

Opening Statement

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Senate Education & Employment References Committee – Estimates hearing
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Thank you, Senators, for the opportunity to make an opening statement. My name is Genevieve Bell and in January this year I became the thirteenth Vice-Chancellor of Australia's national university, the ANU.

I am joined today by my Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Professor Grady Venville who is Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic, Professor Lachlan Blackhall who is Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research and Innovation, and by Professor Anthony Connolly who is Chair of the Academic Board and a member of the University Council.

Coming into the role this year I didn't find any guidance in my handover document on how to handle Senate Estimates, and I've since found out this is because it is very rare for the ANU to be called here. We have only been called here once before, back in 2014 to discuss the establishment of our Socially Responsible Investment Policy.

We take our status as Australia's only university established under Commonwealth law very seriously. The Act of the Commonwealth Parliament to establish ANU was passed in 1946. In the words of one of our co-founders, HC 'Nugget' Coombs, the new university was to be "a powerhouse of social reconstruction" and "a place where research is directed at the problems arising immediately from the social, economic and cultural context that would bring us the knowledge with which to build wisely."

We continue to follow Nugget's vision to this day.

As someone who spent a lot of my childhood around ANU, and having been part of the faculty since 2017, one of the things I love about the place is that we know how to balance multiple horizons. By that I mean we are able to be a university of distinction by delivering what the nation needs today and by also putting brilliant people in position to look at what comes next and develop the knowledge we need to advance society.

I was in this building only recently to launch a new initiative, *ANU Policy Brief*. We created this digital platform because we understand the need for the national university to contribute to evidence-based policymaking. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge may be the creed of many academics worldwide, but all the better if we can help put some of that knowledge into practice.

ANU is unique among Australian universities. Our mandate requires us to serve the national interest. To be expert in areas not addressed elsewhere.

To this end, ANU has the largest gathering of expertise on Asia and the Pacific of any university outside Asia, recognising the importance for Australia to successfully engage in our local region.

ANU has Australia's leading physics school, from which we produce half of all Australia's physics PhDs.

Our First Nations Portfolio is a world-leading initiative using the power of education and expertise to contribute to the nation's relationship with Indigenous people.

We host Australia's largest supercomputer, and Australia's largest heavy-ion accelerator. Our astronomy and astrophysics facilities at Mount Stromlo celebrate their centenary this year and continue to support national research and space industry applications.

The National Security College, the Crawford School of Public Policy and the Australian Signals Directorate-ANU Co-Lab are all located at ANU and are educating current and future APS leaders.

Students of all ages come from all over Australia and from more than 100 countries around the world to study at ANU. Our student population is small by Australian university standards and allows us to offer a unique learning experience featuring a low ratio of students to academic staff and the highest proportion of students living in on-campus accommodation in the sector.

Currently, the higher education sector is facing some challenges that I am sure we will discuss today including a rapidly evolving policy landscape and the impact of slowing migration numbers on universities as well as encampment protests that have sparked much public debate.

Our commitment to the classical ideal of the university: academic rigour, free inquiry, free expression and the right to protest, is not without its challenges. Our campus is one of several in Australia, and more across the world, that have seen protest activity in recent times relating to the conflict in the Middle East.

Throughout this period, ANU has acknowledged the rights enshrined in the University's policy on academic freedom and freedom of speech. This policy is informed by the model code developed for the sector in 2019 following the French Review of free speech in higher education. This includes the right to protest, provided this is done in a way that is safe, appropriate for our campus and adheres to our codes of conduct and applicable laws.

Maintaining this balance requires careful consideration, diligence and compassion. I note the recent comments on ABC radio from Senator Henderson that ANU has a "very positive story to tell" about our handling of this sensitive issue.

Unfortunately, there have been instances where individuals have behaved in ways that are unacceptable. When this has happened, we have taken appropriate action. ANU has initiated disciplinary action under our disciplinary rules against ten students in relation to protest activity associated with the Middle East conflict. I expect this will be of interest to some Senators here today. We will be as forthcoming as we can be about how disciplinary proceedings occur and what options are available to the University, but we do not discuss individual disciplinary matters. This is for privacy reasons and because, despite anything else, we have a duty of care for people in our community and an obligation to provide due process.

Again, I'm grateful for the time to make this opening statement. We are looking forward to your questions.