

Strategies for Managing Psychological Effects of Strike Actions on Academic Staff of Nigerian Public Universities

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Abstract

Strike does not help the educational advancement of a nation and the rating of their institutions. There is a colossal waste in human and material resources as the government will still pay the lecturers their salaries while on strike irrespective of the delay. The paper proffers strategies for addressing psychological effects of strike actions on academic staff of Nigerian public universities; it discusses the concept of strike, recent notable causes of strike in Nigerian public universities, psychological effects of strike actions on academic staff in Nigerian public universities, strategies for addressing psychological effects of strike actions in Nigerian public universities and the implication of strike action on the overall national development. The paper recommended among others that government should be proactive to negotiate with Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) before commencement/embarking on any form of strike.

Keywords: strategies, psychological, ASUU, public, universities

Introduction

Nigeria is at a crossroad despite its stable democratic rule more than at any other time in its history. Public universities are universities owned by the government. Public universities are universities established to provide post-secondary education for Nigerians. They are universities established by the Act of parliament to serve the interest of the general public. Public universities deal with the provision of teaching, research, and community services (Ogunode, 2020). Public universities in Nigeria are grouped into federal and state-owned universities. The federal universities are owned by the federal government of Nigeria while the state universities are owned by the state government (Ogunode, 2020). These public universities are designed and structured to function with human and material resources. The materials resources include administrative blocks, offices, ICT facilities, libraries, water, electricity, internet services, classrooms, instructional materials, and others, while the human resource include the teaching and non-teaching staff. The teaching staff is called the academic staff (Ogunode & Adamu, 2021).

The goal of every university is to impart knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and norms to learners in order to bring about development in the lives of every student and for national transformation and development. Accordingly, the vision of universities is to be pace-setting institutions in terms of learning, character building and service to mankind with a mission to produce competent and resourceful graduates with high moral standards in the society, and the total development of men and women in an enabling environment through appropriate teaching, research and service to humanity, influenced by the constitutional ethics and culture of the Nigerian state (Amadi & Urho in Offem et al., 2018). Over the years, universities have played dominant roles in the developed world. Universities are usually in the forefront of any social, economic and political challenges, especially with the power of research being focused on areas that will promote human development and solve existential problems.

The academic staff is the teaching staff who implement the school curriculum and lectures. They are knowledgeable teachers and character builders. The academic staff is the engine room of higher institutions. They are the pillar and foundation of higher institutions. The academic staff determines the quality of the higher institutions as well as the proper solutions to the nation's economic and social problems (Ogunode & Adamu, 2021). The functions of the academic staff revolve around lecturing, preparation of lecture notes, sourcing for instructional materials, assessing the students through continuous assessment and examination, setting exam questions, marking the answer sheet, supervising students

on research work, especially theses and dissertations, and preparing the students' grade points. The academic staff conducts different levels of research, presents their findings, and contributes to the development of knowledge in higher institutions (Ogunode & Adamu, 2021).

To realize their objectives of improving their welfare and struggling for their rights, the academic staff in Nigerian universities formed a union called the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The union was formed in 1969. Specifically, Arikewuyo in Musa et al. (2022) identified the principles that guide ASUU as a union to include integrity, transparency and accountability, professionalism, objectivity, hardwork, courage, sacrifice, total commitment, internal democracy, teamwork, and group solidarity; as well as patriotism, anti-imperialism, and working-class solidarity.

In the words of Abiodun-Oyebanji in Kazeem (2009), up to the early eighties (of the 20th century), Nigerian universities were repositories of everything that could be considered excellent in academia, with qualified and adequate academic staff and good working conditions. In addition, funding for infrastructures and research was very reasonable then. Consequently, many budding academics, whether trained in Nigerian or foreign universities, were motivated to look for and take up an academic career in Nigerian universities. The totality of the Nigerian university system was recognized and was equally respected. This position gives a graphic illustration of Nigerian universities in their early stage. Over time, this impressive description has been wholly destroyed (Abiodun-Oyebanji, 2015). Abiodun-Oyebanji (2015) also observed that the champion for the battle to savage and redress the ever-diminishing quality of Nigerian University education appears to be the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).

Nigeria has the opportunity to build a society that can guarantee technological breakthrough in a globalized world but due to the plethora of incessant strike in the university education system, this seems to be a mirage. In line with this, International IDEA, in Egberanmwen (2015) posits exacerbating public perception that the government has been insensitive and slow in addressing fundamental issues affecting Nigerians such as poverty alleviation, resource distribution, infrastructure development and security.

According to Dave (2014), Nigeria as a country has been confronted with many teething problems and one would be quick to argue that all nations at one time or the other had had their fair share of challenges; Nigeria therefore cannot be an exception. As germane as this line of thinking may sound, it is pertinent to draw attention to what has come to remain a

recurring tribulation in the annals of the country's chequered existence as a sovereign entity. That seeming misfortune is the lingering education crisis which often rears its ugly head intermittently. Obviously, challenges are part of life. Countries all over the world and even individuals are constantly confronted with issues of varied dimension but the ability to resolve such matter in the mutual interest of all contending parties is what counts. Everybody who ordinarily should have been held responsible is passing the buck, and the ultimate victims of this inaction are the people.

Yusuf and Afolabi (2014) noted that tertiary education is widely accepted in Nigeria today as a form of investment in human capital development that yields economic benefits and contributes significantly to the nation's future wealth and development by increasing the productive capacity of the citizens. University education equips the individual with relevant knowledge, skills and attitudinal orientation required to progress in one's chosen career in life and contributes meaningfully to the economic growth and security of the nation, through purposeful governance.

While the federal and state government largely perceive tertiary education (University) in recent times as an investment in human capital development with the sole aim of producing the required skilled manpower for managerial and technocratic levels of the economic, social and political sectors of the nation, many secondary school leavers in Nigeria conceive tertiary education as a legitimate passport not only to self fulfilment, but also a ladder to higher socio-economic status in the society. Many individuals, groups and organizations hold tenaciously to the fact that tertiary education (University) is a formidable instrument that could be judiciously used in Nigeria to wipe out all social vices, economic woes and ills that usually plague an illiterate society.

Furthermore, Yusuf and Afolabi (2014) posit that tertiary education (University) in Nigeria today is facing myriads of problems. Strike actions in Nigerian educational sector is seen as incessant due to its frequency and duration. Due to the incessant strike actions, students and parents' interest in public institutions have been wavering. Private institutions have been springing up due to this incessant strike actions; and the wealthy persons have decided to seek for education outside the shore of the country. This development is no doubt unhealthy to the country because it has led to brain drain and human capital flight.

Nwadi and Oguugua in Musa et al. (2022) note that strike is the absence of a definite and effective industrial relations policy that takes cognizance of the prevailing economic

situation in the country. Okeke (2003) argues that a strike is a disagreement between employees and their employers following the failure of one side to meet the demand of the other, to address grievances. These actions are bound to have severe consequences on the productivity of educational institutions.

Similarly, Ogunode (2020) observes that strike action is an endemic problem facing the administration of public universities in Nigeria. Nigerian public universities are known for continuous strike actions by different union groups within the system. The actions are frustrating the administration of public universities in Nigeria. The reasons for the strike actions by union groups include underfunding of the public universities, inadequate infrastructural facilities, poor implementation of agreements reached with union groups, and poor working conditions.

Conceptual clarification

Strike is an organized work stoppage by a body of workers to enforce compliance with demands made on an employer or a group of employers. It is an aspect of industrial conflict used by workers to express their grievances. It is a collective and organized cessation or slowdown of work by employees, to force acceptance of their demands by the employers (Amadi & Urho in Offem et al., 2018). Strike is workers' refusal to work as a protest for inadequate service or poor condition. In the education sector, teachers' strike can be compared to students' examination malpractice, corruption and other social vices in the society. Strike is a social ill not different from corruption because it eats into students' time which makes it difficult for students to be fully and properly "baked" within the designated educational time frame. As a result, "products" that are ill equipped in both character and learning are turned out to the society (Edinyang & Ubi, 2013). A strike in labour or employment relations is a combined action of a group of employees, who withdraw their labour totally or partially, with the purpose of persuading an employer to succumb to their combined demands (Parker in Offem et al., 2018).

Recent notable causes of strike action

There are many causes of strike actions in Nigerian public universities propelled by some factors. In this paper, poor funding of public universities, inadequate infrastructural facilities, imposition of Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), poor and inconsistent payment of salaries, poor conditions of service, political interference in university management, and poor implementation of agreements reached with the unions are considered as causes of strike (Musa et al., 2022).

Effects of strike actions

1. Health challenge

The frequent and prolonged industrial actions by ASUU members have caused health-related problems for academic staff. Academic staff that is used to running around every day with work-related activities may suddenly become idle doing nothing at home. The effects of staying idle by most academic staff in Nigeria during strike have led to different illnesses or sicknesses.

2. Brain drain

The incessant strike actions in Nigerian universities have resulted in the migration of academic staff to another sector of the economy and even moving outside the country to seek for better jobs. The strike actions by ASUU have led to brain-drain in the university system. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has warned the Federal Government against encouraging brain drain with lingering strike and nonchalant attitude towards the yearnings of ASUU. Offem et al. (2018) noted that the immediate effect of the depressing working conditions in universities is mass resignation, departure of hard-working colleagues to North America, Western Europe, and the Middle East and even to African Countries with less buoyant economies than oil-rich Nigeria. Many lecturers are disheartened by the gross neglect of the educational sector by successive governments and the government's hardline posture toward their legitimate demands. This hinders their plans to schedule the period to proceed on sabbatical leaves. Factors responsible for brain drain in Nigerian public universities include poor motivation, an uncondusive working environment, insecurity, underfunding, and political interferences. The implication of brain drain in Nigerian public universities includes shortage of lecturers, poor quality of education, and a higher student-teacher ratio (Ogunode, 2020).

3. Low productivity

Strike actions in Nigerian public universities have also resulted in low productivity among the academic staff. Many of the academic staff do not work during strike actions but engage in other minor jobs less productive than their professional jobs in the classrooms. These unprofessional jobs that academic staff engage during the prolonged strike actions have reduced their maximum productive capacity.

4. Loss of manpower

The strike actions in the public universities have also led to loss of manpower. Strike actions by ASUU members in public universities have led to the loss of manpower in the system.

5. Backlog of workloads

The strike actions embarked upon by members of academic staff have resulted in a backlog of activities like project supervision, completion of scheme of work, submitting committee reports for those in one committee or the other, grading of assignments tests, and examinations, among others. It is worthy of note that if the strike is called off, there remain a lot of academic backlogs in the departments and offices.

6. Depression

Prolonged strike actions have led to the depression of many academic staff of public universities. Many academic staff do not work but stayed idle during strike actions and salaries are not being paid because of the government's "no work, no pay principle." Depression is one of the most common types of mental health conditions which often develops alongside anxiety. Depression can be mild and short-lived or severe and long-lasting. Some people are affected by depression only once, while others may experience it multiple times. According to UNICEF (2020), depression can lead to suicide, but this is preventable when appropriate support is provided. Many academic staff can no longer feed their families, pay school fees and meet up with personal needs due to unpaid salaries as a result of strike actions. This has resulted in situations that can cause depression and frustration.

7. Suspension of research activities

The incessant strike actions in the public universities in Nigeria have led to many lecturers' suspension of their research programmes which is the second most-rated core programme of the universities (Ogunode, 2020; Ogunode & Ndayebom, 2022; Ogunode et al., 2022a; Ogunode et al., 2022b). To Tomori (2022), nothing functions when the universities are on strike. If an international collaborator had an agreement with a scientist doing research in Nigeria, and they fail to deliver results because the university is on strike, it will disrupt the programme or project because research grants have a time limit. The implication is that researchers will not be able to access their laboratories or access their funds and even attend scientific conferences. Equipment that requires constant servicing and maintenance suffers damage in strike situations. Therefore, in an ongoing study, for example, there ought to be samples to be collected from a group but it is not possible given the strike for almost six months. Those are ways that the strikes have been affecting scientists. The students' research work, lecturers' research work, and international conferences and domestic conferences are also suspended during strike actions in Nigerian higher institutions.

Psychological effects of strike actions

According to Murtala et al. (2022), psychological effect in the context of this study means the cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects associated with occupational and social impact stressors on an individual or group. Its effect on the academic staff of public universities, therefore, means the profound and permanent reduction in basic skills and loss of control of emotion, and poor behavioural tendencies of the academic staff of the public universities. Issues of brain drain, low productivity, manpower wastage, backlog of workloads, and suspension of research work would be considered as the psychological effects of strike actions on academic staff of public universities. The process of recovery may take a long struggle to regain physical, cognitive, and social skills back on track depending on the number of days the strike actions took. The resultant effect of strike action by academic staff could be debilitating to executive functions including planning, multi-tasking, flexible thinking, and reorganization. More importantly, negative emotions have increased globally, and so has civil unrest.

The incessant strike actions in Nigeria also have implications on the skills acquired by students across all tiers in the educational sector (Edinyang & Ubi, 2013). There is no doubt that strike actions alter the normal skill acquisition process in the university. Education which is a skill based course requires no disruption in the process in order to guarantee easy transmission of skills. Once there are incessant strike actions, the skill acquisition process will be truncated and as such, students will be poorly prepared for the challenges in the world of work.

Strike actions have implications on academic research. Academic research is an integral aspect of education because of its role in improving the quality of teaching and learning. Once there is incessant strike action, students and researchers may not be motivated to go into academic research. During this period, research students find it difficult to gain access to their supervisors and to even find students to administer research instruments to. These scenarios negatively affect academic research in university system.

Strike actions also have implications on the morale of lecturers. Though strike actions are embarked upon to 'press home' certain demands but when the periods extend longer than necessary, the morale of lecturers may not be that high. Many lecturers may find it difficult to carry out their research work freely because of low morale which is a function of the incessant strike actions. There is no doubt that workers may not find it easy to attend

conferences, workshops or seminars during these periods due to low morale which is resulting from the strike.

Incessant strike actions have implications on the stress level of stakeholders especially lecturers and students. Stress is seen as a constant phenomenon in the life of everybody. Once there is strike, it has a tendency of leading to a shortfall in the expectation of both lecturers and students. In the case of lecturers, their expected salaries will not be paid until the end of the strike. In a similar vein, students' expectations may also suffer setback.

Strategies for addressing psychological effects of strike actions

In the course of this paper, the following strategies have been identified for addressing psychological effects of strike actions

1. Universities management and the Union (ASUU) should make adequate provision of members in the course of the struggle for better welfare.
2. Families and friends should always assist their loved ones.
3. They should be involved in regular medical check-up.
4. They should embrace God in time of bad and good.
5. They should partake in social activities to give them rest of mind.

Implications of strike action on overall development of the Nation

Strike actions which is a fallout of disharmony between employers of labour and employees is no doubt an integral aspect of industrial relations and it has far reaching implications on the implementation of curriculum. The implications of strike are explained in this section.

Once there is strike action, schools are closed down and there will be a temporary stoppage of teaching and learning activities in the concerned schools. This temporary refusal of workers or lecturers to work will in turn result in redesigning new academic calendar in order to make up for the period. In most schools/institutions, this academic calendar is called 'Adjusted academic calendar'. Due to this strike action, students may not be able to complete their academic work within the prescribed period as stated in the prospectus.

Incessant strike actions may not be too healthy for the equipment and facilities used for teaching and learning. It is a well-known fact that education is geared towards skill acquisition; and for one to be proficient in any field of study, there must be an effective and efficient equipment; facilities must not be abandoned but maintained adequately and in line with the guidelines for caring for equipment. Most of the equipment and facilities

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Odim Otu Offem, Emeka Samuel Nnaji, Solomon Agwanyang Aniah, Ogban Nkanu Ogban, Ettah Ettah Omini & Chioma Precious Unamba

begin to wear out or depreciate. Some of these machines need to be cleaned and oiled from time to time to avoid rusting or depreciation.

Conclusion

This paper has the strategies for addressing psychological effects of strike actions on academic staff of Nigerian universities. The paper explains relevant concepts relating to strike actions. Based on the literature reviewed, it is important to conclude that strike actions have effects on Nigerian public universities' academic staff psychologically.

Recommendations

Based on the paper, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Government should devise appropriate motivational strategies to motivate public universities lecturers for greater productivity.
- ii. Government should ensure that all agreements researched with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in public universities are implemented as agreed and signed. This will prevent incessant strike actions in public universities. On the other hand, all parties to collective bargaining should comply with the outcome of the bargaining.
- iii. Government should be pro-active to negotiate with ASUU before commencement/embarking on any form of strike.

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