

TRADE UNION AWARENESS AND BARRIERS AMONG UNIVERSITY SUPPORT STAFF IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *Trade unions serve as an important mechanism for safeguarding employee welfare and strengthening collective voice at the workplace, including within higher education institutions. This paper focuses on trade union awareness and participation barriers among university support staff in Malaysia. It highlights how understanding of union roles, access to information, organizational communication climate, perceived union benefits, and management–employee relations influence willingness to join and engage in union activities. Key barriers include limited exposure to union functions and benefits, time and workload constraints, concerns about conflict or career implications, and perceptions that unions are not closely aligned with everyday work issues. Overall, the discussion underscores the need for more structured communication and education initiatives, alongside constructive union–management engagement, to enhance member participation, employee well-being, and stable industrial relations in universities.*

Keywords: *trade unions; union awareness; participation barriers; university support staff; industrial relations; Malaysia*

Introduction

Support staff are vital to the smooth running of universities. They perform various administrative, technical, maintenance and service functions in support of teaching, research, and general operations of the institution. They have a huge impact to universities that without them the system will start to go haywire. Rarely are support staff as valued or have their work structure and developed comparable professional standing to that of academic colleagues. In fact, most of them encounter difficulties including insecurity, prospects of promotion and representation cause possibly a bigger impact in their motivation and general job satisfaction. (Roslan, M. F, 2022). Uniting workers to have the right to negotiate for higher wages, a safer place to work and security of employment is an important social role that unions fulfill. All the partners in higher education institutions benefit from trade unions' work to secure industrial peace, promote a fair dealing with employees, and facilitate good working relationship between workers and their representatives including those of managements. (R. H. Abdull Rahman, 2023).

Trade unions in Malaysia are governed by the Industrial Relations Act 1967 and the Trade Union Act 1959, In The law guarantees workers the right to form and join trade unions to organize collective bargaining. International Labour Organisation: Trade unions are recognized as the collective representatives of workers in negotiations at salary, benefit, and workplace safety levels (Piper, 2023). The Malaysian government had recently allocated RM10 million to strengthen the trade union movement through training and education to increase workers' awareness and participation. (Josephine Tan, 2025).

But despite this legal guarantee and the publicity campaigns mounted by such organisations, awareness of trade unions, their Significance and role especially among university related employees-support staff is low. Many workers also see unions as adversaries in conflict with management rather than as allies ensuring workers' welfare. (R. H. Abdull Rahman, 2023; Pentadbir Sistem, 2025) The myth partly contributes to the low response and problematic union involvement situation. The research has also highlighted a relatively low to moderate participation among academic staff in union activities, suggesting the challenges are pervasive across the sector. (Aziz, M. F, 2023) The objective of this study is thus to assess the level of awareness and comprehension of university support staff with respect to trade unions; investigate influencing factors on their levels of awareness and discuss implications for employee engagement and industrial relations in HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). The objective of this literature review is to consider the level of insight as well as understanding affects employee participation, examine challenges limiting union members' participation and investigate how increased awareness can engender a cooperative working environment and organizational stability. (Aziz, F. A, 2023)

Literature Review

Awareness and understanding comprise two related concepts that have a meaningful impact on employees' behaviors in relation to a trade union. Awareness refers to the employee's knowledge of the existence of the union, the role it plays, and the purpose it serves, including the role of the union in representing workers collectively and defending things like pay, hours of work, and welfare. Understanding or comprehension involves processing the knowledge and understanding how, in practice, the role of union membership can support employees, promote equity, and provide a venue to negotiate. (R.H. Abdull Rahman, 2023; Aziz, M.F, 2023)

When support staff have a strong awareness and understanding, it supports confidence and empowers their roles. Employees who understand the role of the union are more likely to be

engaged by attending meetings and participating in decision making, and view the union as collaborative rather than combative, and focused on fairness (Tiro, 2022). Conversely, low awareness can lead to misperceptions or ideas about unions being combative or redundant, which can lead to low participation. Thus, fostering a good understanding of trade unions is important in promoting engagement and a more collaborative environment within university settings. (Segi Malaysia, 2025; Pentadbir sistem, 2025). These findings are supported by studies and initiatives such as the Department of Trade Union Affairs' awareness programs targeting students and workers, emphasizing the importance of early education on trade union roles and labour rights (Pentadbir Sistem, 2023).

Factors that influence employees' awareness and understanding of trade unions

The level of awareness and understanding of trade unions among university support staff is shaped by various interrelated factors. These factors operate at the individual, organisational, and external levels, influencing how employees perceive unions and their relevance in the workplace. Understanding these factors is important in explaining differences in union awareness and participation among support staff. The following discussion outlines key factors that influence employees' awareness and understanding of trade unions within higher education institutions.

1. Personal Characteristics

There are many factors that can affect how well university support staff understand and are aware of unions. Personal characteristics like your age, education level, how long you have been working there and whether you are a permanent employee all play their part (Arisa, N, 2021). Generally older and more experienced staff are more clued up when it comes to labour issues and union activities. New people on the job, on the other hand, might not know the first thing about how unions work due to limited exposure (Faiq Aziz, 2025). Similarly, people who work for the university full time tend to have a stronger sense of belonging to the place and are more likely to join a union than staff who are only there on a contract basis or as temps. (Mahazril 'Aini Yaacob, 2024).

2. Workplace Culture

The workplace culture, the attitudes of the management towards unions & the channels they make available for staff to communicate all have a big bearing on how staff view and understand unions (Abdull Rahman, 2023; Cirillo et al., 2023). Supportive management attitudes that recognize unions as legitimate partners and provide open communication channels significantly boost staff engagement and union awareness (Noorayuni Rusli, 2025). Management resistance, restrictive policies, and poor communication create significant barriers to union engagement in Malaysian workplaces, a situation reflected in broader discussions on structural and organisational challenges facing the Malaysian labour movement (Yusof, 2025). Recent research emphasizes transforming workplace culture as key to revitalizing union participation in higher education.

3. Management Attitudes

The way management views unions greatly impacts how support staff think about unions and participate in them. Open and collaborative management that respects and includes union membership as an equal partner allows employees more opportunity to learn about and to participate in unions (Siti Suraya Abd Razak, 2022) Conversely, if management hesitates or discourages talking about union issues, employee awareness and participation is significantly limited. Positive management–union relations, characterized by recognition and open dialogue,

can substantially promote employee trust, participation, and commitment to unions in Malaysian workplaces. (Nur, Y., 2023) Even when management is not supportive of union-related conversations, there are still numerous other barriers, primarily structural such as employer unilateralism and restrictive policies, which will continue to restrict the visibility of unions and employees' ability to participate in unions. (Rusli, 2025).

4. External Influences

Another factor influencing how employees think about unions and how aware they are of unions is how government employment policies influence work. Labour regulations and larger socio-political frameworks are created through government employment policies. Therefore, government employment policies determine the structural boundaries of where unions operate (Noorayuni Rusli, 2025). Government programs that support and promote the rights of workers and promote leadership opportunities to increase employee involvement in unions include 10 million RM for training programs for trade unions (PHEKS 2025), that support and protect workers' rights and develop leadership to encourage employee participation. (Josephine Tan, 2025) Negative media portrayals of trade unions and unfavourable legislation and the societal and cultural views toward trade unions restrict and limit employee participation in the activities of trade unions and restrict employee's understanding of their rights (Pentadbir Sistem, 2025). Therefore, the influences of the external environment collectively determine employees' perceptions of trade unions and their willingness and ability to participate in trade union activities.

5. Union Leadership Strength

Moreover, the potency of union members and leadership also affects awareness (Loganathan, B., Sin, T. K., & Ganesan, J., 2024). Strong leadership with open transparency, trust, and good communication helps in gaining the trust of employees and to enhance their understanding of why the union needs to be integrated into work processes and promoted (Mahazril 'Aini Yaacob, 2024). Effective union leadership significantly influences trade union effectiveness, as demonstrated by public sector studies showing leadership quality directly impacts member engagement and organizational performance (Sarah Gideon, 2025)

In summary, awareness and understanding of trade unions among university support staff are influenced by a combination of personal characteristics, workplace culture, management attitudes, external influences, and the strength of union leadership. These factors collectively shape how employees perceive the role and importance of trade unions. When these elements are supportive, employees are more likely to develop positive perceptions and engage with unions. Conversely, weaknesses in these areas contribute to low awareness and limited participation among support staff.

Challenges affecting trade union participation

Despite the recognised role of trade unions in protecting workers' rights, several challenges continue to limit awareness and participation among university support staff. These challenges arise from communication gaps, negative perceptions, workload pressures, and structural barriers within organisations. Understanding these challenges is essential in identifying why support staff remain disengaged from union activities. The following section discusses the key challenges affecting trade union participation in higher education institutions.

1. Lack of Exposure and Communication

Primarily, they hinder exposure and communication around unions. Many do not even realize there are unions in their workplace because very little information about the unions' work is

shared (Aziz & Ismail, 2022). This lack of communication due to the gap existing between the trade union leaders and the employees plays a large part in the many misconceptions about unions as well as the lack of interest in joining a union (Noorayuni Rusli, 2025). Additionally, the Trade union movement in Malaysia faces several barriers at the structural and institutional levels, which continue to hamper the trade unions from reaching out to, and offering support to employees during the COVID 19 pandemic. Lockdowns, economic disruption, and workplace closures reduced union access to workers, making communication and advocacy more difficult. As a result, many employees do not know the many roles and benefits that the unions provide and this has resulted in a significant decrease in the overall visibility and influence of unions (Parasuraman, 2021).

2. Negative Perceptions

In addition, negative perception is also one of the challenges facing the union. Some employees believe that if they become a member of a union, then the administration would be even more against them or they fear there would be conflicts, and as a result, refrain from joining a union. Others believe unions are only in place for non-productive purposes or only for staff with post-secondary education qualifications occupy all unions and benefit from union representation (Mohd Yusof, 2025). These misconceptions mentioned above impact support staff, causing them to either be indifferent toward the unions, or in some manner discourage them from union activities. (Abdull Rahman, R. H.,2024)

Employers in Malaysia have utilized tactics aimed at preventing workers from joining unions, which include intimidation of workers, postponing union recognition based on delays, and exploiting the processes of classifying unions and using legal delays, to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. A report published in 2025 by the LLRC indicated that such tactics discourage workers from joining and/or participating in unions and reduce both union membership and engagement overall. (LLRC,2025)

3. Workload and Time Availability

As mentioned earlier, because participation has relied on employees' workload and time availability, support staff do have low levels of activity in participating periods regarding union issues (Abdull Rahman, R. H, 2024; Trif et al., 2023). Heavy workloads and family commitments consistently rank as primary barriers preventing academic and support staff from attending union meetings or activities (Abdull Rahman, R. H., 2023). Most professionals working in a large public university have families and many are expected to engage in all aspects of their core job duties; thus they are often unable to fully participate in union activity. Approximately 40% of university staff in large public universities are currently participating in unions (Faiq Aziz, 2025). Support staff have little time for union activities, leading to low participation and weaker representation in Malaysian universities.

4. Limited Relevance to Employees

Those who are already busy have difficulty in deliberating or engaging with union matters that they do not perceive as directly relevant to their personal or professional situation. (Siti ,2023) Many of the support staff within the organization believe that union meetings, activities, and initiatives do not focus on their pressing issues or professional development, like daily job responsibilities, promotion opportunities within their field of work, or ways to manage their workloads and job demands. The result is decreased participation, as well as creation of the belief that unions do not represent their real-life issues and experiences. (Jiang, L,2024) Studies indicate that when employees cannot clearly see the benefits or applicability of union

membership to their work or personal circumstances, they are less likely to engage, resulting in lower participation rates and weaker collective representation. (Siti, 2023) As a result, unions are unable to provide value to their members, and support staff tend to be indifferent or not engaged in the union's decision-making and advocacy.

Overall, the challenges faced by trade unions in engaging university support staff are multifaceted. Limited exposure and communication, negative perceptions, heavy workloads, and doubts about the relevance of unions significantly reduce participation. These challenges weaken the visibility and effectiveness of trade unions within universities. Addressing these issues is crucial to improving awareness, correcting misconceptions, and strengthening union engagement among support staff.

Effects of increased union awareness and understanding

Awareness and understanding of trade unions among support staff have important implications for both employees and higher education institutions. When employees are informed about union roles and functions, it can influence participation levels, workplace relations, and organisational outcomes. This section examines the key effects of increased union awareness and understanding on employee participation, working conditions, communication, and organisational stability.

1. Increased Participation and Collective Bargaining Power

A greater awareness and understanding of unions lead to many benefits for both employees and their organizations (Kim & Jung, 2022). In particular, if support workers are made aware of their rights and the roles of unions, they would be much more likely to become active members. More participation increases collective bargaining power and gives unions the confidence to speak on behalf of employees (Nor Syamaliah Ngah, 2024).

Additional research has shown that greater participation by members leads to an increase in negotiation power for union members, resulting in improved wages, increased rights, and a greater ability of unions to effect change in the workplace. Increased member participation will enhance the unions' financial stability through contributions from Union members, which will enable them to continue advocating on behalf of their membership to maintain a healthy work environment. Universities with informed support staff see improved representation, leading to fairer workload distribution and career protections (Nkem, C.A, 2024)

Research has found that unionized workers earn higher wages and enjoy better benefits than nonunionized workers and effective collective action by unions can provide better terms of employment and improved quality of life for workers. (Nassiah Gaong, 2022)

2. Improved Working Conditions and Job Satisfaction

As unions succeed, workers gain better conditions and fairer treatment. In addition, to increase worker satisfaction with their jobs, education and awareness will lead to a more positive work environment (Vohra et al., 2022). Workers will have a greater sense of trusting their employers if they understand the unions' objective is cooperation rather than conflict. (Siti Suraya, 2022). Union membership is also positively correlated to increased job satisfaction, decreased stress, and improved work-life balance through increased pay equality and enhanced grievance procedures. When employees are well informed, their level of trust in their management increases and their intentions to leave their job decrease, when unions encourage and promote discussions that the companies and employees have in common (Blanchflower, 2020). Furthermore, universities gain morale and productivity from their staff members who consider

their unions to be partners rather than enemies or opponents. Unions support the employees that they have represented and provide a means for constructive communication. (Maleka, M. J., 2021). Providing members of unions with the security of protection from abuse by their employer increases employee job satisfaction, reduces anxiety, and improves mental health and job security.

3. Reduced Workplace Stress and Better Communication

Better communication helps reduce workplace conflicts and employee distress (Irwan, 2024). An understanding of the role of a union helps to inform employees about workplace policies and employee rights, thus promoting positive morale and ensuring that a better working environment is created through harmonious relationships. Through a union's support, a collective negotiating body can enhance the mental health of its membership during stressful or crisis situations, as it promotes awareness of rights and benefits (Theocharis, 2025).

Unions lower stress, worry, and depression levels through grievance mechanisms and improved work conditions, with members reporting higher life satisfaction. Informed support staff experience fewer conflicts and greater psychological safety when unions promote cooperative dialogue. Malaysian university contexts show union education reduces workplace tension by clarifying rights and fostering trust-based communication. (J. Paul, 2025; O'Brady, S, 2021)

4. Organizational Loyalty, Motivation, and Stability

From a company standpoint, the more employees are aware and knowledgeable about their surroundings, the more motivated and productive they become. When workers feel supported and appreciated, they are more loyal and dedicated to their company (Kurniawati & Nuvriasari, 2025). It makes the university management also look fair and inclusive to all staffs (both academic and non-academic). When there is high awareness and understanding, in the end, university staff have more stability within their organization; they are a more motivated and united workforce who drives institutional success. (Abdull, Yusof, 2024).

Union awareness enhances organizational commitment and reduces turnover by providing voice mechanisms that address grievances effectively. When the staff in a university organisation have access to equitable treatment of all staff members, inclusive of academic and non-academic roles, this increases the likelihood that there will be higher employee retention and productivity for both academic and non-academic staff members. Further, through accomplishing strong collaborative relationships between unions and management, organisations will develop stable workforces capable of maintaining long-term performance. (William, 2025)

Furthermore, through research, it has been found that employees who perceive a high level of organisational support (including relatively equal treatment, communication open to input, and a grievance mechanism supported or established by unions) have a higher commitment to their organisation and are less likely to have repeated turnover intentions. Consequently, with higher organisational employee retention rates, increased employee morale and long-term organisational stability (Dany, 2025)

In conclusion, increased awareness and understanding of trade unions among university support staff lead to several positive outcomes. These include stronger participation, improved collective bargaining power, better working conditions, reduced workplace stress, and enhanced organisational loyalty. When support staff view unions as partners rather than

adversaries, universities benefit from improved communication, higher job satisfaction, and greater workforce stability.

Conclusion

To sum up, the support staff's awareness or reasoned understanding of the need for trade unions is key to support equity in labour practices and positive industrial relations within the university setting. Awareness will provide an understanding of their rights and of the role of trade unions, while understanding will help to put those aware of rights into practice. Both the level of awareness and understanding for support staff is affected by individual, organizational and exogenous [non-university] factors; however, many hinderances exist, such as lack of communication and information, previous experiences, and lack of exposure to involvement, to name a few. Efforts to raise awareness and understanding must be a partnership between the university, associations, and government organizations. To overcome these previous experiences or misinformation, any form of exposure or knowledge and awareness enhancement (i.e. training of employees or an open communication on the role and advantages of a union) would be beneficial such as events that have been specifically developed for this purpose (e.g. awareness campaigns). As the levels of awareness and understanding are increased among support staff, they can take part in creating a more empowered, motivated, and cooperatively engaging workplace. When we build upon this awareness and understanding as a foundation to enact change, we not only benefit individual support staff, but we also improve the institution's effectiveness and sustainability as a higher education institution.

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