

## **Prolonged Academic Union of Universities (ASUU) Strikes and Socio-Economic Challenges of Niger Delta University (NDU) Vendors**

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### **Abstract**

*Strikes have become frequent in many African public universities with severe social and economic losses to staff, students and vendors. Vendors who throng such campuses and environs to provide needed services to the community experience difficult times when strikes actions last long. The study examined the socio-economic implications of prolonged university lecturers' strikes on campus vendors at the Niger Delta University (NDU) with a view to understanding the challenges of vendors, their coping measures and implications. A total of 471 respondents were interviewed randomly cutting across several business operators with a purpose-made questionnaire. Data was analyzed using the arithmetical mean on a four-point Likert type scale. The study found the vendors experiencing several challenges and initiated measures to reduce the effects. It recommended that vendors should prepare for the eventuality since strikes have become very frequent in Nigerian universities. It also recommended that proprietors of institutions timely dialogue with staff unions to avoid negative implications of strikes on staff, students, the vendors and the proprietors*

**Key words:** *Vendors and Prolonged ASUU Strikes*

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### **Introduction**

Since the formation of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1978 it has embarked on not less than 16 national, and several domestic strike actions by chapters of the union (Wikipedia; Tolu-Kolawole, 2023). ASUU, an offshoot of the then Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT) established in 1965 with the objective of protecting and advancing the welfare of members in the then Nigeria's five premier universities at Ibadan, Lagos, Zaria, Nsukka and Ile-Ife. However, NAUT was bereft of trade union methods of operation. This led to the emergence of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1978 with clearly defined objectives to protect and advance the socio-economic and cultural interests of the nation, encourage the participation of its members in the affairs of the university system and the nation at large (ASUU, 2017). Thus, from inception the union was out to fight for the interests of members, students, the university system and the entire nation which over have had serious implications on the educational development of the nation. The number of universities in the country have also grown from the initial five, to over 200. Currently Nigeria has over 115 public universities - 52 Federal, 63 state - and 147 private universities (though

some are yet to take off) (NUC, 2023). The number of universities keep increasing almost daily as politicians' keep seeking for the establishment of such institutions in their constituencies because of envisaged benefits. Also, with the transfer of higher education from the exclusive to concurrent list in Nigeria's 1999 constitution, influential and wealthy politicians, businessmen and private organizations have been licensed to set up private universities.

Strikes in the ivory tower have so much implications on society - government, parents, students, lecturers, host communities, and vendors within and around the university environment. When strikes are activated by the union withdraws one out of the three components of their job – teaching/supervision, but continue with the two other aspects of research, and community service. For this reason lecturers have argued that their salaries should be paid even when strikes lasts since the two other aspects of their job ensues (ASUU, 2017).

When academic activities draw to a halt and university campuses and host communities are deserted by students, the businesses of vendors around such campuses witness a lull as their target clients are not available to patronize them. Vendors of all categories are thus affected – bookstores, provision stores, photocopying stores, mechanics, commercial drivers, sanitation agencies, landlords and their agents, garment makers and sellers, churches, bukka operators, etc. The Guardian reports that campus vendors recorded an estimated 70 percent decrease in patronage during November 2020 and January 2021 due to the strike action by the academics, which had socio-economic implications on their livelihood (The Guardian, 2022).

ASUU argues that it has painfully continued to embark on strike actions because of the consistent failure of government to implement Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and Memorandum of Action (MOA) freely negotiated and signed between Federal Government of Nigeria and the union to address the issues of brain-drain, government's poor commitment to the payment of academic earned allowances; the continued use of the Integrated Personnel Payroll Information System (IPPIIS) instead of adopting UTAS (Universities Transparency and Accountability Solution) - a more efficient software developed by ASUU, the proliferation of the universities in the country, funding, retirement age of the professorial cadre, etc. (Tolu-Kolawole, 2023).

One category of Nigerians particularly affected by the incessant and prolonged strikes apart from the students, are vendors in and around campuses of higher institutions. As small scale operators their sales and revenue are limited, so they struggle to generate funds to keep them in business which are tailored to serve staff and students are often adversely affected when lecturers down tools. When students vacate for a long time, all their world seems to crumble – vulnerable to cash flow disruptions resulting in not meeting financial obligations to suppliers, creditors, utility providers, etc., loss of perishable materials, paying rents for shops not utilized, temporary or permanent closure of business, etc. This is often their predicament when strikes ensues.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The strikes embarked upon by university academics affects all stakeholders in the system, including (i) students whose studies are disrupted and graduation dates become uncertain; (ii) lecturers who prosecute the action on one part, and welcome back their children in tertiary institutions back home on the other, for an action initiated by them, (iii) vendors of all category who make their living through small scale businesses in and around university towns but are forced to close down operations for lack of patronage; and (iv) host community property owners whose rent on property

expires and no one comes to hire same because the students and businesses in town are temporarily closed down or function at low ebb because the vast majority of their student-clients have deserted campuses.

When strikes are declared, the whole society laments on the plight of the students whose studies may be disrupted, yet they are not the only persons affected (Seye, 2023). The other category are marketers, computer engineers/operations, photocopiers, drivers, artisans, etc. who are generally referred to as vendors, and property owners whose property remains unhired, vandalized or burgled during such periods because they are neither occupied nor secured.

Writers have given much attention to the excruciating pains and agony of students who have to leave campus because their teachers have decided to suspend lectures (Premium Times, 2023), but very little is discussed of the socio-economic challenges faced by vendors in and around University campuses. The need to unravel and document their challenges and livelihood coping measures with the Niger Delta University (NDU) vendors as case in point necessitated the main reasons for the study.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the study is to analyze the socio-economic challenges of NDU vendors when prolonged strikes actions are initiated by ASUU. Others are:

- To examine the socio-economic challenges posed by ASUU strikes on NDU campus vendors.
- To evaluate the coping measures often initiated by the vendors
- To find out the implications of the coping measures adopted on the vendors.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide the study.

- What are the associated socio-economic challenges faced by NDU vendors during ASUU strikes?
- What coping strategies were initiated by vendors to stay afloat during strike periods?
- What is the impact of coping strategies adopted by the vendors?

### **Literature Review**

ASUU has embarked on several national and domestic strikes since inception which have had severe psychological, social and economic implications on the citizenry. The union argue that should they stop fighting the university system might be destroyed like the primary and secondary schools teachers who took no action until almost all the children have left public schools for private schools largely owned by the politicians and their cronies whose source of income and intentions remain unclear (ASUU, 2020). This position was supported by the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria, who averred that for the recurring ASUU strikes to end all politicians and government officials need to be barred from sending their children and wards to private institutions and institutions outside Nigeria for studies so that all hands could be committed to resolve the issues (Tolu-Kolawole, 2023).

In university towns, most of the small-scale businesses are geared towards serving the needs of the student population. Therefore when students are away due to strikes the communities relapses into

coma (Seye, 2023). Tertiary institutions are seen as catalyst for rapid socio-economic development of communities as they draw people of all walks of life to them because of the enormous educational and economic activities that comes with them (O’Flaherty, 2005).

Businesses around government universities in Nigeria bleeds from prolonged strikes by ASUU, with many being shut or perform only skeletal operations since erstwhile bubbling campuses have turned into ghost towns. Food vendors, computer operators, shuttle drivers, hairdressers, barbers and several other entrepreneurs operating on campuses suffer from the strikes (Balaji, 2022).

Universities or other tertiary level educational institutions are known to be powerful instruments for socio-economic development of host communities hence communities’ jostles to have them sited in their localities. Phelps (1998) corroborated this when he said states or regions could leverage more economic benefits from activities of such institutions in urban areas.

In recent times strikes actions by ASUU and other staff unions in the ivory tower in Africa have become too frequent. Universities in Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Guinea, Senegal, etc. in Africa witnessed work stoppages resulting in delays in students graduation time principally due to reluctance of proprietors of institutions to implement mutually arrived solutions at improving working conditions befitting their training and output, staffing, overcrowded classrooms, and provision of adequate teaching and learning facilities (Ibe, 2024). The author notes further that local economies which operate within and around such institutions suffer severe losses during industrial actions which are often decimated as the economies of such businesses thrive mainly through students and staff patronage. The housing market, local markets, small and medium scale businesses spring up here targeted at the needs of mainly students and staff. ASUU strikes affect the whole society, with lecturers reluctantly suspending lectures as directed by the union, and welcome their own children in Universities back home for an action initiated by their union, parents and students plans are distorted as they cannot predict when their children would graduate from the universities, vendors closing shops due to lack of patronage, campus drivers and artisans stay out of business, and undue pressures on government to take action to end strike, as well as leadership of the union who leave their families behind to continue to stay in Abuja for meetings for several months.

### **Methodology**

The descriptive research design was adopted as it suits the explorative nature of the study. It aided the study in identifying appropriate and desired issues for inclusion, with the objective of analyzing the livelihood coping strategies of vendors of Niger Delta University (NDU) during periods the school is closed to students due to industrial action. A purpose made questionnaire was utilized to gather information from respondents in and around the institution. The instrument was designed to capture the demographic variables of respondents, their challenges, coping strategies and socio-economic implications of the adopted coping strategies. Four final year students accompanied the researcher in questionnaire administration. The study adopted the Likert type four-point scale in the analysis of substantive variables, using the arithmetical mean. In order to make valid decisions the mean responses were computed on a four-point scale, thus:  $4+3+2+1 - 10/4 = 2.50$ . Means scores from 2.50 and above were accepted, while those below were rejected. The cross-tabulation statistical tool was adopted in analyzing the demographic variables while the mean was used to determine the strength of variables relative to the weakness of others. The sample size comprised of 471 respondents.

### Study Area

Through an Act of parliament, the Bayelsa State House of Assembly established the Niger Delta University (NDU) in the year 2000, with lectures commencing in 2001/2002 session in March 2002 in eleven faculties, with 1,502 students. Currently the student population is estimated at about 18,000 in thirteen faculties at the end of 2021/2022 session. Its academic staff population is put at 830 lecturers (NDU, 2023). Two communities in Wilberforce Island – Amassoma and Ogbiri – are hosts to the University sited at Wilberforce Island. The Wilberforce Island is a major landmass occupied by communities in four out of the eight Local Government Areas (LGAs) that comprise Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

### Data Analysis

**Table 1: Demographic variables**

Variables	Freq.	Percentage
<b>1. Sex</b>		
Male	277	58.81
Female	194	41.19
<b>2. Age</b>		
15-25 years	118	25.05
26-35 years	191	40.55
36-45 years	88	18.69
46 & above years	74	15.71
<b>3. Marital Status</b>		
Single	271	57.54
Married	143	30.36
Widowed	28	5.94
Divorced/Separated	29	6.16
<b>4. Level of Education</b>		
No formal education	23	4.89
Primary	71	15.07
Secondary	273	57.96
Tertiary	104	22.08
<b>5. Nature of Business</b>		
Computer services/typing	76	16.14
Bookstores/Stationeries	21	4.46
POS/Mini-Banking	37	7.86
Catering services	89	18.90
Raw food items sellers	33	7.01
Cooking ingredients sellers	41	8.70
Hair dressing/barbers		
Laundry services	11	2.34
Drivers/mechanics	31	6.58
Building materials dealers	13	2.76
Builders/Carpenters	19	4.03

House landlords/Agents	10	2.12
Others	38	8.07
	52	11.04

Table 1 at a glance shows the demographic variables of our respondents comprising 277 (28.81%) and 194 (41.19%) as male and female, respectively, making a total of 471. On the age of respondents, 118 (25.05%) are aged 18-25, 191 (40.55%) are within the age bracket of 26-35, 88 (18.69%) aged 36-45, while 74 (15.71%) ranged from 46 years and above. Similarly, 271 (57.54%) as single, 143 (30.36%) as married, 28 (5.94%) as widows, and 29 (6.16%) have either separated or divorced from their marital partners. On educational attainment, 23 (4.89%) claim they had no formal educational training, 71 (15.07) attained primary school level education, and a majority of 273 (57.96%) attended secondary level education. Only 104 (22.08%) are products of tertiary institutions.

The study also revealed the nature of respondents' business operations. A total of 76 (16.14%) are into providing computer services/typing, 21 (4.46%) are sellers of bookstores and stationeries, while 37 (7.86%) are operators of mini-banking services/POS (point of sales) business. A total of 89 (18.90%) provides catering services while 33 (7.01%) and 41 (8.70%) engage in selling fresh food items, and cooking ingredients, respectively. Some 11 (2.34%) respondents engage in hair dressing and barbing services, 31 (6.58%) provide laundry services; 13 (4.03%) are operators of inter or intra campus shuttle services, 19 (4.03%) sells building materials, and 10 (2.12%) are either builders or carpenters or both. Still 38 (8.07%) are either landlords or property agents providing housing services. A total of 52 (11.04%) provides various other unclassified services to the university community.

**Table 2. Challenges faced by NDU vendors from prolonged strike actions**

S/N	Variable	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean (X)	Decision
1.	Loss of workforce	101 404	108 324	133 266	129 129	1128	2.39	Accepted
2.	Loss of jobs/contracts	171 684	103 309	93 186	104 104	1283	2.73	Accepted
3.	Loss of perishable goods	119 476	141 423	98 196	113 113	1208	2.56	Accepted
4.	Lack of sales/business	121 484	129 387	121 242	100 100	1213	2.56	Accepted
5.	High rate of shop burglary/theft	87 348	76 228	208 416	100 100	1090	2.61	Accepted
6.	Payment of rents for shops not utilized	174 696	113 339	88 176	96 96	1307	2.77	Accepted
7.	High rate of unhired properties	113	137	98	123			



		452	411	196	123	1182	2.51	Accepted
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Table 2 indicates that respondents faced several challenges due to the absence of their target clients (staff and students) from town/campus due to cessation of academic activities. All items in table 2 – loss of jobs/contracts, loss of perishable goods, loss of sales/business, high rate of shop theft, and payment for rents of shops not utilized, as well as high rate of unrented properties were accepted since their mean was within the acceptable value. This position is in line with Ibe (2024) who posits that the economies of businesses around universities are tailored to service staff and students and so in their absence such economies crumble.

**Table 3. Coping strategies adopted by vendors vendors**

S/N	Variable	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean (X)	Decision
1.	Suspend/reduce wages payable to workforce	77 304	74 222	201 402	119 119	1047	2.22	Rejected
2.	Source for jobs/contracts from outside the university environs	152 608	145 435	83 166	91 91	1300	2.76	Accepted
3.	Acquisition/sale of only little quantities of perishable goods	118 472	215 645	83 166	55 55	1338	2.84	Accepted
4.	Temporary closure of business or provides on skeletal services	211 844	113 339	106 212	41 41	1436	3.05	Accepted
5.	Transfer goods/business from rented shops to personal homes	82 328	73 219	189 378	127 127	1052	2.23	Rejected

Table 3 sought to unveil the strategies adopted by vendors to cushion the effects of strikes on their businesses. Here items 1 and 5 were rejected because their mean values were below 2.50, while items 2, 3, and 4 were accepted. This shows that the strategies adopted by vendors to survive the lull period included sourcing for jobs/contracts from outside the university campus, acquisition/sale of only limited quantities of perishable items, and provision of skeletal services or temporary closure of business. On the other hand, items 1 and 5 were rejected because it was not easy to reduce and/or suspend wages as they had hopes that the strike action would be suspended soon. Also transferring goods to personal homes where clients might not know or easily access was not a good option for many.

**Table 4. Impacts of coping strategies on university vendors**

S/N	Variable	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean (X)	Decision
1.	Loss of experienced workforce	119 476	149 447	99 198	104 104	1225	2.60	Accepted
2.	Staying out of business for the period negatively affected the fortunes	71 498	73 219	168 336	159 159	1212	2.53	Accepted

3.	Buying/selling only limited quantities of perishable goods results in not being able to breakeven	159 636	126 378	98 196	88 88	1298	2.76	Accepted
4.	Inability to get new jobs/contracts/loss of clients result in losses	141 564	133 399	99 198	98 98	1259	2.67	Accepted
5.	Loss of shop space	75 300	83 249	169 338	144 144	1031	2.19	Rejected
6.	Housing properties without occupants	133 532	140 420	98 196	100 100	1248	2.65	Accepted

Following strike actions and disruption of business on campus, many vendors in a bid to survive the rough times ventured into different strategies. Table 4 seek to know the effect of the coping strategies on their livelihood and businesses. Items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 were accepted, while item 5 was rejected because its mean value was below 2.50. The table affirms that ASUU's industrial actions had the effect of vendors' loss of skilled workforce, staying out of business which negatively affected their fortunes and livelihood, buying/selling only limited quantities of perishables makes them unable to breakeven, and housing properties remaining not rented or occupied resulting in loss of expected revenue.

### Discussion of findings

Existing literature and this study no doubt has shown that campus vendors' clients are majorly staff and students. Any infraction that reduce their population on campus or town was injurious to the vendors' livelihood and business. Thus, when strikes ensue their losses are innumerable and ranges from loss of skilled workforce, jobs, contracts, perishable consumables, lack of business/sales, high rate of shop theft, loss of rent paid for shops which were not utilized, and several apartments remaining unrented. To reduce the effects on their businesses and livelihood, during prolonged strike actions. Many vendors initiated various measures which later had several unintended implications on them. Suspension or reduction of wages to their workers resulted in losing many experienced hands, as such workers seek alternative engagements elsewhere to make ends meet. When strikes are eventually suspended many work hands because they may have gotten alternative engagements. Temporarily staying out of business negatively affected their fortunes and hence livelihood. Also buying or selling limited quantities of perishable consumables result in not being able to breakeven. Same is true for their inability to get new jobs or contracts results in eating into their business capital. Again many shop spaces and living apartments remained unrented which adversely affected the fortunes of property owners. This position is in tandem with Bolaji (2022) and Seye (2023) which impinges that ASUU strike actions come with losses and sufferings on the part of campus vendors.



## Conclusion/Recommendations

There is no doubt that businesses suffer when staff and students are forced to withdraw from campuses of tertiary institutions as a result of withdrawal of services by members of staff union. Vendors at the Niger Delta University (NDU) had been severely affected by the several strike actions embarked upon by NDU branch of ASUU. Vendors experience boom in patronage when schools are in session so many vendors do not contemplate relocating away from such campuses. Besides, university campuses and towns continue to witness increased population and therefore higher patronage. Strikes have become common occurrence in our school system and so vendors should prepare for the rainy day. Proprietors of institutions of learning should be conscious of the implications of strikes on students and timely settle disputes with staff unions to avoid unnecessary withdrawal of services by staff. It takes months or years for ASUU to embark on any strike action. It only initiate action after negotiations have brokendown, with at least 21 days strike notice as enshrine in the labour act in the country. ASUU often go on consultations and sensitization of branches before actions are activated, and this information is often in the public domain. Vendors should use this period of notice and sensitization in planning their businesses so as not to be caught unaware.

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