WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

Introduction

Workplace democracy is fundamental to a strong and inclusive tertiary education sector.[1] It ensures that those who work and study in our institutions have a genuine voice in the decisions that shape their lives and their communities. For Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union (TEU), advancing workplace democracy strengthens our ability to represent members, enhances institutional accountability, and upholds the principle that tertiary education is a public good.

Consistent with TEU's Equity Policy, this policy recognises the intersecting inequities experienced by women, Māori, Pacific, disabled persons, queer, migrant, and other marginalised kaimahi (staff) and ākonga. These inequities must be actively addressed within democratic structures to ensure all voices are heard and respected.

Whare — Our aspiration

We aspire to a tertiary education sector where democratic principles are embedded into the everyday life of institutions. Kaimahi at all levels have meaningful opportunities to contribute to governance, planning, and decision-making. Workplace democracy is visible in transparent processes, accountable leadership, and strong collective voice through union representation.

We envisage a sector in which kaimahi can challenge decisions, propose alternatives, and shape institutional directions without fear of reprisal. Workplaces are characterised by trust and respect, where collegiality and creativity are supported by robust democratic practice. In this vision, workplace democracy is not symbolic consultation, but a living framework that ensures the knowledge, experience, and priorities of kaimahi are central to how institutions operate.

Pou — Why this policy is needed

The need for workplace democracy is underscored by the sector's history of top-down governance, repeated restructuring, and the rise of precarious employment. Many kaimahi – especially those in insecure roles – are excluded from meaningful participation in decisions that directly affect their work. This erodes morale, undermines trust, and reduces the quality of education and research.

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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.

Workplace democracy also provides a necessary counterbalance to managerialism and financial imperatives that have dominated tertiary governance. By embedding democratic processes, institutions become more accountable to kaimahi, ākonga, and communities, and better equipped to serve the public good.

This policy works alongside TEU's Equity Policy, Te Tiriti o Waitangi Policy, and Decent Work Policy. Together, these frameworks provide the basis for a sector that is fair, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of kaimahi and ākonga.

Waka — Our actions

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

Advocacy

- Lobby for legislative and regulatory frameworks that strengthen kaimahi and ākonga representation in institutional governance.
- Advocate for collective agreement clauses that require democratic consultation on restructuring, workload, programme development, and institutional priorities.
- Cross-reference and support TEU's submissions on funding, equity, and decent work to reinforce workplace democracy in government policy.

Campaigning

- Run campaigns to highlight examples of good and bad practice in workplace democracy, using them to mobilise members and influence institutions.
- Publicly challenge decision-making processes that exclude or silence kaimahi voice, and champion models that demonstrate transparency and inclusion.

Organising

- Support the establishment of democratic forums in tertiary institutions that allow kaimahi to contribute meaningfully to governance and planning.
- Provide training and resources for delegates and members to participate effectively in democratic processes.
- Build member networks that strengthen collective voice, especially for those in precarious or marginalised positions.

Partnership

- Promote genuine partnership with mana whenua in institutional practices and decision-making, consistent with TEU's Te Tiriti o Waitangi Policy.

- Promote awareness of, and advocate for, the significance of meaningful engagement with iwi and hapu within the context of institutional decision-making.
- Support Pacific kaimahi to strengthen their collective voice within tertiary institutions and across the sector, recognising the importance of Pacific leadership, values, and community connections in shaping democratic practice.
- Work with ākonga associations and community groups to ensure tertiary governance reflects the interests of all who contribute to, and benefit from, the sector.
- Collaborate with other unions to strengthen collective approaches to workplace democracy across the wider public sector.

Policy sign-off and ownership details

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Revision history

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