

## THE PARTY AIN'T SO FUN

McVicar also criticised the current federal Labor government, highlighting the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, student poverty, and unmet housing policy goals. "What does the NUS have to show for it?" he asked, calling for the union to take a stronger stand against government policy.

## THE GLOBAL FAR-RIGHT

Additionally, the "fascist Donald Trump" and the replacement of traditional conservative parties was noted. McVicar argued that student unions must be proactive in resisting this trend, claiming: "The Labour government remains committed to the Trump administration." One speaker noted that the effects of these shifts have been felt by migrants, trans people and other marginalised groups.

Several speakers called for the NUS to demand sanctions on Israel, remove weapons companies from university campuses, oppose funding cuts, and take stronger political positions. In contrast, one speaker emphasised the benefit of recent NUS statements circulating on social media, but claimed that Penny Wong's statement that morning had undermined them: "Australia has been clear along with the international community that Iran cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon. We support action to prevent that from occurring. And this is what this is."

At this point in the plenary a press conference was suggested, marking a turning point for the plenary.

## IMPEACHING FREE SPEECH

Discussion was subsequently opened to the floor, and arms raised quicker than a Trump scandal drops during campaign season. One speaker raised concerns about increasing restrictions on students' freedom of speech, citing the requirement that posters be approved up to two weeks in advance at some campuses. This, they argued, was "affecting the entire union." They urged students to keep speaking out, stating: "We have to look toward the next period ... we need to have freedom of speech to fight these problems."

Another speaker voiced their concerns over the press conference and its potential impact on the student union. This perspective was met with swift rebuttal. One individual referenced the Labour government's statement of support for U.S. action in Iran, suggesting that the NUS should take a public stance on such political developments to provide students with confidence in their union's advocacy.

Following extensive discussions among various factions regarding the press conference, some students commented on the deviation from the conference's introductory agenda. One student remarked, "What the fuck happens at EdCon?" noting it was their first time attending.

Despite calls to return to the planned plenary, discussion continued to escalate, with tensions surfacing over personal experiences, organisational tactics and concerns about preparedness. A proposal was made by SAIt to take a solidarity photo with the entire union. In response, part of Unity exited the plenary, leaving a gap in the room.

The Tert happily participated in the photo.

# ELDERCON: A VOICE OF REASON

BY SERENA EMANUELE

**First Plenary: What's wrong with our universities and what can we do about it?**

Day 2 of the Education Conference opened on a calmer note than the day before. Maybe it was Canberra's icy night air, helping clear heads. Maybe it was because former student and long-time activist Roderick Lyall was leading the morning plenary – and finally commanding enough respect across factions to be heard in peace. Whatever the reason, it turned out to be the most productive plenary I've attended in two years.

Roderick Lyall was a student activist engaged in the NUAUS in the 1960s, serving as UWA Guild Secretary in 1963. He was also a professor at multiple universities, and was president of the Massey Branch of the New Zealand Association of University Teachers.

## MONEY. MUST BE FUNNY.

Lyall began with a powerful reflection on the surreal experience of still fighting the same battles sixty years on. "It seems very strange to be talking about this today," he said, "when the world is closer to a nuclear war than ever before."

He spoke of his concern – shared by many – over the current direction of tertiary education. He outlined how universities have shifted from their original mission of fostering knowledge into profit-driven institutions, with responsibilities divided between academic and financial arms. This shift, Lyall argue, has led to targeted attacks on arts and humanities departments, as funding is funnelled instead into research that aligns with corporate or government interests. Increasingly, academics are pressured to secure research funding rather than focus on teaching.

"Why do they find them [arts and humanities] so dangerous? Because we teach people to think."

"Why is Trump going after universities? Because we teach people to think."

He also criticised the growing obsession among vice chancellors with university rankings, questioning why some of Australia's most prominent institutions are sliding in these tables year after year.

On a separate note, Lyall recalled the original purpose of academic tenure: to compensate for the lack of job opportunities outside the sector with long-term security. In stark contrast, around 40% of academic staff in 2024 are on short-term contracts. This, he argued, affects not just the working conditions of staff but the quality and continuity of students' education – and even whether certain courses can continue to exist at all.

"This trifecta of discontent which has effectively destroyed much of the academic profession," he said, noting the ongoing deterioration of staff-to-student ratios.

# STUDYING! WHAT'S THE POINT?

## DISCUSSION

Lyll then asked everyone working a job while studying full-time to raise their hand. Nearly everyone did. In the 1960s, he noted, this would have been unheard of. "It was very rare for a full-time student to have a job outside education," he said. Now, thanks to the cost-of-living crisis, the completion rate, engagement, and value of the university experience are all under threat. "Then they have the nerve to talk about job-ready graduates."

## WHAT NOW?

Lyll offered two central solutions: 1) strengthening democracy, and 2) building a sustainable future. He urged the National Union of Students (NUS) to forge deeper alliances with student cohorts and campaign alongside the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), emphasising the shared stakes.

"You and the academic staff have a huge common interest ... everyone gains from a better government investment to the tertiary education."

When discussion opened, a Unity speaker asked whether engaging university management should be the first step before resorting to conflict. "Absolutely," Lyll replied. "That's where it has to start. If that doesn't work then think of alternatives." He encouraged the NUS to develop practical guidance sheets to assist campus unions during negotiations with vice chancellors and senior management.

Responding to a vague reiteration of his points by a SAIt speaker, Lyll doubled down: the NUS should demand more from the Labour government – "Why not push for more?" – and communicate far more effectively with its student base. He also stressed the important of separating one's political affiliations from their responsibility within the NUS, clearly alluding to factionalism in the room.

Another student raised the issue of declining student engagement. "How do we convince them to want academia back?" they asked.

"Constant propaganda is probably the answer," Lyll said, half-joking, before referencing the importance of student media and the archives he's trawled through over the years.

"Most students just want to get on with their lives ... it's about doing stuff that touches them."

He closed with a simple final message: "No other advice than to just keep talking."

# EDCONOMY OF CARE

BY SERENA EMANUELE

Another two plenaries eclipsed Day 3 of the Education Conference. The first was on Diversity in Education by the Women's Officer Ellie Venning – whose motivation was to highlight the segregation of university courses through a panel which included Jade Poulton (ANU Women's Officer), Libby Austin (NX General Executive, WSU), Tritian Young-Glasson (ANU Women in STEM), and Tess Robb (Swinburne SA Vice-President).

The second plenary was on The Housing Crisis in Australia by Jordan Van Den Lamb – a lawyer, unionist, housing activist, and 2025 Senate candidate. He founded “Shit Rentals,” a platform exposing poor housing conditions, and is a leading voice in the fight for renters' rights and housing justice in Australia.

Although both plenaries were incredibly insightful, I found that some of the workshops were more in need of attention. The workshop entitled ‘Why the NDIS fails disabled people’ is one that I was already familiar with from the previous year – a constant issue for those who need care and services. Here's what happened.

## WHAT IS THE NDIS?

The NDIS stands for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and is part of the Australian Department of Health. The scheme is governed by the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013 (NDIS Act) and is administered by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

Founded in 2013 after disability groups campaigned to “Make it Real,” the scheme aimed to support and fund people with disabilities through four key requirements: under the age of 65, lives in an NDIS area, have a permanent and significant disability, and require support or early intervention.

## THIS STORY'S BEEN TOLD BEFORE

The workshop began by reiterating facts from the last year's Education Conference discussions, with the recent cuts and attacks being traced back to the \$124 billion cuts in the 2024 Federal Budget.

Recently, following mounting concerns about the NDIS's rising costs, the Albanese government launched the “Getting the NDIS Back on Track” campaign, aimed at making the scheme more sustainable. In response, Bill Shorten introduced reforms to reduce the scheme's annual growth from nearly 20% to 8% by 2026, resulting in \$14.4 billion in projected savings over four years.

## SO, WHAT'S NEW?

“The government is making it harder,” one speaker said. In October 2024, NDIS reforms forced all participants to have their supports reappraised and many lost access to vital care overnight. One report described people are being hospitalised with malnutrition and dehydration after losing funding for feeding tube support, showing just how dangerously the system has failed its most vulnerable.

The new NDIS rules mean participants can only spend funds on a strict list of approved supports, and anything outside that won't be covered.

Participants can no longer get automatic top-ups and every extra dollar needs to be proved. 'Inappropriate spending' is now monitored and if the NDIS suspects it, they can ask for the money back. Plans are now tied directly to specific impairments, and the NDIA can step in to change how the funds are managed if they think there's a risk of harm or misuse.

The students argued that the NDIS isn't a universal service – it's an insurance scheme, and that distinction matters. Because it's built on a market-based, neoliberal model, providers are forced to compete for participants' business, creating an incentive to cut corners and prioritise quantity over quality. They claimed the real cause of waste in the scheme isn't participants, but the fact that a chunk of funding inevitably ends up lining the pockets of corporate providers.

The speaker highlighted that there are now entire podcast networks: "at least 5 channels," dedicated to helping providers profit off the NDIS. They invoked a pointed quote comparing corporations to psychopaths, asking: "Why are we giving our money to these psychopaths?" They argued that choice under capitalism is an illusion, using biting examples: "You get to choose which supermarket to buy an \$8 carton of eggs from. You get to choose which Catholic hospital to attempt an abortion at. You get to choose which mouldy apartment to spend a crazy amount of money to rent." The NDIS, they said, offers the same kind of hollow freedom – limited, costly and exploited. Despite the scheme's ballooning costs, the quality of services rarely matches what people are paying for. The \$125 billion figure often cited as NDIS spending doesn't even come close to what the government set aside for nuclear submarines.

Crucially, they argued the real issue isn't overspending on disabled people, it's that millions of dollars are flowing away from them entirely. The current system narrows the horizon for people with disabilities, making it seem like there's no alternative. But there is: a future where care is provided based on need, not profit, and where the severity of a person's disability doesn't determine whether they receive support or not.

## DISCUSSION

While all factions acknowledged the NDIS is in crisis, debate quickly splintered over who's to blame and what should replace it. Unity opened by challenging SAlt's argument: "Are you saying just because some companies profit, the entire NDIS is a failure?" They also accused SAlt of ignoring wider disability campaigns, noting that "not all disabled people receive NDIS."

SAlt stood firm, calling for the abolition of the NDIA and the full nationalisation of disability services. One speaker shared the story of a terminally ill mother whose NDIS care hours for her son with cerebral palsy were cut – framing it as a symptom of a profit-driven system. "It's the government's job to provide care, not put red tape around it," they said.

Unity pushed back, arguing that tearing down the scheme would leave people with nothing. NLS proposed a gradual dismantling with protections in place, but SAlt replied, "That's already happening ... millions aren't covered now." Tensions rose when NLS demanded a clear answer: would SAlt commit to not leaving people behind? They didn't get one.

The discussion veered between ideological divides and practical concerns. ANU event organiser claimed the NDIS is "demand-based" – that people who need it will get it – prompting an eruption from SAlt, who called the line "pure Peter Dutton." The conversation closed with SAlt reaffirming their position: "It's not utopian to nationalise services – what's shocking is that Labour students can't get behind that."

# EVADE-A-CON: DAY 4

BY SERENA EMANUELE

It's safe to say that Day 4 of the 2025 National Union of Students Education Conference didn't go quietly. In fact, it ended with a bang, a pow and a flourish – courtesy of one of the more contentious plenaries of the week. Stephen Donnelly, founder of the Dunn Street campaign agency and former NUS Victorian State Branch President, took to the stage to deliver a presentation titled “From Inaction to Collective Action: The Practice of Leadership and Organising.”

SAlt members were not thrilled.

## LET THE GAMES BEGIN

Donnelly's entrance was calm, even reflective. He opened with an overview of his history in student politics – including the uncertain days when legislation around the Education Services for Overseas (ESOS) was being drafted – and moved into a framework of leadership inspired by community organising heavyweights like Saul Alinsky, Fred Ross and Marshall Ganz.

But as soon as Donnelly introduced himself as an “activist,” murmurs turned to heckles. “That's a stretch of the word ‘activist,’ but okay,” one SAlt student said. Moments later, cries of “shame!” began punctuating the air, a soundtrack that would continue throughout the session.

Donnelly pressed on.

## GANZ, OBAMA AND THE PRACTICE OF ORGANISING

Donnelly's plenary centred on the teachings of Marshall Ganz – a long-time organiser who began his career with the United Farm Workers (UFW) under César Chávez and Fred Ross.

Ganz left Harvard in the 1960s to organise with migrant farmworkers in California, eventually serving as the UFW's lead campaign strategist for over two decades. He later returned to Harvard, completed a PhD, and now lectures on leadership and organising at the Kennedy School.

It's this organising tradition – deeply rooted in collective power and personal narrative – that informed Donnelly's own political development. Drawing from Ganz's work, he discussed how he took those lessons to the U.S. to campaign for Obama in 2008, before returning to Australia to establish the Community Action Network. The model, he claims, was instrumental in helping elect the Andrews government in Victoria.

## LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Donnelly laid out his central claim: that effective leadership is “accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty.” He described how campaigns models must adapt over time, noting that methods which once worked may lose effectiveness if they aren't re-evaluated. Throughout the session, he returned to Ganz's tripartite structure of leadership – head, heart and hands – and its core organising model:

People. Power. Change. The key, Donnelly said, is identifying your people, understanding

their values and interests, and building actions from the foundations.

“Who are your people?” he asked. “Know their struggles, their resources, their stories.”

“The bosses!” came the call from the back.

## TENSION BOILS OVER

As Donnelly continues, SAlt members grew increasingly agitated. They criticised the plenary for failing to address issues such as the destruction of public housing, the privatisation of services, and the ongoing crisis in Gaza. When repeated interruptions disrupted the presentation, they were eventually warned that they risked being removed from the venue.

Donnelly, to his credit, remained composed. He carried on, going into the psychology of mobilisation: “You can’t motivate people without urgency, purpose, and belief that they matter.”

SAlt remained unimpressed. “This is just a playbook for building your career,” one member muttered. “A school for hacks.”

## STRATEGY AND THE ‘SNOWFLAKE’ MODEL

Donnelly’s final stretch focused on structuring leadership within campaigns. He introduced the “snowflake model” of distributed leadership: a network of interconnected leaders rather than one central figure under pressure. At the heart of this model, he argued, is relational organising – building values-based connections that can scale.

He detailed motivational task design (a favourite phrase of the day), suggesting that every volunteer should feel like they’re building a cathedral, not just carrying bricks. This metaphor, unsurprisingly, prompted more laughter and mockery from the back rows.

Still, Donnelly concluded with three intended outcomes of community organising:

- Tangible gains in society
- Improved organisational capacity
- Personal growth for the individuals involved

And, then – finally – came the discussion.

## QUESTIONS, CRITIQUES AND A FINALE

In the discussion, several audience members engage earnestly. Donnelly moved through the questions in a wide arc, some who’s reaching SAlt dead last, just as the session wrapped. Timing, as they say, is everything.

One speaker asked how to keep volunteers motivated without burning them out. Another questioned how to turn political agreement into meaningful action. Donnelly emphasised the need for “asks” that are realistic and personally relevant, and recounted moments from his own campaigns when small core groups created community through shared values, clear goals and a little fun.

Then came the final critiques from SAlt:

“No concept of what a campaign is.”

“What a shameful display.”

“This is what the student union and NLS want – to dupe people into power.”

Just as the atmosphere reached boiling point, the Unity students, sitting calmly in another section of the room, broke into a low chorus of “Solidarity Forever.”

And with that, my Day 4 wrapped up – though judging by the mood in the room, things may have kept rolling long after I left.

# Welcome to Allsorts!

Allsorts is the queer collective at the University of Wollongong and we have been a presence here since 1996. Our goal is to manage and promote a safe environment for queer students from all walks of life. We aim to do this by creating a safe space for queer students on campus, as well as running and attending community outreach events. Throughout the year we run, attend, and promote various events, as well as holding weekly meetings to connect with members and discuss issues concerning the community.

We are not the first of our kind – the Gay Society, formed in 1985, is the first collective documented to exist at UOW, while attempts to establish one were made as early as 1983. These societies were short-lived, however, and it is thanks to publications such as *The Tert* (then called *Tertangala*) that records of these early societies exist today.

One major reason Allsorts has managed to last so long is the passionate and dedicated convenors we have had over the years, along with their representative teams. From 2002 to 2005, Allsorts fought the university to have an appropriate queer space on campus – the university had previously torn down one space and given an unsafe and unfit building as its replacement. Throughout this campaign, the convenors and representative teams repeatedly put themselves on the line. This led to an incident where one of the convenors, along with two other collective members, was arrested by riot police during a peaceful protest. Eventually, after almost three years of campaigning, the university caved to the demands, and Allsorts was given room 19-G039. There is no way this would have been possible without the huge lengths the convenors of the time were willing to go to to fight for their community.

Over the following years, Allsorts maintained a major presence at the university. In 2017, the Allsorts Constitution was birthed by Rowan Nielsen, also known as the 'Constitution Mother.' While there were some governing documents written earlier, for example the Safer Spaces Policy, the creation of the constitution was the first action in a major push to create documents which would legitimise the collective in the eyes of organisations Allsorts was seeking funding from. This push was mostly completed by the end of 2018, although it continued to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with updates to the standing orders to allow for online meetings.

Between 2020 and 2024, the focus of the representative team shifted towards ensuring the survival of the collective. Like many other community groups, the lockdowns severely affected Allsorts, both reducing attendance and making it far harder to recruit new members to the space. The collective was also impacted by global tensions over LGBTQIA+ rights and safety, as well as UOW forcefully moving the queer space despite the best efforts of Allsorts. On top of this, it would be remiss of me to not mention the fact that there have been many tensions in the collective over the recent years. These have unfortunately pushed members out of the space, and have included tensions between members; internal within representative teams; and between members and representative bodies.

In light of these tensions, it has become apparent that the documents in their current state are no longer fulfilling their role effectively. While they were fit

for purpose when they were originally penned, they were written to be understood in conjunction with existing community knowledge. With the lockdowns affecting the collective and most members with that original knowledge moving on, then, it is now time to ensure that the documents contain that understanding and are independently functional. Therefore, the current representative team is taking up this effort, as well as attempting to return that community knowledge to the collective. If you would like to join us, we would love to have you!

The current Queer Space is in building 11, room 209. You can find it by taking the elevator opposite the UniShop to the second floor and following the hallway, where we will be on your right. Please come in, make yourself comfortable, and be respectful of those around you. This is a safe and autonomous space, so any non-LGBTQIA+ people must be voted in unanimously by all members in the room any time they would enter. We want to keep this space safe and comfortable for all members of the community, and we are always striving to be better.

We post about major events we are hosting on our instagram – @uowallsorts – and the representative team is directly contactable via email at [uow.queer@gmail.com](mailto:uow.queer@gmail.com). Our weekly meetings are Wednesdays at 12:30pm in the Queer Space. We hope to see you there!

**For any questions about the history of the space, please feel free to contact:**

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### **Further readings**

Allsorts History Book

This document is available in the Queer Space or by reaching out to the Allsorts Representative Team. It can also be found online, at:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/16FEeXU7d5gSEAUuEwaLFSTr74B4DTn\\_X/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/16FEeXU7d5gSEAUuEwaLFSTr74B4DTn_X/view?usp=drive_link)

Operation Queer Space

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4EJ85j0Lbo>

