



## Opening Statement

**Distinguished Professor Genevieve Bell AO**

**Vice-Chancellor – The Australian National University**

Thank you, Senators, for the opportunity to make an opening statement. My name is Genevieve Bell and in January of this year I became the 13<sup>th</sup> Vice-Chancellor of The Australian National University.

In our 78-year history, this is only our third appearance at Senate Estimates and the second this year. We are still learning how to do this process well, and we look forward to addressing particulars of the expenditure of the University.

ANU is more than a billion-dollar organisation, with a staff profile of almost 5,000 employees, and 20,000 students, nearly 7,000 of whom live on campus in our dedicated residential offerings. Clearly, we are neither a department nor an agency, but we are proud to be a Commonwealth entity.

ANU was founded by an Act of Parliament in 1946 to provide research and training for Australia and the region. Our motto, ‘first, to know the nature of things’ is our north star, to be a place for our nation that shapes and shares knowledge and to create a better world for all of us. It’s an extraordinary legacy and responsibility. And one which we all take seriously.

Our student community represents every state and territory in Australia. In a couple of months’ time, we will be welcoming our 2025 domestic cohort of young Australians, with more than 5,000 early offers issued in recent weeks. We are also working hard to offer

scholarships and grants, to make coming to university possible for a broad range of students from across Australia. As the national university, we are also committed to supporting our region, which sees us educate an international cohort comprising of students from around 100 different nations.

But universities are more than places of learning and knowledge – they are centres of ideas and for shaping complex conversations. In any classroom there should be strong, contested ideas and perspectives which create more robust ways of tackling emerging challenges. With these conversations, also comes the responsibility to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom as core tenets of western democracy.

One of the reasons we can offer a transformational educational experience, is we have remarkable researchers. Since our founding, ANU has provided extraordinary research and training outcomes for our nation, from which millions of Australians have benefited.

Forty years ago, ANU faculty started fundamental research into rare earth elements, and we have been instrumental in bringing together academia, industry and government to better position Australia in this global conversation today.

During the Covid-19 pandemic our experts advised governments, in Australia and around the world, on responding to a pandemic at scale: from vaccine development, to rebuilding the economy and even detecting Covid-19 through sewage. And most recently, we were excited to see funding opportunities announced for progressing Australia's Centre for Disease Control and we look forward to continuing to contribute our expertise to this important initiative.

At ANU, we also partner with parliament and the government on key national initiatives. Our work on security, technology, Pacific affairs and migration provides expertise and policy advice directly in support of national interests.

Our work is also helping policymakers navigate the complexities of artificial intelligence, which is sought after by the APS and the parliament. I have had the pleasure of seeing many of your colleagues in my classrooms.

But while ANU is unique in some aspects, we also live in the same ecosystem as Australia's other universities and are subject to the same competitive landscape, policy settings and operating conditions. And this is a difficult time for our sector. The pandemic had a significant impact on university finances and recent analysis by Universities Australia found that 25 of our 39 public universities reported operating deficits in 2023. Since 2021, our University has accumulated operating deficits of almost \$400 million.

This is not a new problem, but recent changes in operating conditions mean our plan to get out of deficits through growing income from student enrolments is no longer an option for us. We have no choice but to address our costs, and this includes structural change to the shape and size of the University.

The ANU Council has directed us to reduce the University's recurring operating costs by \$250 million by 1 January 2026. We are leaning into this challenge. We are not asking for handouts or special treatment that will paper over our structural issues. Rather, we are renewing ANU to become a university able to meet the expectations of today, and adapt to the opportunities of tomorrow.

Again, I'm grateful for the time to make this opening statement. We are looking forward to your questions and to assure the Committee that our expenditure of funds will remain responsible, that ANU will continue to fulfil its mission as the national university, albeit in a changed state. Not bigger, but we hope better.