

MEDIA RELEASE

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ACU honours departing Notre Dame Vice-Chancellor with Doctor of the University

Australian Catholic University (ACU) has conferred an Honorary Doctorate on the outgoing Vice-Chancellor of the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA), Professor Francis Campbell.

Professor Campbell has served as Vice-Chancellor of UNDA for six years, stepping into the role at the outset of the COVID pandemic.

The honorary degree from ACU acknowledges Professor Campbell's service to the Church and community, especially in higher education, and his long career as a diplomat. This is his seventh honorary doctorate and the first from an Australian university.

Professor Campbell said the honorary doctorate came as a "great surprise" and was a humbling way to conclude his service to Australian higher education.

"I want to thank the Chancellor, Deputy Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and Senate of Australian Catholic University for this very kind act. It is humbling to be considered for such an award," Professor Campbell said.

"I have worked closely with ACU in this role and in my previous role in London, and it is wonderful to be associated with the university through this award."

The honorary award comes as Professor Campbell prepares to leave his post as Vice-Chancellor of UNDA for another career venture.

In early 2026, Professor Campbell announced he was stepping down as Vice-Chancellor to work for philanthropic organisation the Templeton World Charity Foundation, relocating to the Bahamas.

Professor Campbell said while he was at the helm of UNDA, the university had seen enormous growth in its international student community, and historic enrolment numbers across its three campuses.

"Over the last six years, UNDA has expanded our international reach considerably to include a vibrant international student community at our Broome, Fremantle and Sydney campuses but also sending ever-more of our students out across the world to our many partner institutions," Professor Campbell said.

"We now have our largest number of students in our history and that is poised to grow in the coming years."

UNDA and ACU are Australia's only Catholic universities, covering the east and west coast of Australia.

UNDA was established as a private Catholic university in Perth in 1989 to train Catholic teachers and nurses, in partnership with the University of Notre Dame in the United States and the Archdiocese of Perth.

In 1991, ACU became the first national Catholic university following the amalgamation of four Catholic tertiary institutions in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the ACT.

Professor Campbell said together UNDA and ACU had flourished in their shared mission to serve Australia and the global Church in the Catholic intellectual tradition.

“We both see Catholic education as a gift to the world, and it is a vital mission of the Church in the world,” Professor Campbell said.

“Both institutions also have a shared mission, as the late Pope Francis set out, to serve communities on the margins of society. That service is an invitation each day to form the next generation.”

Born and raised into a Catholic family in Northern Ireland, Professor Campbell spent his early years immersed in politics and diplomacy. He was a former advisor to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and the first Catholic Ambassador of the United Kingdom to the Holy See since the Reformation.

“Politics and diplomacy were powerful anchors, and at a special time in my life as my home society changed and transitioned to peace,” Professor Campbell said.

“Higher education was there at the very outset and had it not been for the allure of diplomacy and the call to practice, I would have continued with my postgraduate studies.

“But it was to come back into my life in 2014 when I moved from the Foreign Office to St Mary’s University, and now I am about to enter the world of Foundations with my shift to the Templeton Foundations.”

Professor Campbell said his career pivots all shared one common thread.

“All three areas have a shared commonality. Whether it is government, diplomacy, higher education or charitable foundations, they commit to serve the common good of society,” he said.

“The words of St John Henry Newman speak to me quite strongly in this regard when he writes about us perhaps not knowing what our true purpose has been in this life, but it will be revealed to us in the next, and all we are asked to do is to be open to God’s will.”

The departing Vice-Chancellor’s advice to students who may be uncertain about the future was: “Always remain open to opportunities and to take them as they arise”.

“I always encourage students to avail of time abroad to study and to experience different cultures and societies,” he said.

“It opens the mind and it also helps a student to become more resilient and to see themselves and their own society in a new light.

“The beauty of God’s gift of life is its potential, and that is what gives us hope despite the challenges that can arise in life from time to time.”

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