

The ANU Observer

"If It's Written Down, It Must Be News"

NUS OBSERVERS PASS JUDGEMENT

Michael Turvey & Eliza Croft

Physical violence, secret policy deals, and factional warfare were discussed this week when the NUS National Conference observers reported to ANUSA. The conference is generally hostile to media and has banned recording, so the reports greatly impact whether ANUSA funds and supports NUS.

The National Union of Students (NUS) campaigns on penalty rates, deregulation, and other student issues. Each year, ANUSA votes on ‘accreditation’ with NUS, which means paying a fee and voting at National Conference (NatCon). ANUSA President James Connolly negotiated for the National Independents, where Education Officer Jessy Wu and General Representative Tom Kesina also sat. Jillian Molloy, former president of NUS’s ACT branch, sat with Student Unity, the Labor Right faction, and was elected Welfare Officer at the conference. Connolly, acknowledging his perspective as a negotiator, was lukewarm on NatCon, while Wu surprised many with harsh criticisms. Molloy said she was “one of NUS’s largest critics”, but while she did call for reform she largely focused on the successes of NUS.

Fistfights, physical intimidation, and screaming matches have plagued the reputation of NatCon in past years. This year showed improvement in that fistfights were avoided and an independent grievance officer was appointed, but physical intimidation remained prevalent. Wu said she was “followed around and towered over by somebody from SALt [Socialist Alternative]” after a policy disagreement. Reports disagreed on the severity of the problems; Molloy called it a “significant improvement” and argued NatCon is “a time where passionate people speak on policies and actions that mean the world to them”. Connolly, however, labelled it as “tribalistic”, and Kesina described the atmosphere as “an even more juvenile House of Reps Question Time … where delegates tackle each other to eat bits of paper” referring to the practice of eating printed motions so they cannot be discussed.

During Australian and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) policy, one of the few Indigenous Australian

delegates was prevented from speaking after SALt “tried to drown him out, acting in a physically intimidating manner,” because he was also a Liberal. Observers universally condemned this behaviour: Molloy called it “unnecessary and unfair,” while Connolly said it “ranged from inappropriate to appalling.” Kesina raised the example of Lambros Tapinos, a Labor City Councillor appointed independent Returning Officer responsible for running NUS elections, who “purchased alcohol and drunk with [Labor] delegates.” Tapinos was later dismissed from his role for allegedly tampering with proxy forms, which Kesina described as “an insult to the word independent.”

Last year’s NatCon neglected many topics like environmental and queer* policy, but this year was successful in getting policy passed. Connolly described the platform as “sensible, non-controversial and progressive,” highlighting the ‘Make Education Free Again’ campaign and Molloy’s welfare policies as key successes. Wu and Kesina, however, argued the NatCon process made policy unrepresentative, citing the NUS education campaign ‘Make Education Free Again’ “I know there is disagreement” Wu said, “about whether free education is the most equitable fee structure… but that wasn’t discussed robustly. Instead there was a behind closed doors deal to give the position of Education Officer to the Socialist Alternative, and as a result there wasn’t a critical engagement over the education campaign of the NUS.”

While all agreed NUS needs reform, no observers declared their position on accreditation, citing that NUS remains the only national body representing students in a time of cuts to education and welfare. The simple question asked at accreditation debates for the past two years was: do ANU students need NUS enough to justify NatCon? This will likely be the question considered in three weeks when ANUSA debates 2017 accreditation.

The full NUS Reports can be found on the ANUSA website.

MEN'S NETWORK REJECTED

Eliza Croft

Controversy struck at the year's first Clubs Council meeting, where ANUSA rejected clubs on principle for the first time in years. The Council comprises almost 200 club delegates, and each club, from Debating to Drake Appreciation, has one vote. The meeting was the first time that clubs, not an SRC-appointed committee, have decided affiliations.

Clubs such as the Chess Club, the VR Club, and the Street Performance Academy were passed without dissent. However, there were ongoing disagreements over two affiliations, as the Council tested out its new democratic mechanisms.

Accusations of 'voluntourism' and concerns over use of funds were raised regarding ANU Eager Learning Volunteers Association, a group sending students to teach English in rural China. Language Diversity Chair Erin McCullough spoke on the risk of cultural erasure. When a vote was called, the motion failed resoundingly.

The ANU Men's Network, a group which claimed to support and provide discussion spaces for men, was also rejected. Current President Sebastian Rossi addressed Council, saying the group was for people of all genders to discuss male issues. Pointed questions

were asked about possible links to Men's Rights Activism, which Rossi strongly denied. When asked about the potential for this group to propagate misogyny, a concern reinforced by occasional content on the Men's Network Facebook page, Rossi responded "as long as they're not discriminatory or malicious... we'll give people the right to say [their opinions]." During debate, Rossi confirmed a Men's Department would be a long-term goal – one delegate argued this would be a "step backwards." Rossi later told the *Observer*, "I misspoke: being a department is not an official plan at all."

A motion to delay the decision until the next meeting narrowly failed. Delegate Bodie D'Orzario, who moved the motion, argued the Men's Network affiliation was added last minute, and "lots of people have strong opinions...there should have been much more time to debate"

33 delegates voted in favour, and 8 against, with 35 abstentions deciding the vote. "We will try again next week, so more people can have discussions" Rossi said. After the Men's Network vote, most delegates left, leading to a scramble to regain quorum. This was unsuccessful, and another meeting has been called for this week to pass policy reform that did not get discussed.

GUTTED VENUE HIRE LEAVES CLUBS OUT IN COLD

Eliza Croft

ANU clubs have struggled to find available space for their first events of the year. Even ANUSA is affected, with their General Meeting to be staged outdoors after difficulties securing the Haydon Allen Tank. The Timetabling Centre has bulk-booked many rooms, which Marie Fischetti, Venue Hire Co-ordinator, said is usually the case early in the semester. Unusually, though, rooms have been 'blocked out' for classes and exams late into the night, times often used by clubs.

Compounding this is a lack of resources at Venue Hire. "I've been a bit of a one-man band", Fischetti admits, saying she frequently receives more emails than she can respond to in a day. Fischetti has now been given extra support and can process requests quicker, but still cannot meet increasing demand. In fact, she

speculated the situation would deteriorate with the demolitions of the Union Court Redevelopment. Another contributing factor is a movement towards evening classes and exams.

Social Officer Cameron Allan expressed concerns that the shortage of rooms may lead to clubs unofficially holding events in rooms that are booked but empty. He said this could lead to improperly planned events, and that ANU Security and emergency services would not be aware of their location.

Fischetti believes the situation should improve in the next week or two as the Timetabling Centre confirms class times. In the meantime, Allan encouraged clubs to look at other spaces on campus that Venue Hire does not control, such as Hedley Bull, the School of Music, and CBE.