National Tertiary Education Union
University of Sydney

Annual Report 2024-25

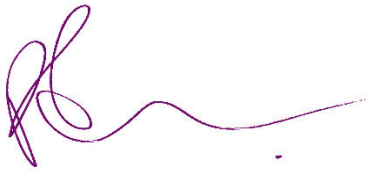
A Branch Committee must present annually a full report of its work in the preceding year to the branch members. – rule 27.7.

Colleagues,

Possibly more than ever before, the National Tertiary Education Union is a critical organisation in the higher education sector. The number of threats and attacks on both the structures and very principles of free inquiry and instruction have never been higher, and this report is being written at a time when over 1,000 of our colleagues are at risk of losing their jobs in the ACT and NSW.

The Branch Committee, through its Officers (the President, Vice-Presidents, and Secretary) are required to provide an Annual Report to members each year. It is my pleasure to present this report, highlighting the work done by the Branch Committee and Officers during the last year; but also an opportunity to be accountable to our members for what we have done and why. As a democratic and participative union, being informed about our processes, structures, and activities is vital for members to oversee and participate in union governance. I hope that members have seen – through our various communications channels – an active attempt to be clear about how we operate and what we do.

In the next year we will be engaged with the 2026 Enterprise Bargaining round, a critical activity of any Branch. Our history of sector-leading Agreements cannot be taken for granted, and the laws regulating negotiations are different from the last round. But the logic of winning has not changed: organisations with higher numbers of active union members get better outcomes. We need to be active, grow, and engage to win. Ask someone you work with to join the union today – and explain why that matters.



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About the University of Sydney Branch

The University of Sydney is numerically the second largest Branch in Australia and the largest in New South Wales. Our key activities are: Representing members' interests (individually and collectively); Negotiating the Enterprise Agreement (EA); Campaigning; Enforcement of rights and EA commitments; Building the Union's power, and; Ensuring good governance of the Union.

The Branch is comprised of you, its members, who are bound by, and empowered by the organisation's rules. As a democratic organisation, Branch members oversee and control the actions of your union through:

- The election of members of Branch Committee (including the Branch Executive – President, Vice-presidents, and Secretary);
- The election of National Councillors who sit on our Union's key decision making body, National Council; as well as Division Council – representing Universities in New South Wales. Through these delegates, the views and opinions inform the policies of the organisation nationally;
- (coming) The election of work unit Delegates, with powers to represent staff in local work areas under the *Fair Work Act*;
- Direct voting on motions raised at General Members' Meetings, and;
- Collectively making decisions in specialist groups (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Caucus, Queer Unionists in Tertiary Education, and Women's Action Network), local work unit meetings, and through Member Organising Groups.

As a federated body, decision-making and control cascades through the organisation. The Division is bound by decisions made by the National Council (and implemented through the National Executive), and the Branch is bound by decisions made by Division Council and National Council. The focus of the Branch Committee and Executive is therefore on matters relevant to our University, with opportunities to feed into decisions of those higher bodies.

Our collective solidarity and actions are supported by the wonderful staff of the NTEU, such as the Branch Organiser (Glen) and Industrial Officer (Simon). These professionals work with the Branch leadership, and are employed by the state Division, reporting to the Division Secretary.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and justice

The University of Sydney's NTEU members live and work on a wide range of Aboriginal lands and support ongoing struggles for reconciliation, justice, and recognition in the work we do.

First Nations Joint Consultative Committee

Contained within the last Enterprise Agreement is a requirement for the establishment of a First Nations consultative body made up of union and management representatives. This body provides an opportunity of our representatives to present issues of concern, review policies and activities of management, and press management of issues like employment targets and cultural safety.

Employment at the University – population parity

The NTEU nationally has been running its "VCs Hit Your Targets" campaign to highlight the under-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in higher education institutions in Australia. While the University of Sydney has areas – such as the Faculty of Medicine and Health – that have performed well in recruitment, the institution as a whole has considerable work to do to lift employment and retention rates. The Union is cognisant that this is not a simple problem to solve, but does require commitment from management to create programs to recruit, develop, and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff across the institution. Sydney should be a leader in our sector.

Considering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander justice in everything we do

The NTEU's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander caucus has asked non-indigenous members to "step up" in supporting the interests of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues. As such, the Branch Committee recognises the importance of considering the impact of any action or issue on our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander comrades. For example, the Branch has specifically raised concerns regarding the use of AI systems that have stolen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural materials in their training and produce outputs purporting to represent that culture, and the failure of change management systems to appropriately and meaningfully consider opportunities and impacts on employment opportunities.

Building our capacity to act and win for members

The new Branch Committee began with a two-day training and strategic planning "away day" in the Division offices in November 2024. This session permitted the Branch Committee to meet, discuss expectations and map out priorities and approaches. A lesson from this is the need to access better training provision from the National organisation.

Member Organising Groups, the future of the Union

A key outcome of the strategic planning away day was a Branch Committee commitment to implementation of the new Delegate structure provided for under national workplace legislation. Importantly, the Branch Committee recognised that simply electing Delegates without ensuring supports and embeddedness in their workplace would not deliver organising, recruitment, and empowerment for members.

Given this, the Branch, led by the Branch Organiser, has focused on the establishment of Member Organising Groups (MOGs). MOGs are developed at the local, organic work area level and focus on:

- Cultivating leadership and active members
- Identifying issues, determining objectives and solving problems locally
- Engaging with the Branch organisation with local issues, and to engage Branch resources where needed to support local action
- Recruitment and instruction for new members
- Cultivating candidates for delegacy from their ranks, ensuring that these positions are maintained over time and do not fall vacant

Importantly, the establishment and maintenance of MOGs will lead to a considerable change in the way NTEU Branches operate: much more focused on empowering and supporting local action, and less on the Branch Executive, Committee, and Staff "servicing" members. This will significantly increase the reach and effectiveness of the NTEU, and our Branch is a leader in implementation of this model.

The development of MOGs will be an activity that runs over many years with many more MOGs to establish and cultivate into self-sustaining active membership fora.

Administration improvements within the Branch Office

During this last year, the Branch staff and Executive have worked to modernise and improve our internal systems and record keeping. This enhanced our work practices and ensured compliance with laws that regulate Union organisations.

The Branch Executive, working with our staff and Division, has:

- Introduced a SharePoint site to allow the Committee better access to documents, and ensure that documents produced for the Branch are stored in accordance with law;
- Reviewed its expenditures to reduce unnecessary costs;
- Created role-based email accounts ensuring emails sent by Branch Officers are retained and accessible to their successors;
- Created tools to ease the creation of minutes of meetings, and;
- Adopted the Asana project management system to better manage activities and track progress on projects.

Communications with members and the University Community

During the last year the Branch President has consulted with communications experts in the Division and worked with Branch staff to align communications to best practice. This has led to an overall reduction in the volume of emails being sent to members, but a correspondingly large improvement in open rates. In addition, the Branch Executive continue to experiment with communications tools focused on increased effectiveness, targeting, and parsimony. These include:

- Use of video material;
- Targeted messages to specific relevant groups;
- Establishment of a Viva Engage presence;
- Use of private social media networks for Member Organising Group members;
- The creation of a higher education news digest, and;
- Use of standardised templates (like this one) to increase NTEU recognition.

During the coming year we will have a branch-specific website which will improve the ability of the Branch to promote its activities to members, recruit new members, have a general repository for information, and produce communications that are shorter and point to more information online.

A leading Branch within our movement

Artificial Intelligence at Sydney, taking up the challenge from National Council

Artificial Intelligence technology presents a range of positive opportunities to the University sector, but also raises the possibility of negative impacts due to the limitations of the technology, and how the technology may be mis-used. Following the development of a Discussion Paper at the National level that asks unionists to engage actively with the development and adoption of the technology at the Enterprise level, the Branch Committee established a policy advisory group to develop a set of guiding principles for the Branch Committee and make recommendations for action.

This group of active members have recommended the Branch leadership engage management over the governance of AI projects and technologies at the University of Sydney to ensure they are in the public interest, ethical, and consider implications for employment.

Engagement with the NTEU State Division (NSW) and National leadership

The Branch Committee recognises that our work is facilitated by the decisions made by our national and state-level Executives. These bodies provide and govern budgets, staffing levels, and key infrastructure that enables our work (for example, membership database systems, websites, communications tools).

The Branch Committee has been active in assessing the quality and quantity of these supports and has actively engaged with Division and National on issues such as:

- Change management within the organisation and the implications for union staff;
- The allocation of staffing numbers and discretionary budgets to our Branch, and;
- National communications to Branch Executives, regarding co-ordination of activities and awareness of national strategies determined by the National Executive.

This engagement has had some positive impacts on the decisions made by our National leadership.

Supporting our members capacity to represent themselves

Education calendar for members

From June 2025 the Branch staff established a rolling education calendar to provide members with information, training, and support associated with common issues faced in the workplace. These events are open only to members, but also are a good means to recruit new members to the union. Sessions undertaken to date or currently planned are: Conversion to fixed-term and continuing employment workshop; Professional staff workloads – know your rights; Casuals information session; Academic Excellence Framework info session; Having Union Conversations (recruitment and organising); Sick leave and ill health – your rights; Change in the workplace; Conversion to fixed-term and continuing employment workshop; Professional Staff PP&D and classification; What is Enterprise Bargaining?; Parental leave and returning to work; Union at USYD, and; Getting the most out of NTEU membership.

Is there a topic you want to run? Let us know.

Joint Consultative Committees, Academic Workloads Committees

Under the Enterprise Agreement, staff are able to call for the creation of Local Joint Consultative Committees to permit interactions between staff and management, raise issues, and look to solve problems at the local level. There are currently two of these bodies, with great members representing their colleagues' interests and concerns. Branch staff support these members, facilitating caucusing, developing skills, and linking these to Member Organising Groups as needed.

Given the EA requires regular reviews of academic workload policies, local members are actively engaged in the collegiate processes, consulting with colleagues about defects in existing policies, advocating for improvements, and campaigning where management resist appropriate improvements. These members are instrumental in developing recommendations to staff about how to vote on proposed policies, for example the 90% rejection of the FASS proposed workload at the end of 2024.

At the Enterprise-level, the Branch Executive sits on the University Joint Consultative Committee and represents member concerns and seeks information from management in this forum.

Cases support, the hidden work of our members

Individual and small group support is a very important, but often "hidden" area of work undertaken by volunteers in the Branch (our wonderful "case handler" team), with the support of the Branch staff to assist in ensuring the best advice is provided to members who have problems in the workplace.

We are always looking to expand the number of volunteer case handlers. This group meets on a regular basis to discuss their cases, learn from other handlers about best practices, and get support from our industrial team.

During the last year, the Branch's 26 handlers and worked on 180 cases. This number of cases is comparatively high compared with other Branches in our Division, and as a result led the Branch Executive to engage with Division to access increased support on cases matters.

As part of engagement with a university review of the complaints management process, social researcher volunteers undertook to interview handlers and members of the union who have received support previously to develop a detailed understanding of the University's complaints system, and develop recommendations for its improvement.

Campaign Committee

The Branch is an active campaigning organisation, with a Campaign Committee made up of members of the Branch Committee and volunteers. The Campaign Committee meets regularly to discuss issues and formulate responses, and has been active in the last year in undertaking recruitment activities; working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to increase their visibility; developing posters and other branch materials; and developing a strategy to implement the institutional academic boycott of Israel, as committed to by the branch in 2024.

Engagement with management to put the views of staff

Submissions and policy responses

The Branch Committee is heavily involved in presenting submissions on policy proposals by management. Over the last year the University has committed to an extensive review of existing Human Resources policies, and the Branch Committee has been active in developing detailed responses and recommendations to these proposals. This work will be ongoing over the coming year.

In addition, the Branch Committee deals with an array of ad hoc policy proposals put forward by management, consulting with members to develop considered responses. Recent examples include the five speech policies presented by management which contained considerable flaws, threats to freedom of expression, and unenforceable and counter-productive elements. Members provided the Union with valuable insights on these matters which the Branch Committee could present to management, but also inform members about how to deal with issues presented by these policies.

Supporting staff in change

While the first six months of 2025 was marked by a change "pause" (one new change was launched during this window), the new Branch Committee has dealt with over fifteen change proposals during the last year. Most are comparatively small and required advice giving and support to local members, however, some like the ICT and Business School change are extensive and have been extremely poorly handled by management. The Branch staff and Executive have considered better ways to engage with changes at the University, identifying strategies to reach out to affected members and possible new members in change early, provide training and advice, form local groups, and provide ongoing support; particularly into post-implementation review and accountability.

Change management at the University of Sydney – engagement with the "summit"

During the "change pause" the Branch Executive and change expert John Bucanan engaged with management in the change summit – providing our views on problems with change, and positively providing recommendations for management to improve its practices. The Branch Committee debated key objectives and principles to inform this work, and it will be engaged in tracking how change is conducted by management as a result of these discussions.

Challenges and opportunities facing our Sector, Union, and Branch

Growth and power / EBA 2026

In the next year the Branch Committee will be heavily involved in the Enterprise Agreement negotiations. This is a critical activity that not only determines the pay and conditions of staff, but also sets mechanisms for staff engagement in decision-making activities of the University, and key processes (promotions, change management, performance management, etc.). The National Bargaining Conference has set a range of mandatory settlement points that our members will add local clauses of concern to.

The 2026 negotiations will be different from the last round, changes to the Fair Work Act are aimed at encouraging a shorted period of bargaining, which has both benefits and disadvantages for our Branch in this process. Bargaining requires activity from members, and the capacity of the Branch to mobilise will be an important determinant of the quality of our eventual agreement.

Managerialism and the management prerogative

Management of the University of Sydney is strongly committed to the concept of the managerial prerogative: that managers should have maximal freedom of action and little requirement to defer to staff. Unions believe in participation and know the research evidence shows that workers who are empowered and have appropriate levels of autonomy work better, harder, and more effectively.

This clash of cultures continues to define the University sector as a whole, and makes industrial relations unnecessarily conflictual. Continuing to push for collegiality and workplace democracy not only reflects core union values, but will deliver workplaces that are better places to be, and give more to the communities we serve.

Stakeholder attitudes to universities and university workers

The Sector has come under considerable attack during the last few years and University management has often not been robust defenders and advocates of our mission and our values. Unions like ours will have to be more active in communicating the public value of the work we do, building public support for our role, but also putting pressure on governments to fund higher education appropriately.