Ken Inglis, at a grand occasion preceding a two-day seminar to mark his retirement in 1994 as W.K. Hancock Professor of History, told a story about Hancock in later life:

One day, when he was into his twentieth or so year of retirement, he came into my room—his room, as I suspect he still thought of it—shut the door, and asked if I had heard that there was a danger of so-and-so being appointed our next Director. ‘I don’t know about you’, he said, ‘but if that happened I should feel obliged to resign.’ He didn’t have to.

As Inglis pointed out, Hancock remained a Visiting Fellow longer—in fact much longer—than he had been a professor. He continued to research, write and publish (including the second volume of his Smuts biography and a pathbreaking environmental history of the Monaro region south of Canberra), to participate in University affairs, to give radio broadcasts, and to offer paternal advice to young scholars about their thesis topics and the craft of history. He was still attending seminars until six months before his death in 1988, aged 90.

For many academics, obliged to retire at the age of 65, the transition from employment to retirement meant little beyond less money and more freedom, especially from administrative chores. This applied most obviously to those engaged in full-time research. Noel Butlin, aged 64, ceased formal employment in RSSS one afternoon in 1986 and arrived at the usual time the next morning to get on with the job of writing two more books, one on the economy of Aboriginal Australia, the other on Australia’s colonial economy, both of which were published after his death from leukaemia in 1991. John Passmore, retiring in 1979, moved freely between the History of Ideas Unit, where he was a Visiting Fellow, and McMaster University in Canada, where he was Chief Editor of a major project to publish a new edition of the works of Bertrand Russell. His fellow philosopher Jack Smart, retiring in 1985, and the mathematician Bernard Neumann, in 1974, continued in the mid-1990s to write, accrue honours, and bicycle to the campus each day from opposite sides of town. Inglis spent much of his first year as Emeritus Professor visiting his scattered family, finishing one book, starting another, presenting and attending seminars, and taking a meticulous editorial pencil to numerous theses and prospective books, including this one.

The transition meant more for academics in The Faculties. John Mulvaney, freed
in 1985 from the burdens of undergraduate teaching, became a Visiting Fellow in RSSS, then honorary Secretary to the Academy of the Humanities, published a book and several articles, and continued to speak out, often angrily, about issues relating to heritage and the humanities. In 1988 he was awarded the ANZAAS Medal for unrolling the historical map of Australia’s Aboriginal people. Mulvaney’s successor as Professor of Prehistory, Isabel McBryde, retired at the end of 1994, earlier than she need have done, in order to devote herself to research and writing. Like many of her colleagues, she was soon overwhelmed by requests to read theses, present papers and attend committees, and had to remind herself of her purpose in retiring. There were others, of course, who took the meaning of ‘retirement’ seriously. Hancock’s successor, John La Nauze, when asked as he approached retiring age what he planned to do, replied that he was going to make toys for his grandchildren; though he did write a delicate memoir of the academic and essayist Walter Murdoch.

Inglis, anticipating retirement, looked forward to retaining a room (smaller than his current one), paper clips and (‘if I’m lucky’) a modem. Academics engaged in experimental science, if they wanted to keep working, usually needed more. For them retirement was often a wrench. While many retained access to a laboratory, equipment and technical assistance, these were generally less than they had been used to, and there was always the prospect of the facilities diminishing or disappearing entirely. Adrien Albert, who reached the age of 65 in 1973, regarded retirement, according to his friend and colleague Des Brown, as ‘a grievous blow’. Although he had organised for himself a visiting fellowship in the Research School of Chemistry, for some time he lamented his fate as ‘a discard on the scrapheap’ and blamed the University for letting it happen. Gradually he adjusted to his changed circumstances and settled down to work, accepting invitations on several occasions to visit the United States, conducting experiments, preparing new editions of his publications, and writing two books, one of which, on food, drugs and poisons in the human body, won him the Olle book prize from the Royal Australian Chemical Institute. He continued working, exercising daily in the gym and frequenting a Canberra coffee shop (where he eventually learned that women were not the ogres he had once thought them) until shortly before his death in 1989, aged 82.

When Frank Fenner retired in 1979, he moved from the Director’s office in the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies back to the John Curtin School. Over the past decade he had played an increasingly important part in the program to eradicate smallpox throughout the world, and in the last three years had been Chairman of the Global Commission for the Certification of Smallpox Eradication. In 1980, when the World Health Organisation officially declared that smallpox had been eradicated, he began the massive task of preparing, as senior author, a history of this remarkable achievement. Published in 1988, the book provided a detailed account of the disease and the campaign to eradicate it, and offered lessons for preventive medicine in the future. Writing history appealed to him: he also edited and wrote large portions of a History of Microbiology in Australia (1990). In the mid-1990s he was working on a history of rabbit control and a second edition of a history of the
Australian Academy of Science, which he had first written (with a colleague) during his years at CRES.

The ANU’s most controversial retirement was that of Sir John Eccles in 1966, three years after winning the Nobel Prize and two years before the statutory date. Eccles left the University to take up a research position at the Institute for Biomedical Research in Chicago, where he was promised ‘virtually unlimited funds’ and the opportunity to continue working indefinitely. While he stated that the offer was too good to refuse, and that he would have accepted it irrespective of retirement considerations, he was also critical of mandatory retirement at 65. The Australian tabloids made the issue a front page story, implying that the ANU had forced him out.

In fact, the University had already arranged for Eccles to continue working with his own equipment in new laboratories, though no longer as head of the Department of Physiology. He would also be appointed University Fellow, a status reserved for exceptional retirees and so far accorded only to Hancock. This position would be available for up to three years and included a substantial stipend. But Eccles evidently regarded the matter as one of principle. Eighteen months earlier he had told the Australian Association of Gerontology that Australia did not make best use of its older people and had called for more flexibility in determining the age of retirement, mentioning the ‘psychological cruelty’ that often occurred when a person left the workforce. Now, rather than expose himself to that cruelty, he embarked on a new life (with a new wife) in a new country, never to return to Australia. While his colleagues in the John Curtin School gave him a lively send-off and the University commissioned the artist Judy Cassab to paint his portrait, senior members of the administration remained sore at the manner of his going.

Eccles was right to anticipate many productive years ahead: after moving from Chicago to the State University of New York at Buffalo, he eventually ‘retired’ to Switzerland, where he continued to publish and inspire until well into his eighties. For Oliphant, on the other hand, the transition at the age of 65 from a position of authority to one of grace and favour was a difficult one. He was offered a University Fellowship for two years and honorary appointments thereafter. His colleagues urged him to engage in ‘biographical writing’ (which would cost their school no money), but he found it difficult to devote himself continuously to writing ‘without the relaxation of active experimental work’. Everyone was delighted when he was invited to become
Two past and one present head of RSPhysS at ‘Founders Day’ in 1984. Founders Day, which includes a morning of seminars, is held each year close to Sir Mark Oliphant’s birthday. Left to right: Sir Ernest Titterton, John Carver and Oliphant.

Governor of South Australia (where he was soon joined in the office of Lieutenant-Governor by his old colleague, Walter Crocker, who had returned to Adelaide at the end of a distinguished diplomatic career).

There was no perfect solution to the problem of retirement from the University, any more than society at large had solved other problems of growing old. Eccles pointed to the economic benefits of older people working longer; Fenner, 30 years later, saw no reason why academics over 65 should ‘plug the system up’, especially when so many young people were trying to join it. In the mid-1990s, when ‘grey power’ forced the abolition of the compulsory retirement age, the University’s administrators wondered how many academics would choose to remain beyond 65. Two things were certain: if salary budgets remained unchanged, for every member of staff who stayed longer, another would have to retire younger, or one or two aspiring academics would have to wait; and if the age of 65 ceased to have significance, the traditional concept of academic tenure (if it had not been abolished already) would eventually lose meaning.

The parts and the whole

No vantage point offers a comprehensive view of the whole University. The RSPhysSE library in the Cockcroft Building affords a fine view of Lake Burley Griffin, but other parts of the campus are hidden. The postgraduate student in physics who conducts all his work in the school library and the nearby laboratories and workshops might easily forget, except at graduation time, that the rest of the University exists. Just over the ridge, the John Curtin School seems remote from those parts of the campus frequented by undergraduates. The laboratory technician, working in one of the wings of Florey’s H-shaped building, need venture abroad only to visit the Sports Union or the bank.

The Coombs Building, home of RSSS and RSPAS, is turned in on itself. The research fellow investigating some aspect of Asian culture, when she is not on field trips, spends most of her time in her office or across the road in the Menzies Building of the University Library, sometimes visiting the National Library to make use of its extensive Asian collections. A few hundred metres away, the Director of the Canberra School of Music can watch, through a closed-circuit television located in his office, students and staff rehearsing and performing on the stage of Llewellyn Hall. Although he often attends meetings in the Chancelry, where he represents the interests of the school and contributes to University policy-making, his main concern is what goes on within his own building.

On the opposite side of campus, the terrace at the front of Bruce Hall once
commanded views along University Avenue to City Hill, one of inner Canberra’s focal points. Now trees interrupt the vista; but the Economics and Commerce undergraduate standing there may imagine her University stretched out along either side of the promenade: lecture theatres, faculty offices, the Union quadrangle and, close by, the Chifley Building of the University Library. The research schools (except for RSC) and the Chancelry seem remote.

Perhaps the best outlook, appropriately, is from the R.C. Mills Room on the top floor of the Chancelry. Moving from one side of the room to the other, the spectator can survey much of the campus in all its diversity and perhaps reflect on the University as a whole. But the senior officers who spend much time in the Mills Room at meetings of Council and the academic boards have little time for gazing and reflecting: the immediate needs of running the University keep getting in the way.

These contrasting perspectives suggest a University in parts, a characteristic shared in varying degrees by most universities around the world. Although many people and projects bridge the gaps, the parts remain the object of individual loyalties that are often more powerful than loyalties to the larger institution, especially when the individual research schools and faculties are forced to compete with one another for diminishing resources. The ANU also shares with other universities an inherent tension between its central administration and governing bodies and its faculties and schools. While the strains do not compare with those that have threatened or undermined some multi-campus universities, they are nevertheless more evident than in traditionally organised universities. Their origins lie in the establishment of the four foundation research schools, each with academic autonomy. The purpose of the University structure, as conceived by the Academic Advisory Committee in the 1940s, was chiefly to provide the schools with a protective umbrella. According to Oliphant, Florey, Hancock and Firth, the vice-chancellor and senior officers were to defend and promote the schools, without interfering in their administration. If they defended too meekly or interfered too
obviously, members of the schools protested. In the mid-1950s Oliphant, smarting
under Melville’s administration and a supposed domination by the social scientists,
toyed with the idea of abandoning the University structure entirely and rearranging the
natural science schools as an institute of scientific research. Thirty years later, the bitter
complaints by scientists that the University administration had failed to provide them
with adequate research funds were in the same tradition of resistance from the
periphery. Although increasing government intervention from the late 1980s made the
research schools more vulnerable and therefore more dependent on Chancelory
protection, they nevertheless retained substantial academic and budgetary autonomy.

The most significant structural feature of the ANU remains the division between
the Institute and The Faculties. The incorporation of Canberra University College in
1960 created what was sometimes referred to as two universities in one; and while no
physical gap separated the two parts of the campus, the perceived gulf was profound.
Ken Inglis recalled Hancock in the early days of amalgamation saying that he and his
colleagues in the History Department, RSSS, should get together more often with the
chaps on the other side of the creek, presumably forgetting that the two History
departments were in fact on the same side.

Various attempts were made to bring the Institute and The Faculties closer
together, especially by Sir John Crawford, who promoted new research centres as
bridging structures; and by Peter Karmel, who promoted the Graduate School as a
third element in the structure, partly to reduce the distance between the other two. But
such initiatives were always premised on the assumption that the Institute must
retain its distinctive character, and hence its claim to special funding. In the days of
relatively generous government funding, Crawford was able to present the University
as a single financial entity, so that the School of General Studies benefited from funds
that might have been intended for the Institute. But as money for higher education
became harder to get and more precisely linked to student numbers, the Institute was
obliged to reassert its separateness. In 1990, the first review of the Institute
recommended separate block funding; and although that was a relief to senior
members of the University, the decision drove another wedge between the two parts
of the University and transferred the Institute’s vulnerability to the bridging
structures, including the Graduate School. The review also recommended that the
Institute have its own Director, at the level of Deputy Vice-Chancellor, who would
oversee its affairs, including its place in Australia’s system of academic research, and
provide leadership on issues beyond the responsibility of individual units.

The process of reviewing one half of the University, while paying little attention to the
other, widened the gap. Richard Campbell, Professor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts
and Chair of the Board of The Faculties, urged the 1995 Institute reviewers to remember
that the ANU was ‘One University’, and that any major changes to the Institute would
have an inevitable impact on The Faculties. ‘The first, and most important, point which
needs to be made is that this review is not just about the future of the Institute of
Advanced Studies; it is about the future of the University as a whole.’ The review committee
responded to this and other submissions by recommending more joint appointments,
with flexible arrangements for the subdivision of time between teaching and research.

Was there an alternative? A few people had argued for many years in favour of radical change. The chemist Arthur Birch suggested in the 1960s that the ANU should set up an honours school, where ‘highly selected’ undergraduates enrolled in a three-year course which would be much more demanding than the ordinary degree. This, he said, would make full use of the unique resources of the Institute and enhance the University’s national role. Three decades later the applied mathematician Barry Ninham argued along similar lines for a national undergraduate school which would exploit the whole University’s teaching and research capacity. But both Birch and Ninham unashamedly used the word ‘elite’; and anything that smacked of ‘elitism’ was unlikely to make much headway in the 1960s, when it was ‘un-Australian’, or the 1990s, when it was ‘politically incorrect’ (except for elite athletes). In addition to meeting widespread community resistance, the concept of an elite undergraduate school, with its implications of extra funding, would be fiercely opposed by other universities.

There were other ways of redesigning the University, both to maximise use of its resources and to help it cohere. Yet people who favoured change also saw dangers in tampering with the status quo. Nothing could be done without the approval of government; and in the context of the unified national system, the government was unlikely to look favourably on anomalies. The Institute was already anomaly enough, without the University seeking to create new ones. And if the government was invited to consider major restructuring, including the ways in which the Institute and The Faculties were funded, what might happen to the University as a whole? So Campbell, on behalf of The Faculties, firmly upheld the existing structure, including separate funding for the Institute, merely suggesting that current arrangements could be made to work better.

Was structure the heart of the problem? Don Aitkin, reflecting on academic institutions generally, concluded that structures are not as important as ideas and people: ‘Given good ideas and good people almost any structure can be made to work’. Susan
Serjeantson told a conference on 'The Modern Vice-Chancellor' in 1994 that 'If you can recruit and retain talented staff, all else will flow', which recalled Alf Conlon's advice nearly 50 years earlier, 'pick the men and the rest will look after itself'. Following this policy, the makers of the University adjusted its structures to fit the available people, often creating jobs to suit an individual's interests and qualifications. With decreasing budgets, this became harder to do. Also, the ANU, in common with other public institutions, was obliged to follow more rigorous appointment procedures which acknowledged the need for equality of opportunity. Nevertheless, as late as the 1980s people were occasionally appointed to jobs created for them, especially in the Institute, which easily accommodated the minor structural changes that such appointments entailed.

Implicit in the notion that individuals are more important than structures is the assumption that some of those appointed to senior positions will be able to lead. Ever since the Interim Council put its faith in Florey, Oliphant, Hancock and Firth, the University looked to outstanding scholars to provide academic leadership, which meant setting research directions, recruiting more junior staff, and giving the University as well as the individual schools intellectual coherence. Hancock's failure to get his men, Firth's eventual refusal to come and Florey's indecision suggested that this faith was largely misplaced. Yet the makers of the University continued to see outstanding leadership as the surest means of guaranteeing the enterprise's success.

Academic leadership is an elusive concept, partly because it conflicts with the collegial notions that are so much a part of university tradition. Academics are generally keen to be led, but only if the leader follows their directions or adheres to the status quo. At the ANU, the peculiar character of the research schools made leadership issues especially complicated from the outset. The confusion was embodied in the office of director, whose functions were never clearly defined. As it happened, three of the four research schools began without directors, leaving authority in the hands of the individual professors, many of whom demonstrated impressive qualities of leadership and did give their departments a clear sense of direction. Moreover, some members of staff interpreted academic freedom to mean the freedom to do exactly as they wished, without reference to any community of interest at the departmental, school or University level. Although such views existed in all universities, they were more evident in the Institute, where a significant number of academics believed they were conferring a favour on the University by being there. In such circumstances, even the most capable leaders sometimes had difficulty, as Hancock might have put it, turning their rabble into a team. Leadership qualities were insufficient without a corresponding capacity for what one reviewer called 'followership' and a commitment to the collective good.

The Faculties, in the meantime, were administered along more traditional collegial lines, with elected deans who conducted the business of their faculties in accordance with the majority decisions of their constituencies. This difference in patterns of governance contributed to the contrasting cultures of The Faculties and the Institute. By the 1990s, however, the nature of academic leadership was changing throughout the University, in response to demands by the government for greater accountability within
the higher education system. Confronted with the prospect of dwindling research funds and increasing government intervention, academics in the Institute were more inclined to accept that directors and deans should play a large role in managing the schools and determining priorities. Similarly, The Faculties moved gradually, and somewhat reluctantly, towards managerial styles of governance, with deans accountable to the vice-chancellor rather than to the faculty that had elected them.

Perhaps surprisingly, the roles of the vice-chancellor had not changed fundamentally since Copland’s day, though the duties of the office had become much more complicated and onerous. His (and not, as yet, her) most difficult task was to mediate between the often conflicting interests of his University constituency and the government that paid the bills. Oliphant’s requirement—‘Give us a person to bully’—was still shared by many senior academics nearly half a century later, though most of them expressed their desire rather more subtly. On the other hand, the government required the vice-chancellor to account for the expenditure of public funds. Just as Prime Minister Menzies and the Commonwealth Treasury had expected Melville to keep a tight rein on free-spending and free-thinking academics, Dawkins demanded that the ‘chief executive officers’ of tertiary institutions demonstrate responsible financial management and provide their institutions with strategic leadership and a strong sense of direction. The difference was large, but it could also be seen as one of degree.

The other major role of the vice-chancellor was to help bind the University together, a function made more demanding from 1960 by the absence of a single, effective academic board (excepting the Professorial Board, which rarely met). The vice-chancellor symbolised the University and could enhance its sense of unity. The most successful vice-chancellors understood the challenges presented by the University’s anomalous structure and, through imaginative leadership, worked hard to surmount them.

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The past in the present

In the mid-1990s the ANU was, as it always had been, a unique institution, not just in Australia but in the world. Yet it had moved gradually closer to the more familiar pattern of Australian universities. The trend had begun even before the ANU Act was passed, when Coombs and his colleagues, who had conceived the University as a means of helping rebuild the country after the war, put their faith in expatriate scholars who were deeply imbued with English university traditions and more interested in seeking to recreate Oxbridge in the antipodes than in responding to immediate national needs.

‘National needs’ was, in any case, a wartime concept which had trouble surviving the peace. Pansy Wright remarked a few weeks after the Japanese surrender that ‘the fine frenzy of enthusiasm for knowledge that was apparent in the danger periods of the war is giving way to the burrowing performances of rodents’. Coombs’s wartime vision faded, though not entirely, as Australians tried to put the war behind them. But
Oxbridge was not the answer. That vision too, though initially realised in University House, became quickly blurred, partly because only one of the four Academic Advisers promptly accepted an appointment as Director of a school and partly because institutions rarely translate unchanged from one country to another.

Left to their own devices, the newly appointed academics behaved as academics tended to do in other Australian universities, forming departments and getting on with their own research. This is what the philosopher John Passmore meant when he referred in 1972 to ‘a natural tendency for universities which were at first conceived of along unorthodox lines to revert to orthodoxy’. So, in the 1950s, the ANU took on many of the characteristics of a traditional Australian university, albeit without the teaching, with subprofessorial staff responsible to their professors and professors responsible chiefly to themselves.

The incorporation of undergraduate students in 1960 deprived the ANU of its most obvious claim to uniqueness. Nevertheless, the University, through its senior officers, continued to assert its singularity, a task made more difficult by the Commonwealth’s assumption of responsibility for the system as a whole. The system of higher education which developed in the 1960s opened the universities to the masses, and at the same time made them dependent on Commonwealth financial support, more likely to be regarded as public institutions and hence more subject to external controls, exercised by the AUC and its successors from 1959 to 1987 and later by government departments. One effect of these controls was to draw the ANU more comprehensively into the national system.

In the 1970s the University lost its ‘special relationship’ with government and was forced to compete with other universities, all determined to ensure that it should be no better (and preferably worse) off than it was already. The new era of financial stringency hastened the trend. As Ian Ross remarked in 1976, for twenty years the ANU had enjoyed patronage and benevolence previously unknown by universities in Australia. Now it faced the prospect of being ‘stirred into an homogenized Australian university mixture’. Few members of the University, on either side of the campus, found that prospect to their taste.

By the 1990s the ANU had moved a long way from the institution that Coombs, Conlon and Wright had talked about during their wartime meetings. Yet in some respects the University in the 1990s had more in common with Coombs’s original vision than with the rarefied concepts discussed at All Souls in the late 1940s or with the University that evolved in the 1950s. John Dawkins and his successors spoke about national needs and research priorities much as Coombs and his colleagues, especially Sir Frederic Eggleston, had done in the 1940s. What was new under Dawkins was the requirement that the system as a whole respond to the government’s assessment of national needs. While the new system encouraged universities to be more diverse, it also introduced unprecedented levels of government regulation and imposed strict guidelines for the allocation of government funds. In such circumstances, the ANU’s efforts to remain distinctive became even more of a struggle.

So the University changed, as Conlon had predicted it would, to reflect the society of which it was a part. Yet at the same time it reflected much of the vision that had inspired its creation. This capacity to adapt to current circumstances without
sacrificing old ideas and structures that were worth keeping was the key to its success, as it was and is with any institution. When members of the University either ignored tradition, as they sometimes did when they embraced the language of the marketplace, or clung to the past too tenaciously, as they did most noticeably in the John Curtin School, they put the institution at risk.

Had the efforts to maintain the difference been worth it? The achievements of the past half-century suggested that they had. By remaining unique, the ANU had contributed uniquely, as its founders hoped it would, to Australian society and the world of research. When we view the University in its parts, the nature of its contribution is easy to identify. Individual academics and departments have done much for Australia and the world, whether in relation to the elimination of smallpox, the exploration of disc galaxies, the elucidation of Australia’s national accounts, or any one of many other research accomplishments, without which the nation would be much the poorer. In specific fields, such as demography and the earth sciences, ANU academics created for Australia a culture of research where none existed before. Individual staff members continued to win recognition through prestigious awards and prizes, receiving collectively many more major international awards than their colleagues in any other Australian university. They continued to be the largest university group in the academies of Science, the Social Sciences and the Humanities; and if outsiders sometimes raised an eyebrow at the ANU dominance of the local academies, they could scarcely question the continuing prevalence of ANU academics and former academics among the Australian Fellows of the Royal Society (29 out of 56 in 1995), Corresponding Fellows of the British Academy (3 out of 4), and the Foreign Associates of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States (4 out of 14).

Viewed more broadly, the University’s achievement may be seen in the collective contributions of over 30,000 graduates, including nearly 4000 PhDs, who were awarded their degrees before 1996; in the impact of vast numbers of publications and reports; and in the cumulative effects of advice to governments by members of staff. As Bill Hayden, Governor-General and former Labor politician, remarked in 1993, the ANU was ‘one of the great reservoirs of information, thought and analysis in Australia’. Through its teaching and research activities, its graduates, staff and visitors, the University helped stimulate an Australian commitment to research.

The ANU also showed, much as Johns Hopkins University had done in the United States in the late nineteenth century, the role research could play in the making of a university. Wang Gungwu, who left the Research School of Pacific Studies in 1986 to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, reflected in 1994 on what he had learnt from the ANU:

I would say that the most important thing I took away with me was the sense of how a university could be built upon the quality of research it produces, because the ANU always struck me as an example of how quickly a university, totally new and unknown, could achieve international recognition through research.
The University of Hong Kong, on the other hand, had begun like other universities as an undergraduate institution, and had won an outstanding reputation for the quality of its graduates, without much emphasis on research. Wang encouraged his colleagues to embrace research, seek research funding and engage in postgraduate teaching. By the time he retired in 1995 (and returned to the ANU as a University Fellow), the numbers of research students at the University of Hong Kong had experienced ‘a spectacular rise’, and the university had achieved what Wang regarded as an appropriate balance between teaching and research. ‘Now that’, said Wang, ‘was inspired by ANU’.

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**Futures**

The makers of the University in the 1940s and 1950s planned buildings to serve its needs for up to 50 years. Beyond that, they were absorbed by immediate challenges, such as recruiting staff, creating a new department or completing a series of experiments. Oliphant looked ahead, never far enough, to finishing his big machine; Florey forecast many years of painstaking medical research and warned the public, overcautiously as it turned out, not to expect remarkable results; Hancock, trusting in his men, preferred to let the future look after itself. When the architect Brian Lewis attempted to describe the completed institution, he got it (through little fault of his own) spectacularly wrong.

The introduction of triennial funding in the 1960s gave the future a horizon. Although the founders of the Research School of Chemistry tried to imagine what their school would look like in 25 years, most people concerned with the future of the University were preoccupied with planning for the ensuing three years. The review process, introduced systematically from the mid-1970s, extended the horizon to ten years; and Karmel’s 1987 Strategic Plan presented a framework for the next five. Reviews of the Institute took place in 1990 and 1995. After the second, both the reviewers and the reviewed concluded that this was too often: reviews were taking so much time, money and effort that they were interfering with teaching and research. The 1995 panel proposed that future reviews should occur not fewer than seven years apart; and the Strategic Plan announced in that year was intended to cover the next decade.

Experience suggested that, for planning purposes, seven to ten years was about right. However, Geoffrey Brennan, Director of RSSS, urged his colleagues, gathered at a seminar to discuss the future of the University, not to forget the long view: ‘the only real measure of “success”, the only proper yardstick for our future, is our capacity to produce great scholars and nurture great work—work that will in a hundred and fifty years be seen as truly major’. On the other hand, for those (including Brennan) engaged in the day to day running of the University, seven to ten years often seemed a long time. Given the pace of change in higher education, the future seemed increasingly unpredictable and outside the University’s control.

As the ANU approached its fiftieth anniversary year in 1996, there were many
areas of uncertainty. One related to industrial relations, an issue that affected universities throughout Australia. For several weeks the campus was disrupted by a dispute, the most serious for a decade, during which academic and general staff, now joined in a single union, applied work bans and the general staff imposed pickets which threatened to undermine teaching and research programs and interfere with student recruitment. The conflict arose in part from the government’s new system of enterprise bargaining, which was ill suited to academic institutions where productivity could not be measured in dollars and cents. Although harmony was eventually restored, the episode damaged morale and offered a further challenge to collegial government. Would traditional notions of the university community survive a system of industrial relations fashioned for the marketplace? And if they failed to do so, what would be the effects on teaching and research?

While workplace issues caused alarm, there was also cause for optimism. Between 1993 and 1995 the Commonwealth government undertook a series of quality assurance reviews of teaching, research and community service in higher education. On each occasion, the external panel placed the ANU in the top band of Australian universities. Then in 1995 the external reviews of individual research schools and centres offered resounding confirmation of the Institute’s achievements. The panel for RSES concluded that the school was ‘one of the top five or so earth science research institutions in the world’. RSBS was described as ‘a distinguished, major international centre of outstanding research and teaching in biology’, which ‘fully measures up to the fundamental objective of the Australian National University to be one of the world’s great research institutions’. RSC had achieved distinction ‘well beyond the fondest hopes of its founders’, while RSPhysSE was ‘working well beyond the limits of its resources’ to produce outstanding research and scholarship. The JCSMR reviewers remarked that the school was ‘vital for the health of the nation’; although it had been through ‘difficult periods’, it was now working with ‘renewed vigour’ and ‘fulfilling its research and development responsibilities with distinction’. The research performance of RSSS was likewise judged to be outstanding and ‘on an upward trend’, while RSPAS was described as ‘a world renowned centre and unrivalled Australian focus for the study of societies, cultures, economics, politics, history and environments of Asia and the Pacific’. MSSSO, the centres and the newer schools all received similar endorsements. Drawing on all these reports, the review of the Institute as a whole concluded that ‘the IAS is now a world player in every field in which it has well established scholarly and research activity’.

Yet enthusiastic reviews did not necessarily secure the future; and while the Institute review confirmed the role and mission of the Institute and proposed a modest increase in funding, the government rather than the reviewers would have the final say.

Meanwhile, as the makers of the University in the mid-1990s contemplated many possible futures, teachers, students, researchers, performers and administrators across the campus were getting on with their respective jobs. One of them, Nugget Coombs, approaching ninety, still a Visiting Fellow in CRES and regarded by many as the greatest living Australian, was developing ideas on how Aboriginal communities
Nugget Coombs, philosopher and visionary, in 1990.
Photograph by Heide Smith.
Heide Smith Photography.

fashioned their own institutions to meet the needs of contemporary Australian society. We had hoped, when we began work on this history, to conclude with Coombs producing another publication. But life is not so tidy; and as we complete this chapter, Coombs is in hospital recovering, with characteristic determination, from a stroke, and uncertain whether he will write again.

We can nevertheless end with an appreciation of Nugget Coombs as the person who contributed more than any other to the making of the ANU, who gave it a vision that is still relevant after 50 years, and who recognised that the continuing potency of any vision depends on its capacity to adapt to the times.