

# Academics union pushes for 15pc wage increase

**Julie Hare** *Education editor*



May 1, 2022 – 1.55pm

The national union for academics says its move to increase its pay claim to 15 per cent is fully justified given last week's inflation numbers.

The union had pitched a 12 per cent pay claim over three years but increased it by 3 per cent before last week's news that [inflation had surged](https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/later-election-rate-hike-a-matter-of-rba-credibility-20220427-p5agdm) [<https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/later-election-rate-hike-a-matter-of-rba-credibility-20220427-p5agdm>] to 5.1 per cent, the highest level since 2001.



A push for a 15 per cent pay increase for academics comes as universities struggle with decreased revenues. **Flavio Brancaleone**

“We were just reading the tea leaves,” said Matt McGowan, general secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union.

“When we originally set the 12 per cent claim, it was on the back of five years of low inflation. The claim was appropriate given the history we’ve seen. But what has happened since then is that inflation is starting to skyrocket.

“We are watching our members’ pay go backwards. So we are simply trying to reflect the change in circumstances since we launched our original claim.” The claim comes as many universities face seriously reduced revenue after two years of closed borders. Although international student numbers are recovering, they are still well short of 2019 figures.

The claim is for pay rises to be finalised by December 31, 2024, leaving just 2½ years for negotiations to take place and be implemented, and for entitlements to be back-paid where necessary.

Stuart Andrews, executive director of the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, said the demands were unreasonable given the legacy of COVID-19 on university finances.

“Universities across the sector are continuing to grapple with significant financial challenges flowing from the pandemic. This has also involved many universities having significant staffing reductions over the past two years, and I don’t think anyone wants that situation exacerbated by unsustainable pay increases through bargaining,” Mr Andrews said.

“The NTEU’s recent log served on a number of universities is totally unrealistic, and I can’t imagine any university providing pay increases by anything close to 12 per cent, let alone 15 per cent, by the end of 2024.”

About 27,000 people in the sector were made redundant in a single year during the pandemic.

Government data [<https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/staff-data>] has revealed the number of full-time-equivalent jobs fell from 130,414 in March 2020 to 121,364 a year later. However, that data obscures the true total of job losses, as it does not count casuals or those on fixed-term contracts.

Mr McGowan said the outlook had been incredibly bleak during the pandemic and many universities panicked at its outset, laying off more staff than necessary.

“Many institutions cut more jobs than they needed to and so they bolstered their bottom lines significantly,” Mr McGowan said.

“And we are starting to see the return of international students. Even though it’s patchy, it’s reasonable to expect that most of our universities will be able to afford the pay rise.

“Our members have a reasonable expectation that the real value of their pay will be maintained, especially given how people’s workloads have been impacted by job cuts. People are working a lot harder.”

Although the NTEU sets the objectives for enterprise bargaining, each university-based union negotiates on behalf of its own members with university management.

It is understood some universities recently have put implemented administrative increases of about 2 per cent outside the regular bargaining rounds. These include Griffith University, the University of Queensland and Western Sydney University.

In the latest enterprise bargaining round, staff at the University of Canberra negotiated a deal linked to CPI. If inflation was under 1.9 per cent, that would be their minimum pay increase. However, if it was over, staff would be paid the equivalent of the annual inflation exactly 13 months after its official end-of-year announcement.

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