

## TRADE UNION AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG NON-ACADEMIC EMPLOYEES

Fadillah Ismail <sup>1</sup>  
Tan Han Chong <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1 2</sup> Department of Production and Operation Management, Faculty of Technology Management and Business, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia

\* Corresponding author: (Email: [fadillah@uthm.edu.my](mailto:fadillah@uthm.edu.my))

### Article history

Received date : 16-1-2026

Revised date : 17-1-2026

Accepted date : 27-1-2026

Published date : 15-2-2026

### To cite this document:

Ismail, F., & Tan, H. C. (2026). Trade union awareness and understanding among non-academic employees. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 11 (80), 563 – 572.

---

**Abstract:** *Trade unions provide collective representation that safeguards workers' rights and welfare, including within higher education institutions where non-academic employees sustain daily operations. However, available evidence indicates that union awareness and understanding among university support staff in Malaysia remain low, reflected in limited knowledge of union roles, functions, and membership benefits. Using a focused literature-based synthesis, this paper consolidates core dimensions of union awareness and knowledge and identifies recurrent constraints that weaken engagement—most notably underexposure to union activities, negative perceptions toward unionism, and inadequate rights consciousness, alongside pressing work realities such as heavy workload and career insecurity. The discussion further underscores the heightened relevance of strengthening union literacy in the post-pandemic context and advances strategic directions to revitalise participation through modernised union practices, structured awareness initiatives, and more accessible communication pathways that support resilient labour representation in Malaysian universities.*

**Keywords:** *trade unions; union awareness; union understanding; non-academic employees; university support staff; higher education institutions; industrial relations; Malaysia*

---

## Introduction

Trade unions are essential in voicing the rights and welfare of workers, including workers in higher education institutions (Cain, 2023). A trade union is an organization established to represent members in collective bargaining with employers. In this sense, trade unions in higher education institutions become the primary modes of voicing staff complaints, especially the support staff, who are often considered the backbone of the day-to-day running of most universities (Ayeni & Ayeni, 2023).

These are the categories of supporting staff that include administrative, technical, and service personnel who facilitate academic and operational activities. However, such a grave problem exists in that the awareness and understanding of the importance and functions of trade unions among support staff are very low. More than 60% of support staff across public and private universities are not aware of the role and benefits of union membership, which is associated with underexposure to union activities, negative attitudes towards union movements, and the constant neglect of worker's rights (Abdull Rahman et al., 2023).

Only 35% of the support staff from local universities knew that trade unions operated within their institutions, and less than 25% knew what trade unions did and the benefits derived from them (Faiq Aziz et al., 2022). This is threatening, as support staff witness challenges connected with high workload, uncertain careers, and slim chances of promotion. If awareness and knowledge regarding trade unions are not created, the voice and rights of support staff may be lost in the processes of decision-making within a university.

This becomes even more relevant in the post-pandemic era of heightened issues concerning job security and the welfare of workers (Moarcăș, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Hence, the paper discusses at length the level of awareness and understanding of trade unions and their necessity among support staff in universities, the related concepts, challenges, impacts, and strategies, emphasizing that reforming union practices is essential to ensure active participation and resilient labour representation (Noorlailahusna et al., 2025). The study is very relevant to gaining a full understanding of the employee-employer relationship in Malaysian higher education and proposes strategic approaches to that effect to enhance support staff trade union membership.

## Literature review

The concept of trade union awareness covers several dimensions of consciousness and the recognition of employees. The dimensional nature of awareness reflects the union's existence and appreciation of its relevance, along with a behavioural disposition towards its use. Their study finds that awareness starts with basic knowledge of workers' statutory rights embedded in employment legislation and progressively develops through understanding how collective bargaining works and the various dispute resolution procedures.

Knowledge of trade unions represents a higher level of cognitive awareness, involving an understanding of unions' organisational structure, processes, and methods (Victor & Kavishe, 2025). Singh's conceptualisation from 2024 depicts that knowledge comprises three core elements: procedural knowledge regarding union processes, strategic appreciation of the collective bargaining approach, and critical awareness of the relevant industrial relations legal frame. His empirical investigation shows that well-versed employees in trade unions' systems are more skilled in identifying complex employment issues and choosing correct procedures for grievance handling (Mohamad Nor et al., 2024). Comparative studies have shown that

support staff working in a public university system have a higher level of awareness and understanding than those in a private university system.

The causes given by this multi-institutional approach are the historical legacy of unionist in public institutions, the difference in managerial attitudes toward union activities, and the resource allocation for educational programmes concerning workers (Abdull Rahman et al., 2024). In spite of these differences, awareness and understanding are perceived at all levels, which points to a systemic problem that transcends institutional classification (Yusof, Rusli, & Hammad Ahmad Khan, 2025).

### **Key Challenges in Improving Trade Union Awareness Among University Support Staff**

Improving trade union awareness among university support staff is important to ensure employees understand the role of unions, their workplace rights, and available support mechanisms. However, efforts to increase awareness are often constrained by practical work realities and organisational conditions. Prior studies show that heavy workloads, management resistance, limited union capacity, generational communication gaps, and dispersed campus settings can reduce participation in union activities and create uneven access to union information across staff groups (Abdul Rahman et al., 2023; Yaacob et al., 2024; Yusof et al., 2025; Victor & Kavishe, 2025).

First challenge that they all facing in to improve the awareness of the trade union among university support is workload and time constraints. It is because the tasks given for them are so heavy, packed schedule and they also often multitask as well. All this makes them lack time to join the workshops, briefings and the awareness programs (Abdul Rahman et al. 2023). Some staff that are working on shift systems faces more problems because their working hours are not regular and cannot be predicted and this will make it difficult in joining the union event (Abdull Rahman et al. 2024). They will miss the important information when they unable to join the event for example, like the purpose of the unions and about their rights and this will let them become low awareness level in the university (Mohamad Nor et al. 2024). Less of availability of time will become an obstacle that improves the union knowledge (Victor & Kavishe, 2025).

The second challenge is organizational resistance and negative perception. It is because the management always think that the union causes the arguement and make the operation unefficiency. All these negative perception lead to the union leader be rejected when to access the staff and also facing many rules and restriction when they are trying to create an awareness campaign (Yusof et al. 2025). This will make the union is hard to organize any event even is only a simple activity like communication activity, and will also make all the staff scare and become worry when joining the union. They all worry that when joining the union event will effect their relation with the management (Abdull Rahman et al. 2023). As result, the staff are stayed and avoid from joining any union event. The management make the workplace environment become negatively that they discourage any of their stuff from joining the union (yaacob et al. 2024).

The third challenge facing is limited of union resources. The union in university facing many problems in running their awareness event. They facing problem like not enough of the money to prepare for their event, buying materials and any of the investment (Noorlailahusna Mohd Yusof et al., 2024). Next, they also lack of well-trained staff or leader that can helps them in

organize the program, hosting the event and also helps them in management (Yusof et al. 2025). This lack of the skill of staff makes them become difficult in maintaining the communication with their staff. Thus, limited of resources means that the union have not enough resources to expand their activity to all the campus, this causes a concern raised and uneven awareness across them (Abdull Rahman et al. 2024). Union awareness is still weak and not consistent when their funding, tools and support like human support are less (Victor & Kavishe, 2025).

Fourth Challenge is generation differences and digital literacy gaps. University support personnel come in a variety of age groupings. Every group has a distinct preferred method for obtaining information. Younger employees want speedy, digital methods. They make use of social media, online training, and mobile apps. According to (Mohamad Nor et al. 2024), they find them more convenient and simpler. Older employees prefer traditional methods. They like physical interactions, written documents, or straightforward communications. The issue is that certain employees—mostly older ones—don't have much experience with digital technology, they struggle with internet resources (Yaacob et al. 2024). This makes digital communication more difficult and unions must thus employ a variety of strategies to reach everyone, more effort, preparation, and resources are required for this (Faiq Aziz et al. 2022).

Last challenge is the geographic dispersion dan campus fragmentation. Buildings or branches, and support personnel may be dispersed among many places. According to (Abdul Rahman et al. 2024), employees who work in small satellite offices or distant from the main campus sometimes receive less information since union officials are unable to visit every site. According to (Yousaf, Rusli, and Hammad Ahmed Khan 2025), workers feel cut off from union updates as a result of this distance, which restricts face-to-face communication and lowers the visibility of union operations. Campus-wide communication routes can sometimes be uneven, with certain departments getting information more quickly than others. These problems lead to awareness gaps where workers in distant regions continue to be less knowledgeable than those in central areas (Nurlailahusna Mohammed Yusuf et al. 2024).

Overall, trade union awareness among university support personnel is shaped by multiple barriers that limit both engagement and information flow. Workload pressures and shift schedules restrict time for participation, while negative perceptions and organisational resistance can discourage involvement. In addition, resource limitations, digital literacy differences across age groups, and campus fragmentation contribute to inconsistent outreach and awareness gaps. Therefore, strengthening union awareness requires flexible, inclusive, and well-resourced approaches that can reach staff across different schedules, generations, and campus locations (Abdull Rahman et al., 2024; Mohamad Nor et al., 2024; Yousaf et al., 2025).

### **Effects of Trade Union Awareness on University Support Staff and Workplace Outcomes**

Trade union awareness does not only influence whether employees understand unions, but it also shapes how they behave and perform in the workplace. When university support staff have clearer knowledge of union roles, functions, and employee rights, they are more likely to engage in union activities, use proper grievance channels, and feel supported at work. The literature suggests that stronger union awareness can contribute to positive individual and organisational outcomes, including improved participation, satisfaction, harmony, and performance (Faiq Aziz et al., 2022; Abd Aziz et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2025).

First effect is higher union participation and stronger representation. Employees are more likely to join or taking parts in union activities when they have an understanding of trade unions and their goals, the union is strengthened and be able to represent the concerns of its members as a result of this helps in rising the participation (Abd Aziz et al. 2023). A strong union can improve and relationship of management and staff successfully, which increase trust and enhances the way issues are resolved (Yusuf et al. 2025). Unions are able to gather information about their staffs concerns, giving them support when their membership is more engaged and in the end, this enhances the union's performance (Yacob et al. 2024). In general, increased engagement results in improved staff protection and increase performance (Mendoza, 2023).

Next, better job satisfaction and commitment is also one of the effect. Workers who are aware of their rights and the function of unions have greater job security and support. (Faiq Aziz et al. 2022) staff will become more satisfied with their jobs when they know they have a platform to voice up their issues. This sense of support makes people feel more devoted to their company and will not consider from quitting (Mohd Anuarul Azhar et al.2025). Unions also contribute to the development of a feeling of justice and trust in the workplace, which boosts motivation and loyalty. Employee performance and attitudes towards the company naturally increase when they feel protected and appreciated (Lee et al. 2023).

The third effects is improve harmony and conflict handling. Understanding union duties contributes to a more harmony and better working environment. According to (Ibrahim et al. 2022), disputes are settled more swiftly and equitably when workers are aware of grievance processes and how unions might assist in resolving issues. Increased knowledge also lessens miscommunications between staff and management, which results in fewer conflicts (Abdul Rahman et al. 2023). Small problems are less likely to develop into larger disputes when unions actively assist workers in resolving problems. This contributes to preserving general stability and harmony in the workplace. A more peaceful and friendly workplace is immediately impacted by awareness (Yusuf et al. 2025).

Next effect is lower legal costs and fewer disputes. Staff sometimes misunderstanding the processes or make mistakes when filing the complaints due to inadequate union awareness this can result in additional problem. These disagreements may need official inquiry or legal participation, which may increase the organisation cost (Mohammad Anuarul Azhar et al. 2025). According to (Abd Aziz et al. 2023), Staff may facing trouble or problems if they don have the right knowledge, which can cause them become stress. Weak awareness structures frequently cause organisations to take longer to resolve issues, which eventually causes disputes. Stronger awareness helps in decrease the complaints and lower the legal fees (Ibrahim et al. 2022).

The fifth effect is higher productivity and btter work performance. Workers are more confident and motivated when they feel knowledgeable, safe, and supported. According to (Abd Aziz et al. 2023), if the staff are knowing that their rights are protected helps them to become more concentrate on their work, which increases productivity. Having a clear knowledge of union duties also helps staff communicate more effectively and prevent conflict by lowering stress and ambiguity (Lee et al. 2023). Stronger union participation ensure better working environment where cooperation and teamwork are valued. This feeling of support results in increase the efficiency of the work, over time, increased union knowledge and strengthen the performance of organisation (Yusuf et al. 2025).

Overall, higher trade union awareness produces meaningful benefits for both employees and the organisation. It strengthens union participation and representation, increases job satisfaction and organisational commitment, and supports healthier conflict management through clearer grievance understanding. At the same time, it can reduce disputes and legal costs by preventing misunderstandings and improving early resolution processes. Ultimately, when staff feel protected, informed, and supported, motivation and productivity tend to rise—contributing to stronger organisational performance over time (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Abd Aziz et al., 2023; Mohammad Anuarul Azhar et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2025).

Stronger understanding of trade unions among university support staff leads to clear workplace benefits: higher union participation and more effective representation, improved job satisfaction and commitment, smoother conflict handling and greater workplace harmony, fewer disputes and lower legal/administrative costs, and ultimately higher productivity and work performance. Together, these effects show that informed and engaged staff contribute to a more stable, cooperative, and high-performing university environment (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Faiq Aziz et al., 2022; Abd Aziz et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2025).

### **Effective Strategies to Strengthen Trade Union Engagement Among University Support Staff**

Trade unions play an important role in protecting employee rights and supporting fair workplace practices, but this role can only be strengthened when staff are consistently informed and actively engaged. In the university setting, support staff have diverse work patterns, age profiles, and communication preferences, which means unions must use flexible and inclusive approaches. The literature highlights that structured training, accessible digital platforms, improved union–management collaboration, targeted communication, and stronger union capacity are among the key strategies that can enhance staff understanding and participation in union-related programmes (Faiq Aziz et al., 2022; Abdul Rahman et al., 2023; Yaacob et al., 2024; Yusof et al., 2025).

One of the effective strategy is training and awareness workshops. By giving often training program and seminars focussing on union rights, and processes are an good way to raise union awareness. These help in giving the workers straightforward information that helps them comprehend how unions may support them (Yacob et al. 2024). Organisations that often offer training also witness improvements to employee involvement and knowledge since workers have various opportunities to learn (Abdul Rahman et al. 2023). Workshops also help in standardised the information so that all staff can receive the same instructions and explanations given (Abd Aziz et al. 2023). Continuous educational programs ensure that awareness doesn't decrease over time.

Next is by using the digital and online communication tools. For example, like websites, mobile applications, online videos, and virtual meetings. Young employees in particular favour quick and easy internet communication (Yusuf et al. 2025). Digital means make it easier for unions to contact workers who work in shifts or across several campuses since online material is always accessible (Mohammed Nor et al. 2024). The fact that online platforms enable rapid updates, reminders, and interactive material that engages staff members (Faiq et al. 2022). This approach is cheap and enables unions' communication with a larger workforce.

Third strategy can be use is increase the collaboration and the relationship of unions and the management. When unions and management can work together and can communicate well, this can helps is decrease the fear, worry and misunderstandings for them (Yaacob et al. 2024).

Unions and management discuss together can helps in strengthen their relationship and also can have a better understanding between them so they will know what they needed as well and this can have a better environment for the awareness activity (Yusof et al. 2025). When the unions's activity is supported, it will make them more easily to organise the events and to share the information, this collaboration can ensure that the union program will be align with the goal and become more efficiency (Abdull Rahman et al. 2024).

Next is can by communication with different age of groups, it is because there are many staff that from different ages and the union must use an appropriate ways to communicate with them to increase the effectively. For younger they are expert in using the digital communication tools like social media, notification and also videos (Mohamad er al. 2024). But for aged staff, they will prefer a physical meetings or a simple email and also a physical materials for example like printed document (Yaacob et al. 2024). By using an appropriate communication ways helps union can make sure everyone can receive the message given clearly and have a better understanding. This strategy helps in make sure everyone received the information clearly and reduce confusion (Faiq Aziz et al. 2022).

Lastly, is by improving the union resource and also the capacity. Union needed resourses like funds, training, management and leadership to organise the awareness program. The more the resource let union to organise more programs and activities and have more effective staff (Noorlailahusna Mohd Yusof et al. 2024). With a good leadership, can helps the union in manage their event effectively and also can communicate clearly to avoid misunderstanding for others, and make their staff more confident (Yaacob et al. 2024). Unions can have a long term programs but not the one time event if they have enough of the resources (Yusof et al. 2025). To ensure that unions continue to support staff in a sustainable and effective way capacity building is important.

Overall, the discussion indicates that strengthening trade union engagement among university support staff requires a coordinated, multi-channel approach that matches the realities of diverse work patterns, generations, and campus contexts. Regular training and workshops provide standardised knowledge and sustain learning over time, while digital platforms expand reach and ensure continuous access for shift-based and geographically dispersed staff (Faiq Aziz et al., 2022; Abdul Rahman et al., 2023; Mohammed Nor et al., 2024; Yusuf et al., 2025). At the same time, closer union–management collaboration is essential to reduce distrust and perceived risks of participation, creating a more supportive environment for union initiatives to operate effectively (Yaacob et al., 2024; Yusof et al., 2025). Tailoring communication to different age groups further strengthens message clarity and inclusivity, but these strategies will remain limited without adequate resources and capacity building to deliver sustained programmes, develop leadership, and maintain consistent outreach. Collectively, these strategies position unions to engage staff more effectively and strengthen institutional employment relations in a sustainable manner (Noorlailahusna Mohd Yusof et al., 2024; Abdull Rahman et al., 2024)

## Conclusion

This literature review systematically investigated the complicated landscape of trade union awareness and understanding among university support staff. The evidence consistently shows severe deficits in both basic awareness and full understanding of the roles, functions, and benefits of trade unions. These knowledge gaps have their roots in the interconnected issues of workload constraints, management resistance, resource limitations, and demographic diversity. The absence of adequate awareness and understanding has significant, multi-level

consequences at the level of individual staff welfare, organizational efficiency, and systemic industrial relations. The study quite clearly illustrates institutions that are underdeveloped in the infrastructure for awareness face more frequent conflicts with higher resolution costs and diminished harmony at the workplace. Conversely, organizations employing well-structured awareness programs did indeed gain improved staff satisfaction, substantial operational stability, and better representation mechanisms.

The strategic interventions identified in this review, consequently, suggest practical pathways to improvement. Successful approaches do indeed share certain characteristics: comprehensive in scope, adaptable to local contexts, responsive to demographic diversity, and sustainable through institutional support. Digital transformation strategies show particular promise in reaching contemporary workforce demographics, and strategic partnerships between management and unions provide critical structural foundations upon which programming can be built. Several of these represent critical knowledge gaps that demand further research. Future research should give priority to empirical studies focusing on awareness levels at different university types and different geographical locations. Longitudinal analyses of how awareness develops over time would yield useful insights into program effectiveness. Comparative international studies can identify best practices transferable between higher education systems.

## Reference

- Abd Aziz, M. F., Ismail, I. A., Abdullah, H., Che Nawi, N. R., Zulkifly, N. A., & Azizul, M. D. A. (2023). *International Journal of Humanities Technology and Civilization*, 8(2), 149–159. <https://doi.org/10.15282/ijhtc.v8i2.9603>
- Abdull Rahman, R. H., Abd. Razak, S. S., Ismail, F., Yakub, N. A., Abdull Rahman, N. L., & Abdul Rohman, N. (2023). Factors preventing public university academic staff involvement in trade unions. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(4), 279–290. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i4/16568>
- Abdull Rahman, R. H., & Ismail, F., & others. (2024). Barriers to trade union participation among Indonesian foreign workers in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Sciences*, 13(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJAREMS/v13-i3/22422>
- Ayeni, A. O., & Ayeni, O. J. J. (2023). The roles of trade unions in higher education institutions and research institutes. *Managing Higher Education and Research Institutes for Results*.
- Cain, T. R. (2023). Academic union voice and the transformations in/of higher education. In *Research Handbook on the Transformation of Higher Education* (pp. 112–126). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Faiq Aziz, A., Ismi Arif Ismail, H., Abdullah, N. R. Che Nawi, Zulkifly, N. A., & M. Dhamir Audi Azizul. (2022). Contributory factors: Determinants influencing trade union membership decision. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(12). <http://hrmars.com/index.php/pages/detail/IJARBSS>
- Ibrahim, U. S. G., Yusof, R., & Ibrahim, H. I. (2022). *International Journal of Academic Research in Accounting, Finance and Management Sciences*, 12(3), 763–785. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARAFMS/v12-i3/15359>
- Mendoza, R. E. (2023). *The impacts of unions on employee performance* (Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Northridge).
- Mohamad Nor, C. S., Moona H., R., et al. (2024). Trade unions: Relevant or irrelevant? A study on generation 's perception in Malaysia. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijhrs.v8i3.11929>
- Mohd Anuarul Azhar, A. Z., & Hamzah, H. (2025). Job satisfaction, organisational justice, and organisational citizenship behaviour among Malaysian employees. *EDUCATUM Journal of Social Sciences*, 11, 82–90. <https://doi.org/10.37134/ejoss.vol11.sp.9.2025>
- Moarcăș, C. A. (2022). Experiences and challenges of the labour relationship in the post-pandemic era. *Analele Universității București–Seria Drept (AUB)*, (1), 41–56.
- Noorlailahusna Mohd Yusof, Noorayuni Rusli, & Hafizah Hammad Ahmad Khan. (2025). *Journal of Emerging Economies & Islamic Research*, 13(1), 1–14. <https://ir.uitm.edu.my/id/eprint/123837>
- Victor, C., & Kavishe, A. M. (2025). The challenges faced by trade unions in improving employee welfare and strategies to address them: A case of the Tanzania Union of Government and Health Employees (TUGHE) at the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF). *African Journal of Empirical Research*, 6(1), 189–200.
- Wang, P., Chen, S., Cuifang, A. L., & Xiuxi, S. Z. (2023). The post-pandemic workplace: Issues and insights for future research and action. In *Elgar Companion to Managing People Across the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 19–46).
- Yaacob, M. A., Mohd Noor, N. H., Ngah, N. S., & Zol Bahari, M. Z. (2024). Examining the effectiveness of a trade union: Role of union strength and union leadership. *Environment-Behaviour Proceedings Journal*, 9(SI22), 245–251. <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9iSI22.5853>

- Yaacob et al. (2024). Bridging the gap between labour unions and the management through leadership development programmes. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 37, 679–690. <https://www.scribd.com/document/766005595/33-Mahazril-Aini-Yaacob-LM-002-245-251>
- Yusof, N., Rusli, N., & Hammad Ahmad Khan, H. (2025). *Atlantis Press Proceedings*. <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/bizfame-24/126015047>