

The Influence of University Strikes on Educational Systems: An Exploratory Pilot Study on Nigerian Students

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Abstract

This study explores how strikes in Nigerian universities influence the educational systems and students' learning and information seeking behaviors. The purpose of the study was to identify consequences resulting from the influence of strike on students' information seeking behavior to that will enable education authorities formulate policies that will remedy the situation. The problem of the study shows that strikes have become synonymous with university education systems more than two decades ago, and as university staff cannot be stopped from exercising their civil rights to industrial action so too should university students' rights to learning not be compromised. Findings reveal the education system was a self-destruct mechanism because it was producing uneducated-graduates. The policy implications of this study will enable government and education authorities realize the consequences of university strikes on students, educators, and society.

Keywords: Educational Crisis, University Strikes, Information Seeking, Learning Quality, Nigerian Universities

1. Introduction

Strike has become synonymous with University education in Nigeria. The past two decades have witnessed strike very often, which have made completing one full academic calendar year look unlikely. Wole Soyinka describes the education system as dead during these frequent strikes (Hughes, 2005). Olujuwon (2002) stated "we have witnessed strikes, counter-strikes, and sympathy strikes from one institution to another for up to months or years in the country" (p.3). Strikes could negatively affect the educational systems in Nigerian and make students and their families disappointed with high level of stress. Olujuwon (2002) stated that due to strikes "the Universities would not be free to set their own examinations or grant their own degrees but would be affiliated with foster-parent Universities" (p.1).

Ajadi (2010) found that public universities' systems are inefficient because of strikes and "to the deplorable situations of public universities and other areas of differences between the government and either the noticed that Nigeria has a peculiar attitude of providing individual solution to social problems" (p.20). The author added that universities would not be able to deliver their services on time due to shortage in "staff needs, funds, physical facilities etc." (p. 20).

Strikes could affect students' learning and information seeking behaviors. In fact, studies have approached the information seeking behavior of students, however, not much address crisis-based information seeking behavior such as this study. Pang (2014) describes crisis-based information seeking as an increasingly important but less investigated context in which situational characteristics may present unique circumstances for researchers. Based on the role of the university in providing information resources, students depend on utilizing the library and other relevant information sources (lecturers, computer laboratory, etc.) available to them on campus.

Students' frequent use of the library gives librarians the opportunity to study students' information behavior either as human information interaction (HII) or as human information behavior (Fidel, 2012). However, for reasons unknown, the researcher cannot explain why this subject has eluded researchers considering its magnitude of occurrence in Nigerian universities, which Hominh (2014) illustrates as having no positive particular stake on education. This study is then significant by being the first academic research article to address these issues just mentioned. It is hoped that this might serve a motivational purpose for researchers to conduct more studies that could provide a wider picture.

1.1. Overview of University Strike

Across the country over the past two decades, strike has become a regular occurrence in Nigeria universities. Albert (2015) observes that, universities in Nigeria embarked on nation-wide strike to pressure government for a pay increase for the second time in one year. Hominh (2014) complained that such industrial action is likely to become common on campuses. Academic activities in almost all of Nigeria's universities have been disrupted; teachings and semester examinations in some 38 universities have been brought to a standstill (Albert, 2015). Unfortunately, neither the university staff nor the government seems to realize what damage is being done to quality of education as well as students' information seeking behaviors.

With several strikes, students' education will be interrupted. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) prefers to go on strike during active academic session, with hopes of giving them undue advantage. Going on strike during academic session is no act of fate, but a calculated process that sees jeopardizing students' education, as one that will yield advantage during negotiation. A sequel to the 2007 University and College Staff Union (UCSU) strike in Great Britain, where union leaders celebrated a successful strike action (Taiz, 2008). It seems unlikely that striking staff could achieve their demands without using students as human shield. Even to the extent, students from the University of Ibadan, returned to school to find lecturers insisting they would not resume lectures (Fatunde, 1996).

1.2. Influence on Education

Particularly in Nigeria, strike has been used as a weapon ready to be unleashed at the slightest dispute between university staff and government, as described by Ajadi (2010) "Nigeria has a peculiar attitude of providing individual solution to social problems" (p.20). What more can be said to refute this when experiences over the years show how it has been used? It is no longer uncommon to hear that the Academic Staff Union of Universities have commenced indefinite nationwide strike, and universities in Nigeria have been thrown into chaos after workers voted to walk out over unpaid allowances and job security (Owoseje, 2013). Addressing a crowd of French journalists in 1999, Soyinka reported that most Nigeria universities are on strike and that means, if you add the total number of months when higher education institutions have been on strike in the past four years, you will hardly find one complete academic year when the universities have been functioning.

Students are constantly the scapegoat from a system that targets them, and their woes have worrisome. Albert (2015) remarked that "what makes strike a nightmare is its frequency" and on that note affects the academic year, which was already disrupted early in the year (p.5). It is pitiable how students are the scapegoat of the situation and nothing is done to salvage their conditions. Youths are without direction as they roam the streets. The situation is the same across the country, and some of them are getting into troubles by engaging in crimes of serious dimensions (Fatunde, 1996). If university staff cannot be stopped from embarking on strike, as that would infringe upon their right to industrial action, should students continue to suffer deprivation of information as a result of such actions? We believe the time has come to learn from past lessons and figure out how to exercise such right (strike) and at the same time, not interrupt students learning process.

Neglect and constant strike interfering with students' education creates a systemic self-destruction mechanism. Crawford (2014) "the college cannot condone industrial action that will impact on the quality of our students' education" (para.12). Families are suffering and sharing in this distress. Fatunde (1996) stated "mothers and wives are concerned about the present situation and the consequences to our children who will be leaders of tomorrow and the social and economic decline of our beloved country" (para.11). It seems that everyone, even the system and society, have their share of the consequences of university strike in the long run. Obviously, when students are poorly educated at university level, they are ill equipped to assume leadership and are exposed to crime and dangerous conditions that will inevitably destroy the system. As a consequence, the system is generating uneducated-graduates within the system capable of self-destruction in the form of social chaos.

2. Methods

The population was selected from Nigerian students who have experienced university strikes in the past. The study focused on university education in Nigeria, the researchers needed students from Nigeria with prior experience or familiarity with strikes and live in the United States. After searching diligently, two students were found who met the average minimum requirements that served as the criteria sought after. First participant was a female sophomore student, and the second participant was a male student in his final year. They were interviewed as respondents based on their relevance to the study.

The study used the qualitative approach to conduct two interview sessions. The total time for all sessions was around four hours. The interviews were designed to gather information on the demographic characteristics of respondents and responded to some other questions that formed the core of the interview. In addition, the study adopted participant observation to further explore codes. Moreover, the researchers sat in a quiet corner, which allowed observing and documenting reactions and behaviors of the chosen target. The patterns that emerged were similar to the coded information material, and without the participant observation experience, we may not have been able to triangulate responses.

The use of an interview guide provided a sense of direction for the study, without which the possibilities of deviating is possible. The interview guide helped the study achieve its goal by ensuring that only relevant questions were asked as well as kept the respondents' remarks within the scope of the study. An example of the main questions is '*how does strike influence your learning and information seeking behaviors as a student?*'.

3. Results

In the present study, the researchers achieved their aim by exploring their own beliefs on the meaning students attributed to strike and how strike impacted their information seeking behaviors. Our assumptions were that strike would influence students' information-seeking behaviors to heights unexpected of good studentship and instill a psychological inferiority complex in them. One of the researchers in this study had a personal experience with university strikes in Nigeria. He was a victim of strike during his undergraduate days at the university of Nigeria, Nsukka campus, he affirms that there is nothing about strike that benefits students' no matter the umbrella the university staff use as a reason for going on strike. Instead, it will take away your faith in the system, fill you with unserious ideas and hate, and finally make you a victim. It is hard to believe that it took me more than six years to complete a four-year program. It is calamitous, in the sense that everyone will blame you for your woes when in the actual sense you as a student were never guided, but often neglected with reckless abandon. Unfortunately, you cannot expect any sympathy from anyone, but you must do whatever possible to survive.

Strike influence students' information-seeking behavior by cutting them off from informational resources pushing students away from academic environment and from developing relationships with learning tools and forcing them to integrate anti-social behaviors such as cultism, crime, and corruption. It is hard to see a student studying at home during strikes due to lack of motivation. It is hard to find study materials to use or any help from environmental conditions. It is obvious that students would have lack of resources; consequently, this would affect or maybe end their searching for information.

The participants were emotional when explaining the plight of Nigerian students' information-seeking behavior during strikes as frustrating, damaging, and neglectful because they were cut-off from their sources of information, which is located on-campus. They see the system as having no real interest in their information needs for quality education. Students felt hatred and revenge toward the system for exposing them to unfavorable conditions that make them vulnerable to crime, corruption, and loss of faith in the educational system.

It is like having your life planned out and just waits to graduate after the specified duration of your studies, and all of a sudden, universities begin their marathon strike. Reality then sets in and you realize you can no longer have your life unfold as planned. Imagine how it feels observing those we call parents debating their children's future over their self-interests. The abhorrent thing about strike is putting the staff welfare above students' future, and because their ambitions are scuttled, students' see themselves as victims of the society's injustice, forcing them to do anything for survival both on and off-campus. When students' education is used as a bargaining tool, when students' are at the losing end, they are left with no choice but to give back to the system what they got from the system, and will never accept responsibilities for their actions. It is normal that such acts will yield consequences of a cyclical nature.

The level of concentration in what participants were doing gave us a holistic view of what students go through during strike. Their actions agree with our personal experience and what they remarked about the influence of strike on students' information seeking behavior. Continuity without interruption is necessary for proper education. Therefore, so long as strike interrupts students' education and deny them access to information resources, the consequences will always impede on students success, and will debase and betray their ambitions.

3.1. Strikes as Weapon

In this study, the researchers found that strike was a weapon that could terminate the learning process in Nigerian universities. The respondent's described strike as a weapon university staff used to their advantage when making demands, during negotiation, or during dispute. The male participant stated "strike was a weapon in the hands of university staff because many a times they threatened they were going on strike if their demands were not met. Usually, they used it to get government to talk with them, and when their demands were not met they go on strike." The female participant shared the same thought and explained strike as a weapon. She remarked "during strike they just close down the school, even while negotiations were going on."

The male participant stated that faculties "had a right to go on strike, and that it has been very successful". The preconditions were that strike was an industrial action (Crawford, 2014), and not the weapon it has been turned into by university staff. Both respondents agreed that strike was a weapon arbitrary. The problem was going on strike even when it was not necessary, such as while negotiations were ongoing. Why go on strike while negotiations were on? Simply because something works does not mean it should be abused all the time. They even went on different types of strike such as warning strike, one-week strike, definite strike and indefinite.

The properties and dimensions indicated that students were forced home and deprived of accessing information resources located on-campus. This implies that whereby students were denied information that will help them form responsible personalities, they would turn to other sources that showed up for information that likely will not impact positively on their lives. This also impacts the learning process especially current systems do not utilize any of the technical tools such as Electronic-learning systems.

3.2. Students as Human-Shield

The findings reported that strike turned students into human-shield. They defined human shield as using students and their education as a focal point in matters of strike. The male participant stated that "the dispute did not concern the students but about the professors and salary issues. So when it comes to making demands, they put students into it". On the other hand, the female participant mentioned that "schools were closed down and students forced home with no form of attention to their needs. The aim was for the strike gain momentum and favors them". Using students as human shield produced in them hatred towards the system for exposing them to risk, using them, betraying their ambitions, and turning them into people without a choice whose opinion did not matter.

3.3. Students as Scapegoats

The study reported that students were the scapegoat. The female participant stated "upon return from strike students lose years by staying longer in school". She said that students could spend over 5 years in a program that can be accomplished in 4 years. She added "strike wasted students' time while those responsible were benefiting. Students suffered at the end by not receiving proper and adequate education that will enable them face the challenges of life. Students suffered depression, cheated, gave excuses against taking responsibility for their actions, and even felt like dropping out from schools".

The male participant stated that most students were "constantly scapegoat because they were thrown into the whole circumstances that made them lose time and academic momentum". He stressed "I am getting close to finishing my Bachelor's degree, and I'm tired of being in school, it's the same process every day. So imagine if I were to be kept another four years? I know students in Nigeria who spent extra years in school because of strikes, doing nothing, got no credits, so it frustrating and it's like you're killing their dreams with no mercy".

The female participant stated "I tell people that I planned my life such that my dream was to start college at 18years old, graduate at 22, get a job after ward, and get married. That's because I'm in the United States. But millions of students' like me in Nigeria had such dreams, but, unfortunately, were battling to graduate at the 27 years old. This is crazy!". The male participant concurred with an example that he still had some of his friends in Nigeria that were not certain of their graduation date even haven gained admission before him over 5 years ago.

The dimensions revealed that students were devastated as scapegoats. A condition contrary to preconditions that education meant everything to students whose life expectations depended on their graduation. A system that created such condition that will benefit one to the detriment of another went contrary to every academic belief and ethics, students’ welfare, equity, and justice.

3.4. Systemic Self-Destruction Mechanism

The study revealed that strike created a self-destruct mechanism within the entire system. They defined systemic self-destruction mechanism as what strike turn students into. The mechanism here represented the students while systemic referred to the society, and self-destruction meant the system destruction was internally produced (i.e. uneducated-graduate). The male participant mentioned that it came back to haunt the system again and again and again. Time students lost during strike, not learning what they ought to, being forced into crime and corrupt practices, all came back to witch-hunt the society because they were the ones recycled back into the system. Students end up summarizing everything just for the semester, pretty much like catching a few things and not going deep as they supposed, but in the end they don’t come out as the leaders of tomorrow.

The female participant confirmed and said that all students “developed a bias towards education in Nigeria because they were dissatisfied with the system. They blamed government and school authority, condemned the education, and practiced crime and corruption”. The male participant added “if students were not getting education you get a lot of them on the streets, and there’s a high tendency of people committing crimes, everything is crazy in the city when the kids were not in schools”.

Both participants emphasized how ridiculous it is when students are constantly deprived of information and education, are pushed into the streets of crime and corruption, and when they graduated and recycled back into the system (work-force) to continue the pollution. The female participant implied that when the system pushes one to learn crime and corruption, it was only a matter of time before that person experiments with the system. Students gave to the system what they got from the systemic self-destruction mechanism.

3.5. A Proposed Model

The data collected reveal that students’ education was debased and that they were not properly or adequately trained for the challenges that faced them after school. Therefore, while students possess certificates of completion of studies, they lacked what the certificate represented- knowledge. Figure 1 shows the components of the proposed model that could explain the university strikes and its influence on educational system and environment.

The concept of “systemic self-destruct mechanism” is the consequence of what happens when strike cuts students off from their sources of information (university environment), exposing them to all manner of anti-academic activities, anti-social activities, criminality, and corruption. Afterward, they become the mechanism for self-destruction that was made and nurtured by their very own system. At the end, there is social chaos because the self-destruct mechanism has been activated, and jobs filled by uneducated graduates.

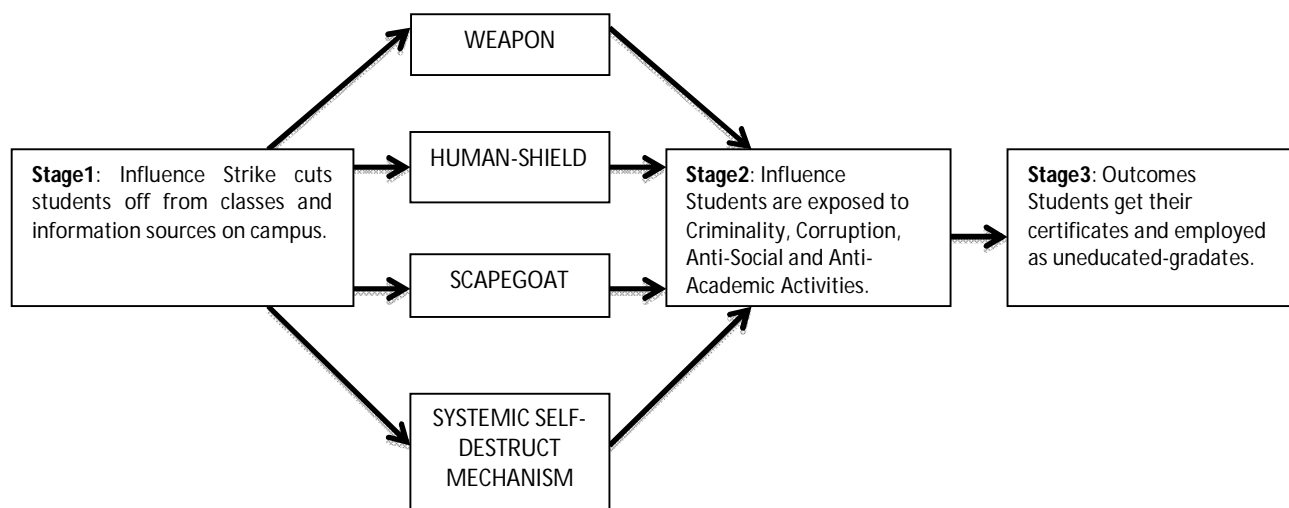


Figure 1: The Influence of University Strikes

4. Discussion

This study explores how strikes in Nigerian universities influence the educational systems and students behaviors. A proposed model was developed from the study to explain the outcome of the influence of strike on students' information-seeking behavior, which the findings describe as suffering from debasement. Two students from Nigeria, a 24-year-old male, and a 19-year-old female were specifically chosen as participants for this study due to their familiarity with the university strikes. In order to provide triangulation for the study, a participant observation was utilized.

The purpose of the study was to identify consequences resulting from the influence of strike on students' information seeking behavior to that will enable education authorities formulate policies that will remedy the situation. The Problem of the study shows that strike has become synonymous with university education more than two decades ago, and as university staff cannot be stopped from exercising their civil right to industrial action so too should university students' right to information seeking not be compromised. Unfortunately, Nigeria universities are constantly thrown into strike with little or no concern for the students' education. Therefore, it is the problem of this study to explore the meaning students attribute to strike and how it influences their learning and information seeking behaviors.

Findings reveal the total education system was a self-destruct mechanism because it was producing uneducated-graduates. Finally, the policy implications of this study would enable government and education authorities to realize the real picture of the consequences of strike on students, education, and the society. This would instigate a re-evaluation of the content and context in which university strike that is allowable by law. The aim is to allow university staff to exercise their rights to industrial action without interfering with students' performance and seeking information, which is paramount to their education. Solutions are possible if current educational systems are empowered with technological tools such as E-learning. However, there is a large demand on conducting more studies to make sure that the use of technology could enhance the learning system during strikes.

Before now, little was known that influence of strike on students' information seeking behavior could have these consequences apart from depriving students' access to their primary information sources on campus. It then call for immediate attention to address these issues which are capable of activating social chaos, as the study found. The clear picture of the situation reveals that university graduates are not adequately prepared for the roles they aspire to assume. The burden of our conscience demands such questions as "what will become of the students and the society/ system that is producing them?" Certainly as the findings reveal, students will end up graduating without the proper education and becoming uneducated-graduates as a result of the mechanism of self-destruction. If the predominant motive eliciting strike is about staff, then no matter how reasonable the demands may seem, strike at the detriment of students future, does not justify any such struggles. Students are as much stakeholders as university staff and their interest must be secured. Unfortunately, history of such events suggests otherwise, and as one of the participants remarked "it's not that they are going to teach more. Instead, they bring students into the picture and use them as human shield to attract attention and sympathy." Larigold (2013) observed a common feeling among students is that of being collateral damage to a fight that does not include them. The transformation of strike into a weapon, which uses students as human shield, is a crime against students and whatever education stands for.

Students are the situational scapegoat as well as the ultimate losers at any given point during and after strike. How else can students be described in this situation? This concept of scapegoat commands very strong implications capable of having drastic consequence on students' learning and information seeking behaviors. However, that is the case, and it could betray student-staff trust, which is necessary for knowledge exchange. Students may begin to express certain emotions and distrust haven defrayed from actualizing their dreams and goals within the timeframe they set. It is also sad to realize they are being used and debased by the same system they are part of.

The systemic self-destruct mechanism describes the final stage when students give back to system what they have received from it. It is the elastic limits resulting from accumulated debasement. When students graduate without the knowledge of their subject of study, how marketable do they become? What can they offer? What happens when students are exposed to different forms of anti-social and anti-academic activities when crimes and corruptions become a way of survival? While some consequences are short term, some are really long term. The big picture, however, reveal how the system is suffering from self-destruction, as a result, by the very mechanism it created and nurtured with utter negligence during its formative years. The leaders of tomorrow are the students of today and the hope of the future.

How they are being prepared as beneficiaries of society's institutions is important. The current results are not positive. So far as the study indicated, social chaos is looming, and the time has come calling for a total re-evaluation of what, why and how the system is shaping university students, because the future depends on them.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

One of the limitations in this study is the sample size. It was a small sample size due to the difficulty to find Nigerian students who live in the United States and had an experience with universities' strikes in Nigeria. However, the sample was enough to explore the influence of university strike and to collect understandings of the situation. It is recommended to use this study as a pilot test for a larger scale study in the future to investigate different learning and information seeking behaviors during the university strikes. Consequently, understating the influence of strikes would inform policymakers to the need of enhancing the educational system and empower it with the proper tools such as the electronic learning systems to minimize the effect of university strikes in Nigeria and other parts of the world.

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