

ABC Radio Canberra transcript – Genevieve Bell

Wednesday 26 March 2025 -7:14am

Interviewer: Ross Solly, ABC Presenter

Interviewee: Professor Genevieve Bell, ANU Vice Chancellor

Ross: So, of course the ANU and the university sector generally has been in the news a lot in recent months. It's a tough time for all in the university sector, especially here in Canberra. I say especially, but we've been focused a lot on what's been going on at the University of Canberra and of course the Australian National University. And I'm very happy to say that ANU Vice Chancellor Genevieve Bell has joined me in the studio this morning. Vice-Chancellor, thank you for coming in and having a chat.

Genevieve: Oh, it's nice to see you again Ross.

Ross: Can I first of all just get your reaction to the budget last night? There didn't seem to be a lot in there for the university sector. Uh, there was some relief for HECS debt, though. Have you had a chance to run your eyes over the finer points?

Genevieve: Yeah, look, we're still digesting it, and I'm glad to see there was relief for HECS deb, I think that's a good step there. Look, I imagine across the sector there were some other things we might have been hoping for there. You'll remember that during the pandemic, the government created the Job ready graduate scheme. And that's continued, I think, to make complexity for us and not really deliver the promise of it as a policy setting. And I imagine for my colleagues, there's a review going on at the moment about how the government tackles funding research and development in universities, and I think we might have been hoping to see a little bit more in that space, too.

Ross: Yeah, I guess on the eve of an election, they probably, it did seem like a budget which had been thrown together when they weren't expecting a budget. But I mean, how desperate is the situation for the university sector? You've outlined there a couple of things that need attention. I mean, what stage are you at at the moment with this?

Genevieve: Look, I think for all universities in Australia, there's a range of things that are impacting us, right? We have lots of geopolitical tensions around the globe. We have complicated policy settings around international students. The cost of doing research for us is very different than it was 20 years ago. So you've got all of that, right? And then, on the other hand, look for us at the ANU this year we saw more kids from Australia apply to university and turn up than we've ever seen. So, sort of it's this interesting tension. There's lots of headwinds for us. But there are still young people and their parents all over Australia saying university is the next step in my life. And that's a really heartening thing.

Ross: Let's talk about some of the other big issues that you've been grappling with in your time as Vice-Chancellor. And the most recent one, of course, is the United States playing hardball, uh, saying, if you want to get our money, you have to meet certain criteria. Now, it was announced last week that at least one research project you've

had to scrap because of these demands by the United States. Can you tell us a little bit about that project that you've had to scrap?

Genevieve: Yeah, can I actually take it back a step, though, Ross? Because there's a couple of different things going on. It's absolutely the case that the US sent to many people a questionnaire. We didn't actually receive it. As far as we were aware at the ANU, none of us have received that questionnaire. We have 16 grants that are funded through various government pieces of the United States, to the tune of about \$10 million Australian, give or take the exchange rate. And that's, you know, that's a range of different projects. We've had one project cancelled, which you're right, we did talk about last week. That project wasn't cancelled off the back of any survey, but it was cancelled because the department that had been funding it, the Department of Homeland Security, wrote to the researcher and said the research was no longer in line with their departmental priorities, so it didn't actually have anything to do with the survey at all.

Ross: Do you know why it wasn't in line with their priorities?

Genevieve: No, they did not choose to unpack what their priorities were in the correspondence, merely say that they weren't aligned.

Ross: So there's nothing you could have done to change...what that project was doing to meet, so there was no, can you please, you know, remove any reference to DEI or anything like that? There was nothing like that at all?

Genevieve: No. And ironically, Ross, this was a project actually about, uh, radicalisation and domestic terrorism for the Department of Homeland Security.

Ross: And that's no longer a priority of theirs?

Genevieve: Apparently not.

Ross: What are the knock on effects from that, then? From that project? I assume you've got people there who've been working on this who suddenly have found themselves without any funding and without a job.

Genevieve: So, one of the things we did when we were first made aware that this had happened was think about, is this going to be the only one or will there be more? And how do we make sure we have a principled approach to all of our researchers who have US funding? We were really clear amongst ourselves and the leadership team that you shouldn't be penalised with your job, because a funding body somewhere else has made what could appear to be quite an arbitrary decision that you don't actually have any input over. And so for us, at least, because it's a small amount of money, \$10 million is small in our university budget - it's not a great time for us, but it's a small amount - we will ensure that our researchers don't lose their jobs on the basis of it. And depending on where the state in the research is, this one happens to be quite close to conclusion. We'll help it get over the finish line.

Ross: So are you saying that you would rather lose the money than change the way that any of these projects are being operated to fit what the United States would rather you do these days? Because we know...

Genevieve: So to be clear, the grant in question that was cancelled, there was no request there.

Ross: No, but the other nine I mean, you've got a chance, I guess, to go back and look and see and make sure that they are ticking all the boxes in so far as what the US government wants you to do, but you're saying you're not going to do that?

Genevieve: Well, so we have 15 other grants on foot and we haven't received a questionnaire, so there's no box checking exercise....

Ross: So you've received no questionnaires at all?

Genevieve: No we haven't. And not everyone has.

Ross: Because, okay. Because this is what the... apparently, all these universities and you've not received one?

Genevieve: No.

Ross: Because apparently the CSIRO, we read today, has received these questions.

Genevieve: So I understand.

Ross: So even without the questionnaire you just had a project just removed, the US decided we don't need to do a joint operation on...

Genevieve: A federal you know, an American federal department made a set of decisions.

Ross: Okay. Wow.

Genevieve: Yeah. And I think...pause for a minute. Ross, what would it be like to be a researcher who's doing good work, that feels interesting. that has had lots of people interested in it and to wake up one morning to an email that says, eh, we're done.

Ross: Yeah, well, interesting. On the, uh, your relationship with the university and some of the coverage you've been getting in the media, I understand, correct me if I'm wrong, that today is the final day for this no confidence vote that's going around. Is that right?

Genevieve: Yeah, it is.

Ross: If that survey comes back and the majority of respondents say that they do have no confidence in you as the Vice-Chancellor, will you consider your position?

Genevieve: No. I will turn up to work on Thursday morning the way I've turned up to work for the last 14.5 months, and I should back up and tell you why. So you're right, there's a no confidence vote being conducted at the university currently into both myself and the Chancellor of the university, Julie Bishop. That vote's been going on for a month. To call it a vote would make the people from the Electoral Commission and lobby roll over. It's actually an online web form. Uh, it's not anonymous. It requires your name, phone number and email address. And if you're a union member, you should tick the box that you are. And if you aren't, it is an invitation for you to join the union. And, you know, my colleagues in the NTEU have been very clear, this is as much a membership drive as a no confidence vote. It's open to anyone. You could choose to vote if you wanted to, Ross. Maybe...

Ross: But I'd have to give my details...

Genevieve: You would, but it wouldn't prevent you from voting. And so look, I imagine...

Ross: So, it's a shonky poll, is it?

Genevieve: Yeah, pretty much. I don't think it has a lot of validity as a voting instrument. And the reality is it doesn't actually have a lot of power at the university either. The people who employ me is the Council.

Ross: Yeah. Do you think if it was, if there was an anonymous vote across the university that most people would say they have confidence in you and the way that you're running the university?

Genevieve: I don't actually know the answer to that. I think the reality here is that it is an incredibly hard moment for the university. I believe that all of us that are there love the place and want it to be in better shape than it is. I think most of us would admit that we're on a hard journey to improvement, and I know that change is hard. I know for some people it's come as a surprise, and I know for a lot of people it's having a material impact on their daily lives. So, do I expect everyone wants to vote unanimously "yes" for that, of course not. But the unfortunate reality here is we do need to be financially sustainable. And we aren't currently and I'm the person in the seat helping drive that.

Ross: Yeah. I mean, your critics say, though, that you're tone deaf, that you're unapproachable, that you're hard. You're too hard and you're not willing to accept other options. What do you say to that? I mean, nobody wants to hear that about themselves, of course, but...

Genevieve: Yeah, look, let's just unpack those two, right? Unapproachable - that's not been my lived experience of my life on campus. I have people approaching me all the time. I do lots of events. I routinely have conversations with people all over Canberra. Part of the thing of being a small red head is people can usually pick you out and go, hey, I have an opinion.

Ross: Yeah.

Genevieve: So I think unapproachable, inflexible. What's the other one? Tone deaf?

Ross: Tone deaf, yeah.

Genevieve: Uh, no, I don't think I'm tone deaf. I think the reality here is that the university is in a financially unsustainable position, and that requires change.

Ross: There's some suggestion that the university deliberately overstated the financial problems that you're in because, um, most recently, I think it was December, there was a new figure come out to show that the budget deficit that had been quoted was \$60 million overstated, and that this had been done deliberately so that you could bring in reforms and changes, uh, and that this would justify it. I mean, was this, are you deliberately overstating the state of the finances at the ANU?

Genevieve: Of course not. So, I mean, most of us who have household budgets understand the reality of the relationship between how much you spend and how much you earn. At the university, for multiple years now, we have been spending more than we've been earning, and there's been a gap in between those two things. And that gap has been

widening year on year. A budget was set in 2023 by my predecessor that sought to close that gap, but it had a series of assumptions built into it that turned out to be wrong for any number of reasons. In multiple points last year, like a responsible financial organisation, we looked at how much we were earning and how much we were spending and made a forecast for our deficit. That's why it's called a forecast. In September the forecast for our deficit for the whole of 2024 was \$200 million, and that was based on a roll up from each piece of the university saying how much money they thought they'd spend in the last quarter. It was based on all the historicals of how we've spent and how we've earned. And that roll up got us to \$200 million. Amazingly, because the community is actually also really taken this seriously, and I'm always a little saddened when people talk about all the dissent inside the ANU because the reality here is there are a lot of people working collectively very hard to change where we're at. And part of what happened in the fourth quarter of last year is a whole lot of people made hard decisions. And so the forecasted deficit of \$200 million actually got pulled in. And so we didn't end up spending as much as everyone around the university thought they would. But to be really clear here, Ross, we still had a deficit last year of \$140 million, which accumulates on top of the 136 we had the year before and the 112 before that. And you just can't keep doing that.

Ross: No. 24 past 7. My guest is ANU Vice-Chancellor Genevieve Bell. I did hear in the news you saying or suggesting that one of the reasons that you've been copping so much flak is because you're a woman. What...are you serious? You're being serious about this?

Genevieve: So the day I was announced, I had someone take me aside and wave their hand at me and say, you can't keep dressing like that when you're a vice-chancellor. And they looked at my hair and said, you'll need to do something about it. So...

Ross: Who said this to you?

Genevieve: People in my community, people who are...

Ross: People within the university sector or just friends or...

Genevieve: Oh, no, people in the sector. And I had comments about my shoes, my jeans, my backpack. I had someone told me not to get fat. I had comments about my attitude and the way I presented.

Ross: But maybe this is what they say to all vice-chancellors?

Genevieve: I asked my predecessor. Because I sat him down and I went...

Ross: Brian Schmidt.

Genevieve: Yep. I sat in a room with Brian and I was like, Brian, I've had all these questions. And he looked at me and said, no one's ever asked me any of that.

Ross: Because, I mean, yes, you've been copping a lot. But I would also say that Mark Scott from the from Sydney University has been copping just as much flak, and he's not a woman. So, is it right to sort of single this out and say it's because I'm a woman, I'm copping all this?

Genevieve: To be clear, Ross, I'm copping some of that flak because I am a woman. Absolutely. Some of that flak I'm copping for the same reason Mark does, which is that we're both outsiders to the sector.

Ross: But also you're overseeing major change.

Genevieve: Indeed.

Ross: So maybe it's not a sex-based thing.

Genevieve: I didn't say it was a sex-based thing, I said gender is a part of it. So is being someone who's not from the sector.

Ross: Um, Julie Bishop, you mentioned her. Have you satisfied yourself regarding the appointment and the money that's going towards some long term friends of hers, and colleagues, that are now getting money for providing, um, media advice, etc. Have you satisfied yourself with that?

Genevieve: So your question here regards the use of Vinder Consulting as a speech writing service for the Australian National University to support our Chancellor. As we said at estimates a month ago, and as we have been responding to the various requests for information from the government, those contracts sit under the threshold for a particular kind of tendering process.

Ross: Yep, I get that.

Genevieve: Those were started with my predecessor. Initially, there was in fact a slate of people...

Ross: With Vinder? With your predecessor, they were using Vinder then?

Genevieve: So, this predates me, Ross.

Ross: Yeah.

Genevieve: So, Vinder was used I believe initially in 2020 or 2021. And yeah, we have satisfied ourselves about that.

Ross: Because from the outside it does look like somebody who Julie Bishop has worked with for a long time and in fact may have been business partner at some stage, and now suddenly they're getting money to provide extra advice. Not from her pocket money, by the way...

Genevieve: We have satisfied ourselves about that. We have an appropriate set of ways of managing conflict and personal interests, and all of those were managed appropriately here.

Ross: Okay. No more, nothing more to see here.

Genevieve: No.

Ross: All right, Genevieve Bell, we do need to leave it there. Thank you so much for coming and having a chat.

Genevieve: You're very welcome.

Ross: It's long overdue, so I'm glad you've come in and had a chat. Thank you so much.

Genevieve: You're welcome.