

The impact of academic strike actions on students' mental health in Nigeria: a case study

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Abstract

The comprehensive study explores the complex dynamics of Nigerian higher education, where the government's control over public universities collides with the ongoing problem of regular strikes, particularly those led by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). These institutions, founded on a multidimensional mission, aim to develop values, elevate intellectual capacities, and prepare students for societal contributions. However, the threat of strikes, which has occurred sixteen times since 1999, has cast a long shadow over academic stability, institutional excellence, and, most importantly, student mental health. The study, which examines global trends, indicates an increase in university staff strikes globally, driven by concerns about compensation, working conditions, and a perceived priority of profit above academic missions. The Nigerian institutions reveal a historical tapestry of strikes, attributing them to a variety of causes, such as political tensions and dissatisfaction with working conditions. The influence on students' mental health emerges as a key worry, highlighting increased stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. To navigate these disruptions and foster a resilient and student-centered university environment globally, the study advocates for proactive measures such as transparent communication, robust conflict resolution mechanisms, enhanced mental health support, contingency plans, and increased student representation. Finally, the findings emphasize the importance of resolving fundamental concerns in order to nurture a harmonious academic scene in Nigeria and abroad.

Keywords: academic strikes, mental health, Nigeria, higher education, university governance, student support services.

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Introduction

In the fast-paced world of Nigerian higher education, the government takes control of public colleges, reshaping the educational landscape with significant intent. According to Ogunode, these schools were envisioned not only as academic citadels but also as institutions for the post-secondary enlightenment of the Nigerian citizen ¹. Embracing a diverse mission, these universities aim to foster values critical for individual and societal survival, elevate intellectual capacities to grasp the complexities of our surroundings, and provide students with the skills necessary to be proactive contributors to society ². The aspiration to promote an in-depth grasp of both local and global ideas is woven into the framework of objectives. However, in the middle of these lofty goals, Nigerian public institutions face a formidable foe: the threat of

frequent strikes, a threat that hangs large over the pursuit of academic excellence and institutional stability ^{3,4}.

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, there have been sixteen strikes by the lecturers' union. These strikes have closed public universities' academic programs for a total of twenty-three years, or long enough to finish a four-year degree program. Some strikes have lasted only a few weeks, while others have lasted for several months ⁵. Many parents, stakeholders, and students at public colleges around the nation have expressed worry about the frequent and protracted labor actions by ASUU. The impacts of strike activities on Nigerian higher education institutions are numerous and complicated. The Nigerian higher education system is facing several challenges as a

result of the strike actions, including an unstable academic program ⁶.

The effects of academic strikes on students' mental health are not well studied. While the impact of the strike on academic performance has been extensively studied, the impact on the mental well-being of students is not as widely acknowledged. The ASUU strike exacerbates the anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that are prevalent among college students. The strike's isolation has a detrimental effect on students' mental health. Acting immediately is essential to preventing the ASUU strike from negatively impacting students' mental health ⁷. The study aims to discuss the impact of the academic strike actions on students' mental health in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study adopts a literature review design to comprehensively examine the impact of academic strike actions on students' mental health in Nigerian higher education. Utilizing academic databases, reputable websites, news websites, and journals, our systematic search strategy incorporated keywords such as "academic strikes," "students' mental health," and "Nigerian higher education." The inclusion criteria focused on recent and relevant publications, ensuring a broad perspective on the topic. Data extraction involved compiling key findings, trends, and statistics related to the consequences of academic strikes on students' psychological well-being.

The current situation of academic strike actions in World

In recent years, there has been an increase in university staff strikes, driven by concerns such as inadequate pay, pensions, working conditions, and a perceived prioritization of profit over the core academic mission of research, teaching, and service ⁸. The year 2022 witnessed an unprecedented surge in academic worker strikes in the US, with 15 instances being recorded—the highest in at least two decades. Notably, this included a prolonged University of California system strike involving 48,000 graduate student workers, lasting nearly six weeks ⁹. In 2023, the US saw a 17-year high in union work stoppages, according to Bloomberg Law's work stoppage database, with several university faculty unions either striking or threatening to do so before reaching agreements with their respective institutions ¹⁰. Similar strikes have also occurred in the UK. The initial strike, commencing in February 2018, escalated over fourteen days between February 22 and March 20, affecting sixty-four universities. Approximately 42,000 staff members participated, resulting in the loss of 575,000 teaching

hours. By late March, over one million students were estimated to have been impacted ¹¹.

Countries such as France and the UK have experienced a high incidence of strikes among European nations, although there has been a noticeable decline in working days lost due to strikes in these countries ¹². However, there's a concerning global trend of an increasing violation of the right to strike. According to the ITUC Global Rights Index, countries infringing upon this fundamental right have risen from 63% in 2014 to a staggering 87% in 2023. Workers exercising their right to strike often face severe consequences, such as criminal prosecution and summary dismissals. A stark example occurred in Trinidad and Tobago, where the government employed an ex parte injunction from the Industrial Court to block a teachers' strike ^{13,14}.

In addition to these trends, it is crucial to acknowledge the impact of these strikes on the mental health of students. Prolonged disruptions to regular academic activities can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and uncertainty among the student body ¹⁵. The uncertainty surrounding course completion, exam schedules, and academic progress can contribute to a challenging and potentially detrimental educational environment ¹⁶.

The current situation of academic strike actions in Nigeria

The present situation of academic strike activities in Nigeria exposes persistent challenges in tertiary education institutions, particularly due to periodic closures caused by strikes led by the ASUU and its non-academic counterparts. These closures have created unfavorable conditions for students, encouraging fraud, malpractices, and other misconduct in society ^{8,17}. The origins of strikes in Nigeria may be traced back to 1980, with data indicating that Nigerian lecturers have gone on strike 16 times since 1999, totaling over 50 months ¹⁸. These have negatively impacted learning performance, interrupted programs, and disrupted lecturer-student ties. The ASUU's frequent and continuous strike activities in Nigeria have become a worrisome and recurring issue, with barely any academic session remaining unaffected ¹⁹. ASUU strikes were initiated as a means of communicating complaints about the government's failure to implement agreements and policies related to university education administration. However, the current academic strike situation in Nigeria is complex, with multiple factors contributing to the recurring interruptions at universities and other educational institutions ¹³. These causes include employers' unfair treatment of workers, workers' perceived victimization, violations of legislation or rules,

poor application of collective bargaining, dissatisfaction with institution policies, wrongful discharge or dismissal, withdrawal of concessions, disputes over minimum wages, political conflicts, poor and inconsistent salary payments, and inadequate working conditions ²⁰.

The cumulative effect of these concerns has resulted in periodic strikes, which have hampered academic activity, demotivated students and staff, and negatively affected the country's overall educational quality ^{18,21}.

Table 1: Trends of academic strike actions between the Academic Staff Union of Universities and the Nigerian Federal Government from 1999 to 2022.

Year of strikes	Reasons	Duration of strikes
1999 ²²	Failure of agreements between academic staffs and federal government to improve working conditions in institutions in Nigeria	5 months
2001 ²³	Reinstatement of forty-nine lecturers dismissed from the University of Ilorin.	3 months
2002 ²⁴	Failure of the President Obasanjo government to carry out a deal it struck during the previous strike with the academic staff.	2 weeks
2003 ²²	Lack of implementation of prior agreements addressing inadequate university funding, salary inequality, and retirement age.	6 months
2005	Not available	2 weeks
2006	Not available	1 week
2007	Not available	3 months
2008 ²⁵	The issue of the 49 lecturers at the University of Ilorin being reinstated was raised once more, and improvement of the salary scheme	1 week
2009 ²⁶	Signing of "FG/ASUU 2009 Memorandum of Action" agreement	4 months
2010-2011 ²⁷	Lack of implementation of the 2009 "Memorandum of Action" by the Federal Government	5 months
2011-2012 ²⁸	Failure of the Federal Government to execute the 70-year retirement age restriction for university faculty members and appropriately support universities in the nation.	1 month and 29 days
2013 ²⁹	Failure of the government to review the professors' retirement age from 65 to 70, provide funding to revive the university system, and increase the financial allocations to the education sector by 26%.	5 months and 15 days
2017 ³⁰	Regarding controversial and unresolved problems with the Federal Government.	August 17 to September
2018-2019 ³¹	Inactions of the Federal Government over contemporary issues.	3 months
2020 ³²	Inability of the Federal government to carry out the union's 2019 agreement and resolution	9 months
2022 ³³	Enhancement of the welfare of academics and institutions, as well as payment of several owed earned allowances	8 months

Impacts of the strike on students' mental health

The impact of university staff strikes on students' mental health has been a topic of concern for many years. Several studies have been conducted to examine the psychological reactions of students to faculty strikes. A study conducted at a large Canadian university found that students' anxiety increased when their plans were affected by the strike ^{34,35}. The current marking boycott affecting 145 universities in the UK was reported to have a negative impact on students' mental health. Campus strikes can affect classes, academic achievement, and campus operations, which can lead to educational chaos while on the student path, resulting in frustration, low self-esteem, withdrawn actions, violence, illicit conduct, and poor self-image. All these have a profound negative effect on students' mental health ^{36,37}.

University staff strikes can cause significant mental health problems for students. The uncertainty about whether classes will continue, when assignments will be due, and when exams will be held can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety. Students may be worried about falling behind in their studies and not being able to complete their degrees on time ^{38,39}. This stress can manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches, as well as psychological symptoms such as restlessness, irritability, and even panic attacks. It can also make it difficult for students to focus on their studies, which can lead to further academic problems ^{40,41}.

Moreover, strikes can also lead to academic concerns for students. When they don't know what material will be covered in class or how they will be assessed, they may start to doubt their ability to succeed. This self-doubt can extend beyond the strike itself and affect their long-term educational and career goals. Some students may seek additional academic support or counseling during this time to help them deal with their uncertainties ⁴². Also, financial strain is another major concern for students during strikes. Strikes can lead to unexpected expenses, such as the need to pay for extra housing or transportation. Students who are on a tight budget may have to make difficult choices about how to allocate their resources. This financial uncertainty can add to their stress and anxiety levels ^{8,13}.

Strikes can also disrupt the social fabric of university life. Students may feel isolated and detached from their classmates and professors when they don't have access to regular classes and support services. The disruption of their routine can also lead to feelings of aimlessness and lack of structure. This can make it even more difficult for students to cope with the stress and anxiety caused by the strike ⁸. Prolonged strikes can have a lasting impact on students' mental health. Chronic exposure to stress can lead to persistent anxiety, depression, and other mental

health problems. Students who have experienced a long strike may have difficulty managing their daily lives and may need extended mental health services ⁴³. In conclusion, university staff strikes can have a significant negative impact on students' mental health. Universities need to provide robust support systems and resources for students during these challenging periods ^{43,44}.

Proposed Solutions

It is imperative to establish robust communication channels between universities, academic staff, and students. Transparent and timely updates regarding any potential strikes or disruptions should be disseminated through various channels, including email, social media, and dedicated platforms ⁴⁵. Additionally, there is a pressing need for the implementation of effective conflict resolution mechanisms within universities. This could involve the establishment of mediation or arbitration processes to swiftly address disputes between academic staff and administration, fostering an environment of open dialogue and mutual understanding ⁴⁶.

In tandem with improved communication and conflict resolution, universities must bolster their student support services, particularly in the realm of mental health. Allocating resources to enhance counseling services and mental health support on campus will be instrumental in mitigating the adverse effects of strikes on students' well-being ⁴⁷. Furthermore, the development of contingency plans for alternative learning arrangements is essential. This could encompass strategies like online courses, guest lectures, or collaborative projects, providing students with opportunities to continue their academic pursuits even in the midst of strike-related disruptions ⁴⁸.

Advocating for increased student representation in university governance and decision-making processes is paramount. This ensures that the voices and concerns of students are not only heard but actively taken into account in shaping policies and procedures. Lastly, addressing the foundational issues that lead to strikes is crucial for sustainable change. This involves negotiations, policy adjustments, and collaborative efforts between stakeholders to ensure fair compensation and improved working conditions for academic staff ⁴⁵.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has clarified on the profound impact of academic staff strikes on students' mental health. The findings underscore the critical need for proactive measures to safeguard the well-being and academic progress of students during such disruptions. The implications of this research are far-reaching, calling for a concerted effort from universities, academic staff, and administrative bodies. It is incumbent upon these stakeholders to implement the recommended strategies

outlined in the "Way Forward" section. As we move forward, it is imperative that communication remain a cornerstone of university operations, with transparency and timely updates serving as linchpins in maintaining a sense of stability for students. The establishment of effective conflict resolution mechanisms and bolstered mental health support services are essential components of a resilient and student-centered university environment. Moreover, the inclusion of students in decision-making processes and the resolution of underlying issues leading to strikes are pivotal steps toward a more harmonious academic landscape.

Highlights

What Is Already Known?

It is well-documented that academic strikes in Nigerian universities, particularly those led by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), have caused significant disruptions to academic programs and performance. Existing literature primarily focuses on the direct effects of these strikes on academic progress, including delays in graduations and interruptions in learning. However, detailed research specifically addressing the impact of these strikes on students' mental health has been limited.

What Does This Study Add?

This study adds to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of the psychological repercussions of academic strikes in Nigerian universities. It highlights increased levels of stress, anxiety, and financial strain experienced by students during such disruptions. By contextualizing these effects within the Nigerian educational landscape, the study offers information on the mental health challenges faced by students. Additionally, it proposes practical solutions to mitigate these impacts, including improved communication, enhanced mental health support services, and better conflict resolution mechanisms, aiming to foster a more supportive and resilient academic environment.

Ethnic approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and material

Not applicable

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

Research conceptualization and design: ROA; Methodology: ROA, DOE; Data acquisition: ROA, DOE, ROA and OJO; Draft manuscript preparation and revision: ROA, DOE, and OJO. All the authors read and approved the final draft before submission.

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