

## **Kate Witenden ABC Radio Interview Transcript**

Interview occurred at 4.37pm on November 15, 2024.

### **Speakers**

Saskia Mabin, Chief People Officer Kate Witenden, and a clip of a previous interview with NTEU ACT Division Secretary Lachlan Clohesy

Saskia: Now, we are going to get into a bit more of a serious topic now, and Kate Witenden, who is the ANU Chief People Officer, is going to help me get this show back on the road. Kate, how are you? Oh, have I got you there Kate? Hello?

Kate: Hi Saskia, how are you?

Saskia: Good. You were thinking, gosh, am I on the right show? They are talking about tracking farts. What is going on? We're getting serious again, Kate. Thank you for bearing with us through all of that nonsense. Some important news from the ANU today. The number of jobs set to be cut is fewer than anticipated, and this is, I believe, specifically from the College of Health and Medicine. Initially, you were planning to make 50 positions redundant, but that figure has changed, Kate. What's the new plan?

Kate: Yeah, sure, thanks Saskia for the question. So, look, the College of a- the College of Health and Medicine, is part of our Renew ANU plan here at the University. So, the Renew ANU plan is primarily around restructuring the academic side of the institution. So, the original plan had a number of roles that we're exploring through this transition, and those roles will simply go with the Schools and Centre that are realigning across the University. So, at this stage that that is right, we have some roles that are now realigning, and that's because, look, we take change quite seriously here at the ANU – we consult extensively across the campus, and we have done that. So, since we kicked off our Renew ANU engagements, we've had over 80,000 visits to our micro sites, we've had 29,000 views of leadership updates, and almost 10,000 views to the FAQ page. So, what that shows to me is how engaged our community is at this time, and we're really grateful for that engagement.

Saskia: So now, no longer 50 positions being cut from the College of Health and Medicine. How many positions will need to be cut now that you've done a little bit of work here in realigning things?

Kate: Yeah, so we're not talking about headcount reductions Saskia, the communication that we have with our community at this time is that we have a huge budgetary challenge here at the ANU, and that budgetary challenge is \$250 million, and of that \$250 million we know that we need to, we need to change around \$100 million of staff expenses. So, we don't talk about head count, because what goes into staff expenses is a number of different things, and how they're continuing to manage our expenses is through a number of different means as well. So that means keeping track of attrition, we carefully scrutinize our recruitment at the moment through a recruitment approval committee. So that's putting some pressure on all of the University to really think about where we do have attrition, what is that role that they need to really bring

back in? We're also actively managing our leave as well, and that also will contribute quite a large amount of money towards those- towards those savings targets that we need to achieve. So that's why we don't talk about head count.

Saskia: Yeah, yeah, right. I have seen it reported today, though, that now 13 positions will be made redundant from the College of Health and Medicine. Is that accurate?

Kate: That's correct. That's, yeah. We've just launched an implementation plan Saskia, so we have a very prescribed approach on how we deal with change, and the stage that we're at with our realignment and our College of Health and Medicine is that we've just implemented or gone to our implementation proposals, and that's correct. So, the number of disestablished roles within that plan now is 13.

Saskia: Okay. There are more job cut plans. I know that you don't like to refer to it that way, Kate, but there are more jobs due to be lost across the university. I think it's somewhere in the realm of 460. Does that sound about right for the ANU to recoup some finances?

Kate: Yeah, no, that's, that's not correct Saskia, so we don't have any head count targets out there at the moment, simply for the reasons that I've just explained. We have another three change proposals that are currently in a- in a stage of collation of feedback, so not quite at that implementation stage yet. But yeah, no, I'm not sure where you got that number from, but no, that's, that's not correct.

Saskia: Okay, that was previously reported by the ABC. I'm sure your staff, Kate Witenden, would be feeling incredibly anxious. And we do know this because we speak regularly with the union who represent a lot of the staff at the ANU. When will they know more about their future and whether or not, you know, their jobs are safe?

Kate: Yeah, sure. So, look what we've been very transparent with our community at the moment, Saskia, so we're continuing to release information as we can, keeping staff updated as to our financial position and what we're tracking against. There's a number of things that will update the community as we get closer to the end of the year, because we're still midway through our financial cycle – our financial cycle doesn't actually close until the end of the year. But look, this is a tough time for our community. We know that which is why we've been extensively engaging right across the university at this- At this point in time. But we are bound by an Enterprise Agreement here at the ANU, so when we know that we have to get to a stage of going to change proposals, which is what we actually are required to do here at the ANU, then we go through that process, but it is a tough time that the university is in at the moment.

Saskia: Yesterday, I spoke with Lachlan Clohesy from the National Tertiary Education Union, and he was telling me that they held another rally yesterday, and there's a lot of support, according to Lachlan Clohesy, among the staff to vote no to a proposal from the ANU asking staff to forego a previously agreed upon pay rise of 2.5 per cent. That vote will go ahead on Monday. Lachlan Clohesy is confident that it will be a resounding no from the staff. Kate Witenden, is this still a request that you and the ANU executive have put before your staff?

Kate: Yeah, thanks for the question. Saskia. So, this is a proposal that we have put to our staff, so the staff ballot will be launched this Monday, and we are proposing a variation to forego a 2.5 per cent pay increase that was scheduled for the 19th of December. Under this proposal, staff will still receive 16 per cent increase over the life of the Enterprise Agreement, and we actually still have three increases still to go under the life of that enterprise agreement. So, we have another 5 per cent next year and a further 2.5 per cent in 2026. Look, to get that proposal through Saskia, it does require 50 per cent of staff who actually vote, or 50 per cent plus one for that proposal to get up, but yes, we are going ahead with that. It's one of the options. What we've been very clear about with our community, as we lean in to try and solve this budgetary problem that we're trying to work through, this \$100 million, we said to our staff that we have to explore all levers and all options, and we've also asked our staff for feedback around other options that they might have to come forward. So, this is one of those levers. What we know Saskia is that if, if this got up, it would save in the vicinity of \$15 million, so that's \$15 million towards that \$100 million budgetary target that we're trying to solve.

Saskia: And so that's if all staff agree to forego their 2.5 per cent pay rise, you'll save \$15 million. I know you're not wanting to put figures on it, but Genevieve Bell, the Vice-Chancellor of the ANU, said in her email, when she requested that staff do this, that doing this – forgoing your pay rise – would save jobs. How many jobs would that save?

Kate: Yeah, so again, I can't quantify that, because we don't, we don't talk about specific headcount in that. What we're trying to do is keep it at that top line, which is savings towards that \$100 million budgetary target that we're trying to make, but it absolutely will save jobs next year.

Saskia: Lachlan Clohesy from the Union, wasn't buying that argument. I'm sure it wouldn't surprise you to hear that, Kate Witenden. I'm just going to play you a little bit of what he said as to why he felt that that wasn't totally transparent from the university.

Lachlan: I mean, it always helps an employer to pay their employees less. They'll, you know, save money by not paying staff for the work that they do. But I think we've got to be clear, there's a difference. There's a lot of sympathy in 2020 for the University because it was COVID, because it was a global pandemic, because we're all pitching in and helping each other out. Now, that's one circumstance, but the circumstance we're faced with now is a financial crisis caused by ANU's own financial mismanagement, poor governance, and what they told Senate Estimates was “erroneous budgeting”. So, there's very little sympathy for management, because it's a crisis of their own making.

Saskia: That there was Lachlan Clohesy from the NTEU. He was speaking with me yesterday. Kate Witenden is the ANU Chief People Officer. Kate, what do you have to say to what Lachlan just said? They know that this, this is a crisis of mismanagement. That's why the ANU is in this position, and there's no sympathy among staff, according to Lachlan Clohesy, for this idea to forego their pay rise in order to save jobs.

Kate: Yeah, so, so look what I'd say Saskia is, is we find ourselves in a position where we had some real budgetary constraints. We had a budget that was set last year based on a number of parameters that have just simply not come into play this, this financial year. So, we'd expected to see some growth in our student numbers. That hasn't materialized for us. We are, I guess, an entity where, when you think about the ways that we can bring revenue into the University, is quite limiting, and obviously student revenue is a key one for the University. So, there's a couple of things that have put, I guess, adverse pressure onto the budget this year. I think the problem we are trying to solve is the problem we are trying to solve right here and now, and it's quite a critical one because if we don't get to ground on making ourselves financially sustainable then there's obviously going to be adverse impacts for that further down the track. So, we are taking a proactive approach at the moment to lean into this problem, and Saskia I am relatively new to the ANU, so I don't want to be drawn into conversations of the past. I know there's been a lot of that chatter to date. I sort of try to take a more pragmatic view that this is where we are right now, and these are the problems that we are trying to lean into and find those right solutions for all of us here.

Saskia: If it is a resounding no vote early next week from your staff to forgoing their 2.5 per cent pay rise, you mentioned earlier there are other avenues that the University will explore to make these savings. What will you do if there's a no vote?

Kate: Yeah, sure. So, thanks Saskia. And it is a great question. So, we have to keep continuing to do what we are doing at the moment. So, we are actively managing our attrition, we are actively managing our recruitment across the University – that does put some good positive pressure back into the system – we're actively managing our leave. We have quite a large leave liability here at the ANU. All of those things add up, but we will need to look at other options next year, and that will mean looking at roles and opportunities across the University.

Saskia: There's a question on the text line from Graham saying, "Will the Vice-Chancellor forgo her own salary rise?" Yes, Genevieve Bell did say when she sent out this email that she would cut her salary by I believe it was 10 per cent, effective immediately. Kate Witenden, will you forgo your pay rise?

Kate: I will certainly consider that, along with the rest of the community Saskia. So, they are open conversations at the moment. Our community has that open to them next week when we go to the vote. We've also asked all of our senior staff to consider doing the same thing, Saskia. And I can absolutely confirm that our Vice-Chancellor has taken a 10 per cent pay cut, and that was instigated as soon as she communicated that out in the community.

Saskia: Are you considering a pay cut of more than 2.5% Kate? I'm sure a lot of the people at the University would like to see senior people taking more of a pay cut than what they're asking to forgo.

Kate: Yeah, I think that's a good question, Saskia. And again, we have all options on the table, so there is nothing stopping us as a leadership team moving forward to

ask more of our community and our senior community, and we're just taking those steps one at a time.

Saskia: Okay, when will we know the outcome of your decision Kate Witenden?

Kate: My personal decision?

Saskia: Yeah, that's right, your personal decision, because you probably, you probably know a little bit more about that.

Kate: Yeah. I'd prefer not to say Saskia. That's umm, that's, that's for me to deal with myself, with the- With the University, and at the moment I need to help manage everything else here.

Saskia: Yes, which certainly seems like a big job. Well, thank you. I'm sure we will hear more from the ANU next week. I appreciate you making time today to chat. Thank you.

Kate: No worries. Thanks Saskia.

Saskia: Kate Witenden is the ANU Chief People Officer, and on the text line, this listener says, "Dialogue in PR terms should be seen for what it is. It's quite disrespectful to try and reword the reality of what is being done." Vicky says, "More yes minister double talk regarding the alignment, another phrase like downsizing." And Rod says, "Anyway you look at it, the ANU are cutting jobs. Management can couch it any way they want."