

Professor Genevieve Bell AO
Vice-Chancellor and President
The Australian National University
Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country
Australian Capital Territory 2600

Via email: ea.vc@anu.edu.au

17 July 2024

Dear Professor Bell,

Re: Respecting students' right to protest

I am writing to address a matter of significant concern regarding the ongoing peaceful anti-war protests at the Australian National University and the reported notices sent to students involved in these protests, threatening disciplinary action.

Student activism has always been a vibrant and essential part of university life. From movements advocating for LGBTIQ+ liberation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights, environmental justice, to the protests against apartheid in South Africa, students have been at the forefront of driving societal change.

Today, we honour these courageous stands for justice and equality, recognising the indispensable role that student voices played in shaping a better world. At the time, these same students often faced harassment, intimidation and repression.

We urge you to refrain from following this too-familiar path by taking disciplinary action, and to uphold the rights of students at the Australian National University to continue to peacefully protest in support of Palestinian lives.

Universities must be spaces where diverse perspectives are not only tolerated but encouraged. We are deeply concerned to hear students may be facing suspension or expulsion for participating in peaceful protests in support of Palestine. We are further concerned by accounts that peaceful actions have been mischaracterised as antisemitic or a threat to safety. Such actions not only undermine the students' right to peaceful assembly but also erode important academic discourse.

The right to freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion and belief – alongside the right to peaceful assembly and association - are not only fundamental human rights and protected under the Australian Capital Territory's *Human Rights Act 2004* but also pillars of academic freedom.

Universities, as places of knowledge and progress, must uphold these rights to foster an environment where diverse perspectives can be freely expressed and debated. Similarly, it is crucial to recognise that while these rights are not absolute, any limitations imposed must adhere to agreed human rights standards.

To this end, I would like to draw your attention to the Human Rights Law Centre's "*Declaration of Our Right to Protest*." The Declaration outlines ten minimum protections for the right to peaceful assembly and provides

guidance on how any limitations should be implemented in accordance with international human rights standards which Australia has agreed to legally protect.

Ensuring that these protections are observed is vital in maintaining the integrity of academic freedom while also upholding the democratic values that underpin our institutions.

I urge you to affirm the university's commitment to protecting the rights to peaceful assembly and free expression. By doing so, the Australian National University can continue to be a place where ideas are openly explored, and where the next generation of leaders can develop the skills and convictions necessary to drive positive change in our society.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any queries regarding this letter, please do not hesitate to contact David Mejia-Canales, Senior Lawyer, at the Human Rights Law Centre via email: david.mejia-canales@hrlc.org.au.

I look forward to your response and to the university's continued support for the fundamental rights of its students.

Yours sincerely,



Caitlin Reiger
Chief Executive Officer

CC: ANU Student Union President: sa.president@anu.edu.au
Enc: Declaration of Our Right to Protest