

**UNION POWER AND ACADEMIC WELFARE: THE ASUU-UNICAL EXPERIENCE**

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the influence of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) on academic welfare and professional development within the University of Calabar (UNICAL). Rooted in Relative Deprivation and Marxian Conflict theories, the research explores the extent to which ASUU's trade union activities have impacted the provision of welfare incentives and growth opportunities for academic staff. Utilizing a descriptive survey design, data were gathered from 300 respondents through structured questionnaires and interviews. Statistical analysis using ANOVA revealed that ASUU's activities have not significantly improved fringe benefits or professional advancement at UNICAL, leading to the acceptance of the null hypothesis. The findings underscore the paradox of ASUU's activism: despite its historical relevance and persistent engagement with state authorities, its influence remains limited by internal inefficiencies, compromised leadership, and systemic resistance. The study concludes that ASUU must recalibrate its approach by adopting a results-based advocacy model, enhancing leadership accountability, and engaging multi-level stakeholders to overcome entrenched structural barriers. It argues for a shift from reactive industrial actions to proactive institutional collaboration and strategic reform. Ultimately, the paper highlights the latent potential of unionism to drive meaningful change, contingent upon introspective restructuring and the adoption of global best practices in labour engagement.

Keywords: ASUU, Professional Growth, Unionism, Welfare Incentives, UNICAL

JEL: J51, I23

INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for workers' welfare has remained a persistent site of conflict between labour and capital. While modern employment frameworks project a semblance of equality between employers and employees, the reality is far from balanced. Employers, by virtue of their ownership of the means of production and the unilateral powers to hire, fire, and alter employment conditions, often dominate labour relations (Ackers, 2002). This imbalance leaves workers vulnerable, subject to systemic exploitation, and frequently denied recognition of their rights. Trade unions have historically emerged as a critical counterweight to this asymmetry, advocating for fair treatment, humane conditions, and equitable participation in workplace decision-making (Serrano *et al.*, 2011).

In Nigeria, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) epitomizes this role of organized labour within the academic sector. For over three decades, ASUU has been at loggerheads with the Federal Government, contesting policies that undermine institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the general welfare of university staff (Godknows & Oyinmiebi, 2024). Issues such as delayed or denied entitlements, inadequate funding, and deteriorating infrastructure have led to chronic dissatisfaction and industrial unrest. The imposition of centralised payroll systems such as the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), despite ASUU's opposition and proposal of an alternative- University Transparency and Accountability Solutions (UTAS)- further illustrates the power struggle between the union and the state. IPPIS has not only disrupted the financial autonomy of universities but also compounded welfare issues, resulting in fractional salaries and prolonged arrears.

This confrontation is deepened by a disturbing trend of state-backed repression of academic labour activism. The erosion of due process, criminalisation of strikes, and arbitrary dismissal of union leaders including notable instances like the 49 lecturers of the University of Ilorin reveal a hostile labour environment (Egbegi & Iheriohanma, 2019). Moreover, government policies such as the “No Work, No Pay” doctrine have intensified the precarity of academic employment, especially during industrial actions (Ibeh, 2024). The failure to remunerate lecturers for already completed workload, denial of earned academic allowances, and unstable salary disbursements have further deteriorated staff morale and productivity (Eke, 2021). These systemic grievances are set against the backdrop of underfunded institutions plagued by dilapidated infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teaching tools—all of which exacerbate occupational stress and hinder knowledge production.

Despite these challenges, ASUU has continued to serve as a formidable voice for academic staff, persistently engaging the state on issues critical to the survival of Nigeria's public university system. While many labour appear weakened under the weight of political suppression, ASUU remains resolute in its pursuit of equity and improved welfare. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the scope and impact of ASUU's interventions at the University of Calabar (UNICAL), interrogating how union power has shaped the welfare landscape for academic staff. The study contributes to a broader understanding of trade unionism in Nigeria's tertiary education sector and offers empirical insight into the efficacy of organised labour in resisting systemic marginalization. The objective of the study therefore is to answer the following research question:

1. To what extent has ASUU's trade unionism influenced the provision of welfare incentives and professional growth opportunities for academic staff at the University of Calabar?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual framework

The conceptual foundation of this study is anchored in the critical intersection between trade unionism and academic staff welfare, with a specific focus on the role of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) within the University of Calabar. This framework integrates perspectives from labour relations and the political economy of education to illuminate how union power shapes institutional responses to staff welfare and professional development in Nigeria's tertiary education landscape. At the heart of labour-capital interactions lies an inherent power asymmetry. Classic industrial relations theorists, notably Marxist and pluralist schools, have long emphasized the imbalance in employer-employee relationships due to the employer's control over the means of production and decision-making structures (Edwards, 2020). This imbalance is particularly

visible in higher education institutions, where state authorities act as employers and regulate conditions of service unilaterally. The resulting precarity makes trade unions indispensable actors in protecting academic workers' interests.

ASUU, as a case in point, functions as a countervailing force to state power, utilizing strikes, negotiations, and advocacy to challenge exploitative structures and demand improved welfare. As argued by Fajana (2021), the power of labour unions in Nigeria is a crucial mechanism for bargaining fairer conditions, especially in public institutions where bureaucratic inertia often stifles progressive change. The union's actions, though often contentious, are framed within a broader tradition of industrial activism necessary to mitigate systemic neglect.

The concept of academic welfare encompasses various dimensions, including job security, salary regularity, promotion opportunities, access to professional development, and a conducive work environment (Okolie & Omodia, 2020). In Nigeria, ASUU has consistently highlighted deficits in these areas, linking them to underfunding, inconsistent government policy, and non-implementation of collective agreements. Studies such as those by Chukwuemeka *et al.* (2022) have shown that ASUU's persistent agitation has led to periodic improvements in salary scales and funding allocations, albeit often after prolonged strikes. Nonetheless, the impact of these interventions remains uneven across institutions. At the University of Calabar, anecdotal evidence suggests that while ASUU's efforts have secured certain welfare gains, unresolved issues such as delayed allowances, discontinuation of staff development programmes and poor infrastructure persist, pointing to the limits of union influence in a politicized governance context.

Empirical review

Studies across Nigeria and beyond consistently affirm the positive link between trade union activity, employee welfare, and institutional productivity. Nwakoby and Chukwurah (2020) found in South-East Nigerian federal universities that robust welfare schemes significantly enhance labour efficiency. Using regression analysis on data from 498 staff, they emphasized the need for increased awareness and accessibility of welfare benefits.

Ugo and Sebastine (2020) provided a critical appraisal of trade unionism in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, identifying internal dysfunctions—such as weak leadership and tribalism—and state interference as key constraints to union effectiveness. They argued, through a Marxist lens, for internal democratization to restore union credibility and bargaining power.

Aduma and Njoku (2022), examining ASUU strikes in the South East, found that prolonged industrial actions severely disrupted academic calendars and hindered student skill acquisition. Their findings highlight the strategic importance of employer-initiated motivation to preempt conflict and maintain institutional continuity.

In the industrial sector, Collins (2015) showed how unionization at Jos International Breweries fostered employee commitment, reduced exploitation, and facilitated collective bargaining for improved conditions. Similarly, Stephen and Emeka (2014) observed in Nigeria's maritime sector that strong union negotiation power directly correlates with enhanced welfare and job satisfaction.

From a global angle, Eaton *et al.* (2007) documented that wellness programmes in U.S. universities significantly improved employee health and service delivery, underscoring the broader impact of

welfare on institutional performance. In Kenya, Lonah *et al.* (2018) found that improved welfare incentives in the judiciary accelerated case resolution rates, affirming the productivity-welfare nexus.

Finally, Igwesi and Offor (2017) linked poor academic working conditions in Nigeria's universities to chronic underfunding. They observed that inadequate remuneration, infrastructural decay, and increasing workloads erode staff morale and fuel brain drain. These challenges, they argue, compromise the welfare agenda that unions like ASUU seek to advance.

Together, these studies underscore a central theme: while trade unions significantly contribute to improved welfare and productivity, their impact is often blunted by internal weaknesses and structural underfunding—making the ASUU-UNICAL experience a critical case for deeper examination.

Theoretical Explication: Relative Deprivation Theory and Marxian Conflict Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory, propounded by Ted Robert Gurr (1970), brings out the subjective, emotional dimensions of ASUU activism. It explains how academic staff at UNICAL feel deprived when their working conditions, wages, and welfare provisions fall short of what they believe they deserve — especially when compared to similar professionals elsewhere or the expectations set by government promises. This perceived injustice — the gap between "value expectations" and "value capabilities" — often fuels frustration, resentment, and ultimately leads to industrial actions such as strikes and protests. In the ASUU-UNICAL context, this theory captures the emotive force driving union demands, not just because of economic need, but because of the perceived betrayal of professional dignity and comparative worth.

While Relative Deprivation focuses on the perception of unfairness, Marxian theory, propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848), explains the system behind it. It frames ASUU's struggles within the broader capital-labour conflict in Nigeria, where the state (as employer) seeks to maximize control over university labour (lecturers) at the lowest cost. In this view, the university system reflects capitalist interests: underfunding, casualization, and poor infrastructure are not accidents but consequences of structural power imbalances. ASUU's resistance, therefore, is seen as a natural, collective response to exploitation, with trade unionism acting as the tool of the working class (academic staff) to resist subjugation and assert their rights.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey design to assess the impact of union activities on academic welfare among ASUU members at the University of Calabar. A sample of 300 academic staff was selected from a total population of 2460 using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and oral interviews with selected ASUU members. The questionnaire, validated by experts and tested for reliability through the test-retest method, was administered using a 5-point Likert scale. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and ANOVA, with SPSS (v23.0) employed for quantitative analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

H₀: *ASUU's trade union activities have no significant influence on the provision of welfare incentives and professional growth opportunities for academic staff in the University of Calabar.*

Table 1: Analysis of variance of the influence of trade union activities on the provision of welfare incentives and professional growth opportunities for academic staff in the University of Calabar

Group	Trade Union Actions	N	□	SD
1	No Responses	0	0	0
2	Strongly Disagree	208	20.8	4.56
3	Disagree	38	3.8	1.95
4	Agree	18	1.8	1.34
5	Strongly Agree	20	2.0	1.41
Source of variation	SS	Df	Ms	F
Between groups	116	4	29	2.47
Within groups	3276	280	11.7	
Total	3392	284		

* $p < .05$, $df = 4$ and 280 , critical $F = 6.39$

As shown in Table 1, the calculated F-value is 2.47. This represents the observed influence of trade union activities of members represented by the calculated F-ratio of 2.47. The calculated F-ratio was found to be less than the critical F-value of 6.39 at 0.05 level of significance with 4 and 280 degrees of freedom. Based on this, the null hypothesis is accepted while the alternate is rejected. This means that ASUU's trade union activities have not ensured the provision of welfare incentives and professional growth opportunities for academic staff in the University of Calabar.

Discussion and findings

This study examined the influence of ASUU's trade union activities on the provision of welfare incentives and professional development opportunities for academic staff at the University of Calabar (UNICAL). Findings from the tested hypothesis revealed that the extent of ASUU's trade unionism has not significantly enhanced the provision of welfare incentives, particularly the payment of fringe benefits and other related allowances. This outcome lends empirical support to the position of Strauss (2006), who observed that in the era of globalization and intensified market competition, the influence of trade unions globally has been on a steady decline, while the power and dominance of institutional management have grown disproportionately.

The situation in UNICAL reflects this broader trend, suggesting that despite its longstanding presence and vocal activism, ASUU has yet to devise and implement sustainable and result-oriented strategies to effectively counterbalance managerial dominance or bring about substantial and consistent improvements in the welfare of its members. This shortcoming becomes even more glaring considering the union's historical prominence in Nigeria's educational sector. Furthermore, the study aligns with Ododoru's (2010) assertion that ASUU has, over the years,

grown relatively weak and inefficient, and often falls short in negotiating meaningful and enforceable agreements with university authorities or the federal government. The union's bargaining power appears increasingly compromised, limiting its capacity to secure significant wins for academic staff welfare.

Echoing this position, Emuchay (2018) highlighted that while the Nigerian government may successfully appoint qualified individuals to academic roles, it frequently fails to adequately prepare them or provide the necessary tools and work environments conducive to academic productivity. These institutional lapses are compounded by systemic neglect and what Emuchay describes as "the worst forms of unfair labour practices," further undermining ASUU's impact. A key proposition emerging from this study is that meaningful improvements in the terms and conditions of academic employment in Nigerian universities require a more strategic, adaptive, and productivity-focused unionism. This includes a shift towards embracing global best practices in industrial relations—especially those rooted in constructive social dialogue, ethical leadership, and evidence-based advocacy.

This finding is also corroborated by Omole *et al.* (2006), whose research concluded that the level of engagement in collective bargaining between university staff unions and management has minimal impact on the actual implementation of agreements, particularly concerning fringe benefits. They attribute this ineffectiveness to widespread compromise and corruption within union leadership, where some leaders are allegedly co-opted or "bought over" by management during negotiations—thus weakening the union's position and derailing genuine efforts at advocacy.

Contrary to these findings, however, Collins (2013) presents a more optimistic perspective. His study found that unionization can foster a sense of security and motivation among academic staff, enhancing their productivity and overall institutional performance. According to Collins, when unions are perceived as trustworthy protectors of members' rights, they inspire loyalty and collective action, empowering employees to demand and secure improved welfare and working conditions. This dual narrative is further reflected in the position of Oluwatobi (2007), who emphasized that ASUU has, at certain points in its history, made strategic moves to address systemic challenges. For instance, in 2001, the union proposed the implementation of the African Average Salary Scale as a way to curb the brain drain and academic attrition crisis. In addition to salary advocacy, ASUU has been instrumental in pushing for other professional development benefits such as staff development grants, research fellowships, academic travel funding, and retirement support—all aimed at fostering academic excellence and capacity-building.

The findings of this study also reveal a correlation between educational attainment and the effectiveness of union advocacy for welfare improvements. Workers with higher and moderate educational qualifications appear to enjoy more welfare benefits than their less-educated counterparts. This is consistent with the view of Blyton and Turnbull (2022), who argue that education enhances a worker's capacity to assert their socio-economic and professional interests and contributes to the development of responsible, socially engaged citizenship.

Nonetheless, the study reveals a persistent shortfall in the provision of structured training and professional development programs across government tertiary institutions. This underscores the

need for ASUU and relevant stakeholders to develop a more robust framework for staff training and career advancement—particularly in a fast-changing global academic landscape where continued learning is critical to institutional relevance and competitiveness.

Suffice it to say that while ASUU remains a critical player in the pursuit of academic welfare and professional development, its overall impact appears constrained by both internal inefficiencies and external structural barriers. Reinvigorating the union's influence would require a strategic overhaul that prioritizes capacity building, institutional accountability, and the adoption of international best practices in industrial relations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and often contradictory role of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in influencing academic welfare and professional development within the University of Calabar. Although ASUU has historically served as a formidable advocate for the rights and interests of academic staff, the evidence from this research suggests that its current influence in securing welfare incentives and promoting career growth opportunities remains limited. The null hypothesis was accepted, affirming that ASUU's trade union activities have not significantly improved fringe benefits, allowances, or structured professional advancement in the university. This outcome underscores the duality of ASUU's trajectory—on one hand, a persistent and vocal union engaging with systemic dysfunction, and on the other, a body constrained by internal inefficiencies, weak negotiation power, and external political interference. The interplay of these factors reveals that while ASUU has made notable gains in advocating for academic staff—such as proposing salary reforms and supporting research grants—its impact is often blunted by implementation failures, compromised leadership, and a hostile policy environment. Nonetheless, the study also shows that unionization holds latent potential for institutional transformation. Where effectively managed, unions can inspire professional commitment, foster accountability, and protect workers' rights. To unlock this potential, ASUU must embrace reform, internal democratization, and global best practices in labour engagement. Only through strategic recalibration can the union realign its mission with the evolving demands of Nigeria's higher education sector and restore its credibility as a catalyst for change.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study and the conclusion drawn, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Given that ASUU's influence has not translated into measurable improvements in welfare and professional growth, the union must shift from rhetoric-heavy activism to a results-based advocacy model. This includes tracking agreement implementation, publishing performance scorecards, and holding both union leadership and government accountable for unmet welfare commitments.
- ii. To address internal inefficiencies and leadership compromises that weaken ASUU's bargaining power, the union should institute leadership vetting mechanisms, anti-corruption safeguards, and regular leadership performance reviews. Training in strategic industrial relations and collective bargaining should also be mandatory for union executives.
- iii. Instead of reactive strikes, ASUU should proactively collaborate with university authorities to design and institutionalize clear, consistent pathways for academic staff

development—including sabbaticals, research grants, and training. Embedding these opportunities in university policies would ensure they are less vulnerable to political interference or budgetary neglect.

- iv. Recognizing the external political constraints limiting ASUU's effectiveness, the union should adopt a multi-level engagement strategy. This includes lobbying at the National Assembly, leveraging civil society and student unions, and building media alliances to frame academic welfare as a national development imperative—thus expanding its influence beyond confrontational strike actions.

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