



Policy: Academic expertise and public debate

Purpose

To provide guidance to staff on the use of academic expertise in public debate.

Overview

The Council of the University has adopted the following policy on the use of academic expertise in public debate.

Scope

This Policy applies across the University.

Policy Statement

Preamble

1. The ANU strategic plan, ANU by 2020, states that in addition to excellence in research and education, a distinctive element of the University will be its focus on national policy issues: "ANU will be recognised as a leading contributor to public policy formation and debate, addressing the major issues confronted by government, business and society."
2. Academics have an obligation to present their expertise outside the strictly academic context; they are expected to inform public debate from the perspective their scholarly expertise brings to an issue. Leading public debate, however, brings particular responsibilities. It involves academic staff in public debates where issues may be controversial, and debates heated and emotional.

Principles

3. ANU staff members have the same rights as all Australians to air their views in public debate, and to use their private resources for such purposes.
4. As ANU staff members, they are encouraged, as part of their academic responsibilities, to engage with the public and participate in open debate in areas in which they have academic expertise. It is noted that contractual obligations with other parties may limit the specificity of public comment by a staff member, or its timing.

Using ANU affiliation

5. Staff members should carefully consider when and where to use their ANU affiliation in public debate.

6. When staff members speak within the broad framework of the expertise which led to their employment, or which they have subsequently developed through research and scholarly activities as ANU staff members, they are entitled to use their ANU affiliation as evidence of their expertise on the issues.

7. The use of an ANU affiliation therefore requires that the views put forward have been developed as part of exploring the important problems and issues that confront the nation, the region and the world.

8. As new knowledge is discovered, or new interpretations of existing knowledge come to light, the initial position may change – it is a normal part of the scholarly development of ideas. Whatever position is adopted, however, staff have special obligations to ensure that their opinions are based on respect for evidence and detailed scholarly analysis and review, together with the relevant principles which are encapsulated in the [Code of Research Conduct](#).

9. In public debate, such as opinion pieces or columns in the media, it is generally not possible to provide a detailed scholarly justification of the position adopted, nor to present every possible perspective on an issue; but it is expected that the position adopted should be defensible and that justification for it should be either available or able to be given at a level which would be of acceptable standard in the field of scholarship.

Support of ANU

10. Engaging in public debate can, in the worst cases, expose ANU staff members to various forms of harassment, including ad hominem attacks, questioning of their integrity, and threats to their research funding or even personal safety.

11. In engaging in public debate within the broad framework of rights and responsibilities outlined above, staff members can expect to be supported by the University. This does not necessarily imply endorsement of the particular views they have put forward, but means defending their right to speak as an ANU staff member in their areas of expertise, and support for the general notion that public debates need to be informed by academic expertise and conducted with due regard to factual analysis and scholarly interpretation.

12. If in doubt as to whether to state University affiliation, staff members should consider consulting with the Vice-Chancellor.

Document information

Title	Academic expertise and public debate
Document Type	Policy
Document Number	ANUP_000359
Version	5
Purpose	To provide guidance to staff on the use of academic expertise in public debate.
Audience	Staff-Academic
Category	Academic
Topic	Staff
Subtopic	Staff & Career Development
Effective Date	23 Jan 2012
Review Date	23 Jan 2017
Responsible Officer	Director, Strategic Communications and Public Affairs (director.communications@anu.edu.au)
Approved By	ANU Council (director.governance@anu.edu.au)
Contact Area	Strategic Communications and Public Affairs (director.communications@anu.edu.au)
Authority	Australian National University Act 1991
Printed On	1 Jul 2020

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