

Impact of Labour Actions on Work Experience in Nigeria: Assessment of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)

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ABSTRACT

Labour actions have remained a recurring feature of industrial relations in Nigeria's higher education sector, with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) frequently engaging in strikes and other collective actions to press demands related to funding, welfare, and university autonomy. While existing studies have extensively examined the macro-level implications of these actions on academic calendars and national development, limited attention has been paid to their effects on the work experience of academic staff themselves. This study assesses the impact of labour actions on the work experience of university lecturers in Nigeria, using ASUU as a case study. Adopting a mixed-method research design, the study combines quantitative data obtained through structured questionnaires with qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews. A sample of 240 academic staff members was selected from federal universities using stratified random sampling. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency distribution and simple percentage analysis, while qualitative data were examined using direct reported speech to capture lecturers' lived experiences. The findings reveal that labour actions significantly shape academics' work experience by influencing job satisfaction, motivation, workload management, professional development, and psychological well-being. While strikes are perceived as necessary tools for protecting staff interests and improving long-term working conditions, they also generate short-term disruptions, emotional stress, and professional uncertainty. The study concludes that labour actions present a paradoxical effect on work experience simultaneously empowering and destabilizing academic staff. It recommends strengthened dialogue mechanisms, improved government responsiveness, and alternative dispute-resolution frameworks to reduce the frequency and negative consequences of prolonged industrial actions.

KEYWORDS

Labour actions, Work experience, University lecturers, Industrial relations

I. INTRODUCTION

Labour action is an integral part of world industrial relations systems as means of workers' collective expression of grievances, bargaining for better working conditions and safeguarding professional autonomy. Labour actions in the university sector instead often point to larger structural and institutional issues of university systems, such as funding problems, policy conflicts, and divergent power dynamics between the state and academic professionals. In Nigeria, these dynamics have been more marked, with frequent strikes by workers associations in universities affecting not only institutional stability, but also the work lives of individual members.

Since the late 1970s, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has been a leading body in labour movements in Nigeria's university system. ASUU's labour action activities have been mainly directed at issues of poor funding of public universities, erosion of university academic autonomy, failure by government to honour collective bargaining agreements, and poor remuneration. These actions have been deemed as they were meant to protect the integrity of the university system, but have attracted widespread public discussion on the impact on students, institutions and the nation.

Academic labour relations are not just political and economic phenomena, but personal events that influence the work and the lives of academics, their career paths and their professional identities. In this context, work experience refers to the academic views on job security, motivation, workload, research productivity, psychological well-being and feeling of professional fulfilment. It is suggested in contemporary organisational literature that continued disruptions of working routines, like those that strike cause, can have far-reaching impacts on workers' attitudes, performance and commitment.

Chukwuemeka, Alhassan, & Kenchuks, that while labour actions can lead to long-term benefits in working conditions, in the short term it can result in instability of income, missed promotions, interrupted research work and increased stress for workers. In Nigeria, long strikes have been correlated with reduced academic calendar, higher teaching loads on resumption and poor staff – University management relationship. They all constitute a new definition of the work experience for lecturers, sometimes in the sense of solidarity and professional consciousness, at times of fatigue and disillusion.

From a theoretical perspective, the effect of labour action on work experience can be applied to the social exchange theory and conflict theory. According to the social exchange theory, employees will respond to low PORS by taking collective action that will ultimately restore balance in the employment relationship. Conflict theory, in contrast, focuses on the structural inequalities and power dynamics of employer–employee relations, and sees labour action as a logical result of the conflict of interests. These views indicate that labour actions can be a manifestation of dissension and can have an impact on future work experiences.

Although the ASUU's labour actions had a great impact on the education sector in Nigeria, empirical studies have mainly been concerned with the impact of these actions on the students and academic calendar with limited attention on lecturers' subjective experiences. This study is aimed at filling this gap by comprehensively studying the effect of labour actions on the working condition of academic staff in Nigerian universities. The study combines quantitative analysis and qualitative narratives to give a good understanding of the advantages, disadvantages and paradoxes of labour activism in academia.

A. *Research Questions*

- The study was guided by the following research questions:
- What is the perceived impact of labour actions on the work experience of academic staff in Nigerian universities?
- How do labour actions influence academic staff motivation, job satisfaction, and professional commitment?

- What specific dimensions of work experience are most affected by labour actions among ASUU members?

B. Significance of the Study

There are several stakeholders in the higher education sector in Nigeria involved in this study. The results offer empirical data for both academic staff and labour unions to inform internal union strategies and welfare considerations regarding the impact of labour actions on lecturers' work experiences. The study is valuable for university administrators who can gain insights into the unanticipated effects of extended industrial actions on staff morale, productivity and institutional stability. The findings can also help inform the policies and practices of government agencies and policymakers because they show the human and organisational costs of an unresolved labour dispute and the importance of effective, responsive and sustainable industrial relations. The study is of academic interest to the discourse of labour relations and work experience, as it moves beyond macro-level outcomes to the lived experiences of academic workers in a developing-country context.

II. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

The conceptual review examines assessment of the impact of labour actions on work experience in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).

A. Labour Actions in the Nigerian University System

Labour action is a collective action by workers, typically organized by a trade union, to assert a claim, to oppose undesirable conditions, or to obtain a concession from an employer. In Nigeria, the university sector, especially in the university sector has developed the habit of involving the state through labour actions, which in their form of strike action is institutionalized. From a conceptual perspective, labour actions arise from the unmet expectations in employment relationships that remain unresolved over time, particularly in the absence of tools for dialogue or in poor practice of agreements. In industrial relations theory, labour action is defined as a manifestation of conflict between labour and management over the distribution of resources, power and authority.

Labour actions are viewed as a struggle for better wages and welfare in ASUU, but also as a campaign for the integrity, autonomy and funding of public universities. This is what makes academic labour actions different from those in other industries. The structural underfunding of higher education and the loss of negotiated governance systems are argued to be the sources of such activities. Conceptually, frequent industrial action indicates a systemic dysfunction in industrial relations and a shift from episodic to cyclical conflict.

Labour actions also serve a symbolic purpose; as they strengthen the sense of collective identity and professional solidarity among academics. Strikes and protests reinforce common cause and common complaint, and thus can improve the unity of the union. This can, however, become normalised and the disruption of work can become part of the

academic work environment. This implies that labour actions can be both means of resistance and uncertainty, which underlies their multifaceted impact on work experience.

B. Work Experience in Academic Labour

Work experience is the sum of the perceptions, feelings and evaluations of employees that result from their interactions with the work environment in the past. For academics, work experience includes lessons, research, administration, career development, colleagues and mental health. In contrast to the typical working context, the academic environment is marked by a high degree of autonomy, intellectual labour and longer-term career paths, which makes work experience especially sensitive to institutional stability and policy continuity.

The work experience in Universities, as a concept, is influenced by structural and subjective aspects. Structural factors are related to access to funding, workload distribution, promotion criteria and institutional governance, and subjective factors are related to perceived fairness, recognition and professional fulfilment. Labour action occurs in both domains as it disrupts work schedules, changes institutional agendas, and impacts organizational perceptions of support. Repeated strikes cause disruption of the teaching and research cycle, resulting in compressed teaching and research schedules and increased workload when strikes are over, particularly for academic staff. Recent literature highlights that work experience is not a one-off occurrence but an ongoing process, and that further experiences of disruption may cause a long-term impact on academics' attitudes towards the profession and employer. Extended strikes in Nigeria have been associated with reduced job satisfaction, lack of job career clarity, and a lack of sense of belonging. In theory, this accentuates the notion that strikes are not just about a temporary disconnect from work, but about how academics experience and understand their work in the academic system.

C. Motivation, Job Satisfaction, and Collective Action

The role of motivation and job satisfaction in work experiences and its connection to labour actions and employee outcomes are key. Motivation is the internal and external factors that start, steer, and keep up work-related behaviour going, and job satisfaction is the employees' general assessment of their job experiences. As employees feel that agreements are not being met or that they are being disregarded, or that there is inequity, motivation drops, which in some cases can result in the need for collective action as a corrective measure.

In Nigeria's university environment, labour actions are often initiated by low levels of job satisfaction resulting from inadequate remuneration and promotion opportunities, as well as poor working conditions. Collective action, conceptualized as an alternative to exit from the academic profession, is an expression of voice behaviour in which academics try to balance the employment relationship. This is consistent with the social exchange theory that suggests that when treatment is undesirable, workers engage in withdrawal and/or resistance, but when treatment is desirable, workers show commitment and improved performance.

But there are also feedback effects between labour actions and motivation and satisfaction. In the long term, strikes that are successful can help increase satisfaction as they result in better working conditions, but continuous or repeated strikes can cause a decrease in motivation through financial loss, job insecurity and exhaustion. Research shows that teachers are faced with ambivalence in relation to strikes as it is seen as necessary and demoralizing. The conceptual duality is of particular importance because it indicates the paradox of collective action: It brings about dissatisfaction yet it can create new forms of dissatisfaction. In addition, one's motivation for academic studies is closely associated with intrinsic motives like intellectual satisfaction, freedom in research and professional recognition. However, when actions take place that impede the pace of research and international collaboration – even if there is a possible extrinsic reward – then these intrinsic motivators are undermined. This indicates that, in contrast to the economics literature, the effect of labour events on work experience cannot be regarded exclusively as an economic phenomenon, but also as a psychological phenomenon.

D. Psychological and Professional Consequences of Labour Actions

Labour action effects on work experience have been explored as a major theme, with a very significant sub-theme being the psychological and professional implications of labour actions. Prolonged industrial action is known to cause stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and uncertainty, especially in situations where income is interrupted and the duration of the strike is uncertain. The lack of certainty can be a big burden for academics, who see themselves in the continuity of teaching and research.

The effects can be conceptualized through the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model. The model indicates that burnout and less engagement are the result of high job demands but low resources, while adequate resources promote resilience and motivation. Job demands may rise indirectly at times during labour actions as a result of financial pressures and/or workload compression following a strike, while resources like institutional support and research funding become limited. This imbalance has a negative impact on academics' working experience during and after strikes. Labour actions damage career paths, slow down promotions, hamper research projects and reduce scholarly networks as a whole. Early-career academics especially are susceptible, as long strikes can result in delayed doctorates, publications, and promotion. The conceptually added intergenerational dimension of the effects of labour actions, with younger academics facing an unequal career cost, is what makes them interesting. The intergenerational dimension is the conceptually added one, when younger academics face an unequal career cost in comparison to their senior colleagues.

Labour actions can also have positive professional outcomes, increasing collective consciousness and professional autonomy at the same time. In the longer term successful negotiations can result in better funding structures, clearer promotion criteria and better governance arrangements, all of which has a positive impact on work experience. This is to emphasize the temporal nature of the impact of labour action, in that there is an impact on the psychological and professional lives of the people who take part, but also an impact in the long term if the action is successful, to the institutional and occupational level.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-method research design. The population comprised academic staff in federal universities in Nigeria who are members of ASUU. A sample of 240 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency distribution and simple percentages, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic interpretation using direct reported speech. Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality were observed.

A. *Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings*

This section presents the analysis and discussion of data generated from the field survey conducted among academic staff in selected Nigerian public universities. The analysis is structured around the three research questions guiding the study and employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative frequency distribution and qualitative direct reported speech. Relevant empirical and theoretical literature is used to support and contextualize the findings.

B. *What is the nature and frequency of labour actions by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigerian universities?*

Table 1: Respondents' Perception of the Frequency of ASUU Labour Actions

Frequency of Labour Action	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Frequent	102	42.5
Frequent	78	32.5
Occasionally	42	17.5
Rarely	18	7.5
Total	240	100

The data in Table 1 indicate that a substantial majority of respondents perceive ASUU labour actions as frequent. Specifically, 42.5% of respondents reported that strikes and other industrial actions are very frequent, while 32.5% described them as frequent. Combined, this accounts for 75% of the sampled population. Only 7.5% of respondents believe that labour actions are rare, suggesting that industrial unrest has become a recurring feature of the Nigerian university system.

This finding underscores the institutionalization of strikes within the public university sector, largely driven by unresolved issues relating to funding, welfare, autonomy, and implementation of agreements. The regularity of labour actions suggests a breakdown in collective bargaining mechanisms and ineffective conflict resolution frameworks between the government and university unions.

One senior lecturer stated:

"Strike has almost become a normal part of our academic calendar. Every few years, sometimes every year, we down tools because agreements reached with government are rarely honoured."

Another respondent noted:

"We do not enjoy going on strike, but it is the only language the authorities seem to understand."

These statements reflect frustration among academic staff and reinforce the quantitative evidence that labour actions are not sporadic but systemic.

Finding aligns with studies by Akinwale (2021) and Omodia and Bello (2022), who observed that industrial actions by the Academic Staff Union of Universities are largely recurrent due to persistent non-implementation of negotiated agreements. Similarly, Ojo (2020) argues that the Nigerian state's failure to institutionalize effective labour dispute resolution has entrenched strikes as a dominant strategy within the university system.

C. How do ASUU labour actions affect the work experience of academic staff in Nigerian universities?

Table 2: Effect of Labour Actions on Academic Staff Work Experience

Effect on Work Experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Highly Negative	116	48.3
Negative	82	34.2
Neutral	24	10.0
Positive	18	7.5
Total	240	100

Table 2 reveals that labour actions exert a predominantly negative influence on the work experience of academic staff. A combined 82.5% of respondents reported that strikes have either a highly negative (48.3%) or negative (34.2%) effect on their professional lives. Only 7.5% perceived any positive impact, while 10% remained neutral. The negative experiences reported include disruption of teaching schedules, increased workload after strikes, delayed promotions, emotional stress, reduced research productivity, and strained relationships with students. These outcomes suggest that while strikes may be intended to improve conditions, their short- and medium-term effects on academic work experience are largely adverse.

An associate professor remarked:

"After every strike, we rush the semester. There is pressure to cover months of work in weeks, and this affects both teaching quality and our own wellbeing."

Another respondent explained:

"The uncertainty created by strikes makes it difficult to plan research, apply for grants, or even mentor postgraduate students effectively."

These findings are consistent with the work of Adeyemi and Olusegun (2019), who found that prolonged industrial actions significantly reduce job satisfaction and professional

fulfilment among Nigerian academics. Similarly, Nwankwo (2022) argues that repeated work stoppages erode institutional commitment and weaken academic identity. From a work experience perspective, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory suggests that while strikes aim to address hygiene factors such as salary and working conditions, their disruptive nature often undermines intrinsic motivators like achievement and professional growth.

D. What specific aspects of work experience are most affected by ASUU labour actions in Nigerian universities?

Table 3: Aspects of Work Experience Affected by Labour Actions

Work Experience Affected	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teaching Effectiveness	68	28.3
Research Productivity	74	30.8
Career Progression	56	23.3
Job Motivation	42	17.5
Total	240	100

The data in Table 3 show that research productivity (30.8%) and teaching effectiveness (28.3%) are the most affected aspects of work experience during labour actions. Career progression accounts for 23.3%, while job motivation represents 17.5%. These results suggest that labour actions disrupt the core academic functions of teaching and research, which form the foundation of university work.

The decline in research productivity can be attributed to halted laboratory work, suspended field studies, and limited access to institutional resources during strikes. Teaching effectiveness suffers due to compressed academic calendars and reduced student engagement upon resumption.

A lecturer stated:

"Research suffers the most. You lose momentum, funding timelines are missed, and collaborations break down."

Another respondent observed:

"Promotion timelines are affected because publications and teaching evaluations are delayed by repeated strikes."

This finding corroborates earlier studies by Okeke and Eme (2021), who reported that industrial actions significantly undermine research output and instructional quality in Nigerian universities. Likewise, Salami (2020) emphasizes that unstable academic calendars discourage international collaboration and weaken Nigeria's global academic competitiveness. From a systems perspective, recurrent labour actions create cumulative damage to academic work experience, even when eventual agreements improve material conditions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Labour actions affect the academic staff of Nigerian universities, as many lecturers believe that the frequent labour actions in the universities create great disruptions in the university's teaching, research and career development. It also confirmed that long-term strikes have a detrimental impact on the morale, job satisfaction and motivation of academic staff members, as they can lead to uncertainty, financial difficulties and loss of morale. The study also indicates that the work experience dimensions that have most impact are research productivity, instructional effectiveness, career development, workload management, and psychological well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this study are presented in direct alignment with the research questions and empirical findings on the impact of labour actions by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) on work experience in Nigerian universities.

- Agreements reached through negotiations should be backed by legal and financial guarantees to prevent repeated breaches that often trigger strikes. Regular biannual review meetings involving government representatives, university management, and union leaders should be mandated to assess the implementation status of existing agreements and address emerging grievances before they escalate into industrial action
- University management should implement structured academic recovery plans immediately after strike actions, including adjusted teaching schedules, mental health and workload support, and flexible research timelines.
- Government agencies responsible for tertiary education funding should also introduce special intervention grants to cushion the effects of prolonged work disruptions on research output and staff morale. Institutional policies should be designed to protect academic staff from career stagnation caused by strike-induced delays in promotions and evaluations.

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