

ACTING PRO-CHANCELLOR
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
REOPENING OF UNIVERSITY HOUSE
14 AUGUST 2026

Colleagues, distinguished guests,

Eighty years ago, ANU was founded on a bold idea.

Today, in this remarkable place, we celebrate not only that inheritance, but also the future we are building together.

It is my great privilege to thank our speakers and guests, to offer some reflections on this significant occasion, and to foreshadow an important announcement.

Dr Matilda House-Williams and Paul Girrawah House, thank you for your warm and generous Welcome to Country.

Chief Minister, thank you for your thoughtful remarks.

You have reminded us of the special place that University House, and indeed ANU itself, holds in the history, present life and future of Canberra, Australia's national capital.

I also thank Minister Hill for his inspiring contribution.

He highlighted something fundamental about this university: that ANU is not only a resource for Canberra and Australia, but also a contributor to our region and the wider world.

His presence, together with that of other Members of Parliament here today, reminds us that ANU was established by the Commonwealth Parliament eighty years ago.

It was founded as a national research university, with a mission to advance knowledge, support Australia's development and deepen our understanding of the world.

That mission is reflected in our motto: *Naturam primum cognoscere rerum*.

First, to learn the nature of things.

These words are far more than a statement of purpose.

They express a commitment to inquiry, evidence and intellectual freedom.

They remind us that universities exist to challenge assumptions, pursue truth and expand understanding.

By choosing a phrase derived from Lucretius, whose work championed rational inquiry over superstition, our founders made a profound declaration about the character of this institution.

ANU would pursue knowledge wherever it led, guided by evidence, curiosity and rigorous scholarship.

That commitment remains as important today as it was in 1946.

Knowledge is global.

Ideas, technologies and people cross borders.

While nations matter profoundly, intellectual inquiry cannot be constrained by geography.

Many of our students and staff come from around the world.

Their presence broadens our perspectives, enriches our community and strengthens our connections throughout our region and beyond.

That benefits not only ANU, but Canberra, Australia and the wider world.

Peter, congratulations to you and your team on the extraordinary restoration of University House.

The care, craftsmanship and respect evident throughout this project have preserved the building's heritage while ensuring its continued relevance for future generations.

On behalf of the university, I would also like to present you with this piece of glasswork.

It bears an inscription of the original 1954 key to University House, a fitting symbol of the stewardship and care that have characterised this remarkable restoration project.

Thank you for helping to ensure that this treasured place continues to serve future generations of the ANU community.

University House is more than a historic building.

It is a place where friendships have formed, ideas have been exchanged, and generations of scholars have come together.

Vice-Chancellor, thank you for your leadership and for the vision reflected in ANU 2030.

Developed through extensive consultation across the university community, ANU 2030 strengthens our commitment to excellence in research and education, Indigenous leadership, service to Australia and our region, and global engagement.

It honours our founding purpose while preparing us for the future.

Colleagues, ANU has faced significant challenges in recent years.

We are still awaiting final reports relating to past failures of governance and leadership.

We know that those failures caused considerable hurt and distress to many people.

Important work remains before us to address those issues and restore trust and confidence.

At the same time, there is renewed purpose, growing confidence and genuine reason for optimism.

I wish to acknowledge my fellow members of the ANU Council.

Throughout a period of considerable challenge, they have demonstrated dedication, courage and an unwavering commitment to the university, its staff and its students.

It is a privilege to serve alongside them.

Vice-Chancellor, I also wish to acknowledge your outstanding leadership.

You bring humanity, resilience, courage and integrity to a demanding role, whilst never losing sight of the people who make up this university community.

You have led with intellect and compassion, helped restore confidence in the institution, and provided a clear sense of direction at an important moment in ANU's history.

You have been supported by an exceptional executive team.

In particular, I acknowledge our Acting Provost, our Chief Operating Officer, our Acting General Counsel, and the many leaders and staff who have carried significant responsibilities during this period and who have discharged them with great distinction.

The university owes all of you its sincere gratitude.

And finally, our Interim Chancellor, Dr Larry Marshall.

Larry, you stepped forward at a time when the university required stability, continuity and leadership.

Throughout a particularly challenging period, you provided all three.

You have indicated that you will retire from the Council when the new Chancellor commences in office.

Today, therefore, we recognise your service and thank you for the exceptional contribution you have made to ANU at a time of great need.

It is my pleasure to present this small token of our appreciation and gratitude for your leadership, commitment and service to the university.

Colleagues, today we celebrate three significant milestones: the eightieth anniversary of ANU, the restoration of University House, and the launch of ANU 2030.

Soon, we shall mark a fourth milestone, one that will help shape the next chapter in the university's history.

On behalf of the ANU Council, it will be my privilege shortly to announce the name of the next Chancellor of the Australian National University.

As we celebrate ANU's achievements, we do so knowing that the university's next chapter will be guided by leadership that understands both our responsibilities and our opportunities.

One of ANU's most influential figures, H.C. "Nugget" Coombs, is said to have observed:

"The ultimate purpose of education is not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but the development of human beings."

That ideal lies at the heart of this university.

It lies at the heart of our new strategy.

And it must continue to guide everything we do.

The philosopher Sir Karl Popper expressed a similarly powerful idea when he wrote:

"The future depends on ourselves, and we do not depend on any historical necessity."

The future of ANU is not predetermined. As Popper reminded us, it depends upon us.

It will be shaped by the questions we ask, the ideas we pursue, the students we educate, the discoveries we make, and the values we uphold.

As we celebrate today, let us also renew our commitment to the purpose of this great university: to pursue knowledge with courage, to serve our community with integrity, and to strengthen this institution for those who will follow us.

Buildings endure through careful stewardship.

Universities endure through something greater still: a shared commitment to learning, discovery and the public good.

And before we leave this place, let us remember that the story of ANU is not written by buildings, strategies or milestones alone.

It is written by people.

Eighty years ago, ANU was founded on a bold belief: that knowledge could help build a better nation and a better world.

That responsibility now passes to us.

May we prove worthy of that inheritance.

And may we ensure that we leave this university stronger, more influential and more deeply committed to its founding purpose than we found it.

Thank you.