Students

Who were the students?

People in the Institute who saw the School of General Studies as a threat must have been alarmed by the growth of undergraduate numbers in the years following amalgamation. In 1961 there were 948 undergraduates, comprising 497 inherited from Canberra University College and 451 new students. By 1965 total undergraduate enrolments had swelled to 2387, 977 of whom were new enrolments. These figures gave the University an undergraduate growth rate about three times the national average.

Over the next decade, numbers continued to rise steadily, though not so sharply. By 1976 they had reached 5058, more than double the 1965 figure. Thereafter they continued to hover around, and usually under, 5000 until the beginnings of a national boom in student enrolments in the late 1980s. The peak of 1976 is an appropriate year to break our discussion of students, as we can also identify about that time some significant changes in student culture.

The most obvious feature of undergraduate enrolments in 1961 was the large proportion of part-time students, who outnumbered the full-timers two to one. Burton and his colleagues regarded 1965, when for the first time full-timers outnumbered part-timers, as a watershed and an indication that the School of General Studies had come of age. By 1976 the ratio had reversed, so that there were two full-time students for every part-timer.

Men outnumbered women throughout the sixteen-year period, with the proportion of women increasing steadily, in line with the national trend. In 1961, the ratio for Bachelor degree enrolments (which offer the most convenient set of figures) was three males to one female. By 1976 the gap had narrowed to three to two, which corresponded with the average for all Australian universities.

Gradually the students became younger (and not just through the eyes of their ageing teachers). This can readily be explained by the decreasing percentage of part-timers, who were often in their early to mid-thirties. Most of the full-timers were aged between 17 and 21, as they were in other Australian universities. A small proportion were in their thirties, with a few aged 40 and above. The most distinguished of the ‘senior’ students was John Dedman, the same Dedman who had presented the ANU bill to parliament in 1946. After losing his parliamentary seat when Ben Chifley’s Labor government was thrown out of office in 1949, he had worked as a farmer and then as an administrator for the World Council of Churches before retiring to Canberra in 1962. As his previous efforts to take a degree had been interrupted, he now enrolled for a BA with a major in Political Science. Seated in the middle of the
second row amid a large class of undergraduates, he listened attentively as Fin Crisp lectured, a little uncomfortably, on the role and working of the Curtin Cabinet in which Dedman had been a Minister. Although the University decided to award him an honorary doctorate of laws, he persevered to complete a creditable degree in the minimum time, graduating in 1966 as he approached his seventieth birthday.

Where did the students come from? Despite hopes that the ANU should function, in the School of General Studies as well as the Institute, as a truly national university, the undergraduates came predominantly from Canberra and the surrounding region. Of the new full-time enrolments in 1961, nearly half came from Canberra and the nearby town of Queanbeyan. Another 30 per cent or more came from more distant New South Wales, including Sydney, Wollongong and a pattern of country towns stretching south to Albury, west to Hay and north to the Blue Mountains, with a sprinkling beyond. Eight per cent came from Victoria, and 5 per cent from all the other states put together. Eight per cent came from overseas. If we add part-timers, who were by definition local, the bias leaned heavily towards Canberra.

In 1976 students from the Canberra region and (mostly southern) New South Wales still made up some three-quarters of the full-time undergraduate population. With the addition of part-timers, the figure rises above 80 per cent. Although the other states were contributing just a few percentage points more than in 1961, in the larger University there were now sufficient interstate students to be noticed, including, for example, 121 Queenslanders and 95 Tasmanians. There were also 191 undergraduates from overseas, including 30 from Vietnam and 24 from Malaysia, with New Guinea, Japan, Thailand and the United States also reaching double figures.

By telling us where most of the undergraduates came from, the statistics also suggest why they came to the ANU. The main attraction was geographical proximity. Just as undergraduates in other cities and states looked for a university close to home, so too the ANU came to be viewed as the ‘local’ University for residents of the Australian Capital Territory and southern New South Wales. This view was encouraged by members of the academic staff, who had been visiting schools throughout the region since the days of Canberra University College. Students wishing to pursue courses in medicine, engineering and other faculties not offered by the ANU were obliged to enrol in Sydney or Melbourne. But many aspiring undergraduates in Cooma, Griffith, Wagga Wagga and Wollongong looked to the ANU as their university of first choice.

Students from Sydney and outside New South Wales came for a variety of reasons. One was the pressure on places in the old universities of Sydney and Melbourne, which imposed quotas in most faculties in the early 1960s. Some academics worried that the ANU, which was open to anyone who matriculated, would be left with the dregs. From the early 1970s, quotas were imposed in several faculties, starting with Law, with the incidental effect of raising admission standards. But in 1976, it was still easier to enrol at the ANU than at Sydney, Melbourne or Monash universities, prompting the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Ian Ross, to acknowledge that ‘our admission standards, for faculties other than Law, hardly give evidence that ANU is seen as a particularly worthy university to come to.’
On the other hand, the University attracted some of the best students from all over the country through National Undergraduate Scholarships which offered generous stipends to ten or twelve new students each year. Introduced in 1962, the scheme justified itself with some outstanding graduates, including John Coates, who became a Professor of Mathematics at the Sorbonne; Philip Eliason, Director of the Real Estate Institute of Australia; Alan Knight, Professor of Chemistry at Griffith University, Brisbane; Rod McDonald, Dean of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney; and Marlene Spiegler, a Professor of English at Columbia University. It also significantly enhanced the University’s national complexion.

The University benefited through the introduction in 1970 of an early admissions scheme, which enabled students to enter on the basis of their school performance, before they had sat for their final examinations. It also allowed intending older students, whose school results now had little relevance, to enrol on the strength of more recent qualifications which might have been gained inside or outside the state educational systems. The scheme owed much to C.A. Gibb’s experience with comparable procedures in the United States. A study in 1974 suggested that students admitted under this system had a higher survival rate than their colleagues. Although it was abandoned in 1977, when changes in assessment procedures in secondary schools made it redundant, before that time it succeeded in attracting a range of good students who might otherwise have gone elsewhere.

For most of the period, around 40 per cent of undergraduates received some form of assistance, including Commonwealth government scholarships, state government scholarships (from 1968), National Undergraduate Scholarships, and other forms of support offered by the University. In 1974, when Gough Whitlam’s Labor government abolished tertiary tuition fees, the figure dropped to 16 per cent and then to 8 per cent in 1976. These figures were close to the national pattern.

Although the statistics tell us little about the sociological composition of the student body, there was a widespread perception that ANU students were different. Given that so many of them came from Canberra and that the social composition of the national capital was and is so different from the rest of Australia, some differences
would not be surprising. Added to that, private schools were well represented among the National Undergraduate Scholars. There seemed to be a high proportion of sons and daughters of senior public servants; or was it just that these students, along with the children of other professionals, tended to be more vocal and hence more noticeable than those with less distinguished backgrounds?

The postgraduate students were always a distinctive group in the academic and social life of the University. From the early 1950s, when PhD scholars first enrolled with the expectation of taking out degrees from the ANU rather than an overseas institution, numbers grew steadily, reaching 136 at the time of amalgamation. By 1976 there was a total of 524 students researching for a PhD, comprising 8.5 per cent of the total student population. This proportion was more than double that of any other Australian university.

The School of General Studies was responsible for most of the Master’s degree students, who numbered 327 in 1976. From the late 1960s onwards, the School also accounted for at least one in three PhD students. The gulf between the Institute and the School was reflected among the postgraduates. Apart from the fact that Institute scholars generally enjoyed better research conditions than their counterparts in the School, they were drawn from different sources. From the 1950s, about half the scholars in the research schools came from overseas, and most of the remainder from other parts of Australia. Postgraduates in the School, on the other hand, came chiefly from the Canberra region, which implied that many had previously been ANU undergraduates. In 1976, over 60 per cent of postgraduates in the School were locals, compared with under 20 per cent in the Institute.

The University in its early years included a number of scholars who enrolled in their mid to late thirties. Notable examples were Russel Ward and Bernard Smith, whose revised PhD theses later became the seminal works *The Australian Legend*, first published in 1958, and *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850*, 1960. Most postgraduates, however, were in their late twenties; in 1976 their average age was 27. In that year men outnumbered women by four to one, though in previous years the ratio had sometimes been closer to nine to one. For most of the 1950s the two social science schools accounted for about two-thirds of all PhD students. By the mid-1970s their share had fallen to well under a half. Enrolments were subject to numerous variables. Changes in fashion partly account for the Research School of Biological Sciences doubling its numbers between 1970 and 1976, while Physical Sciences and Chemistry together fell by almost the same extent.

ANU PhDs graduating in 1960 represented 17 per cent of the Australian total. In 1964, the peak year, this figure rose to over 25 per cent. Then the ANU’s proportion gradually declined, as the old state universities became more active in research and postgraduate training, and new universities entered the field. In 1976, ANU PhD graduates made up just under 12 per cent of the total. This was no cause for alarm. On the contrary, the ANU could take much credit for training many of the staff who took up positions in other universities and for stimulating research endeavour throughout Australia, just as it had always been intended to do.
‘Welcome to the ANU!’

First-year undergraduates were introduced to the University during Orientation Week, which preceded the start of lectures in first term. In accordance with long-established tradition, it gave new students the chance to find out from staff and seasoned undergraduates what the next few years had in store for them, academically, socially and culturally. Although its tone changed markedly between the early 1960s and the mid-1970s, the orientation theme remained much the same: as the 1968 program declared, ‘The essential point about Orientation Week, and university life generally, is that it will be only as good as you are prepared to make it’.

Orientation Week in the early 1960s was a staid affair. Highlights of the 1963 program included an Official Welcome by Trendall, Burton and the President of the Students’ Association, Don Brewster; a cricket match between the township of Bungendore and the A.N.U.S.G.S. team on the University Oval; and on Saturday night the Orientation Week Dance in Childers Street Hall. Each faculty presented lectures on its various courses, Granek spoke about Canberra’s libraries, and Gibb gave advice on How to Study. The program also introduced a dozen students (ten men and two women) who were prominent around the campus: Chris Higgins, ‘a big wheel in the economics society’; Bill Gammage, who had the most extensive collection of souvenired signs in Bruce Hall and who was ‘in his spare time’ a student of history; Tony Whitlam, ‘an embryo lawyer’ and ‘one of the most loquacious and eloquent people around the place’; and John Yocklunn, a part-timer who represented the students on Council. Higgins later became head of the Commonwealth Treasury, Gammage a leading academic historian, Whitlam a judge of the Federal Court of Australia, and Sir John Yocklunn a senior public servant in Papua New Guinea.

If new arrivals in 1963 often found themselves at a loose end, their successors in 1969 were not allowed to be. The main aim of Orientation Week, said its director Ron Colman, was ‘to get you into the habit of giving everything you’ve got, of developing all sides of your character and making this university the vital, lively place it should be’. The intensity of the program suggested that it already was. While there were the usual ‘introducing your courses’ sessions, tours of the Library, and informal gatherings where students could meet their teachers, the main focus was on political involvement. There were talks and debates on ‘Tanks and freedom’ (in Czechoslovakia), ‘Student revolt ... why and why now?’, ‘The Republic of New Guinea?’, ‘Non-violent action’, and ‘To march or not to march’. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders Faith Bandler and Harry Penrith asked ‘Is Australia racist?’ Laurie Aarons from the Communist Party debated with conservative journalist Peter Samuel ‘That Australia should support revolutionary guerilla wars in Asia’. Malcolm Fraser, federal Minister for Education and Science, explained the government’s education policy; Jim Cairns, Labor frontbencher, presented the case for a revolutionary education system. Throughout the week there was a sense of urgency and immediacy. The program for Thursday included course introductions: but ‘If the Berlin Crisis blows up this week, the 3.00–4.00 time slot will be used for an expert talk or debate on this topic’.

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In any university, participation in clubs and societies was generally seen as one way in which students could make the most of their undergraduate years. At the ANU in 1963 there were just a few of them, including the Newman Society, the Law Society and the ALP Club, together with the Students’ Representative Council, which offered aspiring student politicians the best opportunity to be involved. By 1969 there were over fifty student organisations, academic, political, social, cultural, sporting and others that catered for specific interests and needs; and if students found that there were no clubs to suit them, it was easy enough to form another. During Orientation Week, each group hawked its wares on the lawns in front of the Chifley Library: the Labor Club, not formally affiliated with the ALP, which (according to the Orientation Handbook) could be counted on to oppose almost every aspect of the status quo; the Liberal Club, likewise unaffiliated with the Party and professing ‘small-l liberalism’; the Student Christian Movement, probably the most lively of the several religious clubs on campus; the Debating Society; the Choral Society; the Folk Music Society; the Chess Club; the Beethoven Music Lovers of Garran Hall, and a range of others equally esoteric. Abschol, an inter-university group aimed at providing scholarships for Aboriginal students, attracted a large membership. The Overseas Students Association now embraced a cluster of subsidiary clubs representing students of various nationalities. There was also a Part-Time Students Association, a reminder that this group was now a clear minority.

By the end of Orientation Week students had to decide what they wanted to study. Most had settled on their preferred faculty; but each Bachelor’s degree offered a range of subjects and units. They made their choices on the basis of personal interest, relevance to future career, or perhaps the reputation of a course and its teachers. Full-time students in all faculties usually took four units in their first year, and a total of eight (for Science) or ten (for Arts and Economics) over the minimum three years of a pass course. Law students had to complete 21 courses over a minimum of four years. In each faculty, honours entailed an extra year’s study.

As the School of General Studies grew, so did the choice of subjects. Students enrolling in 1961 who wanted to major in Psychology for a pass degree in Arts or Science were presented with a straightforward curriculum: Psychology I (General Introductory Course); Psychology II (Personality); Psychology III (Social Psychology). In 1976 there was still a common first year, either in Psychology or Human Biology; but after that students were offered a supermarket full of half-year courses: Learning and Motivation, Neuropsychology, Environmental Psychology, Psychological Statistics, Human Information Processing. This explosion of courses reflected the increasing specialisation of knowledge in western societies. It also followed the trend...
in other Australian universities, with which the ANU was obliged to compete.

In several areas, the ANU was keen to innovate. At the time of amalgamation, the Faculty of Arts abandoned the University of Melbourne’s system of grouping subjects, which gave students a broad education but often forced them to take subjects in which they had no interest. Arts students at the ANU now had an unsurpassed freedom of choice. The Faculty of Economics also broke away from a Melbourne pattern by requiring one or more units of Political Science in the Economics degree. This recognised different local circumstances: where in Melbourne it was appropriate to prepare Commerce graduates for the commercial world, in Canberra there was more purpose in training people for jobs in government.

Similarly, the Faculty of Law recognised that its graduates were destined either for private practice or for the public service, and fashioned its offerings accordingly. The ANU LLB was unusual in gaining recognition in three jurisdictions (Victoria, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory). Law had to respond to the needs of a profession; as a result it was perhaps the most innovative faculty on campus. A course in Air and Space Law, introduced in 1964, was unique in Australia. The Legal Workshop, introduced in 1971, offered a novel alternative to taking articles as a means of entering the profession. This six-month course was widely supported in the various branches of the profession, and other institutions soon followed the ANU’s lead.

But the School of General Studies as a whole was not much different from other universities in Australia. Many of the staff thought it should be, and came up with various stratagems for making the ANU unique in undergraduate teaching. Several members of the Faculty of Arts proposed in the late 1960s a standard three-year Honours degree for undergraduates, together with an additional ‘super-honours’ four-year course, involving seminars and postgraduate research for the top 1 per cent of students. The other faculties were sceptical, opposing the concept in principle or arguing that their exceptional students were already well catered for. So the School of General Studies remained obedient to tradition.

Life on campus

The other big decision confronting students new to Canberra was where to live. In the early years, unmarried doctoral students had no choice: they were required to reside at University House. True to Hancock’s vision, residence among a community of scholars was considered an integral part of postgraduate training. At the official opening of the House in 1954, the Duke of Edinburgh commended the University for choosing “to follow the ancient pattern, and build a house where your learned men and women, young and old, may live as a household and enjoy in dignity and relaxation the company of each other”. Trendall worked hard to shape the House into the intellectual and social centre of the University, where young scholars could mingle freely with eminent professors, including many famous visitors from overseas. Every evening, in keeping with Oxbridge tradition, the Master
led a procession of gowned academic staff and guests to high table, where he began dinner with a Latin grace which he had composed, occasionally adorning it, for the benefit of those with a classical education, with a humorous pun appropriate to the name of a distinguished visitor.

This was not everyone’s cup of tea. Many scholars found the atmosphere of the House repressive, and some disturbed the calm in spectacular fashion. In February 1957, when a group of Anglican bishops was in residence for a conference, several students returned late one night from a party in a nearby suburb and continued their drunken revels in one of their rooms, spilling over into the courtyard. Sober residents (presumably including the bishops) were awakened by bellowing and banging on doors. Some of them tried to put a stop to it, only to be abused in foul language by one of the ringleaders, R.J.L. Hawke. One of the young women was reduced to tears. A student of Sawer’s and former Rhodes scholar, Hawke, as a married scholar with a newborn child, lived in one of the University flats off campus. Already he was well known as a student representative on Council, and for his drunken escapades. The debauching culminated when one of the revellers stripped naked, jumped into the ornamental lily pond and swam the length of the pool, with Hawke and others offering loud and ribald encouragement. By three in the morning, the party had run its course and the stayers staggered off to bed.

Retribution followed swiftly. Stanner, a Fellow of the House who had confronted Hawke on the rampage, wanted to ‘put them all on a train tonight and send them away’. Trendall, who had been absent that evening, proposed throwing Hawke out of the University. But Hawke apologised promising to give no cause for future complaint. And Sawer, who regarded him as an outstanding student, argued ‘on academic grounds’ that he should not be sent down, defending him as one who had ‘suffered of adolescence perpetuated by [the] Oxford system’. Hawke and the other chief offender were each fined £15 and debarred from the House, and Hawke took a broad hint, resigning his place on Council. In the event, he never completed his PhD, becoming instead a trade unions advocate and eventual prime minister.

Residence in University House ceased to be compulsory in 1964, partly because the House was unable to accommodate all the single doctoral scholars. While some chose to remain there, increasing numbers preferred to live in privately rented accommodation off campus, often in groups of two or three students. Instead of extending University House, as had long been expected, the University built flats for married scholars and then a postgraduate residence within walking distance of the campus. Opened in 1971, the new postgraduate hall, known as Graduate House, provided self-catered accommodation for students, and had nothing of the collegiate ambience which was now, in any case, starting to fade from University House.
Although undergraduates were not required to live on campus, in the early years after amalgamation newcomers to Canberra had little choice. The rental market was such that only a few students had the opportunity to set up for themselves in private ‘digs’. In any case, that was not the fashion. Living on campus was still the thing to do, generally regarded by students and staff as part of the university experience.

Bruce Hall, opened in 1961, provided accommodation for 165 students. Two years later this number was increased by 45, and supplemented by 100 or so places in Lennox House and another 25 in a nearby motel purchased by the University. Being able to offer a large number of residential places was essential if the ANU was to be truly national, so the University set itself a target of having at least half the undergraduate population in residence. Burton Hall and Garran Hall, linked by shared dining and common rooms and providing places for a total of 480 students, were opened in the middle of the decade.

One means of meeting the demand for accommodation was to invite religious denominations to build and run alternative accommodation on campus. In line with Murray Report usage, these were referred to as ‘affiliated colleges’, to distinguish them from ‘halls’ run by the University. Although religious colleges had been a feature of Australian university campuses since the beginnings of Sydney and Melbourne universities in the 1850s, the prospect was immediately controversial. For many staff and students, they challenged the notion of a liberal university education, whose hallmarks were the free pursuit of knowledge and truth. Opponents argued that denominational colleges encouraged ‘adherence to dogma, inculcation of religious doctrine and segregation of students according to religion’; that, as universities in Australia were government-funded, religious colleges denied the principle of separation of church and state; that colleges run by outsiders would be unresponsive to the wishes of residents. Supporters suggested that the University, as well as providing for individual liberty, should allow individual beliefs to have ‘a corporate life’; that denominational colleges contributed variety to the intellectual life of universities; and that many parents wanted their students to attend religious colleges, so why should the ANU deny them?

In the event, the decision was effectively made off campus when Senator John Gorton, Minister for Works, with responsibility for education and research, came out strongly in favour of denominational colleges, hinting at the same time that the University would not get all the accommodation it asked for if it opted only for halls. Council approved two developments, one sponsored jointly by the Ursulines and the Dominicans, and the other by the Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians and (a little later) the Churches of Christ. In 1967 the Dominicans started operating their college, John XXIII, in Lennox House, pending the completion of their new building two years later; Ursula College opened in 1969; and Burgmann, the
‘interdenominational’ college (which in this context meant Protestant), took its first students in 1971. All colleges were open to students of all faiths or of none. Together, the affiliated colleges accommodated some 750 students and enabled the University to exceed its target of half the full-time undergraduates living on campus.

The argument about whether or not to admit religious colleges took place in the context of a general understanding that the student residences on campus were integral parts of academic life. At its inception, Bruce Hall introduced a system of College Fellows, comprising University staff, CSIRO scientists and other friends of the College, all of whom were appointed on the advice of the Vice-Chancellor. The Fellows, informally known as ‘moral tutors’, each had responsibility for ten students. This system was replicated in Burton and Garran halls; and the affiliated colleges too were required to introduce a tutorial system aimed at looking after the academic as well as the social welfare of their students.

Burton described the halls of residence as something intermediate between an Oxbridge college and an American dormitory. Gradually the links between the halls and colleges and the academic departments weakened, as the student residences became just that: places to live, with a more or less structured communal life of their own, but on the periphery of the larger academic community. A fourth hall of residence, opened in 1974 with accommodation for nearly 240 students, did away with communal dining arrangements and provided instead for groups of ten students of at least one year’s standing, each with an individual study bedroom, sharing a common kitchen, bathroom and lounge. The students, lacking reverence for the tradition of naming the halls after the University’s great men, christened the new building Toad Hall, owing to its proximity to Sullivan’s Creek and its willows. The name stuck, and Toad Hall became Australia’s first self-catering hall of residence.

Toad Hall pointed the way. By 1976, the other halls and colleges were having trouble filling their beds, while Toad had a waiting list. This was partly due to relative costs, the self-catering arrangements being much cheaper than the catered and serviced accommodation provided elsewhere. In addition, students were tending to resist the regimentation of college life, however gentle it may have been, opting instead for shared housing in the nearby suburbs of Turner, O’Connor, Braddon or Ainslie.

Each hall and college assumed over time its own characteristics. Bruce Hall enjoyed special status as the University’s first purpose-built hall of residence. Moreover, it was better equipped (and more expensive) than halls and colleges constructed in other universities around that time, as the National Capital Development Commission, which paid for the building, wanted something imposing at the end of University Avenue. Even when there were several halls and colleges to
choose from, Bruce Hall continued to attract a disproportionate number of students who were academically outstanding or socially privileged. The National Undergraduate Scholars were sent there as a group, and the non-Catholic private schools were well represented.

Bruce Hall also distinguished itself as the first hall or college in Australia with accommodation for both men and women. The reason for this initiative was economic: the University had to provide for both sexes and it could not afford two colleges. Although some members of staff, including the Vice-Chancellor, Huxley, feared moral degradation, the experiment won general approval from staff and students. At the time of his retirement, Huxley withdrew his earlier reservations and quoted approvingly the views of a warden of one of the halls that ‘The young women become less giggly and the men better mannered’. Bill Packard, who came as Warden in 1961 and remained for 25 years, administered and relaxed the rules in response to changing attitudes among students and the wider community. At the outset, visitors of the opposite sex were excluded between 10 p.m. and 9 a.m. These limits were gradually whittled away and in 1970 abandoned entirely. Initially the men and women were housed in separate wings, but in response to student demand the whole hall was rearranged on a mixed-gender basis in 1971.

Burton and Garran halls followed Bruce’s lead by offering co-residential accommodation. According to the Orientation Handbook for 1968, Burton saw itself as ‘the swinging, sparkling, spontaneous hall’, in contrast to the more conservative Bruce; while Garran catered for all tastes. The University specified that the affiliated colleges should provide for both men and women, though the Catholics were able to meet this requirement by building one college for men and one for women. Ursula’s, under the sharp eye but gentle hand of the Ursuline sisters, projected an image of harmony and scholarship. John XXIII, governed in more authoritarian fashion by the Dominican brothers, soon achieved a ‘rugger-bugger’ image which it confirmed on and off the football field and took many years to live down.

Undergraduate lives were ruled by the rhythms of the academic year. After Orientation Week, students settled into first term, which usually ran for ten weeks. A three-week vacation was followed by a nine-week second term, a further four-week vacation, and a final fourteen-week term, which included a short study vacation and a three-week examination period.

The routines of study were broken in second term by Bush Week, which began as a week’s activities but soon contracted to one or two days. The ANU lacked any single day that might offer an excuse for a special occasion comparable with Foundation Day or Commemoration Day in other universities. Bush Week, although conceived in the early 1960s as a way of taking the city to the bush and soaking up some of the bush ethos, was soon commandeered by the Students’ Representative Council. As the orientation program for 1963 admitted, it served ostensibly to raise funds for charity while providing ‘the perfect excuse for student hilarity’ and giving them something to do during winter.

Bush Week activities were often boisterous. A regular event in the early years was
a raid on the Royal Military College, Dunroon, a few miles away. The 1963 raiders painted a hopscotch square on the military parade ground, hoisted a swastika and an umbrella to the top of the flagpole, and woke the cadets and officers with a fake reveille at 5 a.m. The cadets responded by capturing twenty students, cutting their hair short, and throwing some of them into an icy fountain in the middle of town. A procession of floats became a regular event, during which students challenged with varying degrees of creativity and wit some commonly held values. Many Catholics were offended when a student frocked in priestly habit handed out mock contraceptive pills, and another, dressed as a pregnant woman, danced before a crucifix. Burton complained that Bush Week ‘gave an opportunity to the exhibitionist and the hooligan under the hypocritical facade of raising money for charity’, and tried to pull the offenders into line. But other staff members saw it as an appropriate outlet for adolescent exuberance. Perhaps there was sympathy for the student leader who argued plaintively that Bush Week was ‘the only tradition the A.N.U. has’.

The students of the ANU were well looked after. Soon after amalgamation, when it was possible to buy a pie or soft drink on campus, but not much else, Fin Crisp and Colin Plowman, Registrar of the School of General Studies, started moves which led to the formation of a Union. Although they had intended it to serve the needs of both students and staff, it evolved as an organisation chiefly managed by students for students, providing a refectory and coffee lounge, entertainment rooms and, after winning the right to serve liquor in 1970, a bar. As originally conceived, the Union was also to have something in common with its Oxbridge counterparts, arranging debates, holding dinners with guest speakers, and generally contributing to the intellectual life of the University. But its main contribution to campus life was as a meeting place, where students could exchange ideas and lecture notes, gossip about their lecturers, argue about social and political issues, and when the time came, plan to change the University and the world.

### Teaching and learning

Staff in the School of General Studies took their teaching duties seriously. This may have owed something to the proximity of the Institute of Advanced Studies and the implicit pressure on the School to excel in its appointed field. Manning Clark in the Department of History told his staff that they were there first to teach and second to do research. Russell Mathews, the University’s agent in London in the early 1950s and now Professor of Accounting and Public Finance, sat in on lectures given by members of his department, vetted their examination questions, and generally made sure they were all doing their job as he thought they should. There were, of
course, some teachers who were lazy or indifferent, provoking criticisms from the Students’ Association. But they were the exceptions, frowned upon by most of their colleagues. By and large, the teachers of the ANU were dedicated and the quality of their teaching was high.

Arthur Hambly, the Professor of Chemistry impressed on his colleagues the distinction between teaching and ‘just lecturing’, and urged them to see teaching and learning as a two-way process. Hambly was unusual, especially among the scientists, in that he had trained as a teacher. Most of his colleagues were, as they perceived it, thrown in at the deep end. Ian Ross, a former ANU Overseas Scholar who joined Hambly’s department as a professor in 1968, had no formal training; but he had, as a Master’s student in Sydney, attended dramatic classes, from which he had learnt how to project his voice and how to make lectures lively. He had also spent some fifteen years at the University of Sydney teaching large classes, which made the relatively intimate classes in Canberra a pleasant change. Like most of his scientific colleagues, he lectured from detailed notes, often distributing specially prepared explanatory material. Another member of that department, Ben Selinger, thought deeply about presenting chemistry as a subject with immediate practical importance for everyday life. This led him to prepare a laboratory handbook which ran, under the title *Chemistry in the Market Place*, to several editions and opened up new areas of environmental and consumer chemistry.

Paul Lyneham, later prominent as a political journalist, remembered the mid-1960s as the golden time of the ANU. As an Arts student, he was taught Economics by Heinz Arndt, Australian History by Manning Clark, Political Science by Fin Crisp and Australian Literature by Alec Hope: ‘you tell me what period of Australian academic life you’ve had more talented first-class people together in one campus than that ...’ Clark in turn reflected on the students: Alastair Davidson, ‘a young man with a lively mind and a fire in the belly’; Philippa Weeks, ‘one of the silent members ... who put what was in their mind into essays rather than into frivolous tutorial discussion’; Iain McCalman, who was ‘such a born teacher that he began to teach me in class—to my great benefit’. For Clark, like Lyneham, these were golden years.

Undergraduate students were taught through a combination of lectures and tutorials, which in the natural sciences often translated to demonstrations in the laboratory. Where the University of Sydney placed heavy reliance on formal lectures, Melbourne had a tradition of tutorials in which the teacher exchanged thoughts with a small group of students, often in smoke-filled studies, on the prescribed topic. Canberra University College inherited the Melbourne system and allowed it to develop during the 1950s, when student numbers were small. The system encouraged rapport between students and their teachers, and fostered a sense of belonging to the departmental family.

Approaches to teaching differed. Students in Clark’s tutorials in Australian history were invited to explore ‘the mystery at the heart of things’, to seek answers to the great questions confronting humankind. ‘We, teachers and students, were all looking for those answers’, Clark later wrote. The student engaged in that process of discovery
need not have worried about formal course requirements. When other members of the faculty urged that late essays should be penalised, Clark resisted.

In contrast, Gibb argued for efficiency in teaching, urging his colleagues to establish ‘stable standards’ and to review their teaching and examining policies and procedures. Inspired by American examples, he attempted to quantify student motives, ambitions, abilities and performances, and urged the University to undertake ‘institutional research’. In Clark’s language, Gibb was a ‘measurer’, whose pronouncements he dismissed as ‘Gibberish’. Gibb’s Department of Psychology was one of the first areas to experiment with continuous assessment, which involved playing down the significance of the annual examination and relying instead on the regular evaluation of class work throughout the year, such as essays, exercises and periodical tests. Students, like their teachers, were expected to be efficient, to submit their assignments on time or accept appropriate penalties.

Gibb and Clark were at opposite extremes on fundamental issues about the nature of teaching and learning, and the concept of a university education. The two world views came into direct conflict when Gibb, whose department straddled the faculties of Arts and Science, urged his colleagues in Arts to follow the lead of Science (and a trend in other universities) by replacing terms with semesters. For the scientists, semesters meant flexibility; for members of the Arts Faculty, they suggested that knowledge and understanding could be delivered in segmented blocks. The scientists won: in the early 1970s, terms were abandoned in favour of two fifteen-week semesters, separated by a five-week break, each with a one or two-week teaching break in the middle. Students now took one or two-semester units. Most worked harder and (if Clark was right) thought and understood less.

Were teachers born or made? The question, as old as institutional learning, was debated at the ANU, as it no doubt was in every other university in the country. Gibb, who believed that teaching skills could be taught, proposed in the early 1970s the formation of the Office for Research on Academic Methods, which he modelled on a research bureau in Michigan. Opened in 1975, ORAM’s functions included gathering data about teaching and encouraging staff to improve their teaching skills.

Clark knew teachers could learn, but whether they could be taught was another matter. In 1969, when Henry Mayer, Professor of Government at the University of Sydney, suggested that he take on Humphrey McQueen as a tutor, Clark’s first question was ‘Is he a Catholic and a Communist?’ Mayer said, yes, he was. Then Clark asked: ‘Has he taught fourth form boys?’ Mayer replied that he had, Clark replied, ‘Oh good, then we’ll have him’. Given that McQueen had published two significant articles and that he had a book, entitled A New Britannia, nearly finished, he was evidently a highly suitable appointment.

McQueen may have had no problem with the fourth form boys at Glen Waverley
High; but lecturing and tutoring at university demanded different skills. Clark was not much help: he warned his colleagues that, when giving essays back, they should always do so in a room with two windows, so that the reflected eyes of teacher and student need not meet, which (if the student was crying) was apt to be a painful experience. More useful advice came from Don Baker and Eric Fry, two old hands in the department (Baker having arrived in Canberra a few days before Clark, and Fry, a former ANU scholar, a decade later). Fry offered to mark the essays of McQueen’s students while McQueen could mark his; and when the process was over, Fry explained to him gently and humorously where he had been too severe and where his comments might have been more helpful.

Baker was never a ‘natural’ lecturer. To counter the anxiety of performing in front of a class, he prepared his lectures thoroughly, coming into the department each Sunday to write them out in full. As a result he became over the years one of the faculty’s finest lecturers. Clark knew all this, so he asked Baker in a staff meeting to explain his success. Baker responded with a list of points: write out the lecture in full; in 50 minutes you can read four and a half thousand words; if you mention anyone by name, then the name should be important enough to write on the blackboard; if anything is worth quoting, you should repeat it; and so on. This was basic but valuable advice. McQueen took it, becoming what Clark later described as ‘a brilliant teacher’. But he found the academic system too constrictive and left early in 1975 to write books, one of which, Australia’s Media Monopolies, he dedicated to his old mentors, Baker and Fry, ‘for showing me how to teach, and more’.

The degree of independence accorded to individual teachers to teach what and how they wanted varied across the campus. Some Faculty of Science departments, in particular, were hierarchical in structure, with the professor and two or three of his senior colleagues setting out the overall course structure and allocating staff to particular classes. The lowly tutor or demonstrator, generally employed on a one-year contract, did what he or she was told. The Faculty of Arts tended to be more democratic, allocating responsibilities in a collegiate fashion and allowing at least the permanent staff to develop and teach such courses as they chose. Arts professors wielded considerable power and influence, but they were less likely than their counterparts in other faculties to play god.

The courses in History ranged over the centuries and the continents, much as in other Australian universities. Clark would no more expect to interfere in the teaching of, say, Indian history or the rise and spread of Christianity than he would expect one of his colleagues to question his own approach to teaching Australia’s past. So when McQueen, as a newcomer to the department, asked innocent questions about Clark’s grand plans for an Australian history major, such as how methodological approaches might differ from one year to the next, the atmosphere in the meeting room suddenly
cooled. McQueen persisted until Clark said ‘There comes a time when one must distinguish between the general will and the popular will’. And that was that.

Just as teachers differed in their teaching methods, so students varied widely in the ways they learnt. A senior undergraduate in the 1968 Orientation Handbook earnestly advised first-years to study moderately and consistently throughout the year. Alongside students who heeded this advice were many others who idled away their time or threw themselves into extracurricular activities, leaving themselves with a frantic rush to catch up in the third term.

Staff throughout the School of General Studies were perpetually alarmed by the large number of students who failed or dropped out. The Murray Report had remarked in 1958 that failure rates were appalling throughout Australia, and that this was largely due to inadequate teaching. While wastage was also a problem everywhere, at the ANU it seemed to be especially serious. In 1963 nearly 20 per cent of students fell by the wayside, most of them during their first year of study. This figure declined as the number of full-timers increased and, during the 1970s, as admission standards were raised. By the mid-1970s, the wastage rate had fallen to under 10 per cent, significantly lower than the national average. In the meantime, staff agonised about matriculation standards, the quality and motivation of students and the adequacy of their own teaching, which could no longer be (if it ever had been) taken for granted.

‘Make love not war’

Megan Stoyles, a second-year Arts student, became famous during President Lyndon Johnson’s visit to Australia in 1966, when news photographers took a fancy to the slogan on the bosom of her T-shirt. She stood out among the large crowd who demonstrated outside the Canberra Rex Hotel (where Johnson was staying) against the Vietnam war and Australia’s support for United States policy.

For the moment her views were well in advance of those of most of her fellow students. Undergraduate life at the ANU, wrote an anonymous commentator in a Current Affairs Bulletin in 1967, ‘is distinguished by its apathy, conservatism and indifference to national causes’. The writer, as many people knew, was Richard Walsh, a prominent student leader at the University of New South Wales. While he was generally scathing about the lack of student activity on campuses throughout Australia, the ANU deserved special mention since, owing to its location among the nation’s decision-makers, ‘it might well have been expected to prove the most dynamic and involved campus in the country’.

Among the few students who were politically inclined, his comments hit a raw nerve. But what could they say? The evidence of apathy was there, in reluctance to join political societies, in the conservatism of the Students’ Association, and in published student opinions about the large issues of the day. A survey of attitudes to the Vietnam war, conscription and the voting age, conducted by the Students’ Association in 1966, revealed what most people expected: that students at the ANU held views similar to the rest of society.
Apart from these specific issues of national policy, there was a continuing debate about whether the Students’ Representative Council, as the elected representatives of the Students’ Association, should take a political stand. Ross Garnaut, an Arts/Law student (and later an ANU Professor of Economics), tried hard in 1965 to get the SRC to pass a motion condemning the commitment of regular troops to Vietnam, but was defeated by the argument that the SRC was not a competent body to issue dictums on student opinion. Two years later the SRC passed a motion denying itself the right to make political comments, except on matters relating to the ANU and education, and others on which majority student opinion could be ascertained. After heated debate and several resignations from the SRC, a general meeting of the Students’ Association, attended by some four hundred students, confirmed that the Council should remain ‘apolitical’. But just in case students in other universities should think they were apathetic, they went on to vote in favour of Aboriginal rights, increased academic freedom, and the readmission of Boris Pasternak to the Soviet Union of Writers.

Those who thought the ANU should be at the forefront of political activism wondered why it was not. Some accepted Walsh’s view that the halls and colleges were to blame, by fragmenting potential campus unity and absorbing the students in internal affairs and parochial competition. Others drew attention to the high proportion of students from wealthy or ‘established’ backgrounds who were content with things as they were. John Iremonger, a Master’s student in History, suggested that the material conditions on campus, including plentiful library seats and staff/student ratios which were the envy of students in other universities, left ANU students with little to protest about. Or was it that the ANU, like other small campuses around Australia, simply had too few students to generate a politically active community? Bruce McFarlane, a Senior Lecturer in Political Science and one of the few outspoken Marxists on campus, was resigned: ‘The number of students who are going to be interested in unorthodox ideas is quite small and the number of students who are interested in the degree shop idea is very large, and that’s a fact of life’.

McFarlane was speaking at a ‘teach-in’ in September 1968. The Canberra Times reported that only 100 students attended, suggesting that ‘Students at ANU shun reform’. Six months later the campus was throbbing with political activity. In retrospect, it was possible to trace a gradually increasing political awareness, as conversations in the Union moved from football to Vietnam, Aborigines, feminism and apartheid. But at the time it seemed as if the ANU had moved from apathy to activism almost overnight. Students started speaking the language of revolution, about imperialist oppression, civil disobedience and direct action. Words changed meaning: in 1968 a ‘rort’ was a party; two years later it was a demonstration.

ANU students became part of the revolutionary movement that was sweeping across the western world. In mid-1968 students in Paris were erecting barricades and tearing up paving stones to hurl at the gendarmerie. In Australia, Monash University students were showing the way towards participatory democracy, with strident talk and sometimes violent action against authority inside and outside the University. The ANU followed, never at the forefront of revolutionary activity, but never far behind.
Left: Over 5000 people attended the Aquarius Festival of University Arts at the ANU in May 1971. An appreciative crowd listens to a rock group from Melbourne University on the lawns in front of the Chifley Library.

Right: The Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, responds to questions from students and staff in a packed Coombs Lecture Theatre, May 1970.
Canberra Times.

The Bulletin, in a survey of student activism in Australian universities in 1969 which categorised campuses from ‘hot’ to ‘frigid’, described the ANU as ‘simmering steadily’. That description remained apt for the next few years.

Perhaps there was a sense that in student radicalism, as in other things, the University had to live up to its national status. Certainly, those involved in the turmoil believed that the ANU was where it was all happening; and in some respects it was. There was never much difficulty in luring a politician across the lake to address a lunchtime crowd, gathered on the lawn between the Union and the Chifley Library. And prominent national and international figures gave talks at various campus venues: Pierre Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister; Benjamin Spock, the guru of parenting and opponent of the Vietnam war; Don Dunstan, the South Australian Premier who seemed to promise a new era in Australian politics; and the communist novelist Frank Hardy, who castigated his student audience for their unconcern with the plight of the Aborigines. All contributed to make the campus a focus for vibrant intellectual and political debate. Students were optimistic about their capacity to bring about change: it seemed that there was nothing they could not do.

Protest was associated with an assertion of freedom. Mark O’Connor, a PhD student in English, defied conventional morality by posing naked with his girlfriend Rigmor Helene Borg for the 1974 edition of the Orientation Handbook. He later won fame as a poet. Students experimented with drugs, and for a time Lennox House was known as a place where heroin was freely available. Many students accepted hard drugs as a legitimate part of an alternative lifestyle. When the doctor in charge of the University Health Service, Bryan Furness, warned new students about the likely dangers of experimenting with LSD, a student defended ‘acid’ as ‘a means of providing an alternative insight into the environment’. At least one student died from a drug overdose. Nevertheless, apart from alcohol, sustained drug use never extended beyond a small minority, so that Crawford could tell Council in 1972 that there was no evidence of a serious drug problem at the ANU.

‘We were all committed’, wrote Alan Gould, then an English honours student and later a poet and novelist. ‘We were up to our eyebrows in Commitment.’ But the reasons
for their commitment and the way they expressed it varied from one student to the next.

Chris Swinbank stood out among the angry young men on campus. The son of a Melbourne scientist with left-wing sympathies, he came, like many of the most determined radicals, from a private school. In 1967 he had spent a year with his parents in Hawaii, where he had witnessed the growing protest movement against the Vietnam war. A National Undergraduate Scholarship brought him next year to Canberra, where he played Australian Rules Football for Bruce Hall and embraced a succession of social and political causes. First he became a supporter of Abschol, which was now an assertive voice for Aboriginal rights. Then he threw himself into the anti-Vietnam movement. In Bush Week 1968 he and some cronies donned stolen military uniforms and dismantled an Army careers booth in the middle of Civic, removing it to the safety of the campus. In the early 1970s he was marching in the front cohort during the Vietnam moratorium campaigns, resisting the police when they came to tear down the Aboriginal embassy in front of Parliament House, and leading the local opposition to apartheid in South Africa, especially during the Australian tour of the all-white Springbok rugby team.

Swinbank belonged to no political party. Some of the hard-line Marxists, Trotskyites and Maoists berated him as ideologically unsound. In retrospect he described himself as ‘a political ratbag’. He saw the answer to all forms of social injustice in direct action. This took the form of distributing anti-apartheid leaflets, demonstrating in the streets of Civic, and maintaining a 24-hour vigil in front of the South African embassy. As self-styled urban guerillas, he and his colleagues spray-painted anti-racist messages on the embassy gates, which became thicker as they were painted over, repainted and repainted time and time again. They often conducted their exploits with a sense of adventure, but always with the conviction that what they were doing was necessary and right.

Effective protest demanded efficient organisation. Much of it took place in Bruce Hall, which Gould, in a later novella, translated to Beasley College (an evident play on the local car sales firm, Beazley & Bruce). ‘Here, in its narrow rooms, with a dozen or so people sitting on an unmade bed, a littered desk, or the floor, with curtains drawn resolutely against any daylight, meetings simply happened spontaneously and action flowed directly from them.’ The other meeting place was a four-bedroom brick and fibro house in Canning Street, Ainslie, three kilometres from the campus on the other side of Civic, which the ANU Labor Club occupied from 1969. ‘Canning Street’ rocked and throbbed to endless meetings about strategy and tactics, debates about the rights and wrongs of this action or that, and the comings and goings of volunteers for writing letters, distributing leaflets, creating silk-screens, producing banners and megaphones.
Stephen Padgham, who enrolled as a Law student in 1968, was the ANU draft resister best known to students, staff and the police. In contrast to Swinbank, he was an erudite revolutionary, having read and absorbed the thoughts of Marx, Hegel, Marcuse, Mao Zedong and other writers whose works were fashionable. Having turned eighteen, the age when all Australian males were required to register for national service, and having decided that the Vietnam war was immoral, he became involved in a battle with the courts and the police which extended over the next few years. Twice he went to gaol, for seven days each time; and twice he went underground, causing a good deal of interest and excitement on campus. On the second occasion he remained inconspicuous for two months until he was sighted on campus by two plain-clothes police. Emulating the famous swagman, he jumped into Sullivan’s Creek, ice cold in the middle of winter, only to be dragged out by his pursuers and lodged safely in the watch-house. Several weeks later, to the accompaniment of charts and protests outside the courthouse (which was conveniently located at the city end of University Avenue) he was sentenced to eighteen months’ hard labour. But while he was still out on bail pending an appeal, the conservative coalition was replaced by Whitlam’s Labor government, one of whose first acts was to abolish conscription and lift the burden from those who had resisted the draft.

For every protester who was willing to stand up to authority and face possible arrest, a dozen or so were keen to stay out of trouble. Nevertheless, Swinbank, Padgham and their colleagues regarded the campus as a sympathetic environment and believed that the
University community, from the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor down, was on their side. When Swinbank sought help for his campaign against apartheid, he received $2 and $10 donations from many of the senior staff, along with letters of encouragement. Padgham, with the help of his girlfriend, found refuge in the all-female Ursula College; and when his girlfriend moved out, the Principal, Sister Angela, asked maternally: 'And who's going to look after Stevie now?'. Colin Plowman, now the Academic Registrar, and Diana Riddell, the Secretary of the Students' Association, kept a money box to bail students out of gaol, should occasion arise.

Protest was becoming respectable. Sir Keith Hancock, now in his mid-seventies and still hard at work as an Emeritus Professor in his old school, took a stand on the issue of a telecommunications tower for Black Mountain, the tree-covered backdrop to the University and a critical point in Griffin's design for Canberra. Early in 1973 he addressed a protest meeting of 700–800 people; and over the next two years, as a member of the Committee to Save Black Mountain, he devoted almost all his time and energy to the issue. When the battle seemed all but lost, some of the students wanted to put sand in the bulldozers' fuel tanks, but in deference to the old man refrained. Hancock and the committee chose to fight through the courts, and when they were defeated and the tower was erected his disappointment was profound. But at least the campaign had allowed him to relive the complementary roles of professional historian and active citizen, and had brought him into touch with the spirit of the times.

The Troubles

There was no obvious moment when the students turned their attention inwards, away from the problems of larger society and towards the University and how it was governed. Certainly the advent of Whitlam's Labor government removed some of the main causes of protest and gave the impression that many of the students' aspirations were about to be realised. Such protests as there were in the Whitlam years, on Aboriginal land rights, abortion, the mining of uranium or French nuclear testing, were moderate by comparison with what had taken place before.

Widespread interest in what was happening off campus was reawakened in late 1975 after the sacking of Whitlam's government by the man who had once been considered as a potential head of the Research School of Pacific Studies and who was now the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr. When Kerr attended a function at Bruce Hall in 1976, a noisy crowd of demonstrators from inside and outside the University protested loudly and alarmed the police. But this and later incidents were merely short-lived interruptions to a life on campus that was otherwise calm.
Concern with internal issues had been evident from the time students had begun speaking the language of revolution. Initially, the key question was the level of student participation on decision-making bodies. When in 1968 the students sought a larger say in University affairs, Council gave them most of what they wanted: an undergraduate representative on Council, and representation on various Council committees, faculties and departments (but not on the Board of the School). These concessions did not put an end to student protests. But, especially by comparison with turbulent universities such as Monash and La Trobe, where it seemed that undergraduates were about to erect the barricades, student complaints at the ANU took the form of grumbling—about semesters, the examination system, the quality of teaching, and so on—often ill-mannered, but rarely seriously threatening. Such grievances tended to be subsumed by the larger protest movement. Occasionally internal and external issues merged, as in relation to the moves in the Research School of Pacific Studies to set up a Centre for Strategic and Defence Studies along what were seen as ideologically unsound lines. But more often than not the administration and staff were seen as allies rather than enemies.

All that changed in 1974, when the undergraduates—or a vocal minorities of them—sought a much greater say in the way the University conducted its business, especially in relation to the content of courses and modes of examination. They demanded more than most of the staff were prepared to give. The events of that year, which extended somewhat half-heartedly into the next, were described at the time and in retrospect as ‘The Troubles’, as they were on other campuses. For some staff, the term signified a passing inconvenience which interrupted their normal activities of teaching and research; for others it was a bitter euphemism for a movement which threatened the core of what a university was or ought to be about.

Coombs and Crawford had always seemed to be one step ahead of student opinion. Apart from the wisdom which came with experience, they enjoyed the great advantage of information, often gleaned directly during their overseas travels. Coombs happened to be in Paris in 1968 when students were disrupting the life of the city. He visited university campuses and talked to academics who were trying to understand and respond to the revolt, and others who were a part of it. At the University of Nanterre one slogan among many plastered on the walls caught his attention: ‘They think therefore I am’, a bitter parody of Descartes’ ‘Cogito ergo sum’. This set him thinking about the sense of alienation among young people, and about how members of a university might seek to understand and devise ways of resisting the depersonalised quality in contemporary life. With the help of Partridge, who was then reflecting on the turmoil while on leave in London, he prepared his inaugural speech as Chancellor, in which he urged his colleagues to heed student opinion and not to let universities become too much a part of the ‘Establishment’.

A society, to remain vigorous requires inbuilt sources of regeneration—and the university is, by its traditions and the quality of its members, well equipped to provide one such source; the more so since through its
membership flows the ablest of our youth—those who come to our society with a fresh and innocent vision.

Students, he said, should not be ground into professionalism too soon; rather they should have time to wonder and time ‘for a certain irresponsibility’.

After the speech someone wrote anonymously to tell him he was talking nonsense and accuse him of being ‘a middle aged adolescent delinquent’. It was a description that he subsequently treasured.

Crawford too was interested in what was happening in other parts of the world. After listening to an American college president outline the elaborate precautions on his campus should demonstrations get out of hand, he expressed relief that ‘The need for this type of preparation calls for no additional comment, other than one of sympathy’. (Nevertheless, at Hohnen’s request one of the Chancelry staff devised a series of tactical responses to any organised campaign to ‘D and D’, demonstrate and disrupt.) At the beginning of 1969, when student leaders were announcing a ‘year of protest’ throughout Australia, Crawford anticipated the course of unrest: initially, he wrote, the protests would centre on national and international events rather than university policies, but the two might end up being linked.

To forestall action directed against the University, he proposed changes to its formal structures. He also wanted to facilitate, as he put it, ‘close personal relations between faculty and students: mutual respect; proper attention to constructive criticism about university policy from staff and students alike; academic freedom but not disruption’. At the vice-chancellorial level he practised this policy by making himself available to the leaders of student opinion, always listening attentively to their grievances, giving the impression that they were participating in the decision-making process, but at the same time keeping himself at just the right distance to maintain their slightly deferential respect. Colin Plowman, the Academic Registrar, served as his able lieutenant, mixing freely with the troops and reporting on changes of mood in the mess. There was no secret about Plowman’s role as an intermediary: he welcomed it, and so did the students.

It was all very well for some of the more radical students to see in Crawford the skilled manipulator of opinion, and to accuse the administration of ‘repressive tolerance’ as defined by Marcuse. The problem was that, except in theoretical terms, the University’s leaders were hard to criticise. Crawford exuded reason and understanding, especially by comparison with vice-chancellors in some of the other universities; and Plowman, always accessible over a bottle of red in the Union bar, always ready to listen and argue, never appearing to ‘talk down’ to undergraduates, was everybody’s conception of ‘a good bloke’.

The Vice-Chancellor, Crawford, addresses students on student participation in university government, July 1969. Photograph by Charlie Dickins.
The rest of the staff followed the Chancellor's and Vice-Chancellor's lead, some eagerly, others with deep misgivings. Geoffrey Brennan, a Lecturer in the Department of Accounting and Public Finance, and typical of many younger members of staff, argued strongly in favour of student participation, partly to forestall unrest, partly to improve decision-making, but most of all to contribute to the undergraduates' education by drawing them into the academic environment. Crisp, then President of the Staff Association, was one of the old school, who regarded formal representation as an unjustified admission that informal contacts had failed. But Gibb, as chair of BSGS, saw the way the wind was blowing, and warned his colleagues that if the Board did not make recommendations for student participation, then Crawford certainly would. 'This is what worries me', said Crisp. 'The Vice-Chancellors will sell us down the river.' Gibb agreed: 'Our Vice-Chancellor will not be in the rear of this movement. We may be stuck with something we do not want.' After much agonising the Board agreed to various levels of representation, perhaps not as much as Crawford thought desirable, but still more generous than in any other Australian university, and sufficient to ensure that any unrest was nipped in the bud.

How far would Coombs and Crawford accede to student demands? For Coombs, encouragement of student participation was an article of faith. In the Boyer Lectures for 1970 he urged his listeners to look to the young as the hope of the future, and specifically to those who were demanding a say in decisions affecting their own lives and the world they would inherit. Their willingness to accept responsibility provided 'a bridge between us and them'. 'I would plunge heavily on giving them that responsibility.'

Crawford's liberality was perhaps more restrained; but then, it was put to an acid test. In late 1970 two former Monash students and well-known revolutionaries, Albert and Kerry Langer, applied to enrol as undergraduates. Albert Langer made no secret of his intention to undermine university administrations whenever the opportunity presented itself. Crawford was confronted with an unhappy dilemma. 'A university', he told the Admissions Committee, 'cannot be closed to ideas no matter how destructive'. But here was a case where a potential student, on the basis of his past record, might disrupt the whole campus.

There was a way out: the Langers had submitted their applications late and could be rejected for that reason. Crawford did not like this option. But he also believed that the University stood to lose more by letting Albert Langer in than by keeping him out. Having said that, he left the matter to the committee which, after much soul-searching, rejected the applications on the grounds of lateness. At least one member lamented that the University had suffered a moral loss by departing from the principle of academic quality as the basis of admission. Crawford remained uneasy; but whether his uneasiness derived more from the sacrifice of principle or a fear of repercussions, we will never know.
Crawford's policy of involving students in the government of the University worked, at least up to a point. The problem was that it was one thing to give students formal status on decision-making bodies, but quite another to ensure that they had significant impact. So much depended on the confidence and capacity of individual students, and the receptiveness of senior academic staff. Plowman's individual efforts to involve students in University affairs probably contributed more to mutual understanding and harmony between staff and students than formal student representation on a dozen committees.

By 1974 both Plowman and Crawford had gone. Crawford had retired in April 1973, having served over a year longer than he had originally intended. He was succeeded by R.M. Williams, formerly Vice-Chancellor at the University of Otago, who had been recommended by his fellow New Zealander, Mick Borrie. Plowman had moved later in the same year, first to the Australian Council for the Arts, then to the University of New South Wales as Academic Registrar. His place at the Union bar remained empty. Their departure might not have prevented the ensuing Troubles; but certainly the University’s response would have been quite different and probably much more effective had they been there. Suddenly, for many of the more vocal students, the staff had become the enemy.

What had caused the change? Were the students’ protests a residue of the momentum which had built up against Vietnam, conscription and the Springbok tour, and which now wanted direction? Did they reflect a sense of disillusionment with a government whose achievements seemed to be falling short of its promises? Staff members unsympathetic to the students suggested that they were merely imitating their brothers and sisters on other campuses.

But there were also causes closer to home. In the latter half of 1973 a few of the students were starting to realise that, despite all the talk of participation and representation, they really had little influence and no power. The Board of the School of General Studies made that clear by insisting that the student members who were proposed to be added to the Board were to be regarded as participants from the student
body and not as representatives of the Students’ Association. This was directly contrary to the Association’s policy, and was interpreted by the students as a deliberate snub.

The sense of powerlessness was felt most acutely in relation to the content of courses and methods of assessment. There were specific problems in the Faculty of Arts, where students could hardly fail to notice significant differences from one department to the next. In the History Department, McQueen in particular encouraged student participation, offering his third-year class the opportunity to influence the lecture program and replacing the much despised end of year examination with a long essay. (At the same time, he maintained firm control over where the course was headed.) Psychology appeared by contrast conservative and intransigent. According to Julius Roe, the Chairman of the Students’ Association Education Committee, Psychology students were expected ‘to regurgitate textbooks, their initiative was stifled and they were assessed like the reflexive rats they were studying’. Students began to ask: if History could give them what they wanted, why not other departments? When staff resisted, they were branded authoritarian and reactionary.

Students such as Michael Dunn, a steely Maoist who was President of the Students’ Association in 1974, and Roe, his equally committed but rather more humorously successful, saw the contest within the University as part of the struggle for ‘a self-managed socialist society’. ‘For students’, wrote Roe, ‘the struggle must be to bring the university into society as a whole and its struggles against racism, sexism, and exploitation but it must also be to end this injustice within the university. Neither struggle can succeed without the other.’ They wanted ‘relevance’. Gibb, and many academics who shared his views, was dismissive: students, he wrote, like industrial workers, were ‘concerned to know how little they might do for how much’. Roe responded that students, in fighting the University, were fighting the capitalist system.

The simmering discontent exploded into direct action a few weeks after Orientation in 1974. After a lunchtime meeting in the Union Court to discuss educational issues, about a hundred students adjourned to the Mills Room on the top floor of the Chancellery, where Council meetings were usually held. As night fell, most of them left the building; but thirty or so staged an overnight sit-in. When Council members convened for their scheduled meeting the next morning, the students presented them with a series of demands: for control of course content to be equally shared by staff and students; for students to be able to choose their own means of assessment; for an end to overcrowded classes by the repetition of lectures and tutorials; and for the establishment of a Women’s Studies course, whose content was to be decided by the women of the University: a new proposal which signified that women’s voices were starting to be heard in the precincts of the Union.

The Board of SGS, in a tense meeting in Melville Hall with some three hundred students, accepted these demands as ‘desirable objectives’ and set up a committee comprising equal numbers of staff and students—the ‘10/10 Committee’—to decide how they might be implemented. Negotiations then dragged on for several months, as the committee’s proposals were referred back to the faculties and departments. There were compromises and signs of progress, but also of resistance from various
parts of the campus. Fearing they might lose the gains they had already made, the student activists became increasingly frustrated.

The crunch came in August. The Board, meeting in the Mills Room to consider the report of the 10/10 Committee, overturned its previous decision and the principle of equal voting by staff and students on course content and methods of assessment. As the meeting continued, a group of students marched on the Chancery, only to find the doors locked and the Acting Registrar, the diminutive Helen Cumpston, barring their way. They then moved across to the Chancelry Annexe (the old Union Building), where Patricia White, the Assistant Registrar in charge of student records, had taken the precaution of placing the current files under lock and key. In the meantime, a small group, inspired no doubt by revolutionary practice abroad, targeted the centre of communications and raided the University telephone exchange, located in the gatehouse at University House.

For Noel Dunbar, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor who witnessed the proceedings, this was the limit: without adequate communications the University was at risk, especially if an emergency should occur in one of the science laboratories. After consultation with colleagues, he took the unprecedented step of calling in the police. Twenty-seven students were carted off to the watch-house, which was what some of them had presumably hoped for; and the shaken switchboard operators were left to resume their duties as best they could.

A month later, after another Chancelry sit-in, Williams announced that he had accepted a senior position in the New Zealand public service and would therefore be leaving Canberra in February, less than two years after taking office as Vice-Chancellor. A journalist remarked that he was leaving with obvious relief. At Otago he had been an energetic and resourceful vice-chancellor, with a firm grasp on administrative and financial issues, and popular among staff and students. But the placid students of Dunedin had given him no indication of what to expect in Canberra and no experience of how to handle recalcitrant undergraduates. Cheery and well-meaning, he was no politician: and that in those years was what a vice-chancellor most needed to be.

For Williams, the ANU represented an unhappy interlude in an otherwise distinguished career. On other members of the University, the Troubles left deeper scars. White, like Plowman and many other members of the administrative staff, was almost maternal in her relations with students and had always enjoyed friendly contact with them. But confrontations with her erstwhile friends, now cold and sometimes threatening, was a distressing experience which left her with a bitter taste for many years to come. Clark was deeply pained by the events, especially since several of the leading revolutionaries, including Dunn and Roe, came from his own department, in seeming defiance of the humane, liberal values that he had always espoused. The confrontation hastened his retirement.
Nobody reacted more bitterly than Crisp, the old Labor man, biographer of Ben Chifley and staunch defender of the university as a bastion of freedom. In October 1974, two months after the raid on the telephone exchange, he delivered the annual John Curtin Lecture, taking as his text Dedman's comments back in 1949 about the need to cherish academic freedom. Now, he declared, there were new 'gravediggers of academic freedom', who challenged the crucial freedom of all academics to determine the content of their own courses and research programs, and their methods of teaching and assessment. These were the 'Marxists with Grammar School accents', the 'hard-core campus ideologists, a self-consciously "alienated" small sector of frequently affluent and privileged middle-class youth born into a generation of conspicuously full employment'. These 'disaffected darlings' had nothing to complain about, yet were out to destroy the University; and the University, seemingly ignorant of the lessons from overseas, was bent on surrender, its Chancellor even appearing to offer the militants encouragement. Crisp had had enough.

Throughout the tussles of 1974, Coombs was never far from centre stage. As chairman of Council during the sit-ins, he found himself playing a mediating role between staff and students. Rather than resisting the protests, he welcomed them as a rejuvenating force, shaking the University from its innate conservatism. Just as the ANU had been founded in the belief that society should be transformed, so the current generation was questioning underlying social values. The University, he told Council members and students crowded together in the Mills Room, had failed to take sufficient account of student opinion. He had no intrinsic objection to sit-ins: while it would have been pleasanter if the students had asked to be invited, some reprehensible behaviour was a small price to pay to ensure the University was revitalised by healthy debate. Impolite activism was always preferable to apathy.

'I believe in controversy within the university', he told a student forum during Orientation Week in 1975; although he conceded that he was perhaps a little remote from its effects. In fact, Coombs probably had a better understanding of the protest movement than anyone else in the University, and more reason to fear where it was headed. By the time he eventually retired as Chancellor in 1976, there were already signs that it had run its course.

By mid-1975 Richard Johnson, the Professor of Classics and Dean of Students who had spent much of the previous year trying to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of staff and student demands, was cautiously optimistic. Students were becoming increasingly involved in discussions on course content, and in nearly every unit assessment procedures were under review. The staff seemed more accommodating and the students more subdued, still firm on the subject of examinations, but now equally anxious on issues relating to housing and undergraduate stipends.

On the face of it, the students seemed to have got what they were after. But on closer inspection, the changes fell far short of their demands. Certainly, students were well represented on this committee and that; but staff maintained effective control of course content and methods of teaching. It was one thing to gain a voice on various committees, but quite another to make that voice effective, especially since the students were themselves by no means clear on what if anything they wanted, beyond the right to have a say.
Examinations were giving way to various forms of continuous assessment, as the students had wished; but continuous assessment did not necessarily mean that each student was able to choose how he or she was to be assessed. Ironically, the need to produce a steady stream of papers and perform well in tutorials imposed more restraints on undergraduates than the end of year examination had ever done. Bright students who in past years might have devoted the first two terms to politics or socialising were now bound to their desks soon after Orientation Week. They had little time to organise protest meetings, and still less to attend the innumerable meetings of which the academics seemed inordinately fond. Students in the latter half of the decade faced the added pressures imposed by a deteriorating job market. No longer did a degree guarantee suitable employment; now it paid to do well.

University was becoming a serious business. Coombs no doubt lamented the change, as he had regretted the demise of post-war optimism. Many academics welcomed the restoration of staff ‘prerogatives’, not noticing, perhaps, that they had never really lost them. Diana Riddell, who had served as Administrative Secretary to the Students’ Association since 1965, remained in that office until 1985 when she decided to move to another part of the University, having concluded that student politics had lost their zest.

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Graduation

Sir Robert Menzies, recently retired as Prime Minister, attended the Conferring of Degrees ceremony in 1966, held in the new Canberra Theatre, to receive the degree of honorary Doctor of Laws and deliver the graduation address. As he described it to his successor, Harold Holt, the occasion was something of a trial:

By the time I got to my feet (long, long after processing began) I was nearly blind. The lighting was really fierce. For a break I would turn my back on my next door neighbour, Hugh Ennor, who appeared to be suffering no discomfort whatever, and concentrate on poor Nugget Coombs who manfully doffed the headgear five hundred times; smiled about five hundred times; presented a Roll about five hundred times. After I reached the rostrum it took me a minute or so to pick out the audience. All in all, you were lucky to be out of it.

As this was Menzies’ twentieth honorary doctorate, his lack of enthusiasm may be forgiven. But to most of the other new graduates, including John Dedman, who was adding the earned degree to his honorary one, the ceremony meant a great deal.

Although the numbers of PhDs produced by Australian universities were increasing rapidly each year, they were still a rarity and therefore much in demand, especially within the rapidly expanding tertiary education system. New PhD graduates could assume that they would be offered jobs that related fairly directly to the sorts of research they had just completed. Many had been offered appointments long before graduation, and were eagerly snatched up the moment they submitted their theses.
Some went on to make research their careers, usually in the universities or the CSIRO. Occasionally in industry. A few entered the middle levels of the public service, where they were generally headed for quick promotion, or joined commerce and industry at salaries which acknowledged the letters after their names.

The Bachelor graduates, too, had no trouble finding jobs. We do not know where the 1966 graduates were headed; but a 1969 survey suggested that all who graduated that year soon had a job, unless they were continuing their studies or training to be a teacher. Over a quarter of the graduates went into the Commonwealth public service. As the survey showed, ANU students were fortunate in having the nation’s largest employer of graduates on the University’s doorstep.

Many of the 1976 graduates, whether they wore a Bachelor’s mortarboard or a Doctor’s cap, were not so lucky. A national survey of first degree graduates from all Australian universities showed that 8 per cent of ANU students who had qualified in the previous year were still seeking full-time employment about the time of their graduation. This was a little higher than the national average, and more than double the 1969 figure. Doctoral graduates generally found themselves a job, but whether it was the job they wanted was quite another matter, varying sharply from one discipline to the next.

A university education meant more than a meal ticket; but exactly how much more depended on the individual, and in any case seemed to be changing over time. In 1968 Partridge, reflecting with Coombs on the nature of student protest, lamented the growing tendency to think of universities as training for economic and other social vocations. ‘The production of professional competence in a specialised academic discipline has become increasingly the central goal of university teaching ... Educationally I believe this to be disastrous’. There was, he argued, too much grading and ticketing, which was mainly for the sake of filtering students into their proper niche in society. He wanted more informality in university education, which ‘would no doubt produce more inefficiency from the point of social employment, but also perhaps, greater spontaneity and intellectual independence and initiative in the people we educate’.

Partridge was conservative, in that he wanted to restore some of the traditional values of university education. He wanted above all to give students the freedom to think. In the same sense, the protesters of 1974 were conservative. They were also revolutionary in that, having lost confidence in their teachers’ power to restore traditional values, they demanded a larger say in their own education.

In 1974 the nature of a university degree was the burning issue. Under the title ‘Just a piece of paper?’, the ANU News devoted its November edition to exploring the relevance of the degree in the outside world, presenting articles by eight graduates from various parts of the University. Bettina Arndt, who graduated in 1971 as a Bachelor of Science majoring in Psychology, and then took out a Master’s degree from
the University of New South Wales before becoming a professional psychologist specialising in sex therapy, thought her years as a student gave her little preparation for the outside world. So much of her time was spent in ‘a competitive mark-grabbing scramble for distinction’ that she forgot to enjoy learning. ‘In the race through units that is essential to degree-acquisition there is little time for questioning, for innovation and curiosity.’

Andrew Bain, who graduated BA in 1972, likewise doubted whether his degree in Political Science contributed much to his current employment as an administrator at the fledgling Murdoch University, though he conceded that it might have helped him develop his capacity for critical thinking. He was more positive about his experiences outside the curriculum. As a prominent student politician, he developed skills in public speaking, debate and decision making. ‘Those years increased my political awareness, enhanced my ability and willingness to question the accepted, and greatly expanded the breadth of my personal and intellectual horizons.’ Twenty years later he was Deputy Registrar at Murdoch University.

Susan Ryan, a Sydney graduate who took out an MA from the ANU in 1973, was more positive; she believed her study of English literature was an appropriate preparation for her role as an education lobbyist. She later became Minister for Education in a Labor government, before embarking on a career in private enterprise.

Each response was illuminating. Overall they tended to reflect the critical spirit of the times. A decade earlier they would have been different; but then, presumably, nobody would have asked the question. Two decades later, they might be different.

The graduation ceremony in Llewellyn Hall, 1976. Photograph by Bob Cooper.
again. And the same students might change their view of the University over time. Penny Chapman, who took out an Honours degree in Arts in 1972 and later became a leading television producer and director, acknowledged a debt to the University, remarking in 1994 that ‘The influence of ANU on my student days grows more significant with each passing year’.

Stephen Padgham and Chris Swinbank likewise reflected on their student years with affection and a touch of nostalgia. Padgham had spent ten years in Britain as a teacher and part-time reviewer of dramatic productions before returning to Australia to teach at a Canberra high school. Swinbank had lived in the United States, where he played professional football and made money from dealing in stamps; in 1995 he was the affluent proprietor of a Canberra business specialising in used government furniture. Both confirmed the repeated claims of the Orientation Handbook that students benefited from their university years in proportion to what they put into them.

Signing the Graduation Register, April 1976.