

ANU – Order of Australia (OOA) Lecture 2010

The Australian National University - where would we be without it?

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Lecture Synopsis

Universities are important nation-building institutions. Universities and the scholars that populate them contribute in special ways to the life of a nation. They question what we often take for granted, offer different ideas, explore new insights, discover new technologies, and apply technologies in new ways. By doing so, they can help advance a nation as a modern economy and a vibrant society. The Australian National University (ANU) was founded in 1946 with a specific nation-building charter. The establishment of a national university, it was said at the time, meant that Australia had taken “one more step to align itself with the great and enlightened nations of the world.” In this lecture, the Vice-Chancellor of the ANU, Professor Ian Chubb AC, will address the unique place of his University in the Australian higher education sector and its distinctive role in contributing to the progress of our nation.

Introduction

- Universities are important nation-building institutions.
- Universities and the scholars that populate them contribute in special ways to the life of a nation.
- They can help advance a nation as a modern economy and a vibrant society.
- They can also help us understand our place in the world, and the ways we might work best within the broader family of nations.
- Tonight I want to consider the distinctive role of The Australian National University (ANU) as a nation-building institution.
- I also want to pose the background question – where would we be without our national university?
- My broad proposition is that great federations require great national institutions.
- And national institutions like the ANU take on a fundamentally distinctive, unifying role in a federal system.

The high aspirations of our founders

- ANU has a specific nation-building charter.

- When we were established, some 64 years ago, our founders had high aspirations for us.
- They wanted ANU to "*advance the cause of learning and research in general and take its rightful place among the great universities of the world. With the establishment of a national university [it was said]...Australia will have taken one more step to align itself with the great and enlightened nations of the world.*"¹
- Our ANU founders were not the only ones openly concerned about building nations and the place of universities in the process.
- A nice essay about the need for a national university for America goes back to 1787, when one Dr Benjamin Rush declared that the war (of independence) may have been over but the revolution would not be completed until the United States had perfected its "*new form of government [and prepared] the principles, morals and manners of our citizens for these forms of government.*"
- Dr Rush argued that a "*federal university*" would be one in which "*everything connected to government, such as history – the law of*

¹ The Hon J.J. Dedman MP. Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, 'Second Reading Speech - Australian National University Bill 1946 - 19 June 1946'. House of Representatives: *Official Hansard*

*nature and nations – the civil law – the municipal laws ... and the principles of commerce would be taught by competent professors."*²

- The US Founding Fathers were convinced that their experiment in republican government could not succeed unless the people and their officials were properly educated.
- They endorsed learning for its own sake; and wanted to raise the level of higher education in America. Two principles endorsed by our Australian founders.
- Around 157 years after Dr Rush we built a national university in Australia even though the US did not.
- One of the architects of the ANU reflected later that "*the concept of the National University was an expression of the optimism of the time.*"³
- In the wake of the Great Depression and the World War there was a newfound faith in the power of science and the social sciences to contribute to the betterment of the human race - to contribute to its self-fulfilment rather than its self-destruction.

² Albert Castel (1964), 'The Founding Fathers and the Vision of a National University', *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol 4, No. 4, p. 280

³ H.C. Coombs, *Trial Balance* (1981), p. 199

- In the immediate aftermath of the war in the Pacific theatre, the founding mission of the ANU also embodied Australia's new-found recognition of the importance of its location within the Asia-Pacific region.
- The need to learn more about our northern and eastern neighbours was a pressing one.
- Leading politicians of the day saw an excessive orientation towards the United Kingdom and Europe as a barrier to an objective assessment of our international concerns.
- The ANU was thus founded in 1946 to help Australia assume its *"proper place in world affairs."*⁴

A strategic endowment for our nation

- As Australia's national university located in Australia's national capital, we have legislated objectives that require us *"to pay attention to [our] national and international roles."*⁵

⁴ The Hon J.J. Dedman MP. Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, 'Second Reading Speech - Australian National University Bill 1946 - 19 June 1946'. House of Representatives: *Official Hansard*

⁵ *Australian National University Act 1991* (Cth), s5(2)

- These roles mean we must engage with the important problems and issues that confront Australia, the region and the world, and work to provide solutions.
- As the Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, J.J. Dedman, said in his Second Reading Speech on the Australian National University Bill in 1946:

*"In Australia, in common with all other countries, we must do everything that is possible to make our own contribution to the solution of the problems which surround us on every side."*⁶

- To give Australia a national capacity to address these issues, the Act of Parliament that established the ANU identified the following key functions for us:

"Advancing and transmitting knowledge, by undertaking research and teaching of the highest quality; [and]

Encouraging, and providing facilities for, research and postgraduate study, both generally and in relation to subjects of national importance to Australia."

⁶ The Hon J.J. Dedman MP. Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, 'Second Reading Speech - Australian National University Bill 1946 - 19 June 1946'. House of Representatives: *Official Hansard*

- The University was to be engaged – through its core research and education functions - in matters of national interest.
- It was this direct interface between national policy concerns and the intellectual resources of ANU as a national university that marked out a unique space in the Australian educational system for ANU from its inception.
- For example, earlier this year I gave the Inaugural Annual Address on Immigration and Citizenship, where I reflected on the long-standing and productive collaboration between ANU and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship in its various forms.
- The relationship between the Department of Immigration and ANU is a good story.
- The two of us were created within months of each other in the aftermath of the Second World War.
- Our combined story provides an important example of the vital role our universities and government agencies can play together – in providing informed advice so that government can develop, justify and fine-tune its policies to meet the needs of changing times.
- It is an example of how the walls between academia and public administration can be broken down, for the betterment of our nation.

- For nearly 65 years, the ANU has worked in many similar ways in the national interest – as the former Prime Minister, ANU alumnus, determined nation-builder, and now Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, put it in 2009:

the ANU holds a *“special place as a strategic endowment for our nation.”*⁷

- The Rudd Government believed it was time to develop *“a new re-invigorated strategic relationship ... between the ANU and the Australian Government.”*⁸
- A Memorandum of Understanding between ANU and the Commonwealth of Australia was signed in May this year to refresh Australia’s national commitment to ANU and recognise the unique place of ANU in the national educational system.
- As in the post-war period, the Australian Government is determined that we can, as a nation, make our own contribution to the solution of the problems which surround us on every side.
- And the ANU has a special role to play in that process.

⁷ Annual Burgmann College Lecture by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd - New strategic relationship with ANU - Thursday 27 August 2009

⁸ Annual Burgmann College Lecture by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd - New strategic relationship with ANU - Thursday 27 August 2009

- The Commonwealth has recognised – again – that ANU offers an accessible, local capacity for the Australian Public Service to tap into world-leading expertise in key areas of policy significance.
- To better harness this capacity for contemporary purposes, the Australian Government announced funding in the 2010 Budget for the establishment of the Australian National Institute for Public Policy (ANIPP) and the HC Coombs Policy Forum at ANU.
- The Government also announced funding for a National Security College and a new Centre on China in the World.
- Through these major initiatives, the Commonwealth and ANU are working together to develop a vibrant intellectual centre in Canberra that will include innovative thinking around the broad variety of critical public policy challenges and drive the creative capacities of Australian Public Servants.
- The re-invigorated relationship between ANU and the Australian Government is putting education and research at the centre of building robust public policy.
- It is a partnership that has its origins in the very formation of ANU – its renewal presents a promising new chapter in the life of our national university.

Conclusion

- Consistent with our charter, how do we in the 21st century imagine a future vision for ANU?
- One of the great roles of universities is to study and to learn about the matters that influence the way the world works and to help inform the responses that we make.
- As I stated at the beginning of my talk, universities are nation-building institutions.
- Universities are one of the places that civilised nations invest in to help that understanding and discovery through careful analysis, robust discussions and, as best we can, the pursuit of truth.
- A strong future vision for ANU must be one that understands the institution's past and builds on its present role in the Australian educational system.
- As the only Australian university to be established by a Federal Act of Parliament, the very origins of the ANU attest to the transformative power of public policy practice informed by academic insight.
- The richness of the research culture at ANU and the quality of our performance creates a unique educational environment in Australia.

- We encourage the use of our intellectual capital to produce wider benefits to the community, often through collaborative engagement with the Australian Public Service.
- The future of ANU lies in continuing to be needed in this way – by exploring without fear or favour the important problems and issues that confront the nation, the region and the world, and working to provide solutions.
- Thank you.