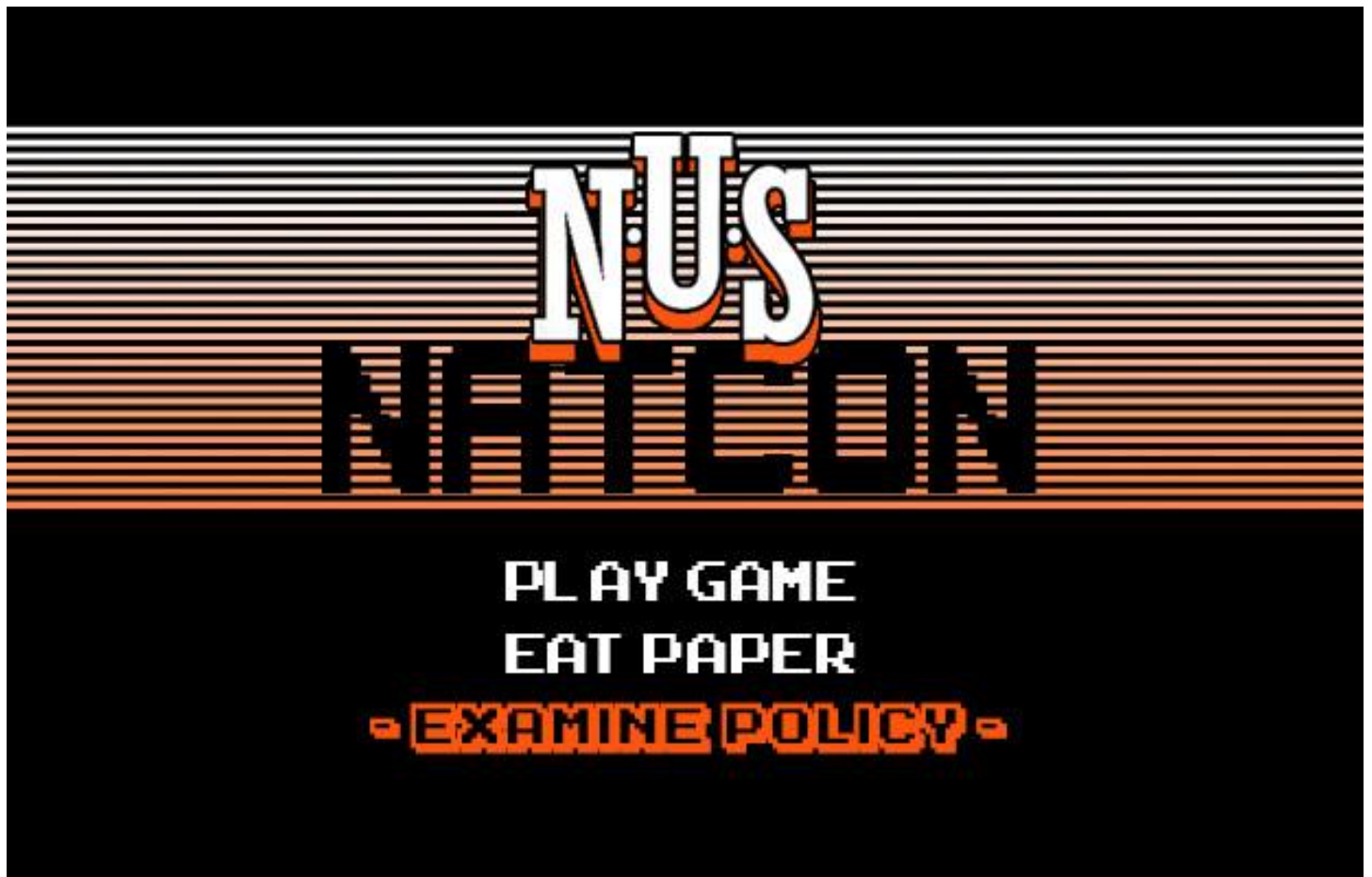


Honi Soit

Analysis //

NUS NatCon 2018: Policy

The direction of Australian students' peak representative body hangs in the balance.



Choose your fighter.

by Joseph Verity
December 10, 2018



For a handy introduction to NatCon, [click here](#).

Each year, days before the start of NatCon, the outgoing General Secretary compiles all the policy to be debated at the conference into a neatly chaptered volume. Hundreds of motions meticulously crafted and submitted by factions undergo a quasi-professional makeover: overly-emphatic declarations are reigned into the bounds of civility by the selective use of asterisks and diligent categorisation and formatting tame what remains.

The stage, it seems, would be set for a rigorous and week of considered policy debate, befitting of an institution with a reputation for spawning future career politicians. What follows, however, is at best, a farce, and at worst, an event resembling gladiatorial combat more than intellectual sparring.

Despite this, the 2018 NatCon Policy Book reveals a number of key indications about the current state of the National Union of Students (NUS). Beyond being simply ideological reflections of the factions that proposed them, the three-hundred and sixteen pages of policy submitted this year reveal a considerable amount about the challenges facing Australia's peak student representative body in 2018.

Key performance indicators (KPIs)

Like most student unions, the NUS rests on precarious financial footing. The passage of voluntary student unionism (VSU) by the Howard Government in 2005 thrust the already strained NUS into dire circumstances. The union emerged into the post-VSU world heavily dependent on affiliation fees paid annually by individual student unions like USyd's SRC. Contributions fluctuate according to the Student Services and Amenities Fees allocations negotiated with respective university managements, alongside the discretion of the particular union as to the affiliation amount paid. For the NUS, the alarming budget deficit of \$61,178 in 2016 can be turned into a comfortable surplus of almost \$12,000 the following year simply through the reaccreditation of several constituent student unions.

For that reason, accreditation remains crucial to the financial security of the NUS. However, difficulty arises in convincing many student unions of the benefits of accreditation.

The NUS is notoriously opaque and unaccountable. Media access to the Union's annual conference is barred behind a prohibitively expensive registration fee, and a motion to ban photography is reliably passed almost immediately as the conference floor opens. The minutes published for NatCon are minimalist to the point of redundancy.

National office-bearers of the Union have also incurred a reputation for being unreliable and internally uncooperative. In 2016, the NUS' General Secretary, Cameron Petrie (Labor Right), sought legal advice on the removal of the President, Sinéad Colee (Labor Left), following her failure to submit monthly reports to the Executive. The

dispute is just one illustration of the factional infighting highlighted by a 2014 audit as a systemic cause of the NUS' inefficiency.

As a result, constituent unions have become increasingly reluctant to accredit. Mere days before the start of NatCon this year, ANUSA voted against reaccreditation after submitting a list of conditional requirements to the NUS in March, which the union claims were not met. This list of requirements, or KPIs, did not stray far from the conditions imposed on the NUS by its own constitution: in a telling clause, ANUSA requested simply that the NUS respect its own regulations.

The prospect of further disaccreditations poses an existential threat to the NUS. The 2018 Policy Book is therefore furnished with a number of motions, proposed largely by the traditionally presidential Labor faction, NLS, pursuing the establishment of KPIs as a safeguard for constituent support. ADMIN 2.12, 'KPIs for everyone', seeks to impose KPIs on all national office-bearers to promote the "transparency of office-bearer activity". ADMIN 2.12, immediately following, seeks to establish a system whereby the President coordinates with affiliate unions to negotiate KPIs imposed on the NUS itself.

Not all are in favour of KPIs however. Listed as a signatory to ANUSA's conditions in March, former USyd SRC President Imogen Grant denied being in favour of KPIs, instead endorsing the position of unconditional accreditation, a position championed at this year's NatCon by Socialist Alternative. Interestingly, Desiree Cai (NLS), President of the University of Melbourne Student Union, has endorsed affiliate KPIs alongside NLS colleague Lachlan Barker in this year's Policy Book, despite originally distancing herself from the ANUSA letter a statement to the *ANU Observer*.

Identity crisis: activism or service provision?

Beyond the battle for performance, the 2018 Policy Book betrays another conflict raging within the NUS, one which speaks more to the identity of the institution itself.

Like many unions, including the USyd SRC, the NUS attempts to strike a balance between activism and service provision. In the same way that 2018 USyd presidential candidates Jacky He and Adriana Malavisi attempted to centre service provision in USyd's 2018 SRC election, focusing on programs like textbook subsidies and Welfare Week, factions such as Unity and NLS are particularly determined to introduce service-oriented policy to the floor at NatCon 2018.

WELF 5.18, moved by Malavisi herself, pushes for the adoption of an NUS backed Welfare Week, like the one orchestrated by the SRC this year, to advertise the NUS' services to students around the country. Other services proposed include the facilitation of pap smear tests and pill testing kits. The bulk of these policies imply a close working relationship with university management and state and federal governments.

To the left of Labor, Socialist Alternative and the National Grassroots and Independents prosecute a much more activist-oriented agenda. The broad left view the NUS, and student unionism in general, as an instrument of protest more than service. Rather than negotiate with university management structures or governments to secure students' interests, leftist factions favour direct action, as reflected in the 'Books not Bombs' campaign spearheaded by this year's education officer, Con Karavias. The campaign sought to expose the arms investments held by prominent Australian universities such as USyd.

This practical and ideological divide was noted by *Honi* in its review of the independent audit commissioned by the NUS in 2014 – a report which warned against the risk of “radical” elements within the NUS. Situated somewhere between the broad left and Unity, NLS are confident in their ability to provide services to students whilst resisting total corporatisation. 2017 NUS President Sophie Johnston described the faction, which is poised to take the presidency again this year, as “directly in the middle of ... SAlt and Unity”. With policies that both expand SAlt initiatives (EDU 4.12, Expanding books not bombs) and seek to operate within government channels (EDU 4.15 OECD please), it seems NUS is set on continuing to play the mediator between the two rival practical ideologies.

Provided more motions make it to the floor than to delegates' stomachs, NatCon 2018 will determine how the NUS moves forward in securing accreditations and executing policy over the next year. Follow the *Honi* live coverage during the week for all the latest.

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