



**Conflict Management and Performance of Academic Staff Union of Universities
(ASUU)**

Chidi E. Nwokike¹; Gladys Unoma Ndu-Anunobi² Nwosu, Ifeoma Chidimma³

1. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University
Igbariam Campus- Anambra State-Nigeria
Department of Public Administration
nwokikechidi@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3991-3379

2 & 3 Department of Public Administration
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Anambra state-Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study examined the unresolved conflicts between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the government, which have led to frequent strikes and disruptions in the education sector. The research reviewed relevant literature on conflict management, industrial conflict, and employee performance to provide a theoretical framework for the study. Empirical studies on conflict management and organizational effectiveness in Nigeria were also reviewed. The study adopted the conflict theory, which emphasized the role of power dynamics and resource distribution in perpetuating conflicts. The study found that the Nigerian government's failure to address grievances promptly has led to conflicts and strikes by academic staff. These conflicts have resulted in disruptions to the academic calendar, delayed graduations, and a decline in the quality of education. Employee performance in universities is crucial for productivity and organizational success. Factors such as pay dissatisfaction, excessive workload, and unfavorable working conditions can negatively affect performance. The researchers recommended that effective communication, engagement, and regular payment of salaries and benefits are important for motivating academic staff and improving their performance.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict management, Performance, Employee performance

INTRODUCTION

Universities were established in Nigeria to provide accessible and affordable learning opportunities and advance research in both formal and informal education, with the aim of meeting the needs and interests of all Nigerians (Otonko, 2012). Universities around the

world have created a conducive working environment that fosters creativity and research. While lecturers work hard to impart high-quality skills to their students, it is the government's responsibility to provide sufficient financial resources, facilities, and security. However, the relationship between the government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigeria has been marked by conflicting responses. ASUU issued a directive in June 2009 instructing its members in Federal and State Universities across the country to go on an indefinite strike due to the government's failure to implement previous agreements. Following over three months of strike action, ASUU and other staff unions reached a Memorandum of Understanding with the government in October 2009. Nonetheless, when the Federal Government breached the 2009 agreement, ASUU began a new strike on July 1, 2013, demanding, among other things, the reinstatement of credible universities in Nigeria and a pay rise for university lecturers.

In 2020, ASUU went on a nine-month-long nationwide strike that sparked concerns among stakeholders in the education sector. The strike caused anxiety, frustration, anger, and uneasiness among parents, students, civil society, politicians, clergy, traditional rulers, businessmen, businesswomen, groups, and civil servants. Many were concerned about ASUU's insensitivity to the plight of students and parents, despite the Federal Government's offer. Unknown to them, the government had been brainwashing the public with its political propaganda while concealing its breach of the 2009 agreements. This unresolved conflict has contributed to the creation of an unsuitable teaching environment in universities, with strikes being the only option. In the end, the Federal Government did not act on the 2009 agreement, but instead renegotiated with ASUU on how best to resolve the issues, and the strike was suspended in December 2020.

Researchers have noted that the continuous conflicts in Nigerian universities are due to the government's inaction in addressing grievances promptly, which allows the issues to escalate to an uncontrollable and complex stage, leading to strikes (Ogbette et al., 2017). Osabiya (2015) observed that the Nigerian government's competing approach to conflict management has hampered the development of Nigerian universities. This approach prioritizes the government's interests before those of the workers, causing workers to respond sharply to protect their rights using any means necessary. This poor conflict management strategy adopted by the government will impact the effectiveness of workers in Nigerian universities. (Egwu, 2020). The effects of the government's inaction and poor conflict management strategies on lecturers' performance and the quality of research have not been properly examined by researchers.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study on conflict management and performance of ASUU relied on secondary data from existing research. This means that the study examines existing data and literature such as academic journals, books, conference papers, government reports, and online databases with focus on the conflicts between ASUU and the government, as well as the impact of these conflicts on the performance of academic staff. The study's desk research approach allows for a comprehensive overview of the existing research on this topic, identifying patterns and themes that can inform strategies for managing conflicts and improving performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Conceptualization of Conflict

Conflict is an inherent and unavoidable aspect of human existence as people often have incompatible goals and needs. In the event of unattended needs, conflicts may arise between individuals, groups, or states whose interests are either compatible or incompatible. It can manifest as a physical struggle or an ideological clash between conflicting concepts. John Burton's Human Needs Approach emphasizes that the pursuit of certain fundamental and universal needs is critical for human well-being, and incompatible socialization processes can lead to frustration and anti-social behavior. Dana (2000) argues that unmanaged conflict can have severe repercussions in various industries, including healthcare, where it can cause waste of time, bad decisions, and even loss of life. Awan and Anjum (2015) suggest that while conflict is a natural occurrence in any collaborative setting, it should be managed to ensure that it does not disrupt the organization's activities. According to Shapiro (2006), conflict is a social interaction process that revolves around the struggle for resources, power, beliefs, status, preferences, and desires. Robbins and Sanghi (2005) also contend that conflict arises when one party perceives that another party is negatively affecting or is about to negatively affect something they care about

Industrial Conflict

According to Yusuf (2020), industrial conflict is a disagreement that arises between an employer and employee representative, while Chukwuemeka et al., (2012) defines it as a crisis or difference of opinion between management and workers on the terms of employment. It is important to note that industrial conflict can also involve differences of opinions among workers, as Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) highlight that it occurs when employees express dissatisfaction with management over the state of their employment relations. In universities, conflicts may arise due to various reasons such as differences in performances, reward systems, sharing of earned academic allowances (EAA), appointment of Vice Chancellors, and poor leadership style. Effective conflict resolution, according to Uchendu et al., (2013), requires prioritizing the quality of relationships by focusing on the problems at hand through active listening and empathy towards others' needs. It is also important to pay attention to the interests of the parties concerned and not just their positions. To achieve effective conflict resolution, Rothman (2014), suggest several measures, such as respecting confidentiality, providing alternative options, managing bias, and ensuring independence in decision-making. Conflict management practitioners should remain impartial and free from any potential conflict of interest to participate effectively in the resolution process.

Employee Performance

In their study, Mitalo et al., (2018) provided a definition of employee performance that encompasses both how employees behave at work and how effectively they carry out their assigned duties. To meet the goals of delivering high value to customers, reducing waste, and running the organization efficiently, performance targets are frequently set for individual employees as well as the company as a whole. For example, a salesperson may be required to make a certain number of calls to potential clients each hour, with a predetermined percentage of those calls resulting in closed sales. On the other hand, a production worker may be held to performance standards for productivity per hour and product quality. As the authors noted, employees play a vital role in an organization's productivity and performance. Dissatisfaction with pay can lead to decreased performance, higher absence rates, and higher employee turnover rates. Similarly, Salem et al., (2017) emphasized the importance of performance evaluation, defining it as the degree to which objectives are achieved by both the organization and its workers. They also highlighted the

impact of various factors on employee performance, such as low rewards, excessive workload, unfavorable working conditions, lack of resources, socioeconomic background, societal respect, reputation, mental health, moral values, family responsibilities, distance from work, exam stress, political interference, student power, and discriminatory behavior. Additionally, they noted that employment security, hiring the right people, team effectiveness, compensation for organizational performance, retraining, commitment, and sharing of information are all factors that should be considered in evaluating performance.

Rabindra and Lalatend (2017) expanded on the multifaceted nature of performance, dividing it into two components: the behavioral interactions involved in the process, and the desired outcome. They defined behavior as the actions taken by individuals to complete a task, while outcome refers to the impact of an individual's work engagement. Performance thus consists of clear task behaviors that are assigned as part of job requirements, with task awareness, competence, and habits being the key factors that facilitate task performance. Greater cognitive ability is required for successful task performance, with task capacity and prior experience serving as the main predictors.

Empirical Reviews

Numerous scholarly works have explored the topics of conflict management and organizational effectiveness in both Nigeria and the Western world. For instance, Ogbette et al., (2017) investigated the causes, effects, and management of the strikes by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in Nigerian universities from 2003 to 2013. The study revealed that the ASUU-government labor disputes were largely due to class struggle and encompassed both political and economic issues. Internal factors, such as low pay, inadequate working conditions, unstable funding, and insufficient institutional autonomy, along with external factors, particularly Nigeria's macroeconomic policies, also contributed to the conflicts. Similarly, Onoyase (2017) explored the issue of motivation and job performance among lecturers in Nigerian tertiary institutions, and its implications for counseling. The study used three hypotheses to guide its investigation, and the results indicated that there was a significant relationship between lecturers' incentives and pay and how well they performed their jobs. The study also recommended that academic staff receive regular payment of their salaries and benefits to motivate them to perform better. Lecturers should also be promoted when necessary to improve their performance.

Agbionu et al. (2018) conducted research investigating the relationship between employee engagement and lecturer performance in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. By utilizing descriptive and correlational research methodologies, the researchers uncovered a significant positive association between employer reciprocity and the research output of lecturers. As a result, the study proposed a recommendation for Nigerian tertiary institutions' management to promote engagement by offering ample training opportunities to academic staff, thereby enhancing their organizational visibility and reputation. Chukwudi and Idowu (2021) conducted a research on the implications of ASUU strikes on students and society in a changing world, using content analysis method. The study found that the ASUU strikes are mainly intended to protect the welfare of its members and to respond quickly to any perceived unfriendly actions by the government. It further revealed that the government's inability to provide adequate funding and establish an appropriate legal environment for ASUU negotiations and regulation had a significant impact on students and society. Sabo et al., (2019) conducted a study on the historical evidence of academic staff salaries and academic union struggles in Nigeria, using content analytical method. The study found that prior to 1978, the National Association of University Teachers, which later became ASUU, was the most inactive labor union in Nigeria. However, the union's position changed in the 1970s

when inflation reduced the purchasing power of all workers. The union's first strike in 1973 was to discuss salary increases. The study concluded that ASUU's militancy resulted from the union's recognition of the need to address the inadequacies in Nigeria's education sector.

Adomi and Anie conducted a study in 2006 to investigate the Conflict Management Patterns in Nigerian libraries. They employed a descriptive research approach and administered questionnaires to gather data from both professional and para-professional staff members working in the libraries of three Nigerian universities. The study revealed that interpersonal conflicts are the most common type of conflict in Nigerian libraries, and accommodation is the most preferred technique for conflict avoidance. Osimore and Abidoun (2014) explored the causes, effects, and remedies of organizational conflict in their work on *Organizational Conflict: Cause, Effect, and Remedies*. The researchers examined the various effects of conflicts in organizations and between nations, including behavioral, psychological, and physiological responses. The study revealed that conflict often arises in organizations due to competition for leadership, scarce resources, and leadership styles. In their study on the *Role of Effective Communication on Organizational Performance in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*, Nebo et al. (2015) employed a survey research method to investigate the disputes and delays in accessing information that could improve staff performance. The study population consisted of 170 non-academic and 130 academic staff, and a sample size of 166 was selected using Taro Yamane formula. The researchers used chi-square to analyze the hypotheses, and the findings revealed that effective communication is critical to effective and efficient management performance of employees in an organization.

Ekwoaba et al. (2015) conducted a study at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, focusing on conflict management strategies. The researchers assessed the efficacy of collective bargaining in handling conflicts within educational institutions. The data collection process involved questionnaires, interviews, and literature searches, with analysis performed using descriptive statistics, frequencies, and simple percentages via SPSS. The study found that effective collective bargaining positively impacted productivity, established procedures existed for conflict resolution in universities, and collective bargaining was an effective instrument for managing conflicts in universities.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Theory

According to Karl Marx's Conflict Theory, perpetual conflict arises in society due to the competition for scarce resources. Conflict theory posits that social order is not maintained through consensus and conformity, but rather through domination and power. Marx argued that the struggle between social classes, particularly between the capitalists and workers, defines economic relations in a capitalist economy and inevitably leads to revolutionary communism. This means that the wealthy and powerful will do whatever it takes to maintain their position, including oppressing the weak and helpless. Conflict theory suggests that individuals will compete with each other for wealth and influence, creating an ongoing conflict between the rich and the poor. The relevance of conflict theory to the issue at hand is that it acknowledges the role of oppression in the struggle to achieve a signed memorandum of understanding between ASUU and representatives of the Federal Government of Nigeria, leading to lingering strikes since 2009. Inconsistencies in resources between those who have power or resources and those who do not have them have led to agitation for salary increases, particularly among lecturers in federal universities in the South East. While professors are paid meager salaries, their wages are stagnated at a certain level, indicating a need for social transformation. If resource control is left solely to political groups, society's competition for finite resources will continue to generate conflicts that escalate unless such anomalies are corrected. Social order is preserved through domination and power, not consensus and

conformity. When existing structures favor one group over others and put them at a disadvantage, the chances are high that conflict will emerge and escalate (Scarborough, 1998).

The Nexus between Conflict Management and Performance of Academic Staff of Universities

Conflict management is a critical aspect of organizational performance, and Nigerian universities are not an exception. Academic staff in Nigerian universities experience various forms of conflicts ranging from conflicts with colleagues, superiors, subordinates, students, and other stakeholders. Conflict, if not well managed, can result in a decline in the productivity and morale of academic staff, leading to poor performance and low academic standards.

According to Chukwudi and Idowu's (2021) study, Nigerian universities' academic staff faces a daunting challenge that significantly affects their performance - the recurring occurrence of strike actions by university lecturers. The primary cause of these strikes is the ongoing dispute between academic staff and the government regarding various issues, including salaries, allowances, and the funding of universities. Consequently, universities affected by these strikes suffer from numerous adverse effects, such as a disrupted academic calendar, delayed graduation of students, and a general decline in the quality of education. As highlighted by Chukwudi and Idowu (2021), the government's inability to provide adequate funding and establish an appropriate legal environment for ASUU negotiations and regulation has a considerable impact on students and society. When university lecturers go on strike, the academic calendar is often disrupted, and students are forced to stay at home for extended periods. This disruption causes significant setbacks in their academic progress, resulting in delayed graduations and prolonged academic programs. The resulting backlog can significantly impact the quality of education, leading to frustration, anxiety, and a lack of motivation among students. Furthermore, the frequent strikes can also result in a decline in the quality of education offered by the affected universities. The disruptions can also lead to the loss of skilled personnel, as some academics may leave the University for More Stable Work Environments, resulting in a decline in the quality of education offered by the institution.

Over the years, the relationships between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria has been marked by a plethora of disagreements, where effective communication has emerged as a pivotal factor contributing to these contentions. Communication breakdowns between the two parties have often resulted in strikes and other forms of industrial action, leading to disruptions in the country's education system. One of the primary communication issues between ASUU and the Federal Government has been the lack of regular and constructive dialogue. According to Nebo et al., (2015), their research revealed the crucial role of effective communication in enhancing the performance and efficiency of employee management within organizations. ASUU has accused the government of not engaging with them on critical issues affecting the education sector, such as funding and infrastructure development. The union has also expressed frustration at the government's perceived lack of responsiveness to its demands, which has often led to prolonged strikes and disruptions in the academic calendar. Olu and Abolade (2013) recommended that the implementation of effective conflict management can improve the performance of employees within an organization while in Osimore and Abidoun (2014) research, it was discovered that inadequately managed conflict can result in decreased productivity or service delivery.

Inadequate infrastructure is a major issue that affects the performance of academic staff in Nigerian universities. Chukwuemeka and Ugwu (2012) agreed that insufficient funding and leadership style are contributory factors to organizational performance. The lack of proper research facilities, classrooms, and libraries can significantly impact the quality of research and teaching, and hinder the ability of academic staff to meet their targets. Research facilities, such as laboratories and equipment, are critical for conducting cutting-edge research and advancing knowledge. Similarly, classrooms that are well-equipped with modern teaching aids can enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, libraries provide a wealth of knowledge and resources for both teaching and research, making them an essential part of any academic institution. Unfortunately, the lack of adequate infrastructure in Nigerian universities has been a longstanding issue. Many institutions struggle with dilapidated buildings, outdated equipment, and insufficient resources to maintain these facilities.

According to Ogbette, Eke, and Ori (2017), the government has delayed paying the extended wage structure that was agreed upon between the ASUU and the government since 2009. The aforementioned factors have mostly stayed at the center of ASUU demand and the root of ASUU crises since 2003. They added that the government had broken its 2013 promise to invest 1.3 trillion over six years on reviving universities. The government was supposed to provide N200 billion the first year, which it did, but it took a while for the union to get access to it. However, But no further release have been issued following the released in 2013. For 2014, N220 billion was not made available. Similar to 2015 and 2016, there was no release until the third quarter of 2017. In total, it's possible to estimate that N825 billion is still owed for the revitalization of universities, and that in the previous two years, between 6 and 7 percent of the budget was allocated to education. Ogbette, Eke, and Ori (2017) argued that some of the issues affecting performance in Nigerian universities include the erosion of university autonomy and academic freedom, poor remuneration structure and conditions of service, underfunding of universities, and poor physical conditions of work in the universities.

Take Home Salaries: (CONUASS) For Nigerian Federal University Lecturers:

Position	Grade Level	Salary (N)
Professor	GL 07	416,743.37
Reader	GL 06	276,452.00
Senior Lecturer	GL 05	229,902.05
Lecturer I	GL 04	177,029.55
Lecturer II	GL 03	133,129.79
Asst. Lecturer	GL 02	121,180.31
Graduate Lecturer	GL 01	109,009.19

Source: ASUU Platform Release February 21, 2022

In the table above, Professors are at Grade Level 07 and receive a take-home salary of N416, 743.37. Readers are at Grade Level 06 and have a take-home salary of N276, 452.00. Also, Senior Lecturers are at Grade Level 05 and receive a take-home salary of N229, 902.05. Lecturer I positions are at Grade Level 04, and the take-home salary is N177, 029.55. Lecturer II positions are at Grade Level 03, with a take-home salary of N133, 129.79. Assistant Lecturers are at Grade Level 02 and receive a take-home salary of N121, 180.31. Finally, Graduate Lecturers are at Grade Level 01, and their take-home salary is N109, 009.19. The salary structure for university lecturers in Nigeria is often governed by various factors, including rank, years of experience, qualification, and the existing collective bargaining agreement between the government and the academic staff union. These figures reflect the salary levels as of February 2022 and may be subject to change in the future due to economic factors, negotiations, or policy adjustments. It is worth mentioning that salary structures and compensation packages can vary across different countries and institutions. The figures provided here specifically pertain to Nigerian federal university lecturers and should not be generalized to other countries or institutions.

Political interference in Nigerian universities has been a persistent issue that has had a significant impact on the performance of academic staff. It is not uncommon for politicians to get involved in the recruitment process, promotion, and award of research grants in universities, which often results in appointments that are not merit-based and a decline in research output. This interference is usually motivated by political gain and not by the need to improve the quality of education in the country. One of the most significant effects of political interference in Nigerian universities is the promotion of lecturers without following due process. This means that lecturers who do not meet the required standards are promoted to higher positions, leading to a reduction in the quality of education offered. This practice not only affects the morale of hardworking academic staff who have earned their promotions through merit but also negatively impacts the quality of education provided to students. Furthermore, political interference in the award of research grants often means that funding is not given to the most deserving projects or researchers. This has resulted in a lack of funding for research that could potentially lead to significant discoveries or solutions to pressing issues in the country. As a result, the research output of Nigerian universities has been reduced, and the country's development has been hindered.

In Nigerian universities, the poor reward system is a significant source of conflict that affects the academic environment, student learning, and institutional growth. The current reward system in Nigerian universities often fails to provide adequate incentives and recognition for academic excellence, which leads to low morale and motivation among academic staff members. Nigerian universities pay their academic staff poorly compared to their counterparts in other countries, and this has resulted in a massive brain drain of Nigerian academics seeking greener pastures abroad. The meager pay scale makes it difficult for Nigerian universities to attract and retain top talent, leading to a shortage of skilled and experienced staff. As a result, universities are forced to rely on junior and inexperienced personnel, which affect the quality of education and research. The study conducted by Onoyase (2017) revealed a noteworthy correlation between the incentives and pay received by lecturers and their job performance. The findings indicate that the provision of incentives and adequate compensation to lecturers is associated with an improved quality of their work. Moreover, the current reward system often fails to provide recognition and promotion opportunities for academic excellence. The promotion criteria for faculty members in Nigerian universities are opaque and based on arbitrary criteria rather than merit. The process

of promotion is often politicized, and it is not uncommon for promotions to be awarded based on personal connections or political affiliations rather than academic achievement. This breeds resentment and mistrust among faculty members, leading to a lack of collaboration and teamwork.

CONCLUSION

The performance of academic staff in Nigerian universities is hindered by several challenges, including frequent strikes, nepotism and favoritism, inadequate infrastructure, and political interference. The persistent occurrence of strike actions disrupts academic calendars, delays graduation of students, and results in a decline in the quality of education. Nepotism and favoritism in academic appointments lead to resentment among academic staff, a decline in the quality of teaching and research, and negatively impact the university's ability to attract and retain top talent. Inadequate infrastructure hinders the ability of academic staff to carry out research, prepare lectures, and access the materials they need to support their work. Political interference leads to the promotion of unqualified lecturers and the award of research grants not based on merit, negatively impacting the quality of education provided and hindering the country's development. Addressing these challenges is essential to improve the quality of education provided by Nigerian universities and advance the country's development.

RECOMMENDATION

- i. Government and academic staff should engage in constructive dialogue to address the root causes of the disagreements. The government should prioritize funding of universities and improve the working conditions of academic staff to prevent strikes from occurring.
- ii. University leadership should establish and enforce policies that promote transparency and merit-based appointments and promotions. Recruitment and promotion procedures ought to embrace transparency, ensuring that candidates are assessed solely on their merits and professional background.
- iii. To tackle inadequate infrastructure in Nigerian universities, the government should prioritize the allocation of funds to improve and maintain facilities such as research facilities, classrooms, and libraries. Universities can also explore partnerships with private organizations and donors to supplement government funding.
- iv. Federal government should establish policies that ensure academic institutions' autonomy and independence. Politicians should not be involved in the recruitment process, promotion, or award of research grants in universities.
- v. Nigerian universities should review and assess the workload of academic staff members and implement measures to reduce excessive workload. This could include hiring additional teaching and research staff, providing training and support for academic staff members to manage their workload effectively, and promoting work-life balance policies.
- vi. Universities should adopt a comprehensive approach to addressing student misconduct that includes education, prevention, and enforcement. This should involve educating students about the importance of academic integrity and the consequences of engaging in misconduct, as well as providing them with the necessary skills and resources to avoid it.

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