



## Radio Transcript

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**TITLE: ADI FRANCIS INTERVIEW WITH ANU'S GENEVIEVE BELL.**

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**Summary: Adi Francis interview with ANU's Genevieve Bell discussing forced redundancies at the ANU to be halted, bullying allegations against the ANU Chancellor and ANU student intake numbers.**

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### TRANSCRIPTION

**ADI FRANCIS:** No more forced redundancies at ANU. That's the message from the university today. And you're about to hear from the Vice-Chancellor, Genevieve Bell. The university, of course, has been releasing change proposals over the past few months as they try to find \$250 million in savings.

On top of that, the university has been referred to the industry regulator, which is investigating the competence of senior management and a compliance issues at the university. Last week the chancellor, Julie Bishop, had bullying allegations made against her in Senate estimates with calls for her to step aside while investigations are underway.

Genevieve Bell is the Vice-Chancellor of ANU. Yumalundi and welcome to 666 Drive.

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Thanks for having me, Adi. I appreciate it.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Why have you decided to stop forced redundancies?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Look, it's a really good question, and one of the things we've worked very hard about over the last 18 months is to make sure that as we're making big decisions our community are the first people we tell. And over the arc of this year you're absolutely right – we've had a series of change proposals and change plans. And earlier this year we gave the community an indicative time line of how we thought those would roll out over the year because we wanted to balance giving people some certainty by also signalling what was to come next. And what we're talking about today is a continuation of that.

And we're sort of really trying to signal, I think, three things: one is we will not have any more change plans this year. We had initially thought we would still be running change plans through the end of October, but we've actually gotten them done sooner, and that's really good news for all kinds of people. I think it gives them certainty.

We also wanted to be really clear that as we continue to work towards that head count sustainability target for us of reducing the head count cost of the university by \$100 million – and we're now at 60 million of that hundred – that in making that really good progress and in continuing to reshape the organisation we believe the last piece of that can be done without involuntary redundancies, and we wanted to let people know that because I think it's important that you can signal that certainty, too.

And then the last thing we're announcing today is that we're going to offer another voluntary separation scheme. We ran one of these earlier in the year, and we know for members of our community this is a place where people can have agency and control. And so we're determined to do that again. And we'll have a lot more details about that one for next week.

**ADI FRANCIS:** So, Genevieve Bell, this public announcement today that you've decided to stop forced redundancies, is that reflecting and acknowledging that you were making too many cuts?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** No, absolutely not. We've had a series of plans here about how we both meet a financial sustainability target for the university, because we've been spending more money than we earn for a really long time, and we're making sure that we're responsible with government money. It feels important to, I think, our whole community. And how we've been doing that has been through a series of change plans and conversations with the community. We ran a long consultation at the beginning of the year about what the right principles were to organise the institution. And as a result of those, there are multiple places at the institution that have had to reconfigure and restructure themselves. And most of those have been completed now or are at least in the stages of consultation, feedback and implementation. And so we've done good work there and I think we wanted to make clear what happens next for everyone.

**ADI FRANCIS:** On spending, Genevieve Bell, is that then a criticism of previous vice-chancellors?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Look, I think one of the challenges for the university is that we've made a series of choices over the last really decade and each one of those choices in the moment it was made, I think, made sense, but the accumulation of them has meant that by the beginning of last year we'd been running operational deficits for a number of years. And the plan to get out of them had to do with an aggressive growth in student numbers, but that hasn't happened and we haven't in some ways controlled our spending as well as we should. And so I find myself, as does my leadership team, in a position where we need to change the way we operate a little bit. And so we've been doing that.

**ADI FRANCIS:** What past spending choices, then, did the most damage, Genevieve Bell?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I don't think it's about the most damage, Adi; I think it's about choices we made and then things that didn't quite work out the way they would have expected. I don't think my predecessor when in 2017 and 2018 he wanted to restructure the university at a human scale – which I think is a really laudable and important ambition – but in making those choices I don't think he anticipated the pandemic would happen. And the pandemic made it difficult to keep recruiting students. And so I think it's less about was there one bad choice and more about a series of circumstances, many of which were beyond this institution's control, including in pandemic, but also changes in government policy.

**ADI FRANCIS:** In announcing today publicly that you're stopping forced redundancies, how will you still reach your target of \$250 million? How will you make those savings?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Look, it's a really good question, Adi. We have to separate out the pieces. One piece of the savings challenge or the sustainability void journey that we're on is about achieving \$100 million in saving around salary. And we've worked hard to do that in a number of different ways. It was certainly the case a year ago that we had a lot of leave liability, which I know sounds really bureaucratic, but that reality was lots of people at the institution hadn't taken as much leave as they are eligible for, and the university was holding a lot of liability there. And, of course, people weren't taking leave, which is never good. And so we've seen our community take more leave, which brings the liability down which helps address our financial target.

We also have other tools at our disposal, like voluntary separation schemes, and we know from feedback we had from the community in 2024 and again this year that voluntary separation schemes are something that people like to have available to them. We've been really clear in doing those, though, that we need to make sure that we are using it both as an expression of interest process and that as people are identified to leave the organisation we make the position that they're in redundant. Otherwise what we end up doing is filling those again, and that's not good for the institution.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Just how confident are you of reaching your target of saving \$250 million? Will you guarantee that you'll get it done?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Look, I think we will make good, earnest progress toward that target. We are making good progress towards the salary target of \$100 million. As I said earlier, we're at about 59.9 million there. The non-salary target state of \$150 million is going to take us longer. And the reality there is that's probably not surprising. Non-salary spending everything from how you think about doing better deals around insurance, how you think about contracting, how you think about all kinds of supplies and services you run at the university. And we always knew that was going to take us a little bit longer.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Genevieve Bell, just before the news, we were hearing about the potential loss of programs at the School of Art, like the Sharing Stories Art Exchange, so important in terms of its collaboration with First Nations communities around our region and in Canberra that have taken many, many years to establish and the legacy. Are the arts an easy target?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Look, Adi, it's a good question and I know it's one that is certainly resonant around the sector at the moment. At the ANU not only does our foundational legislation remind us that we actually need to work in the creative arts, including music and the fine arts, but as someone who comes from multiple sides of all these conversations I'm really determined that the ANU will be a place where the arts, the humanities and the social sciences are as valued as the science is.

We are talking about change proposals, not yet formal, finalised plans. And I know there's been a lot of conversations and feedback in the community. And I imagine that the change plan for the College of Arts and Social Sciences will be like many of the other change plans at the university – the plan and the proposal we took to the community will look different by the time we get to implementation. And I have a lot of faith in the leaders of that part of the organisation and in our community that there will be good ideas and that we will see things look a little bit different when we get to implementation.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Are you hinting there that the school won't be cut, then? The School of Art, and programs like the Sharing Stories Art Exchange?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Those are not decisions for me, Adi; these are decisions that sit at the college level, as they should. Deans at the university should have autonomy. But the reality is we will continue to work to find ways to ensure that good programs and good work continue and that the feedback from the community is listened to and that the plans themselves look a little bit different on implementation than they did on proposal, which has been true for all the plans since I've been based here.

**ADI FRANCIS:** 26 minutes past 5 on 666 ABC Radio Canberra Drive. You're listening to ANU Vice-Chancellor Genevieve Bell.

Let's move on to the allegations of bullying at Senate estimates by Dr Liz Allen last week. Senator David Pocock has called for Chancellor Julie Bishop to stand aside while investigations are taking place. Genevieve Bell, will Ms Bishop stand aside?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** Look, I want to kind of be really clear here, Adi, about what happened last week. There were, as you say, a series of very serious allegations made in the Senate, and making sure that we deal with those appropriately and that there is due process and fairness really matters here. And it's absolutely the case that there has been a workplace grievance, and now there is a much more public complaint. And making sure that university processes are followed here really matters, and I'm not going to comment on it beyond that.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Senator Katy Gallagher has said she's told you some independent mediation between you and the unions might help move things forward. Is that something you'll do?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I expect that the unions will be happy with the choices that we've made today. I know that for both Lachlan Clohesy and Millan Pintos-Lopez, who is our individual, you know, union rep for the ANU, they are both very committed to voluntary separation schemes, and I know they will be pleased about this. They've continued to be good partners with the university; they were in my office not that long ago. We talked both about the upcoming next round of enterprise agreement bargaining and also how to think about the Christmas shutdown period. And I know that they'll be pleased about the direction of travel for us.

**ADI FRANCIS:** And we'll hear from the union themselves after 5.30 shortly. So is that a no, then? There's not going to be any independent mediation between you and the unions?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I'm not – well, union in this instance. You know, our union are a vital part of our community. I'm someone who grew up in a union household, I believe in unions. I think that it's one of the things that's been remarkable about coming back to Australia from 30 years in the United States. The union represents about 17 to 20 per cent of our entire staff base. We have another 80 per cent of our staff, and I want to make sure that we are thinking about and listening to everyone's voices.

**ADI FRANCIS:** So it's a no? They're not necessarily part of this process?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** They are part of every process. We certainly spoke to them in advance of the choices we were making today. We keep them notified. They spend time every week with the chief people officer of the university. They get to meet with the CFO regularly. I have met with them. I think there's an open and ongoing dialogue.

**ADI FRANCIS:** But on independent mediation, it sounds like a no.

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I'm not willing to commit or not commit to it, Adi.

**ADI FRANCIS:** This process, of course, as we've been hearing on ABC for some time now, has caused a lot of disruption and upset to many, many staff and students in our community. Do you accept that these changes have caused serious reputational damage to ANU, Genevieve Bell?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I think it is absolutely the case that the changes that we have had to go through have been really hard. They've been hard for the community at the university. I think they've been hard through the Canberra community and beyond that. This is, after all, the National University, not just a Canberra university. And I think any change, particularly of this scale, was always going to be difficult. And how it is that we work collectively as a community is going to require ongoing effort. We talk a lot as a community about respectful collegiality and about our culture and about the things we value. And one of the extraordinary things about getting to be a vice-chancellor of the university is that I know I am the steward of a place that lots of people feel really passionately about and many people love. And I look at the students who put their hands up to come every year, people who make donations to the institution, people who spend their lives working there and I know that it is a place that is extraordinary and extraordinarily important.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Yes, to that point of yours about perhaps how long you might be a steward, do you acknowledge that you could have done some things differently, Genevieve Bell?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I think anyone who is running a large institution, Adi, imagines themselves and thinks would that have been done a better kind of way.

**ADI FRANCIS:** There have been calls for your resignation. Will you step aside?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** I have three and a half years more on my contract, and a most vice-chancellors do two terms at the ANU. I see no reason to step down any time soon Adi.

**ADI FRANCIS:** How are ANU student numbers trending, Genevieve Bell?

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** We are looking at a really robust class of incoming students for next year. Our early enrolments numbers are at an all-time high, which is wonderful. Our international student numbers have really been unsettled since the pandemic. We were actually just talking about this the other day. One of the things that's really interesting across the sector but certainly for us is that there were these really clear patterns before the pandemic about precisely when students would say yes and when they would turn up and you'd be able to chart it almost by the day. And the patterns just haven't stabilised since then. So we have had a stronger than expected international student numbers in semester 1 and a slightly lesser number in semester 2.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Genevieve Bell, thank you so much for being with us this afternoon on 666 ABC Radio Canberra Drive.

**GENEVIEVE BELL:** You're very welcome, Adi. It was nice to talk to you.

**ADI FRANCIS:** Genevieve Bell, ANU Vice-Chancellor.

**END**