

University of Sydney – Member update

The meeting on 8 March will provide members with an update on key issues concerning the quality of working life for academic and professional staff.

1. Academic Work at the University of Sydney: Decasualisation and strengthening the research-teaching nexus

Context: Academic work has been transformed over recent decades

Over recent decades working life for those in universities, like that for many Australians, has deteriorated with increased casualisation and workloads. For academics, equally significant has been the decline in research and teaching (ie 40:40:20) positions. In 2000 just under 70% of all academics combined research and teaching activities. In 2021 this proportion had fallen to 45.2%. Currently research-only and teaching-only academics each make up roughly 25% of the academic workforce at the University.

NTEU Objectives: Controlling workloads, decasualisation and strengthening the research-teaching nexus

The NTEU is committed to improving the quality of academic jobs in at the University of Sydney. Given the huge proportion of teaching staff currently employed in casual positions, this means pursuing a strategy of massive decasualisation. Just as importantly, it also means protecting the research and teaching nexus and significantly expanding the proportion of academic work performed by staff in 40:40:20 positions.

To achieve both of these ends, the NTEU bargaining team, after consultation with members and understanding management concerns, has the following proposals.

Specific recommendations

1. Protecting the research and teaching nexus is of paramount concern to the NTEU. For the sake of staff, students, and the broader community, academic work must be performed in the best possible conditions, with a balance between research and teaching. This means maintaining the 40:40:20 model as the reference point for academic work (i.e. the University needs a critical mass of research and teaching academics making up at least 60 percent of its workforce). In terms of 40:40:20 academics research and teaching allocations of time should be set by the staff members themselves. Under no conditions should management have the ability to unilaterally change an academic's balance between teaching and research activities.
2. Academic workloads must be determined through collegial, democratic, and evidence-based processes, with local workload committees. These committees must have 50 percent of their members appointed by the NTEU membership.
3. To ensure that as much academic work as possible is performed by staff in 40:40:20 positions, a significant proportion of work currently being done by casual staff must be replaced by secure, ongoing academic jobs.
4. To do this, the NTEU bargaining team is proposing a two-part strategy. The first concerns replacing roles that are currently fractional, 'teaching only' casual roles with ongoing roles. The second involves principles of access to the new roles created.
5. Casual work will be limited to :

- Staff providing specialist guest lectures such as external experts; and
 - Ad hoc or intermittent work requiring staff to undertake teaching work to cover unanticipated absences, or unanticipated increased work (for example a sudden increase in enrolments into a subject), and other similar circumstances
6. Work that that is currently not casual in these terms should be replaced by new, ongoing roles. The new roles created will be of three kinds:
- (a) Fractional fixed-term **PhD teaching fellowship positions**, of flexible length in accordance with PhD candidacy (with minimum and maximum engagement, in line with what PhD students currently teach). These roles will only be open to students studying at the University of Sydney and will improve the quality and professional development of entry-level academics.
 - (b) A limited number of **education-focused roles**.
 - (c) **Research and teaching roles** of the 40:40:20 kind. We anticipate that more than half of the new roles created will be of this nature.¹
7. Access to the new roles will be as follows;
- (a) **PhD Fellowships** will be awarded on a competitive basis from amongst the population of PhD students at the University of Sydney.
 - (b) **The new continuing research-and-teaching and education-focused roles** will be filled from three sources – with all appointments following standard appointment procedures:
 - A minimum of 25% of the roles to be filled by current long-term USyd casuals and fixed-term staff who have not had a permanent role;
 - A minimum of 25% of the roles to be filled by long-term casuals and fixed-term staff from anywhere in Australia who have not had a permanent role.
 - The remaining roles to be advertised through the normal academic appointment processes.
- Also note that where two candidates in (a), (b) or (c) are rated equally, the candidate with University of Sydney experience will be preferred.
8. In exchange for the creation of these roles the NTEU would drop the demand for automatic conversion for all staff having worked in 2 out of 3 semesters, however, we would still seek to maintain and improve conversion rights.
9. The NTEU outright rejects management’s proposal to resolve these issues by periodic employment.
10. The Agreement will also include enforceable caps on the engagement of casual academics to ensure that the current exploitative situation of systemic casualisation does not re-emerge.

¹ The number of roles in (a), (b) and (c) will be determined after we get access to robust data on the number and character of work currently undertaken on a casual basis.

2. Professional work at the University of Sydney – job security, flexible work and career advancement

These changes go hand in hand with improvements required for professional staff.

The NTEU is seeking to ensure all professional staff have secure ongoing jobs that provide increased flexibility and opportunities for career advancement including:

- improved rights for fixed-term and casual staff to convert to ongoing positions;
- an increased right to flexible working hours and the right to work from home;
- improved protections from overwork; and
- improved change management processes to limit job losses, protect staff against unnecessary change and genuinely involve staff in decision making.

These claims are identical to those endorsed by members in our Log of Claims. The NTEU Bargaining Team is still pursuing them as they stand, and we will be holding a meeting in the coming weeks to discuss progress on these issues.