A new generation of students

Who were the students?

Despite what Peter Karmel called ‘the cult of the big’, the ANU remained, in student numbers, a medium sized university. The 1976 figure of 5058 undergraduates increased to 8051 in 1995, while postgraduate numbers rose more sharply from 851 to 2327. Expansion of both groups was concentrated in the 1990s. While Masters’ degree and graduate diploma candidates accounted for much of the postgraduate increase, the numbers of PhD scholars nearly doubled. Although the ANU’s share of PhD students throughout Australia fell from 12 to 5 per cent as the degree became more common, the high proportion of such candidates remained one of the University’s distinguishing features.

From 1976 to 1982 undergraduate numbers in fact fell, as they did in other universities not cushioned by quotas. Then there was a slow and erratic revival until 1990, when new undergraduate enrolments rose suddenly by 18 per cent. These broad trends, as well as variations from one year to the next, were due to various changes: in demography, government policies (especially relating to tuition fees and scholarships), economic conditions and employment prospects, and public attitudes to participation in higher education.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s fewer students went straight from school to university. At the ANU school leavers dropped alarmingly by one-third, while part-timers increased. Hence the undergraduate population aged significantly, from an average age of 21 in 1976 to 26 in 1982. In that year over one-quarter of undergraduates were at least 30 years old. Where many students had once attended university to receive something loosely described as ‘a general education’ or because it was the thing to do, the new generation of students had a clearer idea of what they were there for. More often now, a degree was seen as a means to an end, the end being employment in an increasingly competitive job market. Worsening employment prospects in the mid-1980s helped make universities more attractive to school leavers, who made up a growing proportion of new enrolments. By 1986 the average age of ANU undergraduates had fallen back to 20. In the early 1990s the undergraduates remained collectively, like their colleagues throughout Australia, both young and earnest.

Vacation Scholars Jodie Garrett from the University of Queensland and Brett Yeomans from the University of Adelaide conduct an experiment in the Research School of Chemistry in January 1992. Introduced by Bart Bok at Mount Stromlo in the 1950s, the Vacation Scholarship Scheme aimed to encourage recent graduates to proceed to further studies. Photograph by Graham Tidy.

Canberra Times.
The gender balance continued to move gradually in favour of women. In 1982, female students for the first time made up a majority of new undergraduate enrolments, and from 1985 there were more undergraduate women on campus than men. The proportion of female postgraduates also grew year by year, from 32 per cent of the total in 1985 to 45 per cent in 1995. For undergraduates and postgraduates combined, females outnumbered males from 1991.

Until 1984, most aspiring undergraduates who met the basic admission requirements were permitted to enrol at the ANU. Teachers and administrators worried that the quality of students was declining, and sought to improve standards by increasing the number of National Undergraduate Scholarships. The exception was the Faculty of Law which, like law faculties in other universities, maintained consistently high admission standards. As pressure for places grew, the University was able to raise entry levels, and by the 1990s there was intense competition for places in other faculties, especially the Faculty of Economics and Commerce. The high quality of students was suggested by the large proportion, over one-third, who proceeded to Honours or postgraduate degrees.

During the late 1970s, the numbers of interstate students—meaning those outside the Canberra–Queanbeyan region—declined, partly because fewer public servants were being transferred (with their children) from other capitals. In 1976 interstate students made up one in three of all undergraduates; six years later this figure was one in four, rising in the late 1980s and early 1990s to reach one in three again by 1995. These figures suggested that, as in previous years, most undergraduates were attracted to the ANU because it was close to home. Yet new undergraduates, asked in 1993 why they chose the ANU, gave almost equal weight to the specific courses offered, with the University’s reputation coming not far behind. That reputation was confirmed in the 1990s by several official and unofficial surveys, including the Good Universities Guide, first published in 1991, which gave the ANU an ‘excellent’ rating for staff–student ratios, commended the quality of the library, and remarked that ‘opportunities to continue beyond the undergraduate level are without parallel anywhere in the country’. Quality Assurance reviews conducted by the government in 1993 and 1994 placed the ANU in the top band for teaching and research led to additional funding. Many academics regarded such assessments with scepticism. Nevertheless, their impact on potential students, especially those from other countries, was often telling.

Teachers and administrators closely monitored employment figures for ANU graduates from one year to the next. Generally they mirrored national employment
trends; and generally ANU students had a better chance of finding full-time employment than the average Australian university graduate, owing in part to the proximity of the Commonwealth public service. Not surprisingly more ANU graduates took jobs in the public than in the private sector. The proportion of ANU graduates entering the public sector was the highest of all Australian universities and the proportion entering the private sector was the lowest.

In 1976 Anthony Low had warned against adjusting degree courses (except in special cases) to the perceived needs of future employers. The ANU, he said, should not focus on target vocations, but should encourage its graduates to be versatile, able to accommodate themselves quickly to the needs of a changing society. Nearly two decades later, the University continued to offer a balance between traditional scholarship and professional training. Nevertheless, few students enrolled at the ANU (or any other Australian university) in the 1990s without some idea of how their degree would lead them towards a specific career.

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**Student politics**

In 1976 Elizabeth O'Brien finished her degree and completed her term as President of the ANU Students' Association. Except for a year's break in 1970, she had been a full-time or part-time student from 1969, and a prominent figure on campus. During 'the Troubles' she was at the forefront of student politics, contributing especially to the radical feminist movement and the efforts to get courses in Women's Studies up and running. Known in the Chancery as 'the barefoot contessa', owing to her preference for attending Council meetings shoeless, her departure from the campus marked an end to a turbulent era of student activism. (Two years later she came back to run the campus community radio station 2XX, where in 1996 she was still Station Co-ordinator.)

The new executive of the Students' Association, headed by Jon Nicholson as President, leaned like its predecessors to the left; but its members also believed that the Association's activities should not be influenced by politics. Their main interests were close to home, such as student accommodation, cheaper books, fortnightly flea markets and campus entertainment. They were also keen to improve the popular image of students, much dented in previous years, and to improve relations between students and staff across the campus. Later executives followed this pattern, generally avoiding ideological issues. Ian Warden, resident satirist on the *Canberra Times* (and a PhD student in History in the early 1970s until he realised, as he put it, that his thesis would have a readership of three: its examiners), remarked in 1978 that the
mass of ANU students was orthodox and boring, and that the current editor of Woroni was as ideologically committed as his neighbour’s golden retriever. Jack Waterford, another former ANU student and Canberra Times journalist (and later its Editor) who had marched with megaphone in hand at the head of many demonstrations, lamented in the mid-1980s that students had not organised a memorable or well-attended demonstration since 1972.

Waterford conceded a tendency among old revolutionaries to romanticise the past and mourn its loss. Yet there could be no denying that student politics in later years were often unedifying. In the absence of any issue to compare with conscription or apartheid, the campus, like other campuses throughout Australia, became a battleground between left and right which reflected and sometimes parodied political conflicts outside the University.

The big issue of the late 1970s and early 1980s was voluntary student unionism. Under the University statutes, all students were obliged to pay a General Services Fee, part of which was allocated to the Students’ Association, which in turn paid a fee on behalf of each of its members to the Australian Union of Students (AUS). Both the local association and the national body were dominated through the 1970s by the left. Both were outspoken not just on educational matters, but also in support of such causes as Palestinian Liberation.

In 1976 an Arts student, Peter Berzins, sought exemption from membership of the Students’ Association because its policy of supporting abortion law reform conflicted with his religious principles. The case led to questions being asked in parliament, where the Minister for Education in Malcolm Fraser’s Liberal-National Party government, Senator John Carrick, initially resisted pressure to intervene, stressing the need to uphold the University’s autonomy. Berzins eventually paid his fees; but his resistance contributed to a national campaign by Liberal students who, emboldened by the government’s attempts ‘to pull the trades unions into line’, sought to destroy compulsory student unionism, especially membership of the much despised AUS.

The issue involved matters of principle of a kind that face every democracy. Yet the pursuit of high principles often degenerated into low farce. The campaign for voluntary unionism on the ANU campus was coordinated by an Economics student, Alistair Walton, and an Arts student, Michael Yabsley, leading lights in the ANU Liberal Society who, having failed to win control of the Students’ Association, sought to impose their views by other means. These included purloining all the copies of the 1978 Orientation Handbook in order to insert a Liberal advertisement, and systematically disrupting Association meetings, a tactic which resulted in some forcible evictions and the occasional brawl. At one meeting in 1978, after several ‘serjeants-at-arms’ had been unable to throw Walton out, the left-controlled meeting, in desperation, called in the police. The New South Wales Young Liberals, the official youth arm of the Liberal Party, thought their ANU colleagues had gone too far; but Walton responded that the ANU Students’ Association was like parliament, where the Opposition had a right to pursue its own ends. Yabsley claimed that he and his colleagues were fighting for ‘fairness, justice and the Australian way of life—the rights of the individual’. He later became a New South Wales government minister.
In the meantime, the ANU Liberals urged their friends in parliament to introduce legislation to ban compulsory unionism at the ANU. While Carrick remained opposed, most of his Cabinet colleagues, including the Prime Minister, who had experienced rough treatment at the hands of student demonstrators, supported voluntary unionism. Despite vigorous protests by the ANU Council, a march by students on Parliament House, and some division within government ranks, parliament in 1979 amended the ANU Act to ensure that, while the institutions would continue to collect fees, the money would be passed on to the various societies in proportion to their membership. The constraints were removed after Labor’s return to power in 1983.

While the number of serious politicians varied from year to year, there were never more than could comfortably fit into the often chaotic offices of the Students’ Association in the Union Building. Usually only a quarter of eligible students bothered to vote at the annual elections for the Association executive. Nevertheless, one successful candidate claimed that the ANU was one of the most politically conscious universities in the country.

During the 1980s the Association continued to be controlled by the left in various guises, sometimes allied with mainstream Labor politics and sometimes not. The exception was in 1982 when, after a Committee on Disputed Returns overturned the result of a previous election, an unusually large number of voters elected the President of the Liberal Society and Arts/Law student, Gary Humphries, as President of the Association. Humphries promised reform; and while some commentators confessed to some uncertainty about what he stood for, one of them remarked that he sounded more reassuring than the ‘wild and incoherent ravings’ of the left. He later became an ACT government minister, from which vantage point he reflected that the campus was a good training ground for federal and state politics.

At the 1989 election students turned out in larger than usual numbers to elect Back on Track candidates, who stood for ‘down to earth competence and an end to obsessive ideology’. While the group emphasised that they were not a political party, their commitment to improved services and value for money suggested that they knew how to win votes. After two years in office, they were defeated by the Green Alliance, which emphasised environmental issues and student welfare. The Greens were inclined to the left; but in keeping with political trends throughout the country, they were also keen to present themselves as good managers.

The Dawkins revolution gave students an issue that most of them could agree on. In order to increase the funds available for higher education, the government introduced in 1989 the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, or HECS, which required all undergraduates and postgraduates, excepting recipients of exemption scholarships, to contribute an annual fee, initially set at $1800 for a full-time student undertaking a standard program of study, and payable in advance or deferred until after the student had entered the workforce. As the Labor government in the 1970s had abolished fees, many students regarded HECS as a betrayal of Labor principles, and the link between the student left and mainstream Labor became increasingly tenuous.

At the same time the government, having signalled that its priority was to provide
the necessary funding for school leavers to enter university, took the unprecedented step of allowing universities to impose as a substitute for HECS charges their own fees on certain postgraduate courses, specifically those designed for professional upgrading or extension in employment. These arrangements transferred some of the responsibility for funding higher education to the universities, along with some of the opprobrium. The advantage to the universities of introducing fees was that they were allowed to retain them. The ANU, like other universities, therefore proceeded to impose fees comparable with the HECS charges on a variety of Masters and graduate diploma courses. Yet no sooner was the system in place than the government laid down revised guidelines requiring university fees to be at least double the HECS contribution (as discounted for payment in advance). Graduate students everywhere were understandably alarmed, not least because of the implied possibility of future increases. Then in 1993 the government relaxed the guidelines to allow universities to extend their charges to all postgraduate courses, whether or not they were related to obtaining professional qualifications. The ANU, again in common with other universities, took the hint, and set down fees for the following year for most programs comprising coursework or a combination of coursework and research. Programs devoted solely to research were excluded owing to the University’s research commitment. And to ensure that the fees were restricted to students who had a capacity to earn sufficient to pay their way, they were applied only to those enrolled on a part-time basis.

The Postgraduate and Research Students’ Association protested that graduate tuition fees breached the University’s principles of access and equity, and many staff members agreed. Yet so long as the fees were applied only to those students who were likely to be already in the workforce, and who in many cases were sponsored by their employers, resistance was contained. In 1994, however, the University sought to impose an annual fee of $5000 from 1995 onwards on students in the Legal Workshop and gave notice that it intended to make this eight-month course fully self-funding.

Uproar followed. The Legal Workshop, which followed the LLB course and led to the award of a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice, was full time; and, as the means by which most students completing their law degrees qualified to practise as lawyers, it was in effect compulsory. If students were required to pay the full cost of the workshop, the total expense of qualifying in law, including accrued HECS payments from previous years, could be over $24,000. Although the University suggested that practising lawyers would have little difficulty repaying their debts, students in the Law Faculty rebelled, pointing out that students who were already well into their courses would be obliged to pay fees they had not been told about in advance. Others joined
them, seeing the charge as the thin edge of a wedge that could open the way to substantial fees on all full-time graduate courses, and undergraduate courses as well.

The proposal to impose fees for the Legal Workshop came to Council for approval in September 1994. Two days before the scheduled meeting, students occupied the Mills Room in the Chancellery Building, as part of the wider National Day of Action in a campaign against fees called by the National Union of Students, the successor to the AUS. On the day of the meeting, they demonstrated with the help of a double bass, clarinet, drums and a juggler, but the proposal went ahead. An eight-day occupation of the Chancellery by about 150 students helped force the issue back onto Council’s agenda. At its next meeting, preceded by another storming of the Chancellery, Council narrowly rejected a rescission motion, but agreed to various compromises, including inquiries into the Legal Workshop and into loan schemes which would allow students to repay the fees once they had graduated.

Some students engaged in the Chancellery occupations imagined they were re-enacting the protests of twenty years earlier that had survived in legend. There were certainly resemblances: the sense of injustice, the sit-in tactics, the venue, the frustration of the University administration that eventually led to police being called in to drag the demonstrators away. But there were also differences: the protesters of the 1990s, unlike their predecessors, were described by a reporter as ‘peaceful and orderly’ (notwithstanding injuries sustained by a pro vice-chancellor and a security guard, and significant damage to property), vacuuming the Mills Room daily, covering the furniture with plastic sheets, and even organising a formal dinner one evening. Above all, while both generations took a stand on matters of principle, the issues of the 1990s related more to the pockets of the protesters than to their hearts and minds.

== International students ==

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the University sent its scholars overseas for postgraduate training. Forty years later all Australian universities were engaged in a determined drive to bring overseas students to Australia.

Foreign students had always made up a large proportion of ANU postgraduates. During the 1970s and 1980s about one postgraduate in three came from overseas. By the mid-1990s, following the introduction of full fees, the ratio had fallen to about one in four. Undergraduates from overseas averaged 4 per cent of all ANU undergraduates in the 1970s, increased to a maximum of 8.4 per cent in 1986, and settled to 5.6 per cent in the mid-1990s. By that time, undergraduate and postgraduate students combined made up some 13 per cent of total student numbers,
expressed as effective full-time student units (EFTSUs), which placed the ANU in the middle range of Australian universities in terms of their overseas student components. What made the ANU unusual was the high percentage of postgraduates, who comprised a little over half the overseas total.

Until the 1980s a large proportion of overseas students came from developing countries and were supported by scholarships offered by the University, or by the Australian government through the Colombo Plan or other development assistance programs. An Overseas Students Charge, estimated at 20 to 30 per cent of the full cost of a student’s education, was introduced in 1980. Midway through the decade the government began to look to education as a source of export income. The Overseas Students Charge was gradually raised, and in 1988 the government announced that subsidy arrangements would be phased out and that overseas students would be required in future to pay full fees. Universities were encouraged to become entrepreneurs and to play their part in developing a new industry in the export of education and training services.

The ANU entered the field in 1987 when a team led by Deane Terrell, Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Commerce, visited Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, bringing back with them preliminary enrolments for 21 students, who became the University’s first full fee paying students. Two years later the University set up an International Education Office to market the ANU overseas. As other Australian universities were doing the same thing, the ANU found itself in a highly competitive marketplace, where success was determined as much by the quality of marketing as by the quality of the ‘product’. By 1995 full fee paying students, supported by themselves, their family, their friends or their employers, made up 87 per cent of all overseas enrolments.
The University consistently maintained a policy of treating full fee paying students no differently from any others. Nevertheless, the changes in funding arrangements inevitably influenced the way in which overseas students (excluding postgraduate research scholars) were perceived within the University. Where they had once been beneficiaries, now a large majority of them could be defined literally as clients who received a service for a fee. Some courses, such as the MBA ‘Managing Business in Asia’ program, which reserved one place in three for overseas students, were shaped or adapted to meet overseas student needs.

The changes also influenced where students were coming from. In the mid-1980s the main sources were Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Hong Kong, Singapore, the United States and Britain. A decade later, the largest numbers came from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Singapore and the United States. There was a marked difference between the origins of postgraduates and undergraduates. Postgraduates, who usually received some form of sponsorship, came chiefly from China, Indonesia and the Philippines, while undergraduates, who more often than not paid full fees, came mostly from Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore. About seventy countries were represented on campus, with undergraduates from Malaysia and Hong Kong making up the two largest overseas student groups.

While undergraduates enrolled in all faculties and a wide range of courses, the Faculty of Economics, later styled Economics and Commerce, had always attracted the largest numbers of overseas undergraduates. In the mid-1990s, some 30 per cent of overseas students were studying for degrees in Commerce, followed by Arts, Science, Economics and Commerce/Law. Overseas postgraduates were most numerous in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, where there were large numbers researching for PhDs and many others pursuing Masters or graduate diploma courses, especially in some aspect of Development Studies. There were also large groups of PhD scholars in the Faculty of Arts, the Research School of Physical Sciences and Engineering and the Research School of Social Sciences.

Statistical reports made international students into a distinctive group, but in most respects they were far from homogeneous. Students from particular countries, including Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong, formed national associations which provided a focal group for social activities. Other friendship groups formed in University House, the colleges and the halls of residence, especially those which provided self-catering facilities. In 1992 some enterprising undergraduates formed the International Students Society, which published a newsletter, offered assistance on educational and welfare matters, and promised to ensure that the University gave full fee paying students their money’s worth.

The new emphasis on marketing led to surveys which asked detailed questions about the overseas student population. The results were encouraging. A 1994 survey revealed that most overseas students, whether postgraduate or undergraduate, chose the ANU because of its reputation, either in general, in research or in their specific field of interest. Once settled in Canberra, they were impressed by the helpfulness of teaching and administrative staff, the quality of University facilities and the advantages of living and
studying in Canberra. On the other hand, some offered the complaint familiar to residents of Canberra that the city was boring, with too little night life. Nevertheless, over 90 per cent of students said they would recommend the ANU to a friend or relative.

The full fee paying students of the 1990s benefited from the University’s efforts to generate income from the education export industry. They also inherited a tradition of pastoral care that reached back to the days of Canberra University College. From the time they were met at the airport to the occasion of their farewell formal dinner, they were shepherded through their courses with the aid of support services widely recognised to be among the best in Australia. While the ANU was more bureaucratised than in earlier years, it was still small enough to maintain some of those traditions of student care which ranked alongside academic reputation as valuable marketing tools.

The language of marketing was pervasive: at a ‘Going Home Dinner’ in 1993, the Graduate Affairs Officer even suggested jokingly that the University’s (projected) alumni association could be seen as a means of providing ‘after sales service’. Nevertheless, the ANU’s relationship with international students was not solely commercial. Foreign postgraduate scholars had always been an integral part of its research activities. A few schools and departments relied on overseas scholars to maintain their research programs. When in the 1980s it seemed that government policies would impede the supply of students from overseas, there was an outcry, with some departments protesting that they could not manage without them.

The University continued to provide educational services to developing countries, using some of the income received from full fee paying students to offer scholarships. This helped allay any suspicions that its recruitment policies were purely market-driven. Postgraduate and undergraduate overseas students were also valued for their contribution to the ‘internationalisation’ of the University, and hence to its educational and cultural enrichment. Arrangements with universities in Asia, Europe and North America enabled ANU undergraduates to spend up to a year at overseas institutions, while students from overseas institutions could spend up to a year at the ANU. These and other programs helped maintain the international perspective that had been an integral part of the ANU since its inception.

New graduates in the late 1980s.