Introduction

The recent strike action in Nigeria’s university system and the responses of various key stakeholders call for a reappraisal of the system. The reappraisal becomes necessary in the light of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) – an emergency situation – during the strike action; the emerging sensibilities among academic staff as a result of differences in the ideologies that birthed and sustained the strike; and the dwindling ranking of Nigeria’s public universities in relation to other universities on the African continent.

University education system in Nigeria

University education in Nigeria, as in other nations of the world, is expected to make an optimum contribution to national development (Nigerian Educational Research Development Council (NERDC), 2014: 39). As stated in the country’s national education policy, this is to be accomplished by

- intensifying and diversifying its programme for the development of high-level manpower within the needs of the nation;
- making professional course contents reflect national requirements;
- making students part of a general programme of all-round improvement in university education;
- and making entrepreneurial skills acquisition a requirement for all Nigerian universities.

(NERDC, 2014: 41–42)
As of April 2018, the system comprised 170 universities, consisting of 43 federal, 48 state and 79 private. Suffice it to state that the federal and state universities are funded by the government at the federal and state government level respectively. The overall enrolment data (undergraduate and postgraduate) for 98% of the universities is 2,041,291 (National Universities Commission (NUC), 2018). This accounts for a paltry enrolment capacity of only 1% of the nearly 200 million citizens of Nigeria. Also, 66.1%, 27% and 6.9% of the students enrolled are in federal, state and private universities respectively (NUC, 2018). Undergraduate enrolment accounts for 1,798,958 (88.13%) of the earlier stated total enrolment, with the implication that few graduates enrol for postgraduate education in the universities in the country. The low enrolment figures for university education in the country are attributable to various reasons, including lack of infrastructural facilities hence low carrying capacity of available institutions; unsatisfactory student experiences such as delay in the year of graduation due to incessant strike actions; limited experiential and entrepreneurial curricula and extracurricular activities that allow for full realization of self and careers; and the declining recognition of Nigerian universities’ certificates, among others. The focus of this commentary is public/government universities, which consist of both federal and state-owned universities.

The university system in Nigeria has evolved since the establishment of the first university college in Ibadan, which was affiliated to University College London in 1948. However, it faces a myriad of problems. Some of these problems, as articulated by various higher education scholars, include: inadequate funding; labour unionism and unharmonized academic calendar; inadequate infrastructural facilities and laboratory equipment; paucity of research and development; inadequate access to higher education; insufficient manpower; lack of team spirit; lack of adequate and reliable statistical data; autonomy; overpopulation of students and rising incidences of unaccredited academic programmes; dichotomy between academic and technical and vocational education; rising unemployment rate in relation to the relevance of the curriculum; globalization and international competition; poverty; and value disintegration, among others (Jaja, 2013; Nwagwu, 1997; Ogunyemi, 2013). Of these problems, two have featured prominently in the system. They are problems of funding and elongated strike actions by both academic and non-academic staff unions. Availability of sufficient funds is key to promoting the efficacy and effectiveness of the university system in achieving its goals. Elongated as well as hydra-headed focused strike actions are inimical to the efficacy and effectiveness of the system irrespective of the level of resources provided by stakeholders such as government and the organized private sector. The perceived relationship between the duo of strike and funds in the nation’s university system is such that union bodies have a culture of using strike as a means to coerce government to provide funds for the system. Spirited calls have therefore been made for unions to evolve novel and non-disruptive ways of demanding rights for their members and improved funding for the revitalization of the system. Insistent use of strikes in spite of these calls and the inefficacy of the strike actions in the realization of revitalization only give unions away as being stereotypic and the perception of their collective struggles as selfish missions. The culture of strike is so promoted and pronounced in the nation’s university system that some teaching staff have a counter submission against the spirited calls for the disuse of strikes. The submission is that ‘those who are against the use of strikes should themselves state other alternatives and other related discipline that could be used’. One does not need a PhD in finance, economics, public administration, higher education studies or related disciplines in order to decipher that the celebrated victory by the unions, of the release of ₦40b (equivalent to US$104,986,981) in recent times by the federal government for the payment of outstanding earned academic
allowances to both academic and non-academic staff unions after about 10 months of strike action, to the exclusion of other issues, does not match the losses incurred in the quest towards the substantive revitalization of the universities.

Most astonishingly, the solutions to these perennial problems are already captured in the nation’s education policy, which asserted that the goals of tertiary education (which includes university education) shall be pursued through quality student intake; quality teaching and learning; research and development; high standards in the quality of facilities, services and resources; staff welfare and development programmes; provision of a more practical-based curriculum relevant to the needs of the labour market; generation and dissemination of knowledge, skills and competencies that contribute to national and local economic goals which enable students to succeed in a knowledge-based economy; a variety of flexible learning modes including full-time, part-time, block-release, day-release and sandwich programmes; access to training funds such as those provided by the Industrial Training Fund, Tertiary Education Trust Fund and Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme that are well structured, coordinated and supervised; maintenance of minimum educational standards through appropriate regulatory agencies; an all-inclusive admissions policy for national unity; supporting affordable, equitable access to tertiary education through scholarships and student loans; inter-institutional co-operation and linkages; and dedicated services to the community through extramural and extension services (NERDC, 2014: 40–41).

Commitment to these ideals by the stakeholders in the university education system in Nigeria is needed to lift the system from the conundrum and abyss of failure it has been in. Efforts should thence be geared towards translating these lofty policies into implementable actions that could be tracked to every stakeholder in the system. In addition, government should honour agreements with staff unions as much as staff are expected to be given to the provision of quality services geared towards effective learning, research and community development. It is when these paths are followed that the system could be well expected to respond rather than react to the challenges posed by emergencies such as the Boko Haram insurgencies, armed banditry and outbreaks of diseases such as COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for university education in Nigeria

COVID-19 is an eye-opener. It has revealed the deficiencies in world economies and systems in preparing for unforeseen circumstances and emergencies. The effects of COVID-19 on the already challenged educational system cannot be over-emphasized as it brought a halt to many academic activities. Many schools were forced to switch to an online mode of learning amidst different challenges. The adaptability of most schools/academia to this mode of learning continues, but challenges such as internet facilities/adaptability persist in the face of the already challenged academic calendar. It is on record that there was a strike action by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) at the time the directive for the suspension of academic activities in all educational institutions was issued by the federal government on 20 March 2020. It was expected that this directive would trigger ASUU to suspend the strike action and act in absolute solidarity with the government in stemming the spread of COVID-19 through advocacy and frontline engagement with the testing and treatment of infected persons (in the case of academic medical personnel). This period of suspension could also have been used to train academic staff in the use of ubiquitous, least-cost technologies that could be
used to facilitate remote and online teaching and learning. Yet the strike lingered for about 10 months. Government–union disagreements resulting in the strike actions made it difficult to come up with viable plans to tackle the issues brought to the fore by the pandemic. In essence, the unwillingness of the academic staff union to concede to compromises in order to salvage the dying state of the educational system which was attributable to the government’s undulating record of inadequate funding/planning became more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has made the minimal government efforts futile.

In the face of the adoption and adaptation of technology including e-learning tools when face-to-face meeting with students was threatened due to the pandemic, there are statements credited to some academic staff that ‘the state of infrastructural facilities in the higher education system simply depict a lack of preparedness for the use of e-learning’. The veracity of this statement in the face of ubiquitous Web 2.0 technologies such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook and readily available e-learning platforms such as Google classroom and Microsoft Teams raises questions about the willingness of academia to embrace change and innovations and respond to unplanned disruptions which are the hallmarks of the future in higher education. This latter postulation is of course not without deference to the barriers to the integration of e-learning in sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Adarkwah, 2020). Comparatively during this period, the higher education systems in South Africa and some neighbouring countries adopted these technologies earlier. The higher education system in these countries will continue to favourably compete for students in Nigeria in the light of emerging issues from our attitude and response to disruptions such as COVID-19. The need for the digitization of the official curriculum (UNESCO, 2020), increased access to higher education, concerns for social justice and the protection of students’ and lecturers’ rights, and bridging the digital divide among indigent students are some of the other concerns for the nation’s university system in the post COVID-19 era.

**For or against neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism, according to Handelman (2006) as cited in Egharevba (2008: 63), is an economic model that supports a free market mechanism with the state voluntarily reducing its role in the economy. The principle on which neoliberalism stands is that of competition between nations, regions, firms and individuals. Three variants of liberalism were identified by Mark and Richard (1995) in Egharevba (2008: 64), viz.: *orthodox*, *interventionist* and *institutional*. Several scholars (Broucker and De Wit, 2013; Ekanade, 2014; Ochwa-Echel, 2013) have written on the concept and the implications of its adoption as a philosophy that guides the national economy and specific sectors such as the higher education system in the light of perennial challenges facing that system. Two schools of thought therefore exist among Nigerian academics on the adoption of neoliberalism: those who are in support of it and those who are against its adoption. As it stands, there are two unions for academic staff in Nigerian universities. They are Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Congress of University Academics (CONUA). The former was established in 1978 while the latter was formed in 2018. The origin of CONUA’s fall-out with ASUU could be traced to an internal crisis at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Southwestern, Nigeria. The details of the crisis and the objectives of CONUA have been captured by the print media (Dike, 2018; Vanguard, 2020). ASUU has been observed to repudiate attempts at the
inculcation of (neo)liberalization policies in the university system and could be said to embrace Marxist principles and philosophy in the conduct of affairs at the ivory towers (ASUU, n.d.). The basis of the continued support for Marxist principles has been that (university) education is a public good and attempts at liberalization will erode the autonomy of the university education system. The stark reality of whether full autonomy could be maintained in the light of an average of 72.89% running cost funding by the government needs to be faced. He who pays the piper will continue to dictate the music! There are already elements of the new public management (see Broucker and De Wit, 2013 for details on this term) and by extension liberalization in public universities in sub-Saharan Africa (Ekanade, 2014; Ochwa-Echel, 2013). Academics must understand that continued elopement from these realities will make government formulate policies, wait for academics to revolt (through strike) and expect them to call or sue for negotiations and/or renegotiations – the outcome of which has always been academics receiving whatever the government intended to enforce ab initio rather than being at the centre of the policy making as major stakeholders. On the other hand, CONUA has been perceived to lend its support for the adoption and use of neoliberalization policies on the system as one of its purposes is the provision and propagation of pragmatic intellectual perspectives on social issues. It also claims to offer the university system the enhanced benefits of competition and choice. What is needed by academia irrespective of affiliation is an understanding of the concept of neoliberalism and how it could be contextualized for improved efficacy and efficiency of the system rather than blatant militarized obfuscation of the concept. As a guide towards the adaptation of neoliberalism, some of the questions that could be asked include: Can government continue to substantively fund the system in the light of dwindling economic fortunes? How long can the university survive the meagre funds from the government? Is it out of place for the university system to seek public–private partnerships or external sources of funding aside from government subventions? Can it be expected that government not interfere in the affairs of the university when it provides substantive funding? Are neoliberal principles so entirely cynical that they should be done away with? How are the universities that are being run based on these neoliberal principles faring? Academic Staff Union of Universities

Salience of the university education system, re-examination of the strike and the emerging dilemma of awakened sensibilities among university staff in the post COVID-19 era

Recent global university rankings showed that University of Ibadan, Southwestern Nigeria features within the 401–500th rank, Lagos State University is in the 501–600th rank and University of Lagos is within the 601–800th rank, while the majority of the other universities in the country feature beyond the 1000th rank (Times Higher Education, 2020). The first rank for a Nigerian university in the African list is the University of Ibadan in fifth place, while Lagos State University, University of Lagos, University of Nigeria and Obafemi Awolowo University ranked 10, 14, 27 and 27 respectively. Comparatively, some South African universities, namely University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University and University of KwaZulu-Natal have 155th, 201–250th, 251–300th and 351–400th ranks respectively. These universities are the first four in Africa.
The ranking of Nigerian universities in relation to South African universities calls for concern when viewed from the standpoint that Nigeria offered immense diplomatic aid to South Africa during the apartheid era and subsequently at independence. This is because it is expected that a nation that once stood as a more stable nation supporting another nation should be doing better (in key areas like education) than the one it once supported when compared in later years, but this is not the case between Nigeria and South Africa. In order to be positioned for relevance in the comity of universities in the world and in sub-Saharan Africa in the post COVID-19 era, the challenges hitherto recognized must be surmounted through well-planned, innovative and detailed policy formulation processes that are humane and devoid of bureaucratic bottlenecks. Such processes should also entail inclusive involvement of all relevant stakeholders irrespective of ideologies. These processes and the emanating decisions should consider that universities cannot be excised from the environment they operate in and to which their graduates return after graduation. Furthermore, it should be considered by all stakeholders that extensive industrial strike actions do not contribute to revitalization. For instance, it cannot be argued how strike actions positively contribute to the five indices of teaching (the learning environment), research (volume, income and reputation), citations (research influence), industry income (innovation) and international outlook (staff, students and research) which are used to assess universities for global ranking purposes (City University of Hong Kong, 2021). Yet the Nigerian university system experience has shown that the costs of strikes far outweigh the gains.

A sense of commitment to formulated policies by stakeholders is also needed. However, one of the perceived threats to commitment to tasks is the awakened sensibilities as a result of the perceived divergent support for or against elements of (neo)liberalization of the university system by existing academic staff unions. The emerging diversity should be embraced and well managed by all, as against invectives which will denigrate conviviality among academics and, in the long run, affect the accomplishment of set goals. Indeed, the post-COVID era holds a lot of threats and opportunities for academics which have to be minimized and maximized respectively in order to project the Nigerian university system into relevance.

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ORCID iD
Oyetoro Oyebode Stephen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7515-6806

Notes
1. The problem of finance was referred to as one of the greatest problems that faced the university system (Ukeje and Aisiku, 1982: 227). It still appears to be one of the greatest with respect to universities in Nigeria.
2. The estimated population of academic and non-academic staff (excluding clerical officers and junior technicians) in federally owned universities according to the NUC Statistical Digest (2018) is 39,258 and 85,035 respectively.

3. This was obtained for federally owned universities and institutions from the NUC Statistical Digest (2019) by first determining the average percentage running cost from internally generated revenue (IGR). The figure derived (27.11%) was then subtracted from 100. The range of the values for percentage running cost from IGR is 0% and 98.3%.

4. This fifth rank is shared with four other universities: Aswan University, Egypt; Durban University of Technology, South Africa; Makerere University, Uganda; and Mansoura University, Egypt.

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**Oyetoro Oyebode Stephen** is at present a doctoral candidate in Curriculum Studies (Social Science Education option) in the Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. His present areas of research include: entrepreneurship education, teacher effectiveness research, textbook evaluation, programme evaluation, gender studies and instructional leadership.

**Kareem Adeyinka Oluwaseun** possesses a PhD in Curriculum Studies (Science Education) and presently teaches in the Department of Science and Technology Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. His areas of research interest include but are not limited to STEM education, teacher education, scientific thinking processes and programme evaluation.