BEN HUGHES:

Ben Hughes left school at 16 with a bad attitude and a chip on his shoulder. A four-year engineering apprenticeship at Shell UK sorted out the bad attitude, he says, the chip fell off and before long he was craving to do more with his life.

Working nearly 50 hours a week and studying part time, he obtained the engineering degree he wanted. Hughes was ready to go further, but it was not until he stumbled across the Whitworth Scholarship that he was able to quit work and focus on obtaining his PHD.

Today, Dr Ben Hughes is a trailblazer in the energy sector, a reader at Sheffield University and one of the brains behind innovative global projects, including the construction of air-conditioned stadiums in Qatar.

He says the Whitworth Scholarship gave him the confidence he needed.

“The most important thing is the network of contacts within the Whitworth Society,” he explains. “There’s a network of people who have been on the same journey. You can pick up the phone and get some advice. They can phone you, and you can help each other. It makes a big difference.”

Hughes has worked in Dubai and runs a research company linked to his university. The money generated through the company’s products - such as low-energy cooling wind towers - is channeled back into the university, allowing for more PHDs to be awarded and for further research to be undertaken into things like smart homes and buildings.

For Hughes, what makes the Whitworth Scholarship unique is that it’s designed for people who take a different route into academia. However they get there, he says, they can help engineer solutions to some of the world’s most urgent problems, such as climate change, food security and the depletion of energy resources.

Hughes believes pioneers like Sir Joseph Whitworth, who founded the scholarship 150 years ago, come once in a generation. He thinks that if Whitworth lived in this era, he would still be at the forefront of advancing manufacturing.

“I am sure there are many people looking at scholarships, looking at the lists of scholars and being put off, thinking they are not at that level,” Hughes says. “But the reality is that if you were at that level, you wouldn’t need the scholarship. So apply. Come speak to us. We can help. Just believe in yourself. Have no fear.”