

Taming the Hydra

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Abstract

The Nigerian tertiary education system, which is generally seen as a major contributor to national development, has been repeatedly crippled by a series of industrial strikes of different facets. These breakdowns have resulted in a truncated academic calendar, compromised educational quality, brain-drain, and further waste of human material potentials. The objective of this study was to critically examine the inefficiencies of existing governance structures in managing industrial disputes and to propose a more practical model to the government for implementation. This research employed a qualitative desk-based methodology, which involved a systematic literature review of academic journals, government reports, etc. Findings revealed that the approach of the government in managing industrial relations is weak, reactive in nature, slow and insensitive, among others. This paper, therefore, recommended the legislative devolution of certain negotiation powers to individual institutions as a quick response to the agitations from the institutions concerned.

Keywords: Waste down framework, industrial strikes, tertiary education, ASUU, governance, education financing, policy reform, Nigeria.

Introduction

Higher education is the very foundation of a nation's progress and the primary engine of human capital development. Universities in successful economies become the intellectual laboratories for innovation, technology transfer, and civic education. As a result, the well-being of the higher education system in developing countries like Nigeria is the major determinant of the country's socio-economic future (World Bank, 2019; Okebukola, 2020). However, contrary to its vital role, the tertiary education system in Nigeria is unstable most of the time. The repetitive cycle of industrial strike actions which are usually led by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other sister unions has become a sort of emblem of the systemic dysfunction that has been going on for a long time, the academic calendars have been getting crippled, the credibility of the institutions has been going down, and the problem of brain drain among the country's educated youths has been increasing (Babalola, 2021; Jega, 2022).

Repeated strikes reflect more than just labour disputes; they reveal the weakness of Nigeria's governance framework. Every round of industrial action results in the same routine: extended shutdowns, emergency negotiations, fragile settlements, and government defaults. This cycle has been going on for decades, thus turning the strikes from rare protest acts to those that can be predicted in the academic landscape. The results are very serious: students deprive themselves of valuable time for learning, researchers quit their projects, and the country loses its academic status internationally. Besides that, the whole economy gets into trouble with delayed graduate output, reduced productivity, and the emigration of skilled labour (Uchendu, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

The reasons for these disruptions have been pointed out on various occasions. Continuous underfunding has always been the main cause. Nigeria's budgetary allocation to education, which averages in the range of 5-8% of the total annual expenditure, is far below the UNESCO-recommended 15-20% (UNESCO, 2022). Even after taking care of funding shortfalls, the deeper issue of governance remains: the government keeps failing to honour its agreements. For example, the 2009 FGN, ASUU Agreement, which bordered on the issues of revitalisation funding, academic allowances, and institutional autonomy, has turned into a poster of broken promises (Olukoya, 2020). The attempt to introduce new administrative mechanisms, such as the disputed Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPS), has further worsened the relations between the state and unions in academia (Erunke, 2020).

Though the immediate causes of the crisis are well known, the fundamental reason for the education problem in Nigeria is that there is no self-enforcing governance mechanism that makes policy failure cost visible. Currently, there is very little institutional penalty for government inaction. The costs of neglect, such as disrupted learning, eroded morale, and lost productivity, are carried by students, families, and the broader economy, and not the state. Hence, failure of policy becomes economically invisible. The dominant "top-down" style of education management, characterised by short-term negotiation and political discretion, is responsible for perpetuating this invisibility (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Nwankwo, 2019).

It will take a paradigm shift to have this cycle broken: the shift from reactive, politically motivated crisis management to proactive, data-driven fiscal accountability. The study, therefore, introduces the "Waste Down" Governance Framework as a creative government, education relationship recalibration intervention. The framework rounds off traditional policy logic by grounding education financing in the measurable costs of inaction, the "waste." Rather than considering strikes as unfortunate disruptions, the model views them as measurable economic liabilities that should guide fiscal policy. It argues that if the cost of neglect is made clear, then the logical decision for any government would be regular investment and compliance.

The main research question that directs this research is: in what ways can the organised quantification and policy integration of the socio-economic costs of strike actions, the "waste", lead to the creation of a self-reinforcing governance mechanism that is capable of preventing repeated strikes in Nigeria's tertiary institutions?

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To investigate the evolution and recurring patterns of industrial strikes in Nigeria's tertiary education sector.
2. To analyse governance and policy frameworks which are in place to address the crises.
3. To propose the concept and features of the "Waste Down" as a lasting policy innovation.
4. To map out real policy measures for the actualisation of this model in Nigeria's public administration system.

In terms of methodology, the paper is qualitative and desk-based, and it relies on secondary data derived from academic publications, government official reports, union documents, and trustworthy media outlets. Such a method is quite appropriate for conceptual research, where the aim is to gather diverse pieces of evidence and come up with a single theoretical model rather than to test a hypothesis (Yin, 2018).

The importance of this work lies both in theory and in practice. From the theoretical point of view, the work enriches the literature on governance and policy with the introduction of a fiscal feedback mechanism which guides political decision-making towards the long-term national interest. From the practical side, the work offers a feasible framework to policymakers as a tool to

bring about stability in the tertiary education system of Nigeria and also to regain the trust between the government and the academic unions.

This paper starts with a literature review on strike actions and governance models in the education sector, which helps to identify the theoretical gap for the study in Section 2. In Section 3, the paper describes the methodology used. In Section 4, the "Waste Down" framework is described, and Section 5 discusses its implications and application in policy discourse, whereas Section 6 presents the recommendations for action as the conclusion.

Literature Review

This literature review is organised around four core thematic areas that explain the persistent industrial strike actions in Nigeria's tertiary education sector. These themes are: (1) the historical evolution and patterns of university strikes; (2) funding challenges and financial governance; (3) governance failures, policy inconsistencies, and government–union relations; and (4) the socio-economic and academic consequences of repeated strike actions. Together, these themes provide the conceptual foundation for understanding the systemic weaknesses that the Waste Down Governance Framework seeks to address.

Evolution and Patterns of Industrial Strikes in Nigerian Universities

Industrial conflict in Nigeria's tertiary education system has evolved over several decades, largely shaped by the country's political and economic transitions. The establishment of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in 1978 marked a turning point in organised resistance against declining educational standards (Adeyemi, 2018). Initially focused on professional development, the union soon became a central defender of academic integrity and staff welfare.

The 1980s witnessed entrenched crisis patterns driven by economic recession, structural adjustment policies, and severe reductions in public expenditure on education (Fatile, 2018). Military administrations often viewed ASUU's agitation as subversive, responding with bans and crackdowns, which deepened tensions (Ikuomola, 2019). With the return to democracy in 1999, expectations for improved relations rose, but weak governance structures and inconsistent policy implementation instead intensified labour militancy (Nwankwo, 2019).

The signing of the 2009 FGN–ASUU Agreement, intended to address salaries, funding, and autonomy, did little to halt recurring strikes, as successive administrations failed to implement the agreed terms (Olukoya, 2020). Between 1999 and 2023, Nigerian universities were shut for over 48 cumulative months, equivalent to losing four full academic years (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). This confirms scholars' consensus that strike actions have become systemic, not episodic (Uchendu, 2019).

Funding Challenges and Financial Governance in Higher Education

Underfunding remains one of the most widely documented roots of instability in Nigeria's tertiary education sector. Despite UNESCO's recommendation that countries allocate **15–20%** of their national budget to education, Nigeria has consistently devoted only **5–8%** over the last two decades (UNESCO, 2022; Federal Ministry of Finance, 2023). Scholars such as Babalola (2021) and Okebukola (2020) argue that this chronic funding gap has severely eroded the ability of universities to maintain infrastructure, update laboratories, invest in research, and attract qualified staff.

The 2012 Presidential Needs Assessment Report further exposed massive infrastructural decay and academic resource shortages, confirming long-term fiscal neglect (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2012). Even where funds exist, inefficiencies in allocation and utilisation driven by

bureaucratic bottlenecks, political interference, and lack of transparent monitoring, limit their effectiveness (Eze, 2021). The absence of performance-based funding frameworks weakens accountability and contributes to poor educational outcomes.

Governance Failures, Policy Inconsistencies, and Government–Union Relations

Research strongly implicates governance deficiencies as a core driver of repeated industrial actions. A central problem is the government’s failure to honour agreements and maintain consistency in education policy (Olukoya, 2020). The 2009 FGN–ASUU Agreement, which was intended to be reviewed every three years, has not undergone systematic evaluation, leading to distrust and renewed agitation.

The controversial introduction of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) in 2019 escalated tensions. Academic unions argued that IPPIS compromised university autonomy and created salary irregularities, rejecting the platform in favour of their alternative system, UTAS. Scholars note that this top-down implementation approach reflects a broader pattern of unilateral policy decisions that disregard stakeholder engagement (Nwankwo, 2019; Vanguard, 2020).

Pressman & Wildavsky’s (1984) classic theory of implementation failure is particularly relevant here: weak institutions, excessive bureaucracy, and political discretion undermine effective policy execution. In Nigeria’s case, education governance lacks mechanisms that enforce compliance or penalise non-implementation, making policy failure costless for the state.

Socio-economic and Academic Implications of Recurrent Strikes

The impacts of repeated strike actions extend far beyond campus boundaries. Multiple studies document significant economic, psychological, and developmental losses associated with prolonged academic disruptions. According to the World Bank (2021), frequent university closures reduce the lifetime earnings of graduates, delay labour market entry, and weaken national human capital indicators.

On the social front, prolonged idleness increases youth involvement in crime, mental health challenges, and other vices (Adefulu, 2021). Academically, strikes interrupt research projects, lower publication output, reduce international competitiveness, and diminish the global reputation of Nigerian degrees (Jega, 2022; Uchendu, 2019). The result is an accelerating trend of brain drain among both faculty and students, further eroding the nation’s knowledge economy.

International comparisons also show that other countries have developed stronger governance structures, such as South Africa’s NELRC and Malaysia’s performance-based funding system, to manage labour relations and protect the education sector from political and fiscal instability (Mncube & Olawale, 2019; Lim & Salim, 2021). Nigeria’s lack of a similar institutionalised mechanism underscores the need for reform.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, desk-based research design that focuses on conceptual development rather than empirical testing. Since the main goal is to build and present a new governance framework, the Waste Down model, rather than to measure variables or test causal relationships, the qualitative approach is the most suitable methodological basis (Yin, 2018). This approach makes it possible to deeply analyse the secondary data from different sources, thus empirical observations, theoretical insights, and policy evaluations can be integrated into one conceptual argument.

Research Design and Rationale

The research design is of an exploratory activist nature. The aim is to grasp the complex social phenomena, i.e., the constant pattern of industrial strikes in Nigeria's tertiary education sector, and produce new theoretical perspectives to handle the issues. Instead of statistical generalisation used by quantitative designs, this research makes use of analytical generalisation, which means drawing broader conceptual lessons from qualitative evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary data systematically gathered from a wide range of credible sources to ensure triangulation and comprehensive coverage. These include official government documents such as policy agreements, budgetary reports, and committee findings; scholarly literature consisting of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reports from international organisations like the World Bank and UNESCO; as well as reputable media archives and union publications that provide detailed timelines of strike actions, government responses, and public perceptions. Together, these sources provide a robust foundation for analysing the governance and policy issues affecting Nigeria's tertiary education sector.

Analytical Approach

The data were analysed with thematic analysis, and six procedural stages proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) were followed. The major themes: funding deficits, agreement violations, socio-economic waste, and policy implementation failure were utilised to illustrate how governance deficiencies aggravate strike actions and to develop an alternative model.

Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

To improve the study's trustworthiness and dependability, various data sources were consulted and cross-checked. Whenever there were discrepancies, attention was paid to official government records. The research recognises the limitations of relying solely on secondary data, e.g. no primary stakeholder interviews and precise econometric estimations of strike costs are not possible. Still, the conceptual aims of the study are enough to warrant the chosen methodology.

Ethical Considerations

The study did not comprise human subjects; however, academic integrity was upheld by diligent citation and the observance of intellectual property rights.

The “Waste Down” Governance Framework

The Waste Down Governance Framework is a new model of public administration that specifically deals with the repeated governance failures that lead to the industrial strikes in the Nigerian tertiary education sector. Basically, it is about changing the way accountability, government expenditure, and socio-economic results relate to one another. The framework asserts that it is the cost of doing nothing that is the waste created by the state education sector recurring strikes, which in turn should clearly and systematically govern the government's financial action in the sector.

Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Justification:

The Waste Down model features three main theoretical traditions: Public Choice Theory, Systems Theory, and the emerging Cost of Failure Governance approach, which are also interdependent.

Public Choice Theory

Public Choice Theory, as implemented by Buchanan & Tullock (1962), hypothesises that government actors behave in ways that serve their self-interest and that one of their major concerns would be that of gaining short-term political advantage rather than long-term collective welfare. For instance, in the Nigerian situation, one could say that it is the reason why education keeps on being underfunded, i.e., because the political dividends of investing in tertiary education are postponed, and the fiscal burden is immediate. The Waste Down framework breaks away from this trap of reasoning by changing the incentive system. Thus, in such a scenario, not doing anything would be politically and fiscally irrational since the social and economic costs of strikes would be quantified and made publicly known.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory is based on the research of Bertalanffy (1968), and he considered governance an intertwined network of subsystems, which depends on feedback loops and dynamic equilibrium for its stability. The Nigerian tertiary education sector, as a part of the national development system, has been, for a long time, shut out of fiscal and economic planning. So, the Waste Down framework has the Strike Impact Audit as a feedback tool that, through an interrupting mechanism, automatically calls for a fiscal policy response whenever a disturbance is detected in the education system.

Cost of Failed Governance

The cost of failed governance stresses that the financial and social costs arising from a government's failure to take action should be considered as explicit policy variables. The Waste Down framework goes beyond this by implanting a 'failure cost ledger' that keeps track of the economic and social impact resulting from the failure of policies. Consequently, the "waste" identified in the governance process should become a central input for future decision-making, particularly in determining where fiscal resources must be directed to prevent repeated system failures.

Structural Design of the Waste Down Framework

Its practical configuration is based on three mutually dependent components: the Strike Impact Audit (SIA), the Budgetary Inversion Mechanism (BIM), and the Education Sector Sustainability Commission (ESSC).

The Strike Impact Audit (SIA)

The SIA would become the investigative division of the framework, creating a permanent institution for measuring and recording the socio-economic waste caused by strikes. The audit should be performed once a year by a technically equipped, impartial unit that is either part of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) or an independent agency.

The SIA would utilise multidimensional metrics to quantify the waste along three axes:

1. **Economic Waste:** The direct and indirect economic costs of strikes, for example, loss of productivity caused by delayed graduate entry into the labour market, reduced economic activities between universities and communities, and lost research innovations.
2. **Social Waste** The general societal costs, such as problems of youth restiveness, mental health issues among students and the increasing rate of illegal activities during prolonged academic closures.

3. **Academic Waste:** The loss of research publications, the discontinuation of academic programs, a decrease in the number of publications and damage to the reputation of Nigerian universities in global rankings.

The total amount of these costs is represented by the National Strike Waste Index (NSWI), a yearly official report that quantifies the total losses incurred by the country through disruptions in the tertiary education sector. This report is to be submitted to the National Assembly and also made publicly available.

The Budgetary Inversion Mechanism (BIM)

The BIM makes the central inversion logic of the framework practical, turning the waste into an investment tool. The BIM stipulates that a legally determined percentage of the quantified waste from the last fiscal year should be allocated to the education sector in the next year's national budget. For example, if the Strike Impact Assessment (SIA) reveals that the 2022–2023 industrial actions resulted in ₦600 billion in cumulative losses, a statutory formula, for instance, allocating 30% of the estimated losses, could be used to determine the fiscal provision required for sectoral recovery. In this case, ₦180 billion would be earmarked for revitalising tertiary education in the following fiscal year.

The Education Sector Sustainability Commission (ESSC)

ESSC will be an autonomous board comprising economists, education administrators, statisticians, academic union representatives, and civil society representatives. Besides, it will be the responsibility of the commission to ensure the quality of the SIA, oversee the implementation of BIM, make public quarterly progress reports and provide policy recommendations.

Expected Outcomes and Governance Transformation

When put into effect, the Waste Down framework would lead to a radical change in fiscal governance, stakeholder relations, and national development outcomes. Among other things, it would be instrumental in redefining public budgeting, restoring trust through transparency between the government and unions, and stabilising the tertiary education sector, thus making the country more competitive.

Anticipated Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

The principal challenges are political resistance, data integrity issues, and bureaucratic inertia. The mitigation strategies entail presenting the policy as a means of stabilising the economy, seeking partnership with international organisations for methodological credibility, and securing the commitment of stakeholders at an early stage.

Discussion and Policy Implementation

The previous segment introduced the Waste Down Governance Framework as a conceptual model that aims to transform Nigeria's education crisis management from a reactive, negotiation-based approach to a proactive, data-driven system of fiscal accountability. This part of the paper maps the application of that model to Nigeria's current policy environment, showing how it can be used to break the strike cycle that has become deeply entrenched, regain the trust of the institutions, and reposition tertiary education as a vehicle for sustainable national development.

From Negotiation to Institutionalisation

The pattern of repeated industrial strikes in the Nigerian tertiary education sector is characterised by the following series of events going in a circle: strike negotiation, temporary agreement, government default, renewed strike. This cyclic pattern exists because the cost of default is not borne by the government; it is borne by students, parents, and the economy. Negotiations are held during the crisis, and agreements are mostly politically expedient documents rather than binding legal commitments (Olukoya, 2020).

The Waste Down framework interrupts this cycle by making the strike consequences institutional. It exposes the fiscal and reputational cost of default and makes it financially significant through its Strike Impact Audit and Budgetary Inversion Mechanism. Waste quantification changes policy failure from an indistinct moral issue into a clear economic liability. Once incorporated in law through a proposed Tertiary Education Sustainability Act (TESA), education funding becomes not only discretionary but also obligatory; thus, it is linked to Nigeria's general fiscal responsibility regime.

Legislative and Policy Instruments

The legislative underpinning of the Waste Down model would be the Tertiary Education Sustainability Act (TESA), a law defining the framework's institutional and fiscal organisation. The Act would mandate the yearly SIA, establishment of the NSWI, implementation of the BIM, and creation of the ESSC.

Integration with Existing Policy Frameworks

The Waste Down framework would be compatible with the already established structures like TETFund, NUC, and NBTE. The Federal Ministry of Finance would integrate NSWI into the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) to ensure that fiscal projections are directly impacted by the losses due to the strike.

Implementation Roadmap

Phase One: Diagnostic and Pilot (Year 1). The Presidency establishes a Strike Impact Audit Task Force within the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and initiates a pilot audit using data from a previous strike.

Phase Two: Legislative Institutionalisation (Years 2–3). This phase focuses on drafting and enacting the Tertiary Education Stabilisation Act (TESA), creating the Education Sector Stabilisation Council (ESSC), and developing operational guidelines for implementation.

Phase Three: Consolidation and Expansion (Years 4–5). During this period, annual audits are standardised, and National Strike Waste Index (NSWI) results become tools for federal budgeting. State governments, local governments, and private organisations are encouraged to adopt similar governance frameworks.

Anticipated Benefits

1. Predictable and sustainable funding
2. Restoration of trust
3. Economic efficiency
4. Reduction of strike frequency
5. National development and competitiveness.

Potential Challenges and Mitigation

Potential challenges include political will, limited data and technical capacity, institutional overlap, and the level of union engagement. These challenges can be mitigated by aligning the policy with Vision 2050 and the SDGs, securing technical support from international organisations, and ensuring union representation within the ESSC.

Broader Policy Implications

The Waste Down framework could serve as a source of inspiration for similarly structured agencies in different sectors, such as the healthcare, energy, and public infrastructure sectors by incorporating the principle of cost, accountability to bring about governance transformation in the entire public sector.

Conclusion

The recurring cycle of industrial actions in Nigeria's tertiary education sector is arguably the emblem of the paradox of the country's governance: a rich policy knowledge base but persistent failure in implementation. What literature and policy experience indicate is that not only the reform initiatives but also the main hurdle is the accountability mechanisms that can make policy failure costly in economic and political terms. The present research has indeed been instrumental in filling the gap profoundly by developing and explaining the Waste Down Governance Framework, a model that is data-driven, legally binding, and reverses the conventional logic of public expenditure.

Summary of the Core Findings:

1. **Systemic Governance Failure:** The recurring pattern of strikes reflects deep-rooted governance problems, particularly the absence of institutional mechanisms that ensure accountability, enforce policy implementation, and prevent the economic and social consequences of neglect within the tertiary education sector.
2. **Economic Waste of Inaction:** Nigeria incurs substantial economic, academic, and social losses each time industrial action occurs. These compounded costs undermine national productivity and weaken the country's long-term capacity for human capital development.
3. **Inefficacy of Hierarchical Policies:** The traditional top-down approach to policy formulation and implementation has proven ineffective. Its concentration of decision-making power within bureaucratic structures promotes short-term political considerations rather than evidence-based, collaborative governance, thereby contributing to repeated system failures.
4. **Potential of the Waste Down Model:** Findings indicate that a structured, transparent, and data-driven framework, such as the proposed Waste Down Model, offers a viable pathway for breaking the cycle of strikes, stalled negotiations, and policy reversals by institutionalising accountability and fiscal responsiveness.
5. **Broader Applicability:** The accountability principles underpinning the Waste Down Model can be adapted for use in other segments of the public sector, suggesting its potential for wider governance reform beyond the tertiary education system.

Policy Recommendations

Federal Government: Materialise the SIA as a permanent feature by way of an executive order; lead the way by legislating reforms to get TESA enacted; implement budgetary provisions through the Ministry of Finance.

National Assembly: Make the passing of TESA the chief concern; require the submission of annual reports on NSWI in conjunction with the national budget; ESSC reports to be submitted quarterly and regularly.

Academic Unions and Institutions: Restructure advocacy mechanisms such that they would comprise evidence-based lobbying; get involved in ESSC governance so as to be assured of joint ownership.

Civil Society and Media: Verify and report on audit results; disseminate the information obtained from the open dashboards that are available to the public and conduct investigative reporting.

International Development Partners: Deliver the technical assistance, validation, and capacity building needed to improve the quality and credibility of audit methodologies.

Broader Developmental Implications

The idea of embedding a failed cost logic in public financial management in Nigeria could be the very mechanism that initiates a preventive governance model, which can thus be extended to healthcare, education, infrastructure, and other sectors that are of vital importance. If the framework is aligned with Nigeria's Vision 2050 and SDGs, it will reiterate the position of education as the bedrock of national transformation.

Concluding Reflection

The Waste Down Governance Framework has the features of a feasible and intellectually sound project that overcomes the long-standing problem, which cannot be overcome by ordinary means. If Nigeria, by means of institutionalising the rule that "doing nothing is too costly", manages to convert waste into wisdom and exit the cyclical paralysis of stagnant strikes, then her prospects will be vastly improved.

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