological problems across terrestrial, marine and aquatic environments. Among the issues the group looks at are how to manage threatened species to maximise their chances of survival and how best to invest money in conservation actions.

But it’s not just academic insight that a star scientist such as Professor Possingham can provide. According to his PhD students, working in a top research group brings many advantages. Firstly, there’s the constant stream of academics visiting from all over the world. “It’s fantastic,” says Eddie Game, who’s in the third year of his PhD at UQ’s Ecology Centre, which Professor Possingham directs. “It’s one of the highlights of this lab. Almost monthly there is a visitor. They come with different ideas or facing different problems. They can provide context and insights for your own work.”

Then there’s the group itself. “A good researcher sets up around them a good laboratory,” says Reinaldo Lourival, a PhD student from Brazil. Mr Lourival says Professor Possingham and his colleagues have attracted people from different fields to create what is a large and diverse group.

“Being part of the lab, it’s a credential,” adds Mr Lourival, a wetlands conservation planner. “You can come up with an idea and it’s respected from the start.”

Certainly Professor Possingham’s PhD students appear in demand. Eve McDonald-Madden is 18 months into her PhD. She’s already attended two international conferences and is collaborating with a researcher in France. “I have never known any of my friends doing PhDs to have those kinds of opportunities,” says Ms McDonald-Madden. “Hugh’s connected everywhere. When you finish, having Hugh as a supervisor to help connect you to the next phase is amazing.”

She notes that Professor Possingham encourages his students to submit papers to international conferences and will help them find the money to attend.

Because of Professor Possingham’s high profile, the group is often approached by government departments and international organisations. Also, Professor Possingham sits on several government committees. The recipient of a UQ higher degree supervision excellence award, Professor Possingham meets with each of his students for half an hour a week when he’s in town. His students are also able to drop in for a chat whenever he’s in his office.

“Hugh realises that being a successful academic is many things – a researcher, supervisor, teacher and politician,” says Lourival. “One thing which has been really useful to learn was this view of an academic as a whole.”