

## **The problem with pay in universities**

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Pay in universities is not experienced as a genuine, honest and transparent way to recognise important skills, dedication, and care integral to a university. Rather, pay is a grudging compensation in a system driven by managerial distrust of academic and professional and general staff. That's the experience of hundreds of staff who participated in the latest State of the Sector Survey commissioned by TEU.

The problem with pay in universities was evident in October and November 2022, when over 7000 staff across New Zealand's eight universities engaged in industrial action for being *'underpaid and overworked'*. The last time such united action took place was 2005. According to the National Secretary of the Tertiary Education Union, Sandra Grey, *"For two years, through Covid-19, these staff pulled out all the stops to keep the sector running and they can't even get their bosses to agree to help them with the cost of living – it feels very unfair."* (Spinoff, [November 2022](#))

Universities New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara chief executive, Chris Whelan's response - *"Universities value their staff highly and greatly appreciate all they do, not least during the past 2½ years of pandemic. They understand the pressures staff face because of the current high cost of living. However, each university is negotiating according to its own individual circumstances and need to balance pay increases with other rising costs."*

The issue of pay is the battle ground for staff at universities - it has been since at least 1994 where a *'majority of respondents did not feel their salary adequately reflected their work'* (Boyd and Wylie, 1994, p.18). In 1994 this was linked to increasing workload, stress, problems with internal administration, deterioration of job satisfaction, and the constant threat of imposed changes (1994, p.2).

This short report sets out the views of academic and general/professional staff who responded to the 2022 State of the Sector Survey. In total 1155 general/professional staff responded to the survey; and 1470 university academics completed the survey. The State of the Sector Survey was also completed by staff in other parts of the tertiary education sector, but this short report focuses on the matter of pay in universities.

Half of the university academic respondents in the 2022 State of the Sector survey were very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with their pay rates, stating they do not reflect the hours they work and 55% have the same response when asked about whether their pay reflects the type of work they do. Forty percent of the professional/general/allied staff respondents indicated that their pay rates did not reflect the hours they worked, and 57% were very dissatisfied or dissatisfied that their pay reflected the type of work they do.

The reasons for academic dissatisfaction ranged from being unable to move up salary scales to experiencing increased expectations without commensurate increases in pay.

*The pay structure in the university means I have worked for 3 years and am at the top of the scale (under \$90,000). I will never be able to increase this with the scale. We have not had a pay rise inflation adjusted in 3 years now - whilst there has been a 15% increase in inflation. I have said this in feedback to the dean whose response was "it is out of my hands - join a union".*

*The salaries are too low in comparison with other sectors, even after dedicating many years to get the qualification needed to be a lecturer in a university. Career progression is too slow and full of obstacles (bars). Salaries are not kept in a competitive rate, and it seems the university exploits the nature of lectureship, in which changing jobs frequently is not usual (no need to compete if most of your employees won't jump ship). Salaries are not corrected for inflation (or at all) ...*

*Hours worked grossly exceed hours paid/contracted with no recourse for overtime. Lack of transparency over how hours are calculated and how many hours per task are expected. Lack of transparency in contracts over hourly rates meaning pay equity*

*within departments as well as across other departments and schools is impossible to judge.*

The dissatisfaction with pay by professional and general staff parallels points made by their academic colleagues:

*I've been in my position for years. I am the only person in my service division with my experience and expertise. My work has always been graded as 'satisfactory' at the very least, or higher. My salary hasn't budged past the 1-2% yearly increase this entire time.*

*Given the massive increase to the cost of living and that pay raises are not in line with inflation, it does feel that admin staff, already at the lower end of the value spectrum, are undervalued. Although this process is under review, there is currently no opportunity to apply for promotion unlike academic staff.*

*Pay increases less than CPI are an insult and amount to theft. Pay band upper bounds are irrelevant when you cannot progress beyond the merit point. Remuneration reviews are pointless when it is impossible to progress past the merit point no matter what additional unpaid responsibilities you take on.*

*It's taken me 7 years to get back to the LOWEST salary I earned whilst working in the manufacturing sector. Why are we not better valued considering the employment landscape at the moment?*

The dissatisfaction with pay in universities is set in the context of a range of other problems. Survey respondents noted that they work in a flawed system, internally fragmented, persistently demanding, distrustful of them, and controlled by a disconnected management. This is not new, for example these types of concerns were evident in a Victoria University *Staff Check-in Survey* in 2020:

*...many staff comments mentioned a disconnection between decision making from the higher levels of the University and the impact of those decisions at a local level. Many comments mentioned frustration and disappointment arising from messages considered to be inconsistent and unclear, rapidly changing demands with limited notice and the lack of clear direction and prioritisation (VUW, 2020:7).*

In the third TEU COVID survey in 2021 similar concerns were raised:

*....an astonishing disconnect between the assumptions of senior leadership about the university working environment and actual -coal-face academic experiences. Nobody above the level of HoS appears to have any real grasp or interest in the way their strategic level decisions have consequences for the university's core academic functions (Sedgwick, 2021:23).*

Throughout the hundreds of comments from the latest survey of university staff it is clear these concerns persist. Academic staff describe aspects of the flawed system in which their workload is multiplied with arbitrary non-core functions in a fragmented and constantly changing situation often under arbitrary control:

*The increase in workload is almost entirely due to a restructuring of administrative services that takes services away from the programmes / departments where they are most needed. Centralisation in the name of efficiency ironically produces multiple inefficiencies and leaves academic staff having to do far more administrative work, including trouble shooting after centralised services have messed things up.*

*Constantly changing processes around administration or support services are a big contributor to my extra workload - including reading about the upcoming changes (more emails), understanding the proposed changes, providing feedback on them, and then working out how to work with the changes once they are put through.*

*The university is fragmented and siloed, and different departments have cultural problems which result in attacks on our department and pointless disputes over*

*funding or turf wars which are utterly unnecessary, but the fragmented budgetary structure incentivises this behaviour and disincentivises collaboration between departments. The worst bullying is inter-departmental.*

*The autocratic leadership and lack of real democracy leads to disengagement and reduced morale. The millions spent on buildings, marketing and corporate leadership, while the shop-floor staff who deliver the actual goods of a university are doing more for less. ...The lack of time and resources to teach properly and offer meaningful assessments. Having to spend more time working in a 'reactive' mode rather than a pro-active role due to the mounting work pressures.*

*1) Bureaucracy. It's excessive, unnecessary, repetitive, and designed to turn even minor tasks into an obstacle course. 2) Unchecked growth in student numbers. Our classes are too big to provide an adequate education, but the university's priority is income from EFTs. 3) The emphasis on obtaining funding. We used to get grants so we could do research; now it's the other way around. The university's incentive system (e.g., promotions) is designed to reward and celebrate income, rather than quality output. 4) MOST OF ALL, a university leadership that promotes all the above and is oblivious to the disastrous impact this is having on our research, the quality of education we provide, and staff morale and mental health.*

*We are being run by people who have lost sight of the purpose of a university - we are not a business, we are here to teach and undertake research. Everything done in the last 5 years -the level of administration, constant changing of systems and processes, lack of trust - has made it more difficult for us to do those key activities or to do them well.*

Professional and general staff also spoke about this fragmented flawed system which delivers differential pay for the same work, blocks performance and promotion processes and means managers ignore job descriptions:

*My understanding is that when a new professional staff member was taken on within our School last year, he was started on a higher grade than the other people doing the same job / same title at the other two campuses. This seemed entirely unfair but, due to privacy issues, there is no ability to question this with management.*

*We are part of a team whose roles have grown exponentially in recent years, and who must all hold a PG professional qualification to do the job. We see other professionals across the institution being paid at a higher rate for very similar work, with the same level of qualifications required. We have submitted our JDs for re-evaluation and each time get evaluated at the same salary level and there is just no opportunity for discussion - it is making my team feel undervalued and unhappy.*

*HR seem to block what everyone else can see is fair. Performance reviews use a system that makes the whole experience painful and everyone knows it doesn't really make much difference so it feels like an elaborate box ticking exercise.*

*It is also very difficult to get jobs re-evaluated as whilst there is a process, HR staff in my area did not support following it and were in fact obstructive. It took several years and intervention from the TEU to get the re-evaluation processed. Once it was processed there was no effort by HR to ensure that there was an appropriate increase in pay to match the re-evaluation to a higher pay band.*

This flawed system has a personal impact on staff which, according to academic respondents, is experienced as being constantly undervalued, abused, ignored, dismissed or punished.

*What I do is clearly not valued by the university and is poorly paid.*

*The grandiose narcissistic abuse from management. Very hard to combat and confront as they have all the defences, come backs, deflection and conversational manipulation skills to rebuff.... and all the power and control. It's a known*

*phenomenon called Power-Control Abuse and translates in the home to domestic violence and in the workplace to Institutional abuse.*

*Feeling that everything I do is totally useless. I'm just ticking boxes and accomplishing nothing useful...*

*There is no reward structure at all - there is only punishment for not performing well, and performance expectations change constantly.*

Professional and general staff similarly experience distrust, being undervalued, ignored, abused, dismissed or reduced to silence:

*Constantly being told off for politely voicing frustrations over workload distribution and lack of training.*

*It can feel like management doesn't trust us, and it feels like we're treated like children. Constantly our team leader says she wants the team to be responsible for ourselves, but then when we make autonomous decisions, we get scolded and chided for them. A real "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation.*

*I have asked to be considered for a promotion every year for the last three years. My requests have been ignored or swept under the rug or I have been given unsatisfactory answers as to why I wouldn't get one. I still don't know what the process is and I am still doing the extra work that I took on three years ago.*

*The most dissatisfying aspect is knowing that there is preferential treatment by senior managers, who make decisions based on racial discrimination/unconscious biases, but there is no way to prove these things. We witness it, experience it, but remain silent about it. If people question such decisions, there is definitely unspoken "blacklisting" for future promotions, so people just avoid question senior management decisions.*

Respondents were not expressing unhappiness with their 'job', but with their institutions' responses to pay, stress, appointment and promotion policies, and the all-

too-common personal rebukes, fear and threat of job loss. For many respondents these were the common tools of university management. These tools coalesce to create a self-reinforcing system stifling opportunity to genuinely progress or negotiate any aspect of work.

Professional and general staff are forced into the realisation that to improve anything in your career there is no point in voicing; just look for another job.

*Applied for higher levelled job advertised but I did not get shortlisted for the interview. I asked for a reason for not being selected for the interview but there was no transparency and only been told that the interview panel didn't have a lot of time and they think there's one person who would get the job anyway. I later asked if I could get some feedback on how I can improve and what I lack in my skill sets, so I can try to upskill and be ready for the next opportunity when it arises, but the answer I received was to look at the opportunities elsewhere outside this organisation. This answer was very hurtful and upsetting.*

*I am at the top of my pay grade so there is no progression available to me unless I apply for another role in the higher pay grade.*

*There is no way to be promoted in my current position. I would need to just move to a different position.*

For some of the academic respondents it is the offhand comments from managers that make them reluctant to even talk about pay or other job-related issues:

*We have been met with statements "be glad you have a job" when bringing up stress-related issues.*



*I was offered a full time permanent job last year at the same starting rate as the 1 year fixed term contract I signed the year before. I was advised to sign it before the offer went away rather than query it.*

Likewise for professional and general staff the tool chest of management is a refusal to learn about staff's actual workload, experience or input together with general neglect:

*Management have been in my department for 20 + years and continue to have no understanding of their staff and the role they have in our department.*

*.... Primarily [we need] a vast shift to actually considering the perspectives and real experiences of staff, not just what the organisation assumes to be in 'our best interests'.*

*Seriously broken down communication. I don't think the management and the leadership team care or value the opinions/feedback of the front-line staff. The feedback you give them is like a box ticking exercise for them but nothing actually happens afterwards.*

*Pay and promotions are a total joke, as is any form of HR support or positive intervention.*

For academic staff the constant round of reviews and restructuring—or the threat of this—creates an unstable environment for those seeking better pay.

*I would like to apply for promotion this year, time allowing. However, given the current staffing review underway, I do question whether any increase in pay will affect my employment security. Will I become too expensive?*

And for yet others it is the promotion processes that are problematic:

*Despite having big grants, more than the required publications and aligning my research with the priorities of my faculty I have been told that it will be difficult to attain promotion because my publication profile 'doesn't look right.' How can I argue against this? It makes me feel unvalued and resentful when I am asked to take on big risky service roles and work punishing hours for this institution.*

*The promotion system is too opaque, and rules change regularly, with personal opinion/animosity the single most telling factor.*

For professional and general staff, it is management's blatant refusal to act on their behalf:

*"Sustained exceptional performance" is the criteria for promotion. I was advised a number of years ago, don't bother, despite performing above average every year.*

*I was told by Service leader many times, 'it's not happening' – promotion (change pay grade) due to not enough budget, so no point in applying*

*I was told, on trying to negotiate my salary at entry, that there is no movement on income and that all professional staff start with our institution at the lowest rate. And that I would have to wait for a year before they decide if I deserve more*

The survey responses signal continuously deteriorating conditions for staff at all levels. For those involved in teaching, it makes little difference whether you are a tutor, senior tutor or teaching assistant, part-time or full time academic, the conditions of teaching will be the same.

*Six years of the same fixed term contract-being a precariat. Getting to the point of offering paper co-ordinator and still told the University can't afford to pay me the same senior tutor pay level as a second-year tutor- being scoffed and mocked at in person for asking for a raise. I am not slave labour....*

If the conditions of teaching are the conditions of learning, then the university system is off course according to many respondents.

*.... the institution where I work forgets that it is a University and has a purpose to serve in relation to society. It has become more a vehicle for personal agendas to be played out. It is quite sad, really.*

*Universities should be places where people come to BE educated, which shifts responsibility onto the student to craft their education journey, supported by academics. It encourages a two-way relationship of learning between student and teacher as opposed to an instrumental relationship of exchange.*

*.... The feeling of the university as a scholarly community has disappeared, and the senior leadership team seems to show no desire to rebuild it. If I can't find a way to rebuild a sense of community, collaboration, and collegiality in my job within the next eighteen months I will leave the sector.*

While the context may be flawed, staff have consistently clung to the importance of their tasks described by TEU's national secretary: *"We don't want to be doing this, the staff don't want to be striking," says Grey. "They want to be teaching, they want to be in the library, they want to be running labs, they want to be in the administrative areas of the university. And they really, really, really just want their employer to recognise all they do."* (Spinoff, [November 2022](#))

783 respondents out of 1129 who answered an open-ended question *What aspects of your job do you find most personally rewarding or satisfactory?* stated teaching/learning and research. The responses below are examples of how rewarding people find the work in universities but they always come with caveats:

*I still find myself enjoying teaching and research, despite the stressors of the job.*

*My students. I love teaching. I love research. I love the location. On paper, this is my dream job. In reality, this is hell.*

*I love teaching, working with students and my colleagues, and doing my research. I love my work, but I hate my job.*

*Teaching. Teaching. Teaching. Did I say teaching? I love being in the classroom, helping students develop into the best version of themselves that they can be. I do this despite the University, though, not because of it.*

The caveats, read together, show that they find enjoyment/satisfaction in core work – teaching and research – despite the context within which they work. University staff carry out the core work of the institutions in what many see as a destructive context.

*Because we are a workforce who genuinely cares about what we are delivering (i.e. teaching and research), we continue patching up the holes to keep everything running while the university continues to take away any perks of the job and tells us we're lucky to be employed and paid.*

*We are constantly being asked to do more with less, without recognition or reward. People do it because of their passion and commitment to the students, sometimes at great personal cost, but it's not sustainable.*

*I feel completely powerless to even express how my life is impacted by my working conditions given how HR has treated our staff over the past five or seven years. Better to grin and bear it than find oneself on the wrong side of HR and the Management.*

What was once a career, becomes a unsatisfying job with ever increasing demands. What was once collegial and a collective project is now an individualised career in competition with ones colleagues. From the university's 'top-down' perspective, staff constitute a liability.

*Having the Uni constantly make us feel that we as staff are a liability (due to salary costs) rather than an asset.*

*Leadership has resulted in me feeling I cannot speak up against things that are going to directly affect and change my work because there will be no positive change the comments will not be heard but I will be personally considered an annoyance and a problem staff member.*

The question now is how many more years can Vice Chancellors, Councils and Management be allowed to use pay and our conditions of teaching and learning against the staff?

*(i) Pay level for academics is not competitive with either international norms or industry (ii) promotion processes are designed to make progression as slow as possible. (iii) This incentivises individuals to 'hop' from one institution to another to 'promote themselves' - whilst disadvantaging individuals who have family ties to a single geographical location.*

How long are staff going to be willing to allow the same to undermine the 152 years of public good university education in New Zealand society?<sup>1</sup>

Academic staff clearly understand that changes needed:

*Acknowledge the contributions that academic staff make to the university and provide adequate resourcing and support. It seems that although academic staff are critical to the operation of the university, we are at the bottom of the heap, behind students, management, support staff and even buildings. But without great staff to attract students and research funding there would be no students to put in the buildings anyway. We are constantly being asked to*

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<sup>1</sup> In June 1870 the Otago Provincial Council passed the Otago University Ordinance, creating the University of Otago as a corporate body with powers to grant degrees in arts, medicine, law and music. The university opened in July 1871, with a staff of three professors. <https://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/about-university-sector/brief-history#:~:text=The%20University%20of%20New%20Zealand,Victoria%20University%20College%2C%201897>.

*do more with less, without recognition or reward. People do it because of their passion and commitment to the students, sometimes at great personal cost, but it's not sustainable.*

*One of the best ways to improve conditions would be to genuinely value staff, to treat them with respect, to value their views and input (this does not mean always agreeing with them), to ensure that they are resourced to do their teaching and research, and to pay academic staff appropriately.*

As do the professional and general staff:

*Improve the structure, support and sense of ownership of roles amongst professional staff so they are motivated and able to deliver a high-quality education to students.*

*... We should be trying to change the model of university's run as a business competing with the others. Not stressing staff out with constant change proposals that are not needed and cost jobs. Also the amount of waste both physical and peoples time that is generated via the process of running the university as a business the whole model is flawed.*

## Conclusion

Academic and professional and general staff respondents to the 2022 State of the Sector survey made it clear that the issue of pay cannot be separated from the conditions of labour under which it is earned.

The discontent around pay goes deeper than the salaries on offer, it goes to the heart of the way universities are run. A process that makes staff a liability evaluated on a cost/benefit scale; disciplined by tools of pay and promotion, reviews and restructuring and constantly feeling undervalued, ignored, abused or dismissed.

Respondents felt they were not treated fairly, were put under pressure to take on more and more work expected under the extraordinary measures of COVID lockdowns and now the new norm for the long term. A scholarly community, its passion and commitment, is eroded and controlled by a constructed disconnect between management and staff. And the dedicated professional and general staff community left feeling undervalued and silenced by that same disconnect with managers. The result overall is staff in universities – academic and general/professional – are left feeling undervalued, not listened too, and underpaid.