

## **ABC Radio Canberra Transcript – Steven Fanner**

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Interviewer: Ross Solly, ABC Presenter

Interviewee: Steven Fanner, ANU Chief Marketing and Communications Officer

Ross: Steve Fanner is the Chief Marketing and Communications Officer at the ANU, and as we've been hearing this morning, the ANU has released a discussion paper which they hope to talk to staff and students about, about the way forward. Steve Fanner, good morning to you. How are you?

Steve: Good morning, Ross.

Ross: So yes, somebody saying that the ANU administration could be swapped for the board at the BCC, and I don't want to cast aspersions on the board at the BCC, but do you think you've got a PR problem at the moment, Steve Fanner, the ANU?

Steve: Well, I just want to make it clear what the ANU is doing at the moment. Ross, particularly in terms of transparency. It's been well documented that the university has been living beyond its means and needs to reduce its cost base by \$250 million by the end of this year, including \$100 million in staffing costs. Yesterday, we opened a staff consultation process seeking feedback on the next phase of organisational change as we work towards those targets. This is a consultation paper that doesn't contain job cuts itself or any changes to jobs. It provides a set of overarching principles for the way the university needs to operate. It will be taken and applied by colleges and executive portfolios when developing change proposals later in the year.

Ross: Yeah, I'm sure you've heard the response straight away from the union. They said there was nothing new in this paper. They were quite disparaging about what it was trying to set out to do. Um, how do you feel about that? I mean, it's not a great reaction, is it?

Steve: Well, we're listening to our staff and acting, Ross. Last year, our staff told us they wanted a Voluntary Separation Scheme, and we've delivered it. That's running right now. Our staff told us they wanted clarity around the bigger picture for organisational change, and we're providing it through this consultation process.

Ross: But if the union is saying, Steve Fanner, that this is basically just a document full of a whole heap of words thrown on a page that mean nothing, haven't you got a problem with your starting point there?

Steve: I'm astounded to hear that the union, uh, doesn't support this because it's only, you know, a short time ago that they told us this is exactly what they want, they want us to provide a broader narrative for organisational change. So I don't think they know what they want. We're very clear, however, about the targets that we're working towards. Uh, we're outlining a series of principles that will guide the way we get there, and we're giving our staff the opportunity to help shape that thinking, before we go further.

Ross: Did you involve the union in the drawing up of these documents, or is this part of this process now, Steve Fanner?

Steve: Yeah we put this, this is a consultation process that's open for a period of two weeks. This change proposal document and some background information is available via

the ANU website, a specific, uh, organisational change website that we've created. We take submissions from the union as well as from individual staff. So, we've gone through some change proposals last year, I think it's frankly disappointing that the union hasn't sought to engage more closely with us around our organisational change process. Uh, they lodged an industrial dispute last year to slow down the academic restructuring and then withdrew it before they had to explain themselves to the Fair Work Commission, so they're just not serious about trying to get the best outcome for their members. And what they're doing is causing more distress among ANU staff than there needs to be.

Ross: Well, are you hearing that from the staff? Are they upset with the way the union's handling this? I mean, I will say this, up until now, and by the way Steve Fanner, I'm enjoying this new season of openness between yourselves and us. It's good that we can access you and talk to you about it, because I think that's important. But the union, you know, when all this was unfolding, were certainly much more approachable to talk about this than the ANU. So maybe the union was sort of filling in the gaps there and doing some of the heavy lifting that the university should have been doing.

Steve: The union's been offered the opportunity to engage around what organisational change looks like at ANU but they haven't come to the table. Uh, as I said, they've focused on slowing down the process and running really personal, nasty campaigns against a new Vice Chancellor who's been given the job of trying to pull the ANU out of this situation. This is a genuine consultation process that we're opening now where we've provided a set of overarching principles that will guide what future change looks like as the university works towards its savings targets. I hope that the union and our staff take the opportunity to contribute to this, because these are the principles and this is the model that will be applied as we reshape the university to what it needs to be.

Ross: Just on that, we've only, I think Vice Chancellor Genevieve Bell has only been on the show, the breakfast show once since all of this unfolded. Someone on the text line says the Vice Chancellor continues to arrogantly refuse to engage with the community, why is Genevieve Bell not talking to you this morning? She has a PR problem. I mean, why is it that she is, it seems, so reluctant to come on and answer questions and to talk to students and staff at the university?

Steve: Well, I reject that. Ross, the vice chancellor, is out talking to staff and students at the university every day. Uh, part of the...

Ross: So she has an open door policy at the university for people who have concerns and want to raise it with her?

Steve: The Vice Chancellor's day, Ross, is made up with meeting with staff and students of the university. So, communicating organisational change to the media, that's why we have a media team that exists to, you know, respond to outside inquiries for information. I've made myself available to you twice this week to discuss aspects of our organisational change. So we feel we're providing a wealth of information to our staff and to our students. Uh, and to the extent that there's interest in what the university is doing from outside the university, we make ourselves available to respond to media inquiries appropriately.

Ross: Just on the report then that, um, it would seem to suggest that you're not on pace at the moment to achieve your goals. I mean, one of the headlines out of that is that you've

only been able to save a fraction of the amount of money you were hoping to save through salary reductions. Do you have to try and find a different way, uh, or is this just a slow burn, Steve Fanner?

Steve: Yeah, so last year we commenced a programme that we've called Renew ANU and that started with a centralisation of our finance, HR and IT operations and the realignment of the academic college structure. These and some other new financial controls that were introduced have achieved some savings. But there's much more to do to reach those targets. And what we're doing this week is opening up that consultation around the model that will inform the way future change will take place at the university.

Ross: So did you underestimate in the first instance how much you could, or overestimate, sorry, how much you could save? And do you need to have a new approach now?

Steve: When we commence the renewal programme Ross it was always a going to be a programme of activity designed to get us back to financial sustainability by 2026. So last year we focused on, as I mentioned, centralising those key corporate services and realigning the academic structure. This year is more about how we operate.

Ross: So you're still saying that the guidelines you put in place, the process you put in place was the right one? There's no need to go back and reinvent the wheel here? You're happy and the ANU is happy with the strategy that you've adopted so far? Or has it been underachieving?

Steve: Well it's had the...it's achieved what it needs to achieve. So we've now got centralised corporate services in finance, HR and IT that are operating more efficiently and more effectively than the previous devolved model. We have a new academic college structure where we've realigned some schools within the remaining six colleges and that structure started this year with the new academic year that's just begun. So this year we're talking about, uh, you know, how we operate. So this is going to things like consistency in service delivery across the university, removing duplication, having clear lines of accountability. Essentially, this is a discussion paper now saying that the devolved and ad hoc operating model of ANU new needs to be brought into the 21st century the way other universities did a few years ago.

Ross: Well, yes. And that is a key part of this report as well, because the ANU uh, in regard to university services, ranked as the most inefficient in the country and the most costly in the Australian higher education sector, Steve Fanner, that's not a great reflection on the ANU is it?

Steve: Well, that's right. I mean, this discussion paper outlines that and shows how the focus for this year will be on removing duplication, identifying areas where savings can be made, both...

Ross: How has it got to that, by the way?

Steve: And developing change proposals in specific colleges and executive portfolios that will get us there.

Ross: How has it got there? How do you think you got to that situation do you reckon Steve Fanner?

Steve: So Universities in the Group of Eight, which is the peer group that we compare ourselves to by benchmarking studies, all went through a sort of restructuring and centralising process probably 10 to 15 years ago and ANU did not do that at the time. And then we're coming out of a period of the pandemic where embarking on organisational change like this was difficult because of the great uncertainty around what the future might hold. So we're in a position now where we're trying to implement changes to how we operate that other universities have done quite a long time ago, and we need to bring ourselves into the modern way of operating for our sector in order to continue to be competitive.

Ross: Okay. Uh, just this text. I'll leave you on this, this texter says the staff morale at ANU is terrible at the moment, there is no communication from leadership, almost all professional staff I know are searching for a new job, me included. That's the texter, Steve Fanner.

Steve: Yeah. Look, there's no doubt this is a challenging time for ANU and for our staff. Our commitment is to maintain the most open, transparent and consultative approach to meeting these financial challenges that we can, that gives our staff clear information, provides opportunities to shape our response to this challenge with their feedback. And you'll see through this consultation process that staff at the ANU and their unions have an opportunity to contribute to the way that we're approaching change for the rest of the year through openness and transparency.

Ross: As you know, Steve Fanner, I like to balance up a brick bat with a bouquet. Nick from Wanniasa says well done ANU, finally doing what it needs to steady the ship, which would otherwise have gone down like a Lead Zeppelin says Nick from Wanniasa. It is challenging times, no doubt. I do appreciate Steve Fanner that you've made yourself available to talk to us this morning, thank you.

Steve: Thanks, Ross.