



Industrial Relations in Kenyan Universities: Fostering Collaboration and Preventing Strikes

Francis Murira Ndichu

Kenyatta University, Nairobi – Kenya

Email: Murira.francis@ku.ac.ke

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ABSTRACT

Strikes by university lecturers have become a recurring phenomenon in Kenya, disrupting academic calendars and impacting students' learning experiences. This paper explores the underlying causes of these strikes and proposes strategies to prevent them. By examining the role of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs), funding, and governance, we argue that adopting a collaborative approach to university management, improving communication channels, and ensuring the timely implementation of agreements can help mitigate lecturer strikes in Kenyan universities. We argue that addressing lecturer grievances, improving working conditions, and fostering collaborative industrial relations are crucial for strike prevention. The paper proposes a multifaceted approach, including competitive remuneration, professional development opportunities, and improved infrastructure. By implementing these strategies, Kenyan universities can reduce the likelihood of strikes, enhance teaching quality, and promote academic stability.

Key Words: industrial action, strikes, Collective Bargaining Agreements, quality education, job satisfaction, remuneration, industrial relations, organizational justice, grievances.

INTRODUCTION

University lecturers in Kenya have been involved in frequent strikes, disrupting academic calendars and compromising the quality of education (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012). These strikes have significant consequences, including delayed completion of courses, postponed exams, and truncated semesters, ultimately affecting students' academic performance (Kundi, 2015). They also have significant implications for the quality of education, research output, and the overall reputation of Kenyan universities. The strikes are often triggered by issues such as poor remuneration, inadequate

resources, and lack of consultation (Karanja, 2017).

Addressing these grievances is crucial for preventing strikes and promoting sustainable academic environments in Kenyan universities. Effective industrial relations, improved working conditions, and competitive remuneration are essential for reducing the likelihood of strikes (Odhiambo, 2014). This paper examines strategies for preventing strikes by university lecturers in Kenya, focusing on addressing lecturers' grievances, improving working conditions, and fostering collaborative industrial relations.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The issue of strikes by university lecturers in Kenya has been a recurring concern, with significant implications for academic stability and the quality of education. Previous studies have identified various factors contributing to lecturer strikes, including poor remuneration, inadequate resources, and lack of consultation (Karanja, 2017; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012). These strikes have been shown to negatively impact students' academic performance, institutional reputation, and the broader education sector (Kundi, 2015; Odhiambo, 2014).

Research has also highlighted the importance of effective industrial relations in preventing strikes and promoting sustainable academic environments. Collaborative governance, communication, and negotiation have been identified as key elements of effective industrial relations (Odhiambo, 2014; Karanja, 2017). Additionally, studies have emphasized the need for universities to address lecturer grievances, improve working conditions, and provide opportunities for professional development (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012; Kundi, 2015).

The theory of Industrial Relations, upon which this study is grounded, emphasizes the importance of collaboration and negotiation between employers and employees (Dunlop, 1958). Also relevant in this study is the concept of organizational justice, which highlights the need for fairness and equity in the workplace (Greenberg, 1990).

Empirical studies have shown that universities that prioritize lecturer welfare, provide opportunities for professional development, and foster collaborative industrial relations are less likely to experience strikes (Karanja, 2017; Odhiambo, 2014). For instance, a study on Kenyan universities found that lecturers who felt valued and supported were more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and less likely to participate in strikes (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2012).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded on the Theory of Industrial Relations (Dunlop, 1958) and the Concept of Organizational Justice (Greenberg, 1990). The Theory of Industrial Relations emphasizes the importance of collaboration and negotiation between employers and employees in managing conflicts and promoting stability in the workplace. In the context of Kenyan universities, this theory suggests that effective industrial relations between lecturers, management, and government agencies are crucial for preventing strikes and promoting sustainable academic environments.

The Concept of Organizational Justice, on the other hand, highlights the need for fairness and

equity in the workplace. This concept is relevant to this study as it emphasizes the importance of addressing lecturer grievances, ensuring fair treatment, and providing opportunities for professional development. When lecturers perceive that they are being treated fairly and with respect, they are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and less likely to participate in strikes.

Industrial relations refer to the interactions between lecturers, management, and government agencies in Kenyan universities. This study proposes that effective industrial relations between lecturers, management, and government agencies reduce the likelihood of strikes in Kenyan universities. Organizational justice refers to the perception of fairness and equity in the treatment of lecturers in Kenyan universities. Lecturer grievances refer to issues such as poor remuneration, inadequate resources, and lack of consultation that contribute to lecturer dissatisfaction and strikes. This study assumes that addressing lecturer grievances and promoting organizational justice increases lecturer job satisfaction and reduces the likelihood of strikes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study discusses the interplay between the various variables. The Independent Variable of the study is lecturer grievances, which are pegged on poor remuneration, inadequate resources, and lack of consultation, leading to industrial Relations. These grievances could be addressed through mechanisms such as collaboration between lecturers, management, and government agencies, and effective communication and negotiation, organizational justice (Greenberg, 1990; Kundi, 2015). Other strategies include fair treatment of lecturers and providing opportunities for professional development. When this is not done, the aggrieved lecturers have no option except to engage in an industrial action.

The Dependent Variable of the study is the prevention of strikes, whose result would be a reduced likelihood of strikes and sustainable academic environments. The Intervening Variables in this study are University Governance (including leadership style and decision-making processes by the individual university management) and Government Policies (including education policies and labour laws).

This conceptual framework proposes that addressing lecturer grievances, promoting effective industrial relations, and ensuring organizational justice can contribute to the prevention (or at least reduction) of strikes and sustainable academic environments in Kenyan universities. The framework also acknowledges the role of university governance and government policies as intervening variables that can influence the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

METHODOLOGY

This study offers a philosophical reflection on the phenomenon of frequent industrial actions by lecturers in public universities, to propose a viable solution in view of a sustainable academic environment. Being a philosophical investigation, this paper employs Philosophical Analysis as its primary method of study.

Philosophical Analysis

Philosophical analysis is used in this study to examine the underlying assumptions, concepts, and principles that shape the issue of strikes in Kenyan universities. This method involves a systematic and critical examination of concepts, assumptions, and principles that underlie a particular issue or problem. It examines the concepts of industrial relations, organizational justice, and lecturer grievances, and how they relate to the prevention of strikes in Kenyan universities. To do this, it examines the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie the issue of strikes in Kenyan universities. It scrutinizes the nature of the relationship between lecturers, management, and government agencies, how these stakeholders perceive the issue of strikes, and the implications of these perceptions for preventing strikes.

Philosophical analysis also examines the ethical dimensions of strikes in Kenyan universities. It scrutinizes the moral implications of lecturers going on strike, and how these implications relate to the rights and interests of students, parents, and the broader society (Kundi, 2015). Furthermore, philosophical analysis is used to critically evaluate the concepts and theories that underlie the strategies for preventing strikes in Kenyan universities. To this end, the study has studied the strengths and limitations of the theory of Industrial Relations and the concept of organizational justice in explaining the causes of strikes, and how this theory can help to develop effective strategies for preventing strikes.

Application of Philosophical Analysis

This study has employed three criteria or procedures of analysis in order to investigate the question of industrial actions in view of a sustainable educational environment in Kenyan public universities. These procedures are conceptual analysis, critical analysis, and ethical (or normative) analysis. Conceptual analysis has been used to examine the concepts of industrial relations, organizational justice, and lecturer grievances, and how they relate to the prevention of strikes in Kenyan universities. Critical evaluation was used to scrutinize the strengths and limitations of the theory of industrial relations in explaining the causes of strikes, and how it can be used to develop effective strategies for preventing strikes. Lastly, ethical analysis was used to examine the moral implications of lecturers going on strike, and how these implications relate to the rights and interests of students, parents, and the broader society.

INDUSTRIAL ACTIONS

Industrial actions are collective measures taken by workers—usually organized through trade unions—to express grievances or enforce demands related to employment conditions. They are typically used when normal negotiation or dispute-resolution mechanisms with employers have failed. There is a variety of forms of industrial actions. In strikes, workers withdraw their labour wholly or partially, and in go-slows, employees deliberately reduce the pace of work. In work-to-rule, workers strictly follow job descriptions and regulations, slowing operations, while in sit-ins/occupations, employees remain at the workplace but refuse to work. While picketing workers protest outside the workplace to publicize grievances and discourage replacement labour. Lastly, in lockouts, the employer bars workers from the workplace, often in response to union pressure.

Grounds for Justification of Industrial Actions

Industrial action is generally considered justified when it meets legal, moral, and procedural standards. There are about six or so such standards. First is a violation of workers' rights, such as in the cases of Non-payment or delayed payment of wages, unlawful dismissal or victimization of workers, and denial of legally guaranteed benefits (leave, pensions, safety protections). Second is the failure of collective bargaining, such as when employers refuse to negotiate in good faith, or in a case of breakdown or deadlock in negotiations after reasonable efforts at dialogue. Third is unfair or unsafe working conditions, like hazardous workplaces that threaten health or life, or excessive working hours, or exploitative labour practices.

Fourth is breach of employment contracts or labour laws where the employer ignores agreed Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs); this is interpreted as a systematic violation of labour regulations. The fifth ground is economic justice and dignity, which involves demands for fair wages that meet the cost of living, and resistance to discriminatory or degrading treatment at work. The sixth ground for a just industrial action is legal compliance. In many jurisdictions (including Kenya), industrial action is justified only on three conditions: if statutory procedures are followed (notice given, conciliation attempted), if the action is peaceful and lawful, or if it does not endanger essential services without legal authorization.

There are also ethical and social considerations that could be looked into put into in the case of an industrial action. Thus, from an ethical perspective, industrial action is justified when it is a last resort after dialogue has failed, seeks proportionate and reasonable demands, respects the rights of the public, especially in essential services, or aims at promoting fairness rather than causing unnecessary harm. Thus, industrial actions are legitimate tools for protecting workers' rights and promoting fairness in employment relations. They are justified when grounded in genuine grievances, pursued lawfully, and undertaken as a last resort after peaceful negotiation mechanisms have been exhausted.

Industrial Actions among Lecturers in Public Universities in Kenya

Kenya's public university sector has experienced a series of lecturer strikes over the years, affecting academic programmes, the quality of education, and student life. Understanding the historical context, causes, and resolutions of these strikes is crucial for developing effective strategies to prevent or manage future disputes. The history of lecturer strikes in Kenyan public universities dates back to the 1990s, with notable strikes occurring in 1994, 2002, 2009, 2017, 2024, and 2025.

Lecturer strikes in Kenyan universities have been a recurring phenomenon, driven by various factors including demands for better pay, improved working conditions, and implementation of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). For instance, the 2009 strike, which lasted for several weeks, was prompted by lecturers' demands for a 300% salary increase and improved benefits (Kenya Universities Staff Union, 2009). The 2024-2025 strike was sparked off by unpaid arrears and unfulfilled CBAs worth Sh9.7 billion. A deal was signed in February 2025, allocating Sh4.3 billion for CBA implementation in the 2024-2025 financial year and the remaining Sh5.4 billion to be disbursed in two instalments in the 2026-2027 financial year. In September 2025, a nationwide

strike was triggered by unpaid arrears worth Sh7.9 billion from two CBAs, affecting over 35 public universities. The strike was called off in November 2025 when the government agreed to honour the CBA in dispute in two phases.

Underlying Causes of Strikes among Lecturers in Public Universities in Kenya

Lecturer strikes in Kenyan universities are generally triggered by issues related to employment terms and conditions, funding and resource allocation, and governance and management. However, nine specific issues have been identified as the common causes of industrial action among lecturers in public universities in Kenya. First is salary and wage-related disputes where the lecturers complain of delayed or non-payment of salaries, low wages that do not match the rising cost of living, and disputes over salary harmonization and allowances. Second is failure to implement collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). More often than not the government or employers are known for signing CBAs but failing to implement the agreed terms. This may be due to delays in registering CBAs with the Employment and Labour Relations Court (ELRC) or budgetary constraints cited to justify non-implementation.

The third cause for strikes among lecturers in public universities is poor working conditions that include inadequate tools and facilities, unsafe or unhealthy working environments, and/or excessive workloads due to staff shortages (common in health and education sectors). Fourth is job insecurity and employment terms due to the use of short-term or casual contracts instead of permanent employment, unfair termination, redundancy without due process, or contract non-renewal, and lack of promotion or career progression structures. Fifth is due to governance and management issues, such as poor leadership, corruption, and a lack of transparency in institutions. Other managerial issues include unilateral decision-making by employers without consulting workers or unions, and the victimization or intimidation of union officials.

Sixth is delays in statutory and retirement benefits, such as failure to remit pension contributions, NHIF, or NSSF deductions, and unclear or unfair retirement and gratuity policies. The seventh is due to the rising cost of living and economic pressures due to high inflation and increased taxation, reducing real incomes, and the removal or reduction of subsidies affecting workers' purchasing power. Eighth is disputes over union recognition and representation in cases where the university managers refuse to recognize or negotiate with registered trade unions, and at times, due to inter-union rivalry affecting the representation of the lecturers. The last cause of strikes among lecturers is due to Government policy and budgetary decisions in the pretext of effecting austerity measures and budget cuts affecting wages and hiring, and delayed disbursement of funds to counties and public institutions.

Overall, it is apparent that most strikes in Kenya are driven by economic injustice (pay and benefits), failure to honour CBAs, and poor working conditions, particularly in the public sector. Weak implementation of labour agreements and fiscal constraints significantly contribute to the frequency and persistence of industrial action.

Impact of Lecturers' Strikes on Learners

Strikes by university lecturers in Kenya can significantly impact students' academic performance. They disrupt academic calendars, leading to delayed completion of courses, postponed exams, and truncated semesters. Students miss out on valuable learning opportunities, including lectures, tutorials, and laboratory sessions, and when lectures resume, there is rushed or compromised curriculum coverage that can affect the quality of education. Strikes can cause uncertainty and stress for students, impacting their mental health and well-being, and can result in additional costs for students, including extended accommodation and living expenses. These disruptions can have long-term consequences for students, including delayed graduation, reduced job prospects, and decreased academic achievement.

Improving Lecturers' Job Satisfaction

Industrial relations in Kenyan universities involve interactions between lecturers, management, and government agencies. Effective industrial relations can prevent strikes and promote a productive academic environment. Three parties can play a major role in this. University Management is responsible for policy-making and administration. The Lecturers' Union (Universities Academic Staff Union- UASU) represents lecturers' interests and negotiates on their behalf, while Government Agencies oversee university education and provide funding.

Various challenges often hinder expedited and effective resolution of staff issues. Breakdowns in communication can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Competing interests, where different stakeholders may have conflicting priorities and goals, can also lead to conflict. Another challenge is limited resources since the Universities often face budget constraints, limiting their ability to address lecturer grievances.

Best Practices would call for Regular dialogue, collective bargaining, and joint committees. This requires the establishment of channels for regular communication between stakeholders. Collective bargaining entails negotiating agreements on salaries, benefits, and working conditions. Joint committees need to be instituted to address specific issues, such as curriculum development or staff welfare. Supportive leadership is necessary to foster a positive work environment and address lecturer concerns. Through such collaborative industrial relations, Kenyan universities can reduce the likelihood of strikes and create a more productive academic environment

Strategies for Improving Lecturer Job Satisfaction in Kenyan Universities

Improving lecturer job satisfaction is crucial for enhancing teaching quality, reducing turnover, retaining skilled lecturers, and preventing strikes. Several strategies could be instituted, including competitive remuneration, professional development opportunities, improved working conditions, recognition and rewards, as well as collaborative governance. This translates to offering salaries and benefits that reflect the value of lecturers' work, providing training, research support, and career advancement opportunities, and ensuring access to resources, infrastructure, and a safe working environment. Ensuring job satisfaction also requires acknowledging and rewarding lecturers' contributions and achievements, as well as involving them in decision-making processes and fostering a sense of ownership. These strategies can contribute to a more positive work environment, increased job satisfaction, and improved lecturer retention.

Professional development opportunities, for instance, can significantly impact lecturer job satisfaction in Kenyan universities. It enhances teaching skills because it helps lecturers to improve their teaching methods and stay updated on curriculum developments. Research opportunities can boost lecturers' expertise and contribute to their field. Professional development can also lead to promotions and career growth, and increase confidence among the lecturers, leading to improved job satisfaction. Networking opportunities, such as collaborating with peers, can expand lecturers' professional networks. By investing in professional development, universities can demonstrate their commitment to lecturers' growth and well-being, leading to increased job satisfaction and retention. When lecturers lack job satisfaction, there can be a ripple effect on both the individual and the organization (University). Common outcomes include decreased productivity, high turnover rates, absenteeism, and poor morale and engagement. Other effects include reduced innovation, customer dissatisfaction, and health issues that could translate to poorer service and impact the university's reputation.

Remedies and Resolutions

Over the years, the Kenyan government and university administrations have employed various strategies to resolve lecturer strikes. Such strategies include collective bargaining, intervention by government agencies, and even legal measures through the courts. Negotiations between university administrations and lecturer unions have led to agreements on employment terms, salaries, and benefits (Kenya Universities Staff Union, 2017). Government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, have intervened in strike situations, facilitating dialogue and negotiations between parties (Ministry of Education, 2017). In some cases, courts have been involved in resolving disputes related to lecturer strikes, providing a legal framework for resolving conflicts (Republic of Kenya, 2018).

Lecturer strikes are not unique to Kenya; universities worldwide have experienced similar disputes. Strategies employed to resolve or avoid lecturer strikes globally are threefold. The first is collaborative Governance models, where Universities in countries like the United States and Canada have adopted collaborative governance models, which involve faculty members in decision-making processes (Altbach, 2011). The second strategy is improved communication Channels, which entail regular communication and consultation between university administrations and faculty members (Berdahl, 2017). Third is the timely implementation of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs); this ensures that CBAs are implemented promptly, which can reduce the likelihood of strikes (Hicks, 2018).

Other measures used to prevent lecturers' strikes include increased funding and performance-based pay models. Allocating more resources to the education sector and exploring partnerships with international institutions and donors can help address funding-related issues. This can also help in providing adequate resources and facilities to support teaching and research (Kundi, 2015). On the other hand, implementing performance-based pay models can help motivate lecturers and improve productivity.

Recommendations

The above discussions clearly indicate that preventing strikes by university lecturers in Kenya requires a multifaceted approach that addresses lecturer grievances, improves working conditions,

and fosters collaborative industrial relations. By implementing these strategies, Kenyan universities can promote sustainable academic environments and minimize disruptions to education. Towards this end, this paper has made several recommendations in view of reducing the likelihood of strikes, promoting academic stability, and achieving their mission of providing quality education to students.:

- i. Public Universities should prioritize lecturer welfare and provide opportunities for professional development.
- ii. Government agencies should develop policies that promote effective industrial relations and address lecturer grievances.
- iii. Universities should foster a culture of fairness and equity, and ensure that lecturers are treated with respect and dignity.
- iv. The stakeholders (namely the University management, Ministry of Education, other government agencies, and the University Academic Staff union) should establish a clear timeline for negotiations. They should set specific targets for resolving salary disputes and ensure the timely implementation of agreements.
- v. The Government should increase education funding: this requires allocating more resources to the education sector and exploring partnerships with international institutions and donors.
- vi. Implement Performance-Based Pay Models which reward lecturers for research output, teaching excellence, and student performance.
- vii. Foster Collaborative Governance by involving faculty members in decision-making processes and ensuring regular communication and consultation.

CONCLUSION

Preventing strikes by university lecturers in Kenya requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying causes of lecturer grievances, promotes effective industrial relations, and ensures organizational justice. This study has argued that addressing issues such as poor remuneration, inadequate resources, and lack of consultation can contribute to the prevention of strikes and sustainable academic environments in Kenyan universities. The study has also highlighted the importance of collaborative governance, effective communication, and negotiation in managing conflicts and promoting stability in the workplace. Furthermore, the study has emphasized the need for universities to prioritize lecturer welfare, provide opportunities for professional development, and foster a culture of fairness and equity.

Ultimately, preventing strikes by university lecturers in Kenya requires a commitment to promoting sustainable academic environments that support the well-being of lecturers, students, and the broader society. By working together, stakeholders can develop effective strategies for preventing strikes, avoiding brain drain, and promoting academic stability, which is essential for achieving the goals of higher education in Kenya.

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