

## An Appraisal of Contributions of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) as a Trade Union to Educational Development in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study was carried out to examine the contributions of academic staff union of universities as a trade union to educational development in Nigeria. Since ASSU as a trade union has been noted for her effectiveness of teaching and learning activities in our universities in Nigeria, her contributions to educational development in Nigeria is worth pursuing. Effort was made to define trade union and labour unionism in education sector and as recognised organisation in Nigeria according to Decree 91 of 1993. This study contends that ASUU as a trade union that replaces Association of University Teachers (AUT) in education sector is contributing numerously to the development of education in Nigeria. It is recommended that ASUU's progress towards professionalism and quality, impact towards quality assurance, educating of members, good communication gap and study on societal expectations are desirable for Nigerian educational development.

**Key words:** (ASUU) tradeunion, educational development, Nigeria, AUT

### INTRODUCTION

Trade unionism is concerned with the organization of the labour force which is an important element in the process of production. It is the aggregate of people that work, using their capabilities or skills to render services so as to earn a living, develop themselves and the economy at large (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Maduewesi (2002) argues that different types of labour experience have been sufficiently gathered to enable competent handling of labour or trade union matters. These structures are characterized by different types of service and employment, wages and remunerations, conditions of service, welfare and social security, labour relations and administration of labour or labour laws. He explains that trade unions are in most cases formed in Nigeria along this structure as specification of employed labour.

That the military dominated the Nigeria polity for about twenty-nine out of the first forty years of nationhood is a major factor, which has militated against the evolution of powerful trade unionism. And this makes it imperative that the place of labour in the political process of the military years was characterized by the rule of law, succession of office by popular choice, right to dissent, accountability and sensitivity to the feeling of their members. The military essentially was autocratic.

Nwabueze as quoted by Segun sums up the situation thus:

Quite curiously the state controlled by the military, has trappings of capitalist sentiments and is caught in the neo-colonial function of defending capitalism at home. In addition, the military is very sensitive to any real or apparent challenge to its power due to the perennial affliction by legitimacy crisis. Thus, strong and powerful unions are seen not only as threat but also as anti-patriotic institutions.

The case of Trade Unions in the education sector is not different from other trade unions. The education environment over the years share in the concern at the level of labour restiveness Sector operators are organized into trade unions as follows: Nigeria Union of Teachers for Primary and Secondary Schools, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics (ASUP) and College of Education Academic Staff union (COEASU).

**Labour unionism:** Labour unionism emerges when workers organize themselves into a trade union. Labour according to Umoli (1995) may organize itself into a union for the following basic reasons:

- To increase the bargaining power of the workers;
- To act as a check on managerial abuse on workers;
- To provide an avenue for seeking redress by labour;
- May become politically motivated to organize, attack on government policies believed to be unpopular.

- To provide avenue for ambitious workers in the organization to test power.

Trade union Decree No. 91 of 1993 defines Trade Union as many combination of workers or employees, whether temporary or permanent, the purpose of which is to regulate the terms and conditions of employment of workers.

The Trade Union laws in the United Kingdom and Nigeria defines Trade Union as:

Any combination whether temporary or permanent. The principal objectives of which under constitution are the regulation of the relations between workmen and workmen or between masters and masters, or the imposing of restrictive conditions on the conduct of any trade or business and also the provision of benefit to members.

Fajana (1995) defined Trade (Labour) Union “as association of wage/salary earners formed with the objective of safeguarding and improving the wage and employment conditions of its members and to raise members social status and standard of living in the community.”

Ubeku (1975) traced the development of trade union in Nigeria to the early part of the 20th century citing that one of the earliest unions which came into existence in Nigeria was the civil service union in 1912. Other unions which followed include the Nigeria Railway Native Staff Union in 1919, the Railway Workers Union and the Nigeria Union of Teachers in 1931. These unions, all had a common objective which is to improve the conditions of service of their workers.

The growth of the trade union in Nigeria was rather slow until the introduction of the trade union ordinance of 1st April, 1939. The said ordinance helped to check the proliferation of mushroom unions by making the registration of unions compulsory before a union could negotiate with employees or take industrial action. The Trade Union Decree of 1973, No. 28 (1) brought about the coming together of all unions under an umbrella of one organization by the formation of a central labour organization-the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). It is worthy of autonomous union joined together to promote unified and cooperative advancement of labour union interests.

Ekpo (2000) notes that a trade union may be vertical (industrial) or horizontal (craft). An industrial union is vertical in the sense that it includes all workers in a particular company or ministry irrespective of occupations. Example includes the Civil Service Union. The Craft Union is horizontal in that it cuts across many

companies, institutions, industries and ministries. Its members belong to one craft or a close related group of occupations. Examples include Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigeria Union of Journalist (NUJ), Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT). Thus, trade union can be described as the aspect of industrial relations, the climax of activities in its process of which is often strike by trade union and shut down by employees/management. The notion however, is that Trade Union can wield a great deal of influence among many other forces at work in the country. Nevertheless, the socio-political setting of any country, its economic, legal and other institutional arrangement, serves to impose limits on what the trade union may do (Otobo, 1987).

Lenin (1961) is of the view that only the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop trade union consciousness necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation. However, trade unionism or the function of trade unions include organizing of employees or work groups into trade unions, engaging in collective bargaining, strikes and welfare matters and contributing to the developmental processes of the society to which the unions belong. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the term “Industrial Relations” and Trade Unionism and so on are intertwined.

**Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU):** History has made us to understand that industrial relations in the tertiary institutions has metamorphosed through 2 different phases. The first was the era of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and other similar unions and the second was the period after 1978 which witnessed the restructuring of all unions in the university system into three national groups-the ASUU, the SSAUTHRAI and NASU.

During the first phase, national or central negotiating machinery was absent. Collective relations were localized at each university with the issue of restricted staff welfare, fringe benefits and some aspects of physical conditions of work (Igwe Onu, 1986). Salaries and wages were fixed by government under the unified public service system; each university government council unilaterally determined the condition of service of its employees. There was occasional use of wage commissions to review the salaries and working conditions of the public sector employees, such as Cookey, Udoji, Adebo, etc. The recommendation of these commissions once accepted usually constitute the terms of employment of university staff. The scope of collective bargaining was in the real sense limited to local issues within the jurisdiction of

each governing council in the universities. Grievance processes were restrictive involving only the Head of Department, Dean of Faculty and Vice-Chancellor. Such were rarely taken to the governing councils where joint consultation existed, its use was limited to information dissemination.

The 2nd phase evolved with the restructure of unions along industrial lines in 1978 when ASUU replaced the AUT. Between 1978 and 1980, ASUU manifested a somewhat sophisticated approach to industrial relations throughout the country. In response, the university councils which hitherto felt very limited need for collective employer's actions were encouraged to modify their stance and show better attitude to unionization. Thus, in April 1980, a conference of Pro-Chancellors and Chairmen-Governing Councils held at the University of Lagos resolved to form National Universities Employers Association. The first national collective bargaining machinery in the universities was thus constituted on 20th May, 1980 between the Pro-Chancellors and representatives of the Academic Staff Union. The objective of this inaugural bargaining unit was to consider the union's demands. This was the commencement of the real bargaining in higher institutions in Nigeria.

The centrality of ASUU's demands in 1980 perhaps illustrates its essence. When a trade dispute was consequently declared with the governing council of Nigeria universities after the 20th May, 1980 meeting, the demands were:

- That the universities be adequately funded to allow them realize their goals, vital to national development, for which they were established.
- That academic freedom and autonomous self-governance be restored to the universities to enhance the morale and integrity of academic staff of the universities.
- That a body be set up to carry out a comprehensive review of the condition of service of university staff in Nigeria.

The foregoing which may be regarded as the very first major programme of ASUU consequent upon its formation stems from the objectives that are ostensibly declared in ASUU's constitution. They are a reflection of the blurring in the characterization of this union like the NUT, as a conventional trade union or a professional association.

ASUU is a trade union whose objectives include regulation of relations between academic staff and employers; encouragement of the participation of its members in the affairs of the university system and of the nation; protection and advancement of the socio-

economic and cultural interest of the nation: Establishment and maintenance of a high standard of academic performance and professional practice; establishment and maintenance of just and proper conditions of service for its members, with particular reference to the theme of this study. The code of practice ends appropriately with section 12:

"The principal aim of trade unions is to promote their members' interests. They can do this only if the undertakings in which their members are employed prosper. They therefore have interest in the success of these undertakings and an essential contribution to make to it by co-operating in measures to promote increased productivity and efficiency. They also share with management the responsibility for good industrial relations."

ASUU can therefore be seen to be a trade union, whose activities, being "lawful and not inconsistent with the spirit and practice of trade unionism" are covered by the laws of the land. Their objectives proclaim main concern to be in the national interest and in this, government and the university management can be seen to be partners in progress. ASUU may approach issues from different perspectives; indeed ASUU's liberal, sometimes radical and militant stance more often than not, bring them into conflict with the government. The enlightened sector of the society may see this as no more than a difference of opinion, a mere expression of the voice of dissent, which cannot be resolved through dialogue. But others more intolerant of an alternative viewpoint readily see it as a confrontational posture against constituted authority and declare ASUU as enemies of society.

ASUU's disenchantment with government over issues of university autonomy, poor conditions of service, poor funding of schools and non-conducive environment, for academic pursuit had been simmering for years and had been the theme of fruitless negotiations and 'dialogue' with successive federal ministries of education. It eventually assumed crisis which led to disrupted educational system and paralyzed academic work in all the nation's universities for months.

#### **ASUU, ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND QUALITY ASSURANCE**

ASUU is a union founded on principles and intellectualism. These principles or values can foster quality in the system when applied. Iyayi (2002) has identified five categories of principles that form the basis of the conduct of the union over the years of its existence. These are:

- Integrity, transparency and accountability.
- Professionalism, objectivity and hard work.
- Courage, sacrifice and total commitment.
- Internal democracy, teamwork and group solidarity
- Patriotism, anti-imperialism and working class solidarity.

These principles are ideal goals which should guide the union. They are the prerequisites for a qualitative university teaching-learning environment. The members of the union are expected to exhibit moral excellence, honesty, hard work, objectivity, professional excellence, prudence, selflessness, cooperation, patriotism, among other values, in themselves and in their dealings with fellow union member, with the union as a body, with university management and with the students. In so doing, the integrity of the union will not be sacrificed for compromise. Although it is apparent that the union has not performed creditably in the maintenance of some of these principles, it has however, met with rugged resistance from some stakeholders in the system in the exercise of a few of the principles such as transparency, sacrifice and anti-imperialism. Some of the stakeholders felt their authority is being threatened by the union's sense of commitment and group solidarity. Integrity in the view of Iyayi (2002) is the ability to consistently do the things that are accepted as right. It is also the ability to uphold one's values, uphold the truth and exhibit high ethical standard. These engender high quality and productivity in the system.

Murray *et al.* (2002) have identified nine principles in their own perspective. These are as follows:

- Content competence.
- Pedagogical competence.
- Openness and honesty in dealing with sensitive issues in teaching.
- Contribution to student development.
- Avoidance of dual relationship with students.
- Confidentiality.
- Respect of colleagues.
- Valid assessment of students.
- Respect for institutional goals, policies and standards.

These principles are in consonance with the principles of ASUU. For instance, in line with the union's principles, Murray *et al.* (2002) have also found such ideals as professionalism (content and pedagogical competence among others), honesty, objectivity and education. However, the translation of these lofty principles into practice have been a nagging problem in

the university system but effort is being made by ASUU leaders to make sure that members strictly adhere to these principles.

### **CONTRIBUTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF UNIVERSITIES (ASUU)**

There is no doubt whatsoever that, for the university to function as efficiently and effectively as expected, the stakeholders need to work in harmony, collaborating with ASUU, to a great extent with a clear sense of focus having vision and mission. This guides the university in its development processes as well as its service to the society. In the same vein, the society needs to be in good condition and state of living. But this is not the concern of the stakeholders in Nigeria. Therefore, ASUU as a trade union, in order to fight for their rights, good condition in the universities and the entire masses in the society have been engaging in incessant strikes for more than a decade. There have been about twenty-six (26) strikes between 1988 and the year 2003. These strike actions of ASUU and other collective bargaining of this union have led to the underlisted contributions of this trade union over the years.

**Pay, working conditions, brain drain and manpower development:** ASUU proposed in 2001 the African average salary scale for academics and argued that this remuneration could address the serious problem of brain drain affecting the Nigeria university system (ASUU, 2002; Olamosu, 2001; Ootobo 1987). In Herzberg's theory of motivational hygiene, inadequacy of worker's pay and conditions of work produce dissatisfaction in study place. Herzberg noted that an employee may leave a firm because he disliked its working conditions. He might not be motivated to work harder except the conditions are reasonably adequate.

Some years ago, brain or academic staff attrition was a very common and disheartening phenomenon. It is worthy of note that the increase in salary of 1999 could not adequately address the problem of brain drain, but it helped to stem the tide in some ways. Salaries are not stable as exemplified in the recent salary reversals (ASUU, 2002).

Given ASUU's principle of achieving professional excellence, its contention on the issue of better pay and working conditions cannot be unjustifiable. The union negotiates from time to time for improvement on staff development grants, research grants, research fellowship fund and other academic grants and allowances directed toward manpower development in the system and the nation at large. In the words of ASUU (2000):

Without an internationally competitive remuneration for university teachers in Nigeria, the mass migration of academics to both African, non-African countries where the conditions of service and facilities of academic study are much more attractive would be inevitable. The problem cannot be resolved by unilateral award of salaries and other conditions of services. ASUU and FGN can agree on what autonomy ought to mean in the context of Nigerian universities, the level of development of the Nigeria economy and the fundamental objectives of the Nigeria constitution.

This position of ASUU has not changed but the government appears to be insisting on its own style of solving the problems of brain drain, manpower development and quality in the Nigeria university system.

**Funding, provision of facilities and quality assurance:**

The issue of funding and facilities have been the cause of friction between the ASUU and the government in almost all instances. This is because, the union at different periods have been finding it difficult to teach in an environment without the expected amenities or with poor facilities. It is worthwhile to enumerate some of the instances of the union's concerns about the deplorable state of facilities in our universities. On November 1, 1979, ASUU in its press release noted inadequacy of facilities due to lack of funds as being detrimental to the development of the universities and the nation as a whole (ASUU, 1986). Another release from the union on 21st August, 1983, drew attention to the fact that the underfunding of the universities was growing worse than before (ASUU, 1986). The concern was and is being repeated in many other releases of the union too numerous to list. For example, in September 1984, the union presented a paper to the Minister of Education in which it made some recommendations for the resuscitation of Nigeria Higher Education. The recommendations included the provision of adequate libraries, laboratories, subsidized facilities for feeding and lodging, books and equipment at one-half of their market prices, among others (ASUU, 1986).

Also Gboyega and Atoyebi record that the Academic Staff Union of Universities has been at the forefront of protest against inadequate funding of Universities since the 1970s. In other words, ASUU's contention has been to refuse underfunding of the Universities which undermines the capacity of Universities to maintain standards at desirable levels. Underfunding according to Gboyega and Atoyebi and Aina has made staff and student not have access to the

latest books and journals, laboratories lack equipment, so experiments cannot be conducted and local research funds have virtually dried up.

Thereafter, the Federal Government and ASUU reached an agreement on a number of issues in 1992. The Federal Government itself acknowledged that the agreement was a source of crucial decision and bold policy initiatives aimed at addressing some of the ills plaguing the university system (ASUU, 2000). The agreement was a rational basis of budget allocation to education. The issues of chronic underfunding of education was addressed in terms of creating higher education tax, provision of a basis for library development, health-care services, purchase of laboratory equipment and teaching facilities, provision of more classrooms, campus water supply, establishment of work centres, among others.

Although, government had been failing in its obligation to the above agreement, but some improvements have been made in the course of time in the provision of funds for some facilities in the system.

Subsequently, in June 2001, another agreement was also reached after a long struggle by the union. In the agreement, Government accepted the UNESCO minimum allocation of 26% of Annual Budget to Education, but this agreement was never practicalised.

**Political/economic problems:** The contribution of ASUU towards the resolution of political and economic crisis cannot be overemphasised, this is because if the economy is not in a good state definitely it will affect the education sector of the nation. The major political problem which ASUU intervened was in 1993. The strike action by ASUU then was partly political. At this time, it demanded for the actualisation of June 12 Presidential Election at which Bashorun M.K.O Abiola was proclaimed the undeclared winner and also for full implementation of all agreements reached earlier on. It also demanded for proper funding of education. A move which may be considered as a furtherance of ASUU professional objective (Fajana, 1997).

In addition to Fajana's narration, unfortunately, at this time, the Abacha led regime was not prepared for any form of dialogue with ASUU as the regime was still facing political and economic problems resulting from the demand of actualisation of June 12, 1993 Presidential Election results and the nationwide strike by oil workers which disrupted fuel supplied nationwide. Hence, ASUU suspended its strike, amidst public cry for mercy and "professionally" responsible approach to crisis management. In December 1994, the government had taken a drastic step in the stoppage of ASUU member's

salaries. This salary stoppage was disturbed by ASUU's leadership as counter productive and capable of deepening the crisis, one that could have been averted if government had responded to ASUU's numerous efforts to enter into dialogue between January and August 1994.

**Tackling of examination malpractice in schools:** Another contribution of Academic Staff Union of Universities is their effort in tackling the menace of examination malpractice and the adoption of continuous assessment system in our institution of learning so as to arrest this act of indiscipline from the educational system.

Igwe (1986) Umo 1996 and Shonekan have identified some cases of examination malpractice which had happened at one time or the other in our tertiary institutions. These cases are as follows:

- Collusion among candidates e.g exchange of answer scripts.
- Assistance by supervisors/ invigilators to candidates such as dictating answers to candidates.
- Officials of the examination bodies collecting money from prospective supervisors before appointment to serve. This act enables the supervisors extort money from the candidates to enable them bring in prepared answers to the examination hall unchecked.
- Supervisors remove live question papers and circulate to candidates who prepared answers from outside and bring to the examination hall.
- Course lecturers in tertiary institutions collect money from candidates for specified marks whether or not the candidate has taken an examination in the course, a system popularly known as sorting.

In an effort to uproot this hydra-headed problem from our institutions of learning, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) in conjunction with the University management of each institution formed what we have as Examination Malpractice Committee. Apart from this, each faculty also have his committee to combat against any form of examination malpractice(s) as listed above. Any one that is caught in any of these acts would face the committee before any drastic decision is undertaken which may be expulsion from school or repetition of a session. The union also motivated her members to be involved in the process of teaching, which will motivate the students to learn effectively. If the spirit of hard work is induced in the students, they would be more serious in their studies, shun all forms of cheating and imbibe the spirit of education. Members of the academic staff unions can achieve this through the proper use of continuous assessment in schools (Inyang, 2002).

Inyang (1987) also pointed out that continuous assessment system advocates a properly monitored educational progress of an individual through his school career. The academic staff union has been contributing to the attainment of this diagnostic or guidance-oriented exercise by monitoring its effectiveness in schools. In this way, the students will be put at an acceptable level of performance before being exposed to any form of examination. Their confidence will be strengthened and they will be able to face their examination squarely without resorting to malpractice.

**University autonomy:** The strike by the Academic Staff Union in year 2000 centred on several issues including university autonomy and better funding of universities. Abdusalam and Sunday (2002) indicate that "after a rigorous and patriotic dialogue, both sides (Government and ASUU) reached an agreement on the basis of funding and university autonomy on Monday, December 18, 2000".

Maduewesi (2002) pointed out that ASUU is the organisation of the intellectual labour force within the academia in Nigeria and has a long history of emergence transformation, struggles and success. The achievement recorded are predominantly quantitative but also fairly qualitative. This is especially in terms of demands or advocacy by academic unions aimed at transforming and sustaining the academic system. The advocacy for and action on 'Education Trust Fund' and autonomy for university that the ASUU championed are brilliant milestone among many other suggestions that have been adopted and put in place to improve quality.

Although, Ukoli (1996) has examined university autonomy having three major organs, with well-defined power and functions namely:

- A council whose membership is appointed by Government which controls the finance and property of the University as well as exercising formal decision over appointment and discipline of staff.
- The senate made up mostly of senior academics, charged with the control of academic affairs like admissions, curricula, examinations, award of degrees, welfare and discipline of students.
- The National Universities Commission (NUC) appointed by Government which serves as coordinating body. This has been the main cause of some of the difficulties facing the University today in Nigeria.

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has emerged as the chief advocate of the ideals of

University autonomy. It therefore does not come as a surprise that most of the conflicts and disputes between ASUU and Government stem from a breach of University autonomy which is fundamental to a system of University governance founded on the rule of law and whose precepts are well-entrenched in the laws establishing the universities in Nigeria. ASUU, by its very nature, as well as by its stated aims and objectives are particularly sensitive on this issue and never fails, both at the national and local levels to draw the attention of Government and the general public to such breaches when they occur. This they do through press release, paid advertisements, open letters to the head of state or state chief executives, or seeking redress through the courts of law. As a last resort, they even embark on appropriate industrial action when their cries go unheeded and when the occasion demands.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, it is pertinent to say that ASUU is not only to protect and advance its member's interests but to also be part of the entire development process in our tertiary institutions, so as to ensure quality.

For I believe that any progress towards professionalism and quality will to an extent depend upon academic unions making certain positive contributions necessary to the decision-making processes. This is because, there is little or nothing they can do in pressing for increase in salaries unless they simultaneously insist on performing professional functions.

The position of unionism as a trade union in relation to its positive roles or contributions that the Academic Staff Union of Universities are expected to play considering the role of education in human resources development and the role of human resources in national development had been underscored. Therefore, ASUU should look ahead in making numerous impact toward quality assurance and development in our university education.

Accordingly, ASUU apart from certain contributions highlighted in this study which they have to play, must in addition strive to attain the following as their contributions. ASUU as a trade union should consider educating or re-educating its members on the ideals or principles of the Union which are not at variance with goal of enhancing productivity in the system. The values of honesty, hard work and moral excellence, among others, should be exhibited by union members.

Individual members of ASUU called lecturers should be objective in arriving at decisions that will have permanent effects on the future of students and the society. In doing this, ASUU should endeavour to

narrow down the communication gap between the Union and her members. The Maiden Newsletter of ASUU should be sustained in order to keep her members abreast of the activities of the Union.

ASUU should seek for ways and means of improving and sustaining quality in the performance of assignment by every staff in a total quality management framework. There is need for an empirical study by ASUU to determine societal expectations and the performance of trade union.

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