

# Nigeria's Public University System: Are Trade Unions Still Viable?

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**Olabode A. Oyewunmi<sup>1</sup>; Adebukola E. Oyewunmi<sup>2</sup>**

Department of Business Management, College of Business and Social Sciences, Covenant University, Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>olabode.oyewunmi@covenantuniversity.edu.ng;

<sup>2</sup>adebukola.oyewunmi@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

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**Abstract** - *The actors within Nigeria's public university system are by no means immune from critical assessment, especially when established facts and prevailing circumstances, sharply contrasts with direct contextual as well as the wider public expectations. Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the umbrella trade union for academic staffs of public universities in Nigeria, is seemingly at cross-roads in terms of its viability indicators and perceptions. This outlook becomes more evident when construed against the backdrop of well-established antecedents and the current contextual realities militating against the contributions of the union to the overall development of the public universities in Nigeria. Moreover, the conversations on the long-term sustainability of government funded tertiary institutions cannot be divorced from the contributions of important stakeholders. This outlook is consistent with the essence of the stakeholder theory in terms of the contributions and returns associated with a given role. The paper thus recommends that ASUU should re-align its focus to redress the identifiable issues jeopardizing the continued viability of this important union. There should be some appreciable degree of synergy between the goals of union members and the corporate goals of the university context. Instructively, if there is a need to re-energize and restructure the fundamentals of the union, concerted efforts should be made in this direction to preserve the tenets and sanctity of the 'ivory towers' of learning.*

**Keywords:** Academic Staff, Nigeria, Public Universities, Trade Union, Viability

JEL Codes: J50, J51, J53

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's public university system has evolved over the last three decades, particularly as tertiary academic providers are increasing; notable growth in access to technology driven learning and growing evidence of the benefits of knowledge capital. This trend is still unfolding in varying respects, and is targeted at specific purposes, whilst yielding manifold outcomes. In the course of this socio-cultural evolution, the roles of the actors have been affected, thus necessitating different modes and degrees of adjustments especially at the individual and organizational levels. It is noteworthy, that the essence of a university context, is usually relegated in the heat of the dialogues or debates amongst the matrix of stakeholders. The interested parties are usually keen to advance the best arguments that highlight their own interests, without taking cognisance of the broader implications. This approach has evidently stunted the appreciable growth of several Nigerian public universities. It is somewhat ironic, that such an

undesirable outcome has progressively manifested in spite of the existing platforms for wide consultation and aggregation of shared views.

As the tertiary academic community is indeed becoming more global and internationalized, it has become imperative for the key actors in Nigeria to revisit the long-term viability of the university system. The era of being unnecessarily circumspect has elapsed, as the general quality and standards in higher education being offered in public schools across the geo-political regions continues to decline. A fuller picture comes to the light when construed against the increasing contribution of private universities to the provision of enhanced education delivery. The reality of the decreasing and inconsistent federal government funding of universities, coupled with the apparent regulatory quandary bedevilling the achievement of the optimal performance of the system, are also integral issues for consideration within the ambit of this paper.

In the light of the above, the recurring question seems to be the centrality of the role of trade unions to the viability of the public university system. This is a hydra question with diverse possibilities, especially bearing in mind the historical, political, regulatory and other contextual underpinnings attributable to Nigeria's public university context. Not to lose sight of the primal role of trade unions, a robust and practical conceptualization of the terms is exhibited as fundamental issues are explored. The peculiarities and realities of the Nigerian environment are also captured to highlight the substantive and expected contributions of trade unions to the overall viability of public universities. This dimension is instructive, bearing in mind some notable effects of prevailing socio-economic factors amongst other externalities on the functioning the higher learning institutions.

From a legal and policy stand-point trade unions have a case for their continued existence cum importance to overall university system. However, when construed from a cost-benefit standpoint in terms of substantive contribution to the academic standards, qualitative research outputs and internally generated revenue, the measurable contribution or viability of trade unions may be questioned. Perhaps, re-engineering of the fundamentals of trade unionism is required as a veritable platform to re-set the core objects of the actors in this regard. Hence, a fuller appreciation of the structure, functions and other associated matters is necessary to determine the viability or otherwise of trade-unions in public universities. The following sections entail a critical overview of the historical antecedents of trade-unions in public universities; analysis of prevailing and emerging issues affecting the contribution of trade unions; critique of the viability of trade unions; recommendations and conclusion.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The paper furthers the conversations or debates on fundamental issues affecting the deliverables associated with institutions of higher learning, particularly as regards a developing context, such as Nigeria. Hence, in view of the competing interests at the micro and macro-levels, it has become necessary to critically review the viability status of trade unions, bearing in mind their well-established antecedents in reshaping the academic landscape. It further brings to the light the essence of the sustainability of trade unions in Nigeria as the academic environment evolves and transitions to other alternatives that can deliver more robust outcomes

#### **METHODS**

A wholly critical analysis approach of existing literature relevant to the theme of the paper is adopted. Specific views and opinions are also aggregated. This is deployed towards achieving practical recommendations and conclusion. Also, applicable theory is also captured to further highlight the essence of the views discussed.

#### **RESULTS**

##### **Trade Unionism in Nigeria: Historical Antecedents**

The evolution and growth of industrial relations in Nigeria was prompted by the progression in European and Asian countries [1]. In Nigeria, its rise was majorly evidenced in the emergence of workers' union to facilitate the anti-colonial liberation struggle, influence wages and conditions, and to serve as political force that not only defends its members but also play a decisive role in the removal of autocratic regimes [2]. The pre-colonial antecedents of industrial relation in Nigeria can be traced to 1912 when the civil service under the colonial administration organized themselves into what was described as workers' representatives, which later metamorphosed into the Nigerian Civil Service Union (NCSU). The first evidence of industrial relations/trade unions in Nigeria was the creation of The Mechanics' Mutual Aid Provident and Mutual Improvement Association in July, 1883. Fashoyin [3] posits that it is on record that the history of the industrial relations and trade unions in Nigeria dates back to 1897, citing the 3-day strike by artisan workmen in the Public Works Department in Lagos as evidence of the beginning of joint action amongst Nigerian workers to protest unfavourable employment conditions.

Between 1919 and 1932, four unions were formed cutting across the railway sector and the teaching establishment. They were, The Nigerian Native Staff Union, The Nigerian Mechanic Union, The Nigerian Union of Railway Men and The Nigerian Union of Teachers [4] (Tokunbo, 1985). It is instructive to note that the NCSU, the Railway Men and the NUT played a pivotal role in establishing Industrial Relations in the 1930s. It is important to note that at this period the interest of these unions centred on promoting efficiency in the civil service and the advancement of the employment interests of members [3] (Fashoyin, 1992), to address wider economic issues, promote national development, execute the regulatory processes, and summarily maintain the stability of the nation's economy [5].

A turning point for the growth of Industrial Relations in Nigeria was in 1938 when trade unions were formalized on the legal platform of the Trade Union Ordinance. The law expressly stipulated the minimum number, that is five, required to constitute a trade union in Nigeria [6] (Otobo, 2004). The Trade Union Ordinance essentially created a platform to formulate other policies related to trade union activities in Nigeria, having set the minimum benchmark in terms of membership. In effect, it created a practical basis for individuals to aggregate and advocate a shared viewpoint.

The period of 1942-1975 was characterized by the emergence of many central labour organizations. These unions proffered strategies for sustained trade unionism, promotion of workers' welfare and national development. There was an apparent synergy between trade unionism and nationalism which provided a viable platform facilitate the establishment of good leadership in the country [5] (Okolie, 2010). The need to centralize and strengthen the unions led to the formation of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) in 1975 which became the rallying point for the other unions. The NLC harmonizes the affairs of the unions and in return the unions leverage on the associated benefits of being affiliated with the NLC but it should be noted that there are guidelines in the procedure for such affiliation. Over time, the Nigerian Labour Congress constantly mediated in government face-offs with workers in the country, grown in stature and presented a united front despite the constant harassments and intimidation on the leaders particularly during the military regime of Abacha and the Obasanjo led democratic government [5] (Okolie, 2010). The union remained committed to pressing the government for increased funding and remuneration, endowment of research initiatives, and catering for the welfare of members. At this period, the focus of trade unions centred on ensuring that members got full value for contractual obligations created on multiple levels; whilst not relegating the associated function of promoting national growth and sustainable development.

### **Trade Unionism: The ASUU Experience**

It has been globally established that universities are citadels of learning where knowledge is acquired and passed on. They are also formal or structured institutions set up to enrich the practical and theoretical knowledge base of the society at large. Universities can thus be aptly described as; citadels of learning and platforms for critical thinking,

implementation of ideas and solution providers for societal problems. In effect, dissemination of knowledge, teaching and research is the focal point of universities and it is these ideals that sustain the very existence of these institutions of learning. Its output is critical factors for the maintenance and adaptive structures of society [7]. Nigerian universities have evolved over a reasonable period and thus have experienced a constant re-evaluation of its specific purpose and goals towards the developmental needs of Nigeria. In particular, some of these goals are to:

- i. Enhance national development by providing high level manpower training;
- ii. Develop intellectual capacity geared towards the appreciation of local and external contexts;
- iii. Develop and inculcate enduring values that will ensure the survival of the individual and society;
- iv. Acquire physical and intellectual skills which ensure individual self-reliance
- v. Promote scholarship and community service; and
- vi. Forge and cement national unity and stability

It should be noted that the universities can only pursue these goals amongst others in a particular context which will usually include; research and development, aggressive staff training and development, knowledge generation and dissemination. The attainment of the numerous objectives by the various Nigerian universities cannot be taken for granted bearing in mind the hurdles or challenges confronting them. In identifying some of the problems facing the university system, one can readily appreciate the benefits that would accrue to the national economy which serves as the external context to the immediate university environment.

The role of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is paramount in Nigeria's economic development and cannot be over emphasized. It is a trade union that is legally recognised and empowered to negotiate with government and management as it seeks favourable terms and conditions of employment for its registered members. ASUU, it should also be stated, is one of the three established trade unions within the university setting in Nigeria. The other recognized trade unions are Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union. Iyayi [8] captures the guiding principles of ASUU in specific respects, even though the prevalence levels of the

fundamentals vary across the existing higher institutions of learning. Amongst others, ASSU seeks to project the ideals of; transparency and accountability; professionalism, courage, sacrifice, internal democracy and workplace comradeship. While performing its duties within the established parameters, ASUU has had cause to firmly engage with the government and university authorities. In negotiating with the government, ASUU focused on some pertinent issues, and they are: adequate funding of the system, university autonomy and conditions of service.

The level of funding that is required for the university system has been a contentious issue between labour and government. It has thus been opined that government has not committed reasonable amount money to the educational sector, especially in comparison to other developing economies. It has also been noted that Nigeria's expenditure on education is on the average of 1.1% of its GDP/GNP which contrasts with Ghana which spends 3.6% and Kenya 6.2% [9]. The primary effect or consequence of inadequate funding is the occurrence of brain drain which in simple terms refers to the loss of skilled manpower to other economies with sufficient capacity to accommodate such skills [10]. Nigerian universities have been significantly affected by the brain drain syndrome which has resulted in several its seasoned and budding academics migrate to some Southern and West African universities that are willing to offer better or competitive terms and conditions of employment. This dilemma becomes even more complex as the student ratio of universities is constantly on the increase [11]. This in effect puts pressure on the limited human capital that are left in the system who have to manage the consequences without compromising the standard and quality of training offered by the universities. This is indeed a very tough proposition bearing in mind the infrastructural and structural challenges.

In the light of the above scenario, ASUU has resorted to embarking on strikes at different periods as a last resort to compel the government of the day to commit more of its budgetary expenditure to the system. Unfortunately, these strike actions have been costly for the nation in various respects particularly as there is shortfall in the level of manpower required to grow the local economy. In addition, the incessant strikes, and of recent in 2011-2012, have impaired the focus and commitment that it necessary for learning and training in an ideal setting. Thus, the graduates from such a flawed system are constantly frustrated

and are more concerned with exiting the system to the detriment of the nation which is robbed of their creative capabilities and skills. The crux of the matter here is that money is central to success or development of any university as it is applied to procure other essential components of in the school such as equipment, salaries, building and running expenses [12].

University autonomy relates directly to the internal administration and the exercise of freedom by universities in certain areas of their operations. The areas of autonomy are usually concerned with student selection, staff appointment and teaching. The contention here is that government has over the years relied on the somewhat arbitrary stipulation that it shall continue to respect the freedom of the universities where these goals are in tandem with the national goals. It is against this backdrop that the government has found a viable platform to interfere with traditional areas of autonomy of the universities which in turn has resulted in a breakdown of activities in the affected institutions. The actual interference in Nigerian universities dates back to 1975 and transcends matters of dismissing of staff [13], bastardizing of the admission procedure, earning of promotion by sycophancy and arbitrary governance [14]. In the circumstances, staff unions, ASUU inclusive were banned and unbanned at various periods. Many Vice Chancellors were also removed for non-compliance with government directives, academics were dismissed, retired and unjustly jailed for teaching when they were not employed to do so [9].

It should be stated that the arbitrary conduct of the government in strictly academic matters is well documented and this has usually manifested in illegal employment suspension and dismissal of staff, disobedience to court orders, vandalization of property as experienced at the University of Abuja in 1995. At the Ogun State University now known as Olabisi Onabanjo University, ASUU criticized and challenged the dismissal of about two hundred academics without due process. In the midst of all the conflict is the costly loss of work hours in the university system which could have translated to meaningful contribution to the economy. It should also be borne in mind that the process of negotiation has huge cost implications especially where the agreements derived from previous negotiations are not honoured thus resulting in a protracted situation.

Conditions of service have been a recurring decimal in collective bargaining agreements between

ASUU and government. It relates to matters of salary and allowances, retirement and pension, appointment, disciplines and promotion of staff among others. Thus, there has been a shortfall in the number of academics primarily because of the relatively uncompetitive wage structure and poor conditions of service obtainable in Nigerian universities. This has in turn led to drop in quality of the training provided by these institutions which lends credence to the abysmal global ranking of Nigerian universities inspite of the great propensity for growth [15]. According to Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Education (2003) there was a shortfall of 46% in the Nigerian universities in 2000. In light of the myriad of problems facing ASUU, and more importantly how the collective agreements negotiated with government have been dishonoured; it is not difficult to perceive how dis-incentivized the academics within the Nigerian university system have become [16].

Another area of contention between ASUU and government has been on the issue of pay differential in the University Salary Structure (USS) applicable to academic staff which has consistently been eroded by the prevailing economic conditions. It is this recurring issue that has been identified as the major cause of brain drain within the Nigerian University system. An attempt to remedy this problem of wage distortion under the Elongated University Salary Structure (EUSS) was short lived in the light of the mismanagement of the macro-economy which manifested in the Structural Adjustment Programme of the Babangida administration [16].

ASUU's grouse is targeted at improving the conditions of service in the University system and that the academics should be paid a wage that is reasonable and reflective of the prevailing economic circumstances. This has led to lecturers engaging in private practice and contract chasing to supplement their income. The current position is more progressive against the backdrop of the introduction of a new minimum wage and reflected in the Unified University Salary Structure (UUSS).

### **The Viability of ASUU**

The pedigree of ASUU over the years as regards; its numerous engagements, protracted negotiations and aborted agreements with successive governments, has given the union considerable visibility, a sense of permanence, some degree of entitlement and recognition. It suffices to say, that these acquired features have seemingly placed the union upon an imaginary pedestal. Also, in view of the tenets of the

well-established stakeholder theory [17] and coupled with its evident ethical notion dimensions [18]; ASUU to all intents and purposes, is a legitimate interest, participant or agent whose well-being is of principal concern, being integral to the overall development of Nigeria's public university. However, it is instructive to note that public universities are established to serve multiple interests, and each one of such, must integrate into the general arrangement so as not distort the equilibrium of the whole corporate academic entity. The task to achieve this veritable and desirable balance of interests lies at the root of securing the enduring viability of the academic union.

ASUU operates in the public domain, is accountable to the public, whilst also bearing in mind that the union is dependant predominantly on allocations from the national budget. In the light of the above, it is pertinent to reflect on the critical question as the current viability of ASUU. It is not tenable to assume that because ASUU is enabled by law to establish a branch in every federal government owned university, and such that on this basis, it is deemed that substantive representation and contribution will be achieved. In fact, the available evidence indicates that not every university having representation under the union has enjoyed comparative level of development and growth. The question then is why remain in such a union. It is also instructive to note that some public universities have in time past disregarded ASUU resolutions when it was considered not to be in their ultimate interest.

It should be noted that ASUU is greatly affected by the external environment and cannot exist in a vacuum. Thus, it beholds on the government who created these universities by the instrument of law, to provide the necessary support structure if they are to yield the long and short term benefits in various sectors of the economy. However, where the government is constrained to reduce funding owing to a decline in national revenue, such brings to the fore the matter of re-assessing the contributions of ASUU to the broader workings of the public university system. Perhaps, the focus more should be on re-aligning the focus of the membership towards financial independence which will help to secure the professional and welfare ideals of union members.

Evidently, the issue of funding is very vital if the academics are going to make any meaningful contribution to the economy. This is a globally established fact and is not peculiar to Nigeria. Government at the Federal and State levels must be responsible in this regard, by re-setting their priorities

by allocating considerable funds to the educational sector in successive budgetary appropriation. Fostering appropriate linkages and high level collaborations could also help to optimize the available allocations and trigger external support. However, ASUU must also endeavour to discipline its members who are contributing to the decay of the university system in the mode of illegal profiteering activities, absenteeism from lectures amongst other acts of indiscipline. ASUU could also assist in capacity development and utilization, by leveraging on personal interactions and exposure to attract talented, promising and experienced staff to their respective universities. The academic community is a global one, and the full practicalities and potentials of this dimension must be brought to bear in the Nigerian context. This is important especially in terms of active collaborations which are mutually beneficially, self-sustaining and delivering industry relevant solutions.

#### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The continued existence and contributions of ASUU are indeed integral to the repositioning of public universities in Nigeria. Simply put ASUU comprising of academic staff of the university need the university system to remain relevant in as much as the university as an educational organization needs the union members to achieve its corporate goals and objectives. Once there is disconnect continued relevance of those who are driving the tenets of the system undoubtedly will call for some level of introspection.

Specifically, it should be noted that there is still some measure of restructuring needed in the make-up of ASUU to facilitate negotiations with government which in turn translates to better conditions and terms of employment for their members. The need to harmonise membership in the private and public institutions should also be critically evaluated which will could further strengthen the base of ASUU. Consideration should be given to the level of agreements that is usually entered between the workers' union and the government or another agency. The scope of these agreements should be adequately construed to ensure the execution of such agreements.

In spite of non-implementation of certain agreements reached during collective bargaining, trade unionism exemplified by the ASUU experience, collective bargaining and collective agreements have contributed immensely to Nigeria's local economy. A contrary view will not augur well for our economy in

the short and long term, and this is in addition to the loss of confidence on the part of those willing to invest both time and material resources in higher learning institutions.

A major fall out of ASUU's engagement with government over the last decade has been on the consensus of the need to deregulate the university system and the emphasis on cost sharing. This has manifested with the emergence of several private universities that have taken advantage of the licenses which empower them to run specific programmes that have been duly accredited. Private sector participation has been pivotal to the drive and growth now being experienced in the university system, and this had a spill over effect to the external environment in terms of job creation both in the formal and informal sector. This option has lightened the burden of funding the establishment of more universities to cater for the backlog of applicants, and in principle will have free funds to invest in other sectors of the economy.

However, it should be noted the Federal Government's perception of university autonomy places too much emphasis on revenue generation by the universities, and is not demonstrating its commitment to the education of Nigerians as exemplified in its budgetary allocation every year to this sector. It is hoped that the government will not allow the university system to degenerate beyond the level at which it is presently as this could have serious consequences for the entire economy as this universities are indeed the human resource base of any modern economy and the most important asset of any organisation.

It is evident that labour unionism in Nigeria has evolved and is now somewhat established. The system as a whole has been bedevilled with numerous conflicts which have not yielded any lasting results between unions and government. Egbokhare [19] stated that a principal area of disconnect between ASUU and government lies in perception of the purpose or the mission of the universities. The former seeks act as a custodian of wider societal interests, while the latter perceives the universities as extensions to or appendages of the State apparatus and one of the dividends of a recognized government. The university system in Nigeria is suffering from hangover effects of the military era which has also negatively or adversely impacted on several other spheres of the economy. There is therefore need for a concerted effort on the part of ASUU and government to reconcile their differences with a view to install best practices and international standards within the

university system. The words of Harbison [20], best capture the need for both ASUU and government to reconcile their differences as he noted that:

“human resources- not capital, nor income, nor material resources- constitute the ultimate basis of the wealth of nations..... human beings are the active who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic and political organizations and carry forward national development”.

On a final note, the viability of ASUU should be measured against specific contributions of the union to the overall university system, even though on the surface it is usually assumed that union is integral to the optimal performance of the university. By adopting a more specific posture in assessing the viability issue, it is opined that ASUU will not take the public trust for granted, whilst also motivating members to preserve the sanctity and ideals of the university system. Hence, the objective is not to relegate the significance and contributions of ASUU, rather the underlying intention being to re-energize the essence of what the union represents.

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