DECENT WORK

Introduction

Decent work is central to a strong tertiary education sector.[1] It means secure employment, fair pay, manageable workloads, and meaningful work at workplaces that enable people to flourish. Secure employment means ongoing and stable work that provides predictable income, protection from unjustified dismissal, and opportunities for progression, rather than reliance on casual or fixed-term arrangements. The concept aligns with international best practice, including the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) standards and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8.

Consistent with Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union's (TEU) Equity Policy, this policy recognises the intersecting inequities experienced by women, Māori, Pacific, disabled persons, queer, migrant, and other marginalised kaimahi (staff) and ākonga (students). While these inequities are addressed in detail in TEU's Equity Policy, this policy affirms that decent work cannot be realised without systemic fairness and inclusion.

Whare — Our aspiration

We envisage a tertiary education sector where all kaimahi enjoy dignified, secure, and fair employment. Workplaces are supportive and sustainable, with conditions that enable creativity, collegiality, kaimahi voice, and professional growth. Decent work is built on trust between kaimahi and institutions, where workloads are manageable, contracts are stable, conditions are equitable, and pay enables a decent standard of living.

This vision extends beyond the individual to the collective. Institutions that provide decent work are better able to deliver high-quality teaching, research, and community engagement. Decent work ensures that tertiary education remains a public good, serving society as a whole rather than being undermined by short-term cost-cutting or instability.

Pou — Why this policy is needed

Despite decades of advocacy, many tertiary workers still experience precarity, overwork, and inequity in employment which has led to ongoing psychosocial harm. Fixed-term and casual contracts are increasingly common, workloads are rising without recognition and compensation, and pay disparities persist. These pressures undermine the quality of education and research, damage wellbeing, and contribute to high kaimahi turnover.

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[1] Within the context of TEU policies, 'tertiary education sector' is the umbrella term used to infer the following sub-sectors: polytechnic; PRRISM (private; REAP; research institutes; statutory; miscellaneous); university; and Wānanga.

The disestablishment of Te Pūkenga and ongoing restructuring in the university sector have deepened insecurity, with job losses and heightened workloads affecting both academic and general kaimahi. Without clear standards for decent work, these pressures are increasingly becoming entrenched features of the sector.

At the same time, international frameworks emphasise that decent work is essential for sustainable societies and economies. The ILO defines it as productive work that is fairly remunerated, secure, and undertaken in conditions of freedom, equity, and dignity. Aotearoa New Zealand has committed to these principles through the UN Sustainable Development Goals, yet they are not upheld in tertiary education.

Waka — Our actions

To achieve our aspirations, TEU will implement a range of the following actions.

Advocacy

- Campaign for stronger employment protections in tertiary legislation and collective agreements that establish secure, ongoing employment as the default in tertiary education, with strict limits on casual and fixed-term contracts permitted only in clearly defined and exceptional circumstances.
- Advocate for tertiary funding models that prioritise secure staffing, sustainable workloads, and fair pay, with explicit recognition of decent work as a public good.
- Promote decent work standards in national policy debates, referencing international commitments such as ILO conventions and SDG 8.

Campaigning

- Lead national campaigns to highlight workload crises and casualisation, drawing on member experiences to expose the human and educational impacts of insecure work, including ongoing psychosocial harms.
- Mobilise public support for decent work in tertiary education, emphasising its role in safeguarding the quality of teaching, research, and community engagement.

Organising

- Support members to identify and challenge breaches of decent work, including unreasonable workloads and inequitable employment practices.
- Provide training and resources for delegates and branches to negotiate improved workload models, secure employment pathways, and pay equity.
- Strengthen member networks to ensure decent work is prioritised across the sector as a shared concern that will be raised through collective bargaining.

Partnership

- Engage constructively with government, the Tertiary Education Commission, and institutions to embed decent work standards in sector planning and funding.
- Support the development of transparent, publicly available workforce data to monitor employment security, workloads, and equity outcomes.
- Build alliances with ākonga organisations and community groups to reinforce the message that decent work underpins the wider public value of tertiary education.

Policy sign-off and ownership details

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Revision history

Version	Date	Revision description	Owner
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