



Interview with Emeritus Professor Ian William Chubb AC, MSc DPhil (Oxon)

Vice Chancellor of Australian National University 2001-2011
Chief Scientist of Australia 2011-2016

Interview conducted January 2016 in the Chief Scientist's office

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Biographical introduction:

Ian Chubb has grappled with and solved many important questions concerning the management of academic research, and academic leadership in Australia. A decade after Professor Chubb's appointment as Vice Chancellor of ANU, his boss (Gareth Evans, Chancellor of ANU and previously Foreign Minister in the Hawke and Keating Governments) was moved to say of him as he retired from ANU:



"... we've had in Ian Chubb an absolutely brilliant and inspiring leader of this great university, who has delivered an unbelievable amount during his tenure here, and whose legacy will be absolutely enduring. When the next history of the ANU is written we know that Ian Chubb is going to be right up there with the legends, and future generations will talk about the three Cs – Coombs, Crawford and Chubb – who, more than anyone else, made this great national institution what it is and what it aspires to be."

Emeritus Faculty spoke to Professor Chubb in January 2016, as part of the Faculty's Oral History Program. We asked him to outline something of his origins and life as a student, as a scientist, and as an academic leader and manager. An audio file recording of the interview is attached below the following synoptic text file. His career is formally summarized at the Australian Chief Scientist website [www.chiefscientist.gov.au/about], a position he held after his decade with ANU, and has just relinquished.

Early days

Ian Chubb was born in South Melbourne in 1943, his father an enlisted soldier, his mother a home maker. Soon after, with his father safely back from the war, a younger brother was added to the family, then 17 years on, an adopted sister. As the Second World War ended, the family moved to a small shared farm at Menzies Creek, in the Dandenong Ranges to the east of Melbourne. In this countryside there were plenty of opportunities for a youngster like Ian to wander, and to wonder about life and the natural world about him. Being an only child, often with only his parents as company, Ian learnt early to read and write. At four years old, he started at the local primary school, a single-teacher school in which all primary grades were taught. Each day, if the young Ian had completed the school-work the teacher had set for him, he could go outside and explore, sometimes following the suggestions of his teacher, at other times according to his own whim. Teachers in such schools often were engaging and creative, as Ian's was, encouraging independence and exploration.

A few years later the family moved to Belgrave, a little closer to Melbourne, looking for a better life, and Ian moved to Tecoma Primary School. Then, in 1954, he was off to Springvale High School, a new and much larger school, mixing with older kids from the new fringe suburbs beginning to overtake suburban Melbourne. Ian's parents insisted their children continue at school for as long as possible ('go to school, stay at school') though financially that was not always easy for a working-class family.

Springvale was only a railway stop or two from Clayton, where Monash University was beginning to take shape. Finishing high school, and being interested in science, Ian looked for a job on the campus, and soon found one working with Laurie Austin, newly appointed to the Biochemistry Department staff. Laurie saw early promise in this youngster from the bush, and became, and remained, a mentor for Ian. Mentors over the years have marked Ian's educational progress – he names and dates them memorably, up to the very present.

Ian enrolled in a lab technician's course at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, then a large technical college in the city. With Laurie Austin's encouragement, and his own widening knowledge, Ian was soon working as a technician-cum-research assistant, and not long after that co-authoring research papers from Laurie's laboratory. Ian thrived on the mix of challenge and opportunity which Monash and his mentor provided, steadily expanding his understanding of neuroscience and chemistry.

Young scientist

Ian began imagining a larger life in science, and in the world generally. In 1969 he applied to the University of Ghent in Belgium for a research fellowship, which he won. Soon, with his cup overflowing in Ghent, it positively flooded when he fell in love with his French teacher there, Claudette. They married in 1971, and over the following years added three daughters. Through a chance meeting with an Oxford scientist visiting Ghent, Ian impressed to the extent that he was offered a Wellcome Foundation scholarship at Oxford University. He enrolled for graduate studies at Christ Church and this was followed by a Junior Research Fellowship at St John's, and then a Royal Society Research Fellowship.

'Oxford is where I grew up', Ian recalls.

In 1978, with an Oxford doctorate and a growing list of published research papers in hand, Ian and Claudette were on their way to Australia, to a lecturer post for Ian at Flinders University Medical School, in Adelaide. From here, over the next few years, he progressed to associate professor, researching and publishing as a neuroscientist, building an independently funded and active research team.

But something was missing, he sensed.

Ian began looking for wider academic options, putting into practice advice he had received from another mentor – view your academic career as a vocation, to be invested with all the energy and curiosity you would bring to such a commitment; don't see it merely a set of career markers to be met.

Academic manager and leader

In 1986 Ian was appointed Deputy Vice Chancellor at Wollongong University, and Honorary Professor in Biology, the latter providing continuity to his scientific career. In 1990, he veered and broadened direction, exploring public policy in education by way of appointment, by the Commonwealth Government, to Chair of the Higher Education Council (the peak advisory body on higher education), with part of his time (from 1994) spent as Deputy Chair of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training, then the peak policy body in the Commonwealth's Employment, Education and Training portfolio. He now had a sound understanding of how the national higher education system fitted together, and functioned. Much of this time too he watched the radical changes entrained by Education Minister John Dawkins, as the Commonwealth Government effectively doubled the size of the university sector, amalgamating colleges of advanced education, and merging others into existing universities. All as part of an attempt to bring together higher education, vocational training, and relevant employment functions under a single umbrella. Then, in 1989, the Higher Education Contributions Scheme (HECS) was introduced to establish a surer financial footing for students entering university. Real-cost university and school fees were soon added for overseas students. ANU came in for special attention in this period, partly as a focus for possible amalgamations, and certainly with pruning of its budgets in mind, as ANU and universities generally began to feel the financial pinch.

By 1994 Ian was back to more familiar academic ground, appointed Senior DVC at Monash University, while continuing as Deputy Chair of NBEET and adding Dean of Business and Economics at Monash. He was still broadening his academic ambit, and extending his managerial and leadership range.

Vice Chancellor

In 1995 Ian Chubb was appointed Vice Chancellor at Flinders University. He responded decisively to the challenges offered by this young and dynamic institution, to the extent that in 2001 he was invited to take up his most significant academic post, as Vice Chancellor of ANU. ANU was one of the so-called 'Group of Eight' universities, but tough questions were beginning to swirl even among this elite group.

ANU itself was different from other Australian universities in that it had a research and post graduate 'Institute of Advanced Studies', established at ANU's inception as an exemplary 'national university' in 1946. A separate undergraduate School of General Studies at ANU grew from a Melbourne University undergraduate college established in 1930, principally to serve the growing Australian Public Service. For the next 30 years, these two halves of ANU were seen as different, and separate, an artificial distinction that may have held ANU back, particularly in limiting interaction and growth of the parts of this (for Australia) strangely bipartite structure. By the time Ian Chubb arrived as Vice Chancellor in 2001, this rift was mending, though it was still too evident for Ian and other senior staff. And evident also to ANU's paymasters in the Commonwealth Government.

A practical and political difficulty lay in funding this structure – two universities in one, as it seemed to the critics? ANU was directly funded by the Commonwealth. The older, or even newly created, state universities were funded initially by their governments, related primarily to their student loads, and subject usually to tighter budgetary constraints.

A question put to Ian Chubb was: could a new ANU, more consistent with contemporary expectations, evolve? It seems it had to, as ANU Chancellor Peter Baume made clear to his new Vice Chancellor at the outset – ANU was to remake itself as "a university for the 21 century". It was anticipated that it would be less generously funded at the graduate and research level, but with greater opportunities (and enrolments) at the undergraduate level, and support for research coming through research councils.

The decade at ANU

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Another financial problem soon became evident. ANU was seriously 'under-enrolled' when Ian Chubb arrived, meaning that its low undergraduate numbers would mean reduced (formulaic) government funding until undergraduate student numbers 'caught up' with agreed targets. 'Block grants' direct from the Commonwealth Government to ANU (and less sensitive to levels of enrolment) would decline - partly as payment to enable ANU to join research council funding, from which it had been precluded, and partly to make up inadequate indexation. The intrusion by ANU into Australian Research Council funding led to a predictable response and further irritation on the part of the state universities.

The new 'university for the 21 century' seemed to be coping it from both sides - from existing forces within ANU who liked the idea of established research-driven elitism, even in the face of declining support, and from newer political forces outside ANU who saw savings to be made from pruning or restricting any elitist tendencies at ANU.

Ian instituted a major review of the entire ANU in 2004, addressing a multitude of issues, chief among them perceived organisational redundancies and financial inefficiencies. These were not straightforward matters, embedded as they were in tradition and sometimes unreal expectations. Ian confronted head-on the organisational and management aspects of ANU's problems. Through much listening, and persuasion, he found options or solutions that could be made acceptable to the rationally minded, even if original doubts may have seemed well-grounded. Over the following two years the Vice Chancellor and his lieutenants drew up a new Strategic Plan for the university, with the central feature a suite of research centres within which undergraduates could comfortably fit, and thrive. And importantly, in respect of academic freedom, a strong element of disciplinary flexibility and adaptability so that the centres of research (or research schools) could do best what they did well.

At the same time, special attention would be paid to building on the strengths of ANU in those academic and scientific areas already carrying (or likely soon to do) an earned reputation for excellence - Pacific and Asian studies, for instance, and astronomy and medical research, and more recently, national and local security policy and governance.

Ian Chubb thus brought the two parts of ANU together as an integrated and remarkably functional whole, one in which interdependency between teaching and research became a feature of this 21st century university.

The new unity and coherence, and surer purpose at ANU, brought with it greater access to funding from the ARC (and in a separate deal, the National Health and Medical Research Council). ANU was thus able to compete strongly, but fairly, for funding from these and other sources that increasingly became accessible to it. Given the quality of the establishment at ANU (built on staff and student capabilities, and access to equipment and disciplinary choices), and the new leadership and management skills flourishing under Chubb's new regime, ANU expanded into new (or established) fields of academic innovation and excellence.

A new awareness of ANU

Before Ian Chubb's first decade was done, ANU became accepted as the top research and teaching university in the nation. Moreover, the 'international league tables' soon ranked ANU among the top 20 or so universities in the world.

Ian says there was no 'master plan' for his ANU years. 'The university is not a business, but it can be run in a business-like way', he explains. He thrives on hard work, challenge, and application of his general yet exacting skills to planning and management. He believes in cooperation and consensus, with the abiding belief that as Vice Chancellor (at Flinders or ANU) he was paid generously to solve hard problems. And that he, in the end, had responsibility for what was decided. He does not suffer fools or bullies lightly. His management style is low key, direct, and clear as to purpose and responsibility. His immediate staff, junior and senior, are unremittingly loyal to him, which he responds to by expecting them to be creative and to exercise risk-taking in their areas of expertise.

Ian Chubb's relationship with his peer Vice Chancellors across the nation is well measured by the fact that he was entrusted as Chair of the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee in the years 2000-2001, and was a member of the Board of AVCC from 1996-2006. He was Chair of the Group of Eight Universities (there are 40 or so Australian universities in total) in 2003-2005.

The wider educational and political communities recognised him for services to education and neuroscience by making him an Officer in the Order of Australia (AO) in 1999, and in 2006 a Companion in that order (AC). He has honorary doctorates from a number of universities. Canberra voted its confidence in Ian Chubb by making him *ACT's Australian of the Year in 2011*.

On becoming an elder

In an important way, Ian Chubb's entire school and working life illustrates an important general educational principle: provide youngsters, and their sometimes uncertain parents, with access to sound general schooling - 'secular, compulsory, and free' - enrolling, and cajoling if necessary, because 'it's got to be good for them - you can't get enough of a good education!' The archetypal - 'poor country kid makes good' - remains a practical and important stereotype in the 21st century. As it would prove to be for Ian Chubb, and his schoolmates, at that Menzies Creek single-teacher school in the 1950s.

Such children, attending school day-by-day, month-by-month, cared for and guided by good teachers exercising no privilege or preference, but given practical assistance by small groups of managers, are

steered faithfully by their schools. Students are assessed or examined as need be, and the great majority

steered primarily by their schools. Students are assessed or examined as need be, and the great majority of them eventually issue forth from their bush blocks, or farms, or city streets, with completion certificates in hand. A multitude of youngsters have experienced what Ian Chubb saw and heard and felt at Menzies Creek in the late 1940s – and became, not necessarily famous or rich, but marvelously better for having been through an Australian education. And so, in some quietly ironic yet expected way, we might all be thankful that the young Chubb turned himself into a technician, then a lecturer, then a fully developed academic and manager. And finally, the community leader – Ian Chubb DPhil AC – who so fully repaid his parents-teachers-tax-payers, and us, many times over.

Americans, so the stereotype goes, like to model their lives on success measured by fame and fortune. Australians, by contrast but again stereotypically, measure success by a quieter vision – school kids eventually giving back to their communities, to their disciplines, to their parents and elders, even if unknowingly. Give back a willingness to make their education system strong not only philosophically and ethically, but self-regeneratively so.

Chief Scientist of Australia

Following his 'retirement' as longest-serving Vice Chancellor of ANU in 2011, Ian Chubb was invited to take on the mantle of Australian Chief Scientist by the Gillard Government. The appointment is for five years, and is intended to provide wise counsel and sound ideas to the Prime Minister and Ministers of Government. The position of Chief Scientist has few resources at its disposal, so their impact depends on the quality of the advice offered, in the corridors of Parliament House and the Public Service. Ian completed his appointment as Chief Scientist at the beginning of 2016, and it will be a matter now for time to show what his impact has been or will be, and how enduring. He has given hundreds of documented speeches and talks each year, attended meetings of the same order, and taken on briefs and tasks set by his employer, the PM and Government. He has focused on a few key policy matters, all related to STEM (science-technology-engineering-mathematics) in Australia, and in shaping Australia's progress in the world.

He still has tasks for 2016 and beyond:

- chairing an expert group of scientists advising Ministers on the condition and environmental management of the Great Barrier Reef
- a Commonwealth Government audit and review of national Centres for Research Cooperation (CRCs), a system of properly funded, multi-disciplinary initiatives and grants involving mixes of commercial-academic-private stakeholders, focused on critical national areas of research and innovation.

Beyond these tasks always stands Ian Chubb's abiding interest in encouraging children to be curious, and promoting the importance of school teaching as a profession. Ian still has much to say and he has a long schedule of invitations aimed at bringing science to the community, at both professional and lay levels. Listening to him will continue to be worthwhile!
