

THE ANU GOVERNANCE PROJECT: FIRST FINDINGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This ‘first findings’ report presents provisional results of a survey of the Australian National University (ANU) community, **launched on 6 August 2025**, and feedback from two kitchen table conversations, regarding governance at the ANU. After only five days in the field, the project has received **209 responses** and counting. A majority of survey respondents (75.1%) were current staff followed by former staff (12%) and students (8.6%) (See figure 5 on page 13 for further details). 11 academic staff have participated in kitchen table conversations so far, with many more conversations scheduled over the coming weeks.

These initiatives are driven by the ANU Governance Project, an ANU-staff driven effort to improve governance at the ANU by generating credible, constructive, and evidence-based proposals for governance reform at the ANU through a carefully structured collaborative process incorporating staff, students, and stakeholders who are most impacted by the quality of governance. As Australia’s only federally-regulated university and with a founding mandate to produce high quality public policy advice, ANU is uniquely positioned to lead sector-wide higher education governance reform.

We believe the innovative co-design of governance reform with our university community is a constructive step forward for a higher education sector dealing with serious issues of poor transparency and accountability, wage compliance failures, and inadequate internal and external oversight of the university’s core purpose as an institute of knowledge production and public education (particularly, in the case of the ANU, our mission to produce research and education in areas of national importance). We will continue to report on project findings over the coming weeks, and ***we invite policymakers, concerned stakeholders, and the higher education community to engage with this project to support governance at the ANU that is informed by both the practical on-the-ground experiences of staff and students and the world leading expertise of the ANU community. To read more about our project, visit our [website](#).***

HEADLINE FINDINGS

1. The ANU community - staff, students, alumni, and stakeholders - are deeply dissatisfied with current governance arrangements and believe it requires an overhaul.

- a. Over 97% of survey respondents and all kitchen table conversation participants believe current ANU governance is not fit for purpose and should be reformed.
 - b. Over 91% of survey respondents and all kitchen table conversation participants expressed dissatisfaction with current ANU governance, including 56% who said they were 'completely unsatisfied'
- 2. The ANU is suffering from a significant deficit of trust in their current practices of transparency and accountability**
- a. Over 94% of survey respondents said they were dissatisfied with ANU's current practices of transparency, including over 72% who said they were 'completely unsatisfied'.
 - b. Over 92% of survey respondents said they were dissatisfied with ANU's accountability frameworks, including over 67% who said they were 'completely unsatisfied'.
- 3. The ANU community has genuine and credible reform recommendations and must be consulted in governance reform of their own university (and can inform reform of the higher education sector more generally)**

Key recommendations include:

- a. Increase academic voice to restore balance between educational and corporate governance principles (more academic presence on key governance bodies).
- b. Strengthen academic oversight processes of ANU Council and other key decision making bodies through increased transparency and improved corporate practices.
- c. Increased accountability via improved feedback and evaluation mechanisms particular for senior university managers
- d. Set principle-based salaries for senior university executives

PRELIMINARY FINDING 1: DEEP DISSATISFACTION WITH THE CURRENT GOVERNANCE MODEL

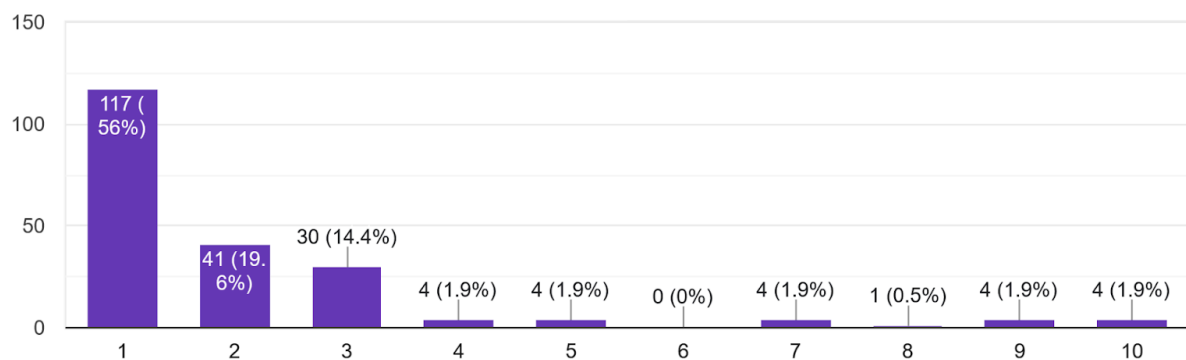
The ANU community - staff, students, alumni, and stakeholders, are deeply dissatisfied with current governance arrangements and believe it requires an overhaul.

We asked ANU staff about their level of satisfaction with the ANU's current governance arrangements. Preliminary findings show an overwhelming majority of respondents are deeply unsatisfied (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How Satisfied are you with the ANU's current governance arrangements?

How satisfied are you with ANU's current governance arrangements where 1 = completely unsatisfied and 10 = completely satisfied?

209 responses

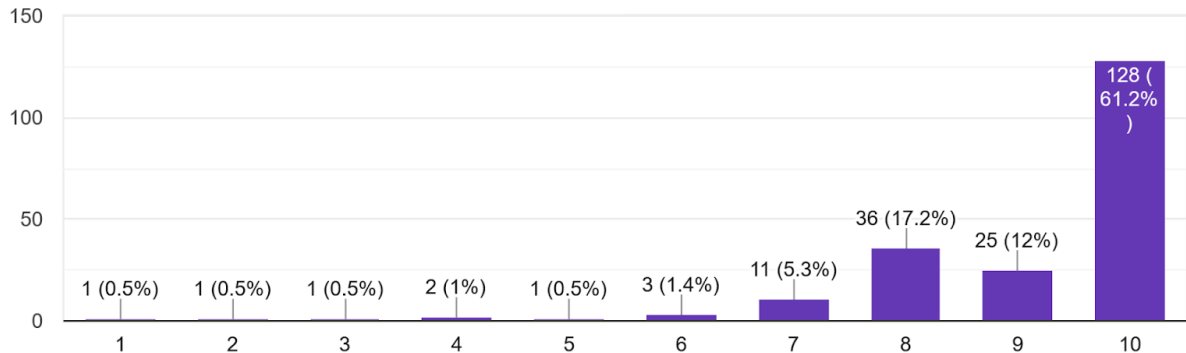


We also find that the ANU community overwhelmingly believes that the university's governance arrangements need to change (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Do you believe that the ANU needs to reconsider how it is governed?

Do you believe that the ANU needs to reconsider how it is governed where 1 = no change required and 10 = a complete overhaul?

209 responses



A summary of qualitative findings reveals staff are especially concerned about the disconnection between senior executives and (academic and professional) staff who are responsible for delivering educational and research outcomes.

- ANU staff describe the executive as disconnected from educational realities, prioritising corporate imperatives over scholarly values.
- Poor transparency and accountability practices by ANU executive leadership has eroded confidence in institutional decision-making.
- Too often, staff learn about critical university decisions through external media rather than internal channels, highlighting a profound breakdown in organisational communication.

Quotes from qualitative survey data and kitchen table conversations:

“The current governance structure at the ANU has failed the university community on multiple occasions. It is not fit for purpose and has promoted unethical and unlawful decision making from ANU leadership.”

“I have been genuinely shocked at how isolated and alienating the university leadership has been. One of the most surprising aspects for me is the extraordinary concentration of power in the hands of executives. I came to academia after five years working in international organisations and the corporate world. These spaces are often criticised for being rigid and top-down. But I have found academia to be, in my ways, even more closed and hierarchical. What’s particularly striking for me is how disconnected senior management, including Deans and Associate Deans at times, are from the rest of

academic staff. There seem to be no real expectations or structures guiding how leadership engages with academic staff, apart from the enterprise agreement, which is often treated more as a box-ticking exercise than a meaningful framework. In my view the university does the bare minimum required, mostly to avoid legal risk."

"Current leadership appears to revel in the fact that they are not answerable to the ANU staff community. They shelter behind the anti-democratic nature of this university's administration"

"ANU is an autocracy. Incompetence and grift are unsurprising"

"We are on the receiving end of the chaos created by management's disconnection from staff".

"I have donated to the ANU in the past but will not do so until there are serious changes to governance and transparency".

PRELIMINARY FINDING 2 - TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

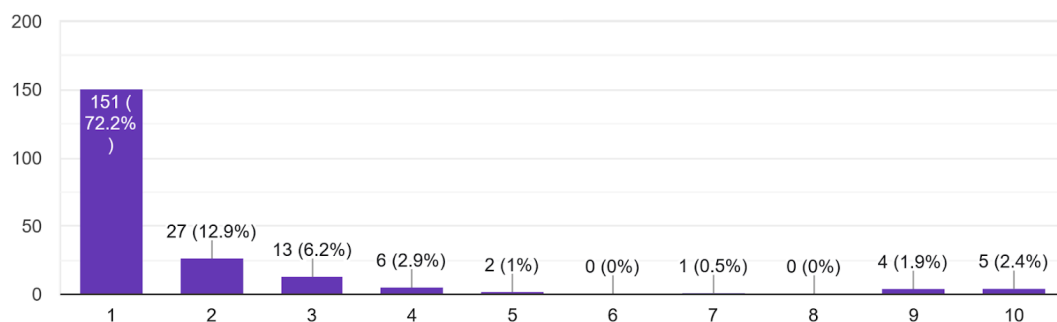
The ANU community is deeply dissatisfied with ANU's current practices of transparency and accountability.

ANU community members overwhelmingly report that they are dissatisfied with the current way transparency is practiced at the ANU (Figure 3).

Figure 3: How satisfied are you with ANU's practices of transparency?

How satisfied are you with ANU's current practices of transparency where 1 = completely unsatisfied and 10 = completely satisfied?

209 responses

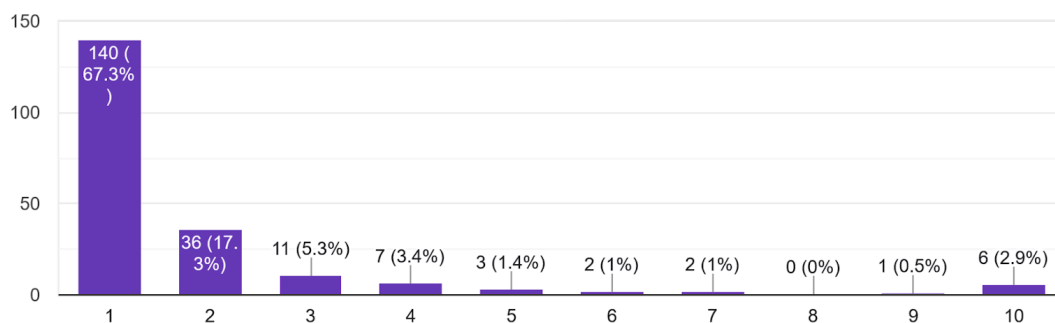


Similarly, we find that ANU community members are not satisfied with the way accountability is operationalised at the university (Figure 4).

Figure 4: How satisfied are you with ANU's practices of accountability?

How satisfied are you with ANU's current accountability framework where 1 = completely unsatisfied and 10 = completely satisfied?

208 responses



Preliminary qualitative results reveal that staff, students and stakeholders believe that while processes may exist, and rhetoric around transparency is strong, the actual practice of transparency is lacking.

1. Financial Decision-Making and Consultation Failures

- As a tax-payer funded institution, ANU should offer a transparent and evidence-based rationale for financial decisions.
- Deep concern about hiring expensive external consultants while overlooking internal expertise.
- Respondents argue that genuine consultation has been replaced by superficial engagement exercises to push predetermined decisions that often generate perverse outcomes.

Quotes from qualitative survey data and kitchen table conversations:

"The financial situation should be visible to all staff at any time via a public sheet containing R,Q,S,W account balances, income sources etc."

"The leadership at all levels and in particular at the highest level needs to be more accountable to its academic staff and to be more transparent about finances and financial policies."

"I don't dispute universities are businesses and need good financial management, but that does not mean they should be treated as corporations, particularly ones where top-level "executive" roles proliferate whilst those who carry the work of the mission suffer huge workload issues and job losses. We need far more involvement of all parts of our academic community who understand what ANU is and does."

"The current institutional climate at ANU has become increasingly untenable, marked by a lack of transparency and a governance culture heavily influenced by external consultancy frameworks, particularly NOUS. Strategic decisions often appear disconnected from academic values and collegial processes, undermining trust and morale across the university community. This environment has made it difficult for academics to engage meaningfully in shaping the future of the institution, and has raised serious concerns about accountability, consultation, and the preservation of ANU's distinctive mission."

"Honesty and transparency about the effects of "restructuring" would be welcome. We are not unintelligent people so being continuously fed a diet of obvious untruths is impolite. If executive are intent on dismantling things, a minimum level of honesty about the destructive consequences in terms of everyday functioning, quality of teaching and research and external reputation would be welcome"

"A university is not a business, it's an institution for education and research. It's packed full of clever people who care very much that it works well - we are not just employees, we are members of the institution. Why do you pay corporate outsiders who know nothing about education or research to decide our fate, instead of asking the people who actually understand and deeply care about education and research?"

2. Culture of fear, bullying and lack of safety

- Too many respondents report a toxic workplace environment, including bullying, harassment, and psychological harm, reflecting broader governance failures that extend beyond individual leadership problems.
- Many staff, students, and stakeholders believe the ANU has a 'culture of fear'.
- The atmosphere of fear and uncertainty has created conditions where academic freedom and collegial decision-making are increasingly compromised.

"The culture of bullying and excessive secrecy seems to go to the top, and is designed to protect executive privilege."

“If university executives are going to be paid more than the Prime Minister, they should be at least as accountable.”

“In the Nixon report, it became clear that some supervisors were sleeping with their PhD students! This is unacceptable - we must have an accountable culture that prevents this type of abuse of power.”

“More than anything, I want to see ANU rebuild a culture where people feel safe to contribute. Right now, many do not. That needs to be acknowledged before anything can change.”

“I feel like we are all sitting in the back seat of an old car that has no seatbelts, being driven by a drunk driver down the wrong side of the road. Please, someone help.”

“Yes. The ANU is not a safe place to work. People are traumatised. Management does not listen. Council doesn't care. People are being treated appallingly. If the ANU was a factory that manufactured a product through a process that involved heavy or dangerous machinery and we were expected to work without safety guards or eye protection or near a blast furnace with no door on it, Worksafe would have shut the place down by now. Psychosocial harms are being caused every single day and no one seems to be able to prevent it. We are being brutalised.”

PRELIMINARY FINDING 3: PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The ANU community are offering clear and credible recommendations for improvement of governance at the ANU through the survey and kitchen table conversations. The ANU Governance Project will hold a workshop with a representative in the coming weeks to evaluate these reform proposals with a representative sample of staff, students, and stakeholders and selected higher education governance experts.

Some preliminary examples of solutions that are recommended by participants so far include:

- Improve academic oversight of university governance to ensure fulfillment of the ANU's national mission
- Improve feedback, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms for senior university managers
- Improve corporate governance practices
- Set principle-based salaries for senior university executives

In greater detail:

1. Improve academic oversight of university governance to ensure adherence to the ANU's mission and mandate as a higher education provider.

"ANU should be governed by a Senate, consisting of the Chancellor, VC, various academic DVCs and Provosts, Deans and maybe Directors, elected academic, professional staff and alumni and higher degree and undergraduate student reps. All of these should be elected. There should also be appointed ex officio a Union rep. Senior managers equivalent to the current CPO, COO, CFO et al should be appointed ex officio, have no voting rights but are there to provide information and reports on matters relating to their portfolios and admin support to the Senate. Decisions at Senate to be made by voting and each member's vote carries equal weight. Industry and business allies, government champions could be invited to sessions as required but have no voting rights."

"The current Australian National University Act 1991 should be reviewed and updated to explicitly include principles of good academic governance. For example, the legal framework should include clear mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing compliance with these principles. This could involve regular audits, reporting requirements, and consequences for non-compliance. Mechanisms should be established to ensure accountability for academic governance. This could involve performance evaluations, reporting on academic governance activities, and mechanisms for addressing concerns raised about academic governance practices. Mechanisms for independent oversight of academic governance should be established. This could involve external reviews of academic governance practices and the establishment of independent bodies to investigate concerns about academic governance."

"Majority voting representation from staff and students in the ANU Council. Live streaming and recording of all ANU Council Meetings (with exceptions for items/projects with national security concerns). Formal procedures mechanism for staff and/or students to initiate and carry out no-confidence vote on university leadership, whether binding or not."

"I think principles of shared governance are incredibly important. I don't necessarily think academic staff need to make every decision or run every aspect of the university, but staff (academic and professional) should have a say in crafting the policies that impact us and in appointing the people who make those decisions. Making a decision

on a new LMS [learning management system], for example, should be made by a faculty committee, not a senior executive who does not teach.”

“We need greater oversight of the management of the university by senior academic leaders. In addition to smaller changes requiring that Council operate with greater transparency, I agree with the proposal that we need something akin to an Academic Senate - a formal body that represents academic expertise on strategic matters. This body should be involved in key executive appointments and in monitoring the performance of the executive. I agree also with the more ambitious change to the ANU Act to change the composition of Council to include more academic representation.”

“Ensure that academics and professional staff—those closest to teaching, research, and student support—have a meaningful role in shaping strategic decisions. This includes re-establishing empowered academic boards and committees with real influence over policy, budget, and planning.”

“ANU Council's composition should be reformed to give a majority of seats to 'insider' voices (elected staff and student representatives) with 'external' appointments requiring ratification by a majority of 'insider' council-members or even ANU staff at large). There should be provision for recall of C/VC and Council members by ANU staff at large to ensure that leaders have and work to retain the confidence of the workforce. Appointment of e.g. College Deans should also be by election or at least require ratification by academics of the relevant schools/centres (as is the norm in many jurisdictions).”

2. Improve feedback and evaluation mechanisms particular for senior university managers

“Require public reporting of decision rationales, consultation outcomes, and performance evaluations for senior leadership. Establish independent oversight mechanisms to ensure governance aligns with ANU’s stated values.”

“Introduce structural safeguards to prevent individuals from moving between senior roles without accountability for outcomes. One option is to require that senior academic leaders return to substantive academic positions within the same institution after their term. This would encourage in my view more responsible and sustainable leadership.”

“There also need to be evaluation mechanisms in place so that feedback is collected at least annually from faculty and staff about the performance of Directors, Heads of School, and Deans. There should also be the opportunity to give feedback on the local level about administrative processes and systems (things like timetabling, mark

submissions, event planning and room booking, etc.) so that problems can be addressed and solutions proposed. In my area, there is rampant dissatisfaction with how things are run; systems and processes are burdensome and don't work, which only leads to frustrated faculty and overworked admin staff. It's maddening that things work so poorly and there is no mechanism to express this or offer alternative suggestions."

"Although there are numerous performance evaluations conducted against staff members, there is a glaring absence of performance evaluations for senior management, which is an unacceptable practice."

"The use of non-disparagement agreements needs to be banned. Currently all middle and senior management positions require a non-disparagement agreement. This is a two way agreement that prevents any criticism of the institution or individuals associated with the institution. The University keeps their very existence secret and they would argue they are to protect the institution's reputation, when in fact what they do is protect bad operators from any consequences - these agreements even cover professional references. Other universities also use them. So poor performers and bad operators can move from one institution to the next without having to answer for their previous poor performance."

3. Improve corporate governance practices

"In terms of change, it is not to become more corporate oriented, monitored by external consultancies and operating according to a US-based corporate business model, but to go back to the way the ANU operated in the past, as a research university where the pursuit of knowledge and postgraduate education was what was prioritised with more financial support from the Australian government."

"In the discussion of the composition of Council, it has been pointed out that there is no requirement for members to have experience in the higher education sector. I agree that this is a problem. However, if 'experience in the higher education sector' is going to include managerial experience at another university, the problem of Council would not be resolved. There is now a managerial class that moves between institutions, leaving behind greater or lesser trails of destruction, and who face no accountability - they do not go back to teaching and research and so don't have to live with the consequences of their actions themselves, and they frequently move on to another institutions, so don't have to put up long with colleagues whose work conditions they have undermined. So there would be very little benefit to be gained if experience in higher education sector was to include the current managerial class."

“Risk management should be deeply embedded in governance processes to proactively identify, assess, and mitigate a broad spectrum of risks—financial, reputational, operational, academic, and environmental. A comprehensive risk framework enables timely responses to emerging challenges and opportunities, ensuring the university’s long-term stability and trustworthiness. Effective risk governance includes clear roles, regular monitoring, and transparent reporting, creating a culture where risk-awareness informs decision-making at all levels. At present short term financial risk is over prioritised and long term contribution as a public institution is under prioritised.”

“Diversity and Inclusion in Governance: Incorporating diversity in governing bodies by representation of various groups (students, staff, Indigenous voices) enriches decision-making and aligns governance with modern university values. Above all accountability and a clear focus on the mission of such an institution that is about Education not a Corporate entity.”

4. Set principle-based salaries for senior university executives to attract the right people to university leadership

“Introduce salary caps for the vice-chancellor and senior executives, benchmarked against public sector norms and university performance in core areas (education, research, equity). Excessive executive pay undermines collegiality and public trust, especially during periods of budget constraint.”

“Greater involvement of academic staff & less of external, business people; rebalancing salaries with more modest amounts payable to uni executive to reduce moral hazard of aspiring to positions because of remuneration instead of a desire to contribute & make a difference”

“Senior executive salaries should be fixed % loading on professor salaries, rather than individually negotiated. There should be a rationalisation and fixing of the number of executive positions.”

“There needs to be transparency around all the remuneration packages of all staff. In my opinion the exorbitant salaries we are offering for management positions attracts the wrong sort of people to these roles. We have decades of effective management where staff taking on these roles didn't need huge salaries as motivation - their motivation was the success of the institution. As the salaries have increased the quality of management has diminished.”

APPENDIX: DATA OVERVIEW

The survey was launched on 6 August 2025. The survey remains in the field.

As of Monday 11 August at 12pm, 209 members of the ANU community have completed the survey. The largest cohort of respondents is current ANU academic and professional staff (75%). Former ANU staff are the next largest cohort (12%), followed by students at (8%), the remainder are ANU Alumni and members of the wider community, including parents of ANU students and donors.

Figure 5: Composition of respondents to ANU Governance Survey

I am a (please select the option that most recently applies to you. For example if you graduated from ANU but are also current academic staff, please select current academic staff).

209 responses

