

Strikes affect students, faculty and varsities

It is the headline that Kenyans have become accustomed to: *Workers to go on strike*. Be they doctors, nurses or teachers, the narrative remains the same.

Industrial action has become a much-needed avenue for workers to air their grievances. Last year, there were three lecturers' strikes, which paralysed learning in the public universities. On Wednesday, February 21, the Universities Academic Staff Union (Uasu) issued a seven-day strike notice, citing failure by the government and the Inter-Public Universities Council's Consultative Forum to table a counter-proposal on the 2017-2021 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

Lecturers, like every other worker, have a constitutionally protected right to fair labour practices. This means that they are entitled to fair remuneration, reasonable working conditions, belonging to trade unions and going on strike.

Last December, Uasu called off the previous strike following a return-to-work formula. The causes of these strikes tend to be the focus of discussion, yet it is imperative that consideration be given to the effects of



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One of the biggest concerns for students during a lecturers' strike is their missing contact hours with information on topics crucial to passing course work tests and examinations. They tend to read on their own or teach themselves the content that they so miss.

This is a poor substitute for teaching as it does not include the additional comments and insights from lecturers, which

would help them to understand the subject better.

Another concern is the timing of the strikes: Either in the middle of the semester or near the end. This means continuous assessment tests and exams are postponed, disrupting learning. It could adversely affect the students' final grades, which are reflected in the transcripts presented to employers after graduation.

Also key is that the adjustments to the academic calendar have students graduate later than expected, making four-year degree programmes to run for five or more years. This demotivates the students and shifts the trajectory of their life milestones.

Faculty in institutions subjected to constant strikes also suffer adverse effects.

Academic staff tend to be under a lot of pressure to complete the syllabus and work with a constantly adjusting calendar. For some universities, the semesters are shortened, meaning lecturers cannot complete the syllabus, leading to dire implications on the scope and quality of exams.

Lecturers who attempt to teach are intimidated by the students who are unhappy with the strike and colleagues who

disagree with their choice to not participate in the strike. A recent article alleged that the students of one university threatened to cane lecturers who participate in the strike.

Universities also lose revenue. Rent is paid for buildings that are not in use. The universities stand the risk of gaining a reputation of not producing competent graduates. Parents who can educate their children abroad choose to do so to avoid periods of industrial action.

The administration also faces the uphill task of dealing with a volatile student body as well as demoralised lecturers.

There is a need for all the key stakeholders to come to the table to negotiate a mutually acceptable 2017-2021 CBA and ensure that learning in the institutions of higher learning is not disrupted any further.

Amid these conversations, they should remember that quality of education and the interests of faculty are in their hands. Education Cabinet Secretary Amina Mohamed should ensure that industrial action is minimised and negotiations encouraged.

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