

**University of Melbourne Student Union**  
**Reports from NUS Delegates**  
**To Students' Council 3(17)**  
**24.1.17**

These reports have been processed and collated by the General Secretary of UMSU. Small formatting changes have occurred to have a consistent document. There have been no changes to the content of the reports.

These reports were given to the General Secretary, and were not asked for in any formal way. But it is best to show all correspondence to Students' Council.

**Yan Zhuang**  
*With recommendations*

### **NUS National Conference Report**

I was elected as a Melbourne University delegate to the NUS' National Conference, held on 12-16 December at Deakin University, Waurn Ponds.

#### **Conference Organisation**

From the start, the conference was poorly organised. Little information was provided about the specifics of the conference beforehand. On Monday, policy discussion did not start until after dinner because Socialist Alternative were at another conference. On most days, the conference did not start until the afternoon, and lasted until midnight.

I moved 12 policies, both written by myself and on behalf of fellow attendees Martin Dittmann and Ella Shi, as well as Caleb Triscari. These were in the policy chapters of Administration, Education and Ethnocultural. Due to some kind of administrative error, none of these policies were included in the finalised policy booklet.

When the policy booklet which compiled, all submitted policies was sent to all attendees by the National General Secretary (Cameron Petrie), my policies were not included in the booklet. I emailed the General Secretary, who replied stating that a number of policies were missing, not just mine, and that the version of the policy booklet which had been released was not the final version. It was assured that my policies would be included in the finalised policy booklet. This occurred on the Sunday before conference started.

I received no more information about the matter until Monday night, as we were about to start policy discussion. The General Secretary sent around an email at 8pm on Monday with additional policies in the Administration and Unionism chapter had been uploaded. However, the only policies which had been added were six policies moved by delegates from the University of Tasmania. A substantial amount of policy, including my own, was still missing.

Though I sent three more emails to Cam throughout the week asking whether he planned to upload the rest of the missing policies, none of my emails were responded to.

The only person I am aware of who managed to get their missing policies clogged only did so, according to the University of Sydney student magazine Honi Soit, after considerable pressure from two national factions (source: <http://honisoit.com/2016/12/live-from-hack-schoolies-nus-national-conference/>). This incident illustrates the difficulty for people not aligned with a national faction to properly participate at Natcon, even at the most basic level of being able to move policy.

I have included the policy I moved at the end of this report.

## **Policy Discussion**

A range of important and necessary policies were passed at Natcon. Policies around issues such as reaching out to TAFEs, abolition of unpaid internships, student homelessness, sexual assault on campus, and mental health, amongst others, were discussed and passed.

While this is heartening, and arguably the main reason why Natcon exists, the fact that so many policy were moved in each chapter more or less guarantees the impossibility of them all being achieved by the relevant OB. For example, in the education chapter, 36 policy were moved, and in the welfare chapter, 49 policies. As such, it falls to the discretion of individual officers to determine which policies to implement and which to ignore. Passing policy has symbolic importance, of course, in determining NUS' position in regards to issues. However, it in no way ensures that action will actually be taken.

While in an average campus election it might matter to the average voter whether a party fulfils their election promises or not, this is not the case at NUS, where the majority of voters belong to binding factions, each of whom needs to protect their own office bearers who have done very little that year. Because of this, a faction with a track record of officers not doing their jobs will still be put into the same positions year after year.

The process of allowing a motion to be discussed on conference floor is itself a convoluted one. Before conference, each faction determines internally whether they are happy for a motion to be discussed. Once conference starts, the motion is circulated on a piece of paper, requiring the signatures of enough factions to get it voted up on 'business committee'. Business committee, made of seven members, is elected proportionally depending on the percentage of votes each faction holds. While being voted on at business committee, there is the added danger that the motion will be eaten by a member of business committee who is unhappy for the motion to be spoken about, as happened numerous times throughout the duration of the conference. If, after that entire process, the motion gets voted through by business committee, a vote is presented to the floor about whether it is to be discussed or not. Only if that also goes through does the policy actually get discussed.

Sometimes, when someone fails to stop said piece of paper from being eaten on business committee, they are accused of being 'pathetic' by members of other factions, as happened to myself. Needless to say, the fact that people are mocked for not being equipped to deal with these frankly ridiculous actions that often descend into physical altercations, means that such environments are only accessible to the few who are.

Furthermore, many policies were moved in blocks, often due to it being politically advantageous. For example, one policy block included both a motion regarding supporting Trades Hall campaigns and rallies around domestic violence leave, and a policy to congratulate the union associated with a certain faction, written by that faction. In such a case, because of the difficulty of making amendments to policy blocks (such an amendment would have to go through the process outlined above), motions often were passed not because people agreed with them but because they were unwilling to not pass other policies in the block.

The discussion around some controversial policies were useful in allowing delegates to hear different views about said issue. However, a number of policies were clearly just written to bait another faction or for a faction to congratulate themselves, and provided no constructive debate apart from for individuals to grandstand. Furthermore, it was extremely disappointing that during policy discussion of some quite controversial issues, like campaigns around sexual assault and trigger warnings, some attendees felt it necessary to heckle and mock speakers, often speaking from personal experience,

because they thought there were more important issues to be discussing. This made the conference an unsafe space and contributed to people feeling like they could not participate in these discussions.

In addition, with most people in the room already having made up their minds about how to vote - whether by belonging to a binding faction, or having discussed the policy with people beforehand and having more or less come to a decision. Over three quarters of delegates belonged to binding factions and hence would not have been swayed by any amount of policy debate. It is for this reason that the majority of unaffiliated Melbourne University delegates chose not to speak on policy.

### **Transparency measures**

On the first day, a motion was passed to ban filming of conference, as is done every year. Although a policy had been passed at a previous Natcon allowing the filming of candidate speeches (the only part of the conference that could be filmed) this was not upheld. I am unsure why this was the case.

I have always been of the opinion that Natcon should allow filming of policy discussion, with an opt out policy to be implemented for speakers speaking on sensitive issues. I believe that allowing filming of conference has the potential to contribute to a more accountable and respectful conference culture.

### **Recommendations**

I believe the NUS needs serious reform if it's to have any hope of credibility. In the coming year, UMSU needs to determine how it continues to engage with NUS, and to that end, I'd like to recommend that UMSU establish a NUS working group, with the aim of exploring both the most effective ways of engaging with the NUS in order to make our voice heard, and possibilities for reforming the NUS. The working group should contain the the following members: the UMSU President and General Secretary, the seven NUS delegates elected for Natcon 2016 and the NUS Campus representative. A system should also be put in place to allow other students to voice their opinions, potentially through a submission process.

### **Policies Submitted**

#### **Admin Policy**

##### **Allow cameras, stop the *in camera***

Preamble:

As the peak representative body for Australian tertiary education students, NUS should maximise its efforts to increase student engagement nationwide. A core method of doing so is through the student media outlets present at the majority of universities. However, this relationship is primarily dependent on a sufficient degree of accountability and transparency. Two current barriers to student engagement are the high cost for Media Observers to attend National Conference, and regular motions prohibiting audiovisual equipment from recording or broadcasting the outcomes of the Conference. As a result, Media Observers are not capable of providing the highest quality coverage possible to their university constituencies.

Platform:

1. That NUS affirms its commitment to optimising transparent practices at all times, especially at National Conference.
2. That NUS understands that transparency is crucial for students to fully understand its function, its achievements and its roles.

Action:

1. That National Conference acknowledges the role of Media Observers in recording and disseminating the policies, discussions and other outcomes of the Conference.
2. That National Conference endorses audiovisual recording of the conference for recordkeeping, transparency, accountability, and accurate media reporting.
3. That National Conference embraces new methods of media engagement, such as Periscope, to broadcast the outcome of the Conference and engage students in real time.
4. The National Conference organisers will investigate decreasing the cost for Media Observers which will, in turn, allow for a greater media presence and subsequent engagement with student constituencies.

5. The National Conference organisers will investigate the possibility of livestreaming the National Conference for all students to engage with.

**Moved: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

### **Improving ballot processes**

#### **Preamble**

1. The secret ballot is one of the most important inventions of modern democracy, and Australia has been a particularly significant champion of it historically. The secret ballot is designed to prevent voter intimidation, a historic feature of the pre-secret ballot era, which disproportionately affected women, the working class and autonomous groups. The entire point of the secret ballot is that it is compulsory in secrecy – that there is no opportunity for potential pressure on people to reveal how they voted, or to hand over their ballots. “Optional secrecy” clearly is not enough. That is why even photography within ballot rooms is banned by all proper electoral bodies and returning officers

2. The NUS, while nominally maintaining a secret ballot, allows people to show and hand over their ballot papers under R80.4. This is not only simply not the definition of the secret ballot, but it also defeats most of the purpose of it. The balloting process at NUS is questionable at best, and has generated negative publicity and alarm with students and beyond. The kind of practises at NUS conference – showing people ballot papers and handing over large stacks of ballot papers – would be considered deeply shocking if they happened at a federal or campus election.

3. That said, there are alternatives to a secret ballot. If the NUS feels that the most important thing is the ability for people to transparently know how their representatives (their delegates) voted, than it can move to an open ballot instead. Such a measure could see an open floor vote recorded in a Hansard-type roll call recording. Or, it might see people hand in registered voting slips, electronically and in person, allowing them to be recorded in a report. If NUS feels instead that is not the primary objective, the only option is a secret ballot.

#### **Platform**

1. NUS recognises the importance of the secret ballot, the fact that compulsory secrecy is an inherent feature designed to protect intimidation, and the role of both in ensuring a fair vote for all, particularly women, the working class and autonomous groups.

2. NUS recognises that its current procedure under R80.4 is not compliant with this, and that it has a number of alternatives instead.

3. NUS is committed to reforming in some way its ballot procedure.

#### **Action**

1. National Conference directs the National General Secretary to investigate various alternative ballot proposals which either ensure a full secret ballot or a full transparent ballot recordable in a report, and to present the proposal to the next National Conference in 2017.

**Moved: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

### **Equity Grants for National Conference**

#### **Preamble**

1. As the peak representative organisation for tertiary students in Australia, NUS should be transparent and accountable to its member organisations

2. As the national annual general meeting of the NUS, National Conference is an integral decision making forum for NUS, and its proceedings should be accessible to as many students as possible.

3. A key barrier to the accessibility of National Conference is the price of non-official observer registration. Students who are not already deeply involved in NUS find it hard to justify shelling out \$200 to go to a conference with seemingly minimal personal benefits, which exacerbates the difficulty of engaging them in these decision making processes.

4. The impact of this is most apparent for interstate and rural students, who can come from campuses that are unable to sufficiently subsidise the numerous costs associated with attending National Conference

5. This also disproportionality affects students from marginalised groups, for whom NUS conferences are an important way to network and build community with likeminded students.

#### **Platform**

1. NUS acknowledges the importance of engaging with its constituents, the majority of whom are disengaged with its governing processes, especially at National Conference.

2. NUS recognises that the high observer fee associated with National Conference disproportionately affects the ability of students from marginalised backgrounds to engage with student unionism on a national level.

3. NUS acknowledges its own responsibility in ensuring the accessibility of National Conference.

**Action:**

1. That NUS instate equity grants for students attending National Conference as non-official observers, to be put in place in time for the 2017 National Conference, through a process similar to that which is currently used for Education Conference equity grants

2. That said equity grants are to be allocated to students on the basis of disadvantage, prioritising:

1. students from interstate or rural universities,
2. students from marginalised groups,
3. and first time attendees.

**Mover: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Second: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**An up-to-date NUS Website**

**Preamble**

1. The current NUS website contains information that is largely out of date. At the time of writing, the last minutes from National Executive and Office Bearer reports uploaded to the NUS website is from April. The last time the homepage of the NUS website was updated in regards to the activities the organisation is undertaking was in February of this year. Furthermore, the minutes from 2015 National Conference have not yet been uploaded to the website.

2. As the peak representative body for students in Australia, NUS must lead by example in ensuring that information about its activities is transparent and easily accessible. In addition to this, NUS should make every effort to remain accountable to its affiliate organisations by ensuring that information about its internal proceedings are made available in a timely manner.

3. It is difficult for campuses to engage with NUS if they have no clear way of finding out about NUS' activities. This then lowers the incentive for campus student unions to engage with NUS.

**Platform**

1. That NUS acknowledges the importance of having an up to date website in increasing the organisation's legitimacy. An up to date website will also allow NUS to raising the profile of its national campaigns and activities undertaken by its office bearers.

2. That NUS recognises the importance of fostering a culture of accountability and transparency, and acknowledges that this includes ensuring that information about its proceedings are made available to its affiliate organisations and the wider student population. This includes publishing National Conference minutes, National and State Office Bearer reports, and the minutes of National Executive meetings.

**Action**

1. That the General Secretary, in collaboration with other National and State Office bearers, as well as National Executive, update the NUS website about current office bearer activities on a monthly basis at the minimum.

2. That the General Secretary uploads the minutes of each National Executive meeting, as well as Office Bearer reports, no later than one week after they are confirmed.

3. That the General Secretary uploads the minutes of National Conference onto its website no longer than a month after the close of the conference.

**Mover: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Second: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Education Policy**

**Education – Improving EdCon**

**Preamble**

1. EdCon is an important fixture in the NUS calendar. For many students, it's their first contact with NUS. But it's clearly in need of improvement.

2. First and foremost, we need more sessions on the actual details of education policy – assessment, pedagogy, development and teaching issues.
3. EdCon is an important place to learn how to organise, but we need to make sure that the focus on education remains clear. And we need to make sure EdCon is about more than just the Go8.
4. Welfare at EdCon is important. Part of that means continuing the work done this year to include a Welfare section in EdCon. EdCon can be a great place for the student movement to further its Welfare goals, and the National Education and Welfare Officers should work closely together here.
5. We also need to improve the general welfare situation at EdCon – it's no secret that EdCon every year faces equity breaches, big and small. We need a stronger general equity procedure for EdCon and other NUS conferences. That includes increasing group interaction, and continuing to boost cross-factional workshops.
6. And we need to ensure that the mechanics of EdCon continue to run smoothly. EdCon should be as affordable and accessible, and as well run, as possible. And EdCon should be a hub for producing resources for the whole country – producing videos for some EdCon sessions could be a great way to do that.

#### **Platform**

1. NUS believes in improving EdCon, including in its policy and education focus.
2. NUS believes in maintaining welfare at EdCON.
3. NUS is committed to ensuring the conference runs smoothly and is accessible to all students.

#### **Action**

1. The National Education Officer will aim to improve EdCon next year.
2. The National Education Officer will ensure EdCon holds more sessions on the actual details of education policy – assessment, pedagogy, development and teaching issues.
3. The National Education Officer and National Welfare Officer will work together both in terms of including a Welfare section in EdCon again, and developing a better general welfare situation a stronger general equity procedure.
4. The National Education Officer will ensure videos are produced for some EdCon sessions.

**Moved: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

#### **A National Education Audit**

##### **Preamble**

1. The NUS Quality Survey is an important tool in the NUS's push to improve higher education. But it should be part of something bigger.
2. Over the next one or two years, the NUS Education Office should conduct a National Education Audit, in partnership with campuses.
3. To improve data, the National Education Office should consider conducting some scientific surveys too, potentially in collaboration with sympathetic university staff members in statistics and research fields. That would provide the opportunity to get a true compass on the state of education in Australia, with potential to grab serious media and university attention.

##### **Action**

1. The National Education Officer will develop a National Education Audit. This audit will be conducted scientifically and identify the range of education and learning representation situations at universities, looking at everything from quality of online learning to fair assessment.

**Mover: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

## **A new approach to grassroots organising**

### **Preamble**

1. NUS don't have the resources of most other peak bodies – money for expensive broadcast and print advertising, or to hire professional PR or lobbying staff.
2. What NUS do have is potential people power – out there in the over one million Australian students. Successive generations of National Education Officers have tapped into that – but there's so much more potential than is utilised.
3. The way people get involved in a movement is when they have opportunities to take on meaningful and defined roles. Many of the best student unions and representative organisation are the ones that do that. They might give students opportunities to be representatives on university boards, or to take on certain communications, policy or organising roles on public affairs issues.
4. Supporting these structures means that the National Education Office can tap into a much larger pool of people. A pool that includes people working up and down university bodies. And a pool of people with communications and policy skills that can support the National Office.

### **Platform**

1. NUS believes we need to look at a new model of organising based on delegated responsibilities.
2. NUS believes the National Education Office should be supporting campus Education Officers in adopting the kinds of programs and structures – where there are meaningful roles for all in university boards, faculty representation and public affairs groups.
3. NUS believes in particular, students should to be able to provide their specialist expertise to campus Education Departments and action groups – on everything from PR to policy organising.

### **Action**

1. The National Education Officer will support and drive a new model of grassroots organising on campuses, where all unions offer opportunities for students to take on delegated positions of responsibility in Education Departments, on both academic affairs and public affairs front.
2. The National Education Officer will aim to make this the basis for a much bigger, more vibrant and more supportive national education group – with a much more diverse Facebook group and more voices at new monthly national education linkups.

**Mover: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconder: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

## **Building the tools to mobilise students**

### **Preamble**

1. A national peak body needs to be able to reach its constituents. But currently, the NUS is limited in its ability to do this.
2. That outreach ability must include direct outreach – through things like email newsletters and social media. But it also needs to stretch to targeted outreach, where certain contact can be made to certain groups of students.

### **Platform**

1. NUS believes it needs to develop new tools, from new email newsletters to new CRM tools, to improve both direct and targeted outreach.

### **Action**

1. Over the next year, the National Education Office will examine the potential outreach tools it can use and implement, and present a report to the next NUS Education Conference in 2017.

**Mover: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconder: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

## **Proactive activism, not just responsive activism**

### **Preamble**

1. Over the last decades, the student movement has achieved some great things. It has fought various attacks on student rights and the quality of education. It has fought discrimination and bigotry, and has made both society and universities a better place for millions of people.
2. Despite this, on many aspects, life on many fronts for students has gotten worse. Student fees have kept rising and rising. For many, going to university is less affordable and accessible than it

would have been in the past. Funding to higher education has consistently been short in some areas, harming both education and equality.

3. It's time the NUS did more not just to successfully stop attacks on students, but also to have more impact on proactive education change. Big issues, like higher funding and more student representatives on university councils, need to be part of that.

4. Student unionists have talked for years about putting textbooks on HECS – let's make that front and centre in our campaign, starting with a push for a NZ-style ancillary cost support scheme.

#### **Platform**

1. NUS resolves to do more in the field of proactive education activism.

2. NUS believes that long term change requires long term, consistent, campaigns.

3. NUS believes in developing a roadmap that gets us closer to our goal of education genuinely being accessible to all, and free of the financial inequality that current plagues it.

#### **Action**

1. The National Education Officer will launch two proactive education campaigns next year. These will be flexible enough to be highly responsive to new attacks on education, but also to deliver a long-term push for better conditions, not just more of the same. These campaigns will run not just for a year, but for three years. Each of these campaigns will come with an NUS Education Platform for them.

2. One campaign will focus on education quality and pedagogy issues, and another on education fairness and fees issues, with the two campaigns intersecting.

3. In particular, the National Education Officer will make front and centre a goal of cutting student ancillary costs to \$0, starting by making sure students face no upfront ancillary costs.

**Mover: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

### **Ethnocultural Policy**

#### **Continuation of the national student People of Colour Conference**

##### **Preamble:**

1. The inaugural student run People of Colour Conference was held at University of Melbourne this year over 23-24 July.

2. This conference provided a valuable opportunity for students of colour to network, create communities, engage with issues affecting them during their university experience, and develop their skills in activism.

3. Students of colour are continuously underrepresented in student activism forums, and it is important that they have a space where they can engage with activism on a national level.

##### **Platform:**

1. That NUS acknowledges the specific barriers to engaging in student activism that students of colour face, and the importance of an autonomous conference in providing these students a space to network, organise and hold discussions.

2. That NUS recognises the benefits of the continuation of an annual national student People of Colour Conference, and in allowing the conference to gain momentum.

##### **Action:**

1. That the National Ethno-cultural Officer will assist campus activists in hosting 2017's People of Colour conference, using the NUS' networks to promote the conference, help source speakers, and other such tasks.

2. If necessary, that the National Ethno-cultural Officer assist in finding a host for the 2017 People of Colour Conference

3. That the National Ethno-cultural Officer acknowledges the autonomy of students of colour and acts according to their directions.

**Moved: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

### **Solidarity with Queer Students of Colour**

#### **Preamble**

1. Queer students can face disadvantages and discrimination as a result of queerphobia, heteronormativity, transphobia and gender essentialism.



2. Discrimination against queer students can disproportionately affect queer students of colour who additionally face oppression on the grounds of race and culture.
3. In the past year, some political voices and mainstream media outlets have capitalised on particular incidents of anti- queer sentiments arising from certain cultural communities, and have falsely characterised these communities as being anti queer.
4. This is not only distressing for queer students of all backgrounds, but also perpetuates a problematic view that cultural communities are comprised of indistinguishable, unanimous voices rather than diverse individuals.

**Platform:**

1. That NUS supports and advocates for the rights of queer students, including queer students of colour.
2. That NUS recognizes that different forms of oppression and violence are not mutually exclusive but intersect, and acknowledges the importance of intersectionality in uniting autonomous departments in the campaign against oppression.

**Action:**

1. The NUS Ethno-Cultural Officer should work with the Queer, Ethno-cultural and People of Colour departments on campuses nation-wide to ensure these departments support queer students of colour.
2. Where necessary, the NUS Ethno-Cultural Officer should assist the establishment of autonomous collectives for queer students of colour.
3. The NUS and the Ethno-Cultural Officer should support and demonstrate solidarity with queer rights movements and campaigns.
4. The Ethno-Cultural officer should publically speak out against the misrepresentation of cultural communities, and publically demonstrate support and solidarity with queer students of colour.

**Moved: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

## **Mental Health support for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Students**

**Preamble:**

1. Mental health is an important issue which presents real challenges and consequences for students. Mental health and wellbeing deserves thorough recognition, and all students should have access to information and support.
2. Awareness of and access to mental health support may be particularly difficult for some students from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, due to a number of factors including the issue being a taboo topic, or a lack of information.
3. Racism – whether in the form of isolated incidents or structural racism which impacts social participation and engagement – can be a contributing and exacerbating factor for mental health issues.

**Platform:**

1. The NUS believes that support and access to mental health services should be available to all students.
2. The NUS recognises that different cultural backgrounds may result in different understandings and ways of communicating about mental health.
3. The NUS recognizes the importance of mental health awareness and support for student wellbeing and is committed to supporting all students including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

**Action:**

1. The Disabilities Officer should work with their respective counterparts on campus to ensure that mental health support services on campus are accessible to all students, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
2. Where necessary, the Disabilities officer should assist in setting up autonomous collectives for CALD students for mental health support.
3. The Disabilities officer in conjunction with their respective campus counterparts should liaise with universities to ensure that the professional mental health and counselling services offered have staff members from CALD backgrounds, and who are trained and equipped to assist students from CALD backgrounds.
4. The Disabilities officer should work with the Ethno-cultural officer and relevant community groups to create material on mental health awareness that is accessible and relevant to CALD students, and distribute this material via their respective campus counterparts.

**Moved: Yan Zhuang (University of Melbourne Student Union)**

**Seconded: Zachary Power (University of Melbourne Student Union)**



**Sinead Manning**  
*With recommendations*

I was elected a delegate to the National Union of Students (NUS) National Conference (NatCon) from the 12th-16th December 2016. It was a deeply disturbing experience.

Prior to NatCon, members of our delegation and other students organised multiple meetings and information days to discuss the conference, and the submission of policy. Our delegation worked together with non-delegates to write a total of 23 policies for the Administration, Constitutional, Education, Ethno-Cultural, and Welfare chapters. Despite submission, few of our policies were included in the final policy book. The final policy book included many good policies, although there remained policies included that were blatant jokes, inter-factional insults, and/or entirely unrelated to Australian students and the work of a national student union.

The policy book was sent out a few days before the conference, and delegates received no information about conference scheduling beforehand. This seems to have occurred since NatCon is designed to accommodate two large Labor factions (Student Unity and National Labor Students, right and left respectively), the National Independents, and Socialist Alternative. A schedule is not needed because senior figures from each faction will inform their delegates and observers of how to behave at NatCon, and how the conference will proceed. For those of us without a faction, and little experience with the NUS, the lack of information was one of many issues.

The Socialist Alternative delegation, almost 17% of conference floor, did not arrive until late Monday evening, which prevented non-ceremonial conference matters from being discussed until after dinner. There was a ceremonial first session, in which outgoing office bearers gave reports. This session lasted less than an hour.

The second session began just before 9pm, and lasted until 1am. Major factions Student Unity, NLS, and the Socialist Alternative voted to ban filming of the conference at the beginning of this session.

Although real-time information is available on Twitter and live blogs, this commentary fails to capture the inherent and intense toxicity of NatCon. Prior to attending, I had read many reports and articles about NatCon's failings; none prepared me for the actual experience. Even the faction with the most numbers on conference floor (Student Unity) has officially commented that, were NatCon filmed, it would be defunded. I cannot imagine any non-stupol student observing NatCon coming to the conclusion that it is not a waste of their money. During an instance of factions chanting "Drain the Swamp!", I overheard a delegate laugh and comment "this is why we don't allow filming". Film would capture the verbal and physical violence of the conference. Allowing filming is my first recommendation. That said, filming autonomous departments where people speak to personal experience (for instance, someone who hasn't come out talking on LGBTI policies) should remain restricted or opt-out.

The second session discussed Small and Regional policies first. This chapter was uncontroversial and policies were passed en bloc. The next chapter discussed was Unionism. This chapter allows factions to present their political views to conference. Although Unionism is a big chapter, and does contain important policy, it should not have been prioritised over autonomous policy chapters which were discussed at the end of conference. Whether or not the NUS has a stance on the Australian Building and Construction Commission or the United Firefighters Union is perhaps less fundamental than its plans for Queer or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Admin was also discussed on Monday night. Despite being largely uncontroversial, there were multiple speakers for and against each motion.

This session of conference did include abhorrent behaviour, such as the Socialist Alternative calling volunteer firefighters "scabs" who are "playing firefighter", and speaking against a motion to increase transparency for national office bearers. That said, this was one of the better conference sessions in terms of behaviour. For reference, Socialist Alternative won three national office bearer positions.

Tuesday did see two conference sessions. The first from 2.50pm until 6.50pm, and the second from 9.30pm to 12.50am. Conference doesn't start earlier in the day due to delegates commonly being too hungover from the night before. The chapters discussed during this session were Welfare, Education, International Students (for less than ten minutes), and Disabilities. Good welfare policies were passed, although speakers continued to speak for and against on every motion. Usually policies are debated in this way to inform undecided voters within a conference, or to provide further information for observers. At NatCon, speakers are commonly training for Parliament.

Student Unity, NLS, and Socialist Alternative all vote along factional lines. This means that someone will yell "Unity/NLS Up!" or raise their lanyard and all delegates will vote en bloc. Further, these factions (and the National Independents) conducted deals prior to and during the conference. These deals dictate the way in which the vote occurs, so it is clear whether or not a policy will be carried. As a result, the speakers are generally talking for their own ego. Speaking, commonly, is virtue signalling; delegates or observers self-aggrandise their political views and demonstrate their progressiveness to their faction. Our delegation received criticism for not speaking on conference floor. Personally, I did not speak because I was able to vote on motions and thought it prudent to 'speak' with my vote rather than my voice (especially as a fairly privileged white woman). Moreover, the delay in conference starting, and the amount of speakers on uncontroversial issues prolonged the earlier policy chapters and left less than an hour at the end of the conference to debate Queer and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy.

During the disabilities debate, Socialist Alternative (again, a group with three national office bearer positions) criticised a policy about inherent requirements as "trigger warnings", stating "if you are upset it is because life is upsetting" and that "distress is not a disability". Members of Socialist Alternative laughed and mocked those speaking in favour of this motion, before leaving conference en masse. Socialist Alternative again mocked students with disabilities in the next conference session. When called out on it, they pointed to a member of their group with a cast on one leg and crutches; as if to say, "we're not ableist, our friend has crutches".

The behaviour of Social Alternative was disgusting throughout the conference. Socialist Alternative consistently criticised those "collaborating" with university administration or rival factions (particularly the Liberals), yet signed a deal with Unity, NLS, and the National Independents in order to be elected to the NUS, and collected discarded ballot papers from Liberal delegates to use during voting.

The next day proceeded much as the previous, but debate had to end by 12.45am. The chapters discussed were Disabilities, Ethno-Cultural, Constitutional, Women's, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and Queer. The Ethno-Cultural chapter was extensively debated, despite the majority of votes being unanimously in favour of various policies. Socialist Alternative decried any motion that did not include protesting, and aggressively heckled speakers from other factions. Women of Colour were abused by White members of the Socialist Alternative. Again, speakers unnecessarily opposing or favouring policy prolonged debate over uncontroversial matters. To be fair, not all speakers did this, during autonomous chapters many gave impassioned anecdotes—mostly from the Independent and Labor factions. Few attendees listened during the Ethno-Cultural discussion; many were talking amongst themselves, or sneaking out for a smoke break.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy starts being discussed in the last hour of NatCon. Socialist Alternative, unsurprisingly, criticised an Indigenous speaker during debate since this speaker was a member of the Liberal party. The debate was less than thirty minutes if you exclude the heckling. Queer policy was discussed in the last fifteen minutes of conference. Most Queer policy was not discussed, just voted on; by contrast, there was an extended debate as to whether or not the NUS website should be updated in 2017. It may be humorous; certainly members of Student Unity were enacting meme culture by chanting in favour of fracking, coal-seam gas, and that "the union gives us jobs". Unfortunately this attitude effectively normalises the abhorrent behaviour plaguing NatCon.

Frankly, NatCon is one of the most sickening things I have seen since entering student politics.

To give some perspective: there were 59 policies submitted for Education and Welfare, over 50 for Women's, 39 for Queer, 37 for Unionism, 25 for Admin, 22 Ethno-Cultural, 20 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, 18 Disabilities, 10 Constitutional, 6 Small & Regional, and 5 International. These are approximate numbers and not all policies were included in the book or discussed.

The Thursday of NatCon is set aside for voting. It is not a secret ballot and many delegates 'hand over' their ballot papers to their factional leaders, who have participated in deals beforehand ensuring their election to particular positions in exchange for others. Delegates from More! committed to having no one touch their ballot except themselves and electoral staff. Voting is optional preferential. I filled in every one of my ballots to the full extent. When I was finished, I approached a member of the staff to ask where the ballot box was. He was visibly confused by my question, asking whether a faction knew what I was doing, and unsure how to proceed with a pile of individual votes rather than a huge stack from one of the factions. Although I knew my votes were meaningless, it was important for my own integrity that I fill them out correctly. However, even this small stand was in vain, as all the candidates for office bearer positions were elected unopposed due to late withdrawals. So much for the 32,000 ballots printed.

A small positive was the election of Caleb Triscari to be the University of Melbourne's Campus Representative. But even this, once posted on Facebook, invited a torrent of abuse. I hope that Students Council will support Triscari in his new role, with a view to reforming the processes of the NUS. Anneke D'Emanuele and Jade Eckhaus from the University of Melbourne were also elected, to Education Officer and Victorian Education Vice President respectively.

Reading over this report, it does not encapsulate the insidious awfulness of NatCon. I am a strong believer in national unionism, and a national union which represents and includes all students. NUS, from my experience thus far, does not achieve this.

### **Recommendations**

1. That Students Council lobbies the NUS National Conference to allow student media to film proceedings, with an opt-out option during autonomous chapters.
2. That Students Council support and work alongside Caleb Triscari in his role as Campus Representative.

That Students Council establish an NUS Working Group. This group will consist of the University of Melbourne's campus rep, this year's delegates, the UMSU General Secretary or nominee, and President or nominee. The purpose of the working group would be to examine the continuing relationship between UMSU and the NUS before presenting Students Council with a report of their findings in six months.