

INTERIM VICE-CHANCELLOR
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
REOPENING OF UNIVERSITY HOUSE
14 AUGUST 2026

I acknowledge the Ngambri-Kamberri and Ngunnawal peoples, the Traditional Custodians of the lands we are meeting on this morning, and I pay my respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here, especially Dr Aunty Matilda House-Williams OAM, Paul Girrawah House and Professor Aunty Anne Martin AO.

Aunty Matilda and Paul, thank you both for welcoming us to your Country. Your ancestors have cared for these lands for thousands of years, and it is a privilege to live, work and study on them.

Paul, it is an honour that your artwork appears throughout our strategy, carrying the beautiful meaning of **Marramarra murru** — the creation of pathways, passed down through the generations to carry knowledge and cultural authority.

This Hall has stood silent for six and a half years, and to have heard the sound of the didgeridoo in it this morning is truly special.

Acknowledgements:

- Chief Minister of the ACT, Andrew Barr MLA
- Assistant Minister for International Education, the Honourable Julian Hill MP
- Federal Member for Canberra, Alicia Payne MP
- Senator for the ACT, David Pocock
- Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
- David Smith MP
- Members of the ACT Legislative Assembly
- Secretary of the Department of Education, Tony Cook
- High Commissioner for Fiji, His Excellency Ajay Amrit
- Interim Chancellor Dr Larry Marshall
- Acting Pro-Chancellor Andrew Metcalfe
- Council Members
- Former Vice-Chancellor Professor Ian Chubb
- Our distinguished guests
- Our ANU community: staff and students, valued donors, alumni
- Our ANU Chamber Choir, directed by Tobias Cole — who were just excellent
- And our Master of University House, Professor Peter Kanowski

Chief Minister, thank you for officially reopening University House, and for the key, which I am honoured to accept on behalf of the ANU community. Our campus is part of Canberra, and University House is part of that shared history.

Assistant Minister, thank you for being here, and for your work on international education — our international students are integral to ANU, and this University would not be what it is without them.

Thank you all so much for being here today. It means a great deal to have you with us for this moment.

It's not every year that an institution sets down, in writing, what it believes it's for — and does so before the very people to whom this institution means so much, in a house that has waited six and a half years to welcome us back. It is a privilege to share our strategy with you today.

So why does our founding purpose matter now more than ever?

Let me take you back eighty years. This university was born out of a war that had shown Australia just how much it depended on other nations for its expertise and knowledge. So Ben Chifley's

government did something no one had done before: it created a university by an Act of Parliament, with a mandate to build research for the benefit of all Australians.

It was nation-building through knowledge, and that's also why this university answers to the Commonwealth in a way no other Australian university does — a responsibility we carry with great pride.

Eighty years on, we sit proudly among the world's leading universities — a small university by Australian standards that has punched above our weight from the start: six Nobel laureates, two former Prime Ministers, and students from more than a hundred countries and every state and territory in Australia. At any given time, our students are on exchange across 38 countries, and our 155,000 alumni live in 163 countries around the world.

Our reach is significant.

So where are we now, and what does that mean for our purpose?

For most of the eighty years since our founding, information was scarce — you had to earn access to it. We now live in an era of abundant information, sitting in our pockets.

And yet we are not living in a knowledge-rich age. We have more information, less understanding, and a shrinking capacity to tell what is robust and evidence-based from what merely sounds confident.

Information was never the same thing as knowledge. Knowledge is what is left after a claim has been tested, argued over, and shown to hold. It is what builds capability and skill, and it is core to everything we teach, research and convene.

For some, a saturated information environment looks like an existential threat to universities. I see it differently, and I hope you will too: it's the clearest opportunity we've had in a generation to show the country exactly what a university is for. That's something worth celebrating today, of all days.

And so why does this matter, and why now?

Because the forces bearing down on this generation and the next — fractured peace, fragile prosperity, a planet under pressure — none of that gets solved by information alone. It gets solved by rigorous knowledge development and its application: tested, disciplined, honestly held, and translated into action. In a world this noisy, it's the only thing that holds up — and it's what our ANU

community does, day after day.

So how does our strategy address this?

This strategy is built on two fundamental contributions that look, at first glance, in tension: disciplinary, peer-tested knowledge — rigorous, and never finished — and problem-solving, proof that what we understand here can meet a problem out in policy, industry and community.

Our strategy says they're the same obligation, seen from two directions, and that's something to be genuinely excited about.

Alongside that sits a commitment I'm proud to see given real weight in this strategy: recognising Indigenous and traditional knowledge as knowledge in its own right, validated and tested through methods refined over tens of thousands of years, held in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, on their terms. A country cannot truly understand itself while keeping the oldest living cultures on earth at the edge of the story.

Our standing also rests on our place in the world's leading knowledge networks, and nowhere is that more a source of pride than our own region: no other Australian university has our depth on Asia and the Pacific.

Underneath all of this sit three principles that hold our knowledge work together: academic freedom, excellence with openness, and the public good — because none of it is held for its own sake, but in trust for the country that sustains it. That is something we will defend plainly, and without apology.

None of it happens in the abstract. This strategy commits us to shared decision-making with our staff and students, while decisions are still open. To codesign with the communities we serve. And to operating with kindness and care — because hard intellectual work is no excuse for not being a decent and great place to work and study.

And to our professional staff, you make all three of those possible.

What are the key features of our ANU by 2030 strategy?

Three pillars.

Research, where disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge is made and defended until it earns the right to be trusted.

It comes from asking the hardest questions, and then putting the answers through the most demanding tests. We are known and celebrated for our disciplinary depth and quality, and we are

uniquely positioned to build the sovereign capability our nation needs.

Education and student experience, where understanding is handed on — producing graduates who can determine a well-tested claim from a merely confident one.

We are small enough to know our students, serious enough that they learn from the people doing the research, and placed where the country makes its decisions.

We all know that talent is spread evenly across this country, but opportunity is not. Any eligible student, whatever their background, should be able to come to The Australian National University, and feel at home once they arrive.

I am pleased that this work is already underway. We are applying the final touches to the ANU Vice-Chancellor Scholars Program, which will back students for whom circumstance, geography or history has made their path to university harder.

The Program will support these students throughout their time with us, and it exists because our donors, alumni and staff have made it possible. To all of you, thank you — we will share the full

details in the coming weeks.

And the third pillar, **Convening**: bringing tested knowledge into the room with the people who have to act under real pressure, and often without all the information they need — government, industry, community, Traditional Owners, our regional partners. There are not many places in this country where they can all be brought together at once. That is our duty, and it is our privilege.

So what comes next?

This strategy was built by more than 1,000 staff, students and alumni over ten months, through workshops, focus groups, submissions, and a great many conversations where people told us plainly what they thought, and what they aspire to for ANU. To everyone who gave their time to it, thank you — I hope you can see yourselves in it.

The implementation plan comes next, and that is deliberate: an opportunity for our incoming Chancellor and forthcoming substantive Vice-Chancellor to work with this community on delivering the strategy and setting the targets for success. What matters most is that the path forward belongs to this community, and not to any one leader.

None of that work happens at a distance — it happens through relationships and through opening our doors to the people around us. Which brings me to tomorrow. I am delighted that we are hosting the first ANU Community Day, opening our doors to the city we live in with workshops, exhibitions, music, food, and family activities all over this beautiful campus. Our former Vice-Chancellor Professor Brian Schmidt will also be there — and I hope you will join us too.

Peter, thank you. You have kept this House alive through six and a half difficult years, and today it is back where it belongs, at the heart of this University.

I'll close where I started. Eighty years ago, this country put a university on a paddock in a half-finished city and asked it to help Australia understand the world. Today, in a house that has waited six and a half years to welcome us back, facing forces that will shape generations not yet born, that belief matters again.

Our job — and it is a privilege of a job — is to keep producing something rarer than information: knowledge in service of this country and our region, worthy of the trust Parliament placed in us in 1946.

Thank you.