
Academic staff perspectives on operating beyond industrial actions for sustainable quality assurance in public universities in Kenya

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Abstract: Industrial actions represent the climax of unresolved conflicts between employers and employees, and have devastating implications on quality assurance in higher education. Management of strikes in public universities in Kenya has been based on a conventional top-down approach which further undermines the greatly needed quality of human and social capital that is responsible for implementing the university mandate towards sustainable development. Results of this study show that the main causes of industrial actions are poor remuneration and offending disparities within and between employee grades in university and other civil service offices – qualifications and the ability to perform, notwithstanding. This calls for radical rationalisation and restructuring of remunerations and staff placement in the entire civil service, based on a combination of earned qualification and competence for prescribed tasks. Overall, a synergistic and people-centred motivational management system stands out as being a critical basis for strike prevention and enhanced quality assurance.

Keywords: strikes; university; remuneration; equity; motivation; industrial actions; work environment; remuneration disparities; Kenya.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Worldwide, teachers' (and lecturers') trade unions have continued to demand that the professional voices of their members be heard, and that their experience and expertise be valued and appropriately rewarded (Worlds of Education, 2007). Where employees and employers have failed to satisfactorily agree on these concerns, industrial actions (also called industrial unrests or strikes in this paper) have often been called by representative trade unions. Industrial actions thus represent the climax of unresolved conflicts between employers and employees. Within universities, strikes have traditionally been called by students, support staff and academic staff. In this paper, the focus will be on industrial actions called by academic staff in public universities.

Industrial actions have lately been common in the eastern Africa region, particularly Kenya, Uganda and Malawi, where disparities in remuneration seem to be major areas of concern. A fitting imagery of this scenario is 'muzzling the ox that ploughs one's land'. According to Vernor Munoz (quoted in Worlds of Education, 2007), knowledge that is not built on the respect of human (worker) rights is knowledge of poor quality. Further, since there are certain cardinal values that motivate learning (including teaching, research and community outreach), it is essential to define the needs of students and teachers (and lecturers), as well as the adjustments needed to improve functions in the schooling and political systems.

From his extensive study of the world's best service companies, Frei (2008) observed that investing in what makes employees reasonably able and motivated to achieve excellence is much more important than employee self-sacrifice, which is rarely a sustainable resource. Resistance to potentially positive changes in the aspects mentioned above remain the root causes of most industrial actions. The emerging challenge for institutions is how to better appreciate the wealth in continuous learning and the subsequent modification of behaviour in tandem with the dynamic global and national scenarios in higher education.

Despite their devastating implications, the management of strikes has been based on a conventional top-down, autocratic approach, which further undermines the greatly needed quality of human and social capital responsible for implementing the university mandate. The supposed failure of universities to offer leadership in such areas and catalyse policy reforms at the political level may be indicative of the need for extra learning on how to enhance the autonomy of universities. Ultimately, universities risk losing their crucial role as the nation's voice of rational thinking, professional pace setting, meritocracy and intellectual social responsibility. This is particularly true because universities are regarded as the pinnacles and indeed suppliers of expertise in all fields that drive national economies, including competence building in human resources management and strategic corporate governance.

While the law provides for industrial action in Kenya, its negative consequences on the total University system have often undermined quality assurance both in the short and long term. This is normally expressed through lost academic hours, strained personnel relationships particularly between academic staff and university management, and brain drain and brains in drain. A situational SWOT analysis of Kenyatta University attests to this by pointing out that brain drains, the capacity to attract and retain well-qualified staff, and the occasional disruption of academic programmes and the university calendar are current weaknesses of the system and thus pose major threats to its successful functioning (Kenyatta University, 2005). Ultimately, the final product being rolled out (i.e. graduate students) stands the risk of being 'half-baked' and thus not adequately prepared for the job market. This in itself translates into the loss of quality of human capital beyond the University walls. The financial implications on the part of the employer, through avoidable retooling (training) of these graduates, cannot be overemphasised. This has implications on the image of the concerned universities within the wider public. Planning for posterity in quality assurance in higher education would thus call for finding innovative ways of predicting and averting industrial actions at all times. This is the gist of this paper, which is presented from the point of view of challenges that must be surmounted in organisational learning. It is hoped that lessons highlighted in this paper will elicit debate and hopefully pave the way for policy changes to boost quality assurance in Kenya's higher education.

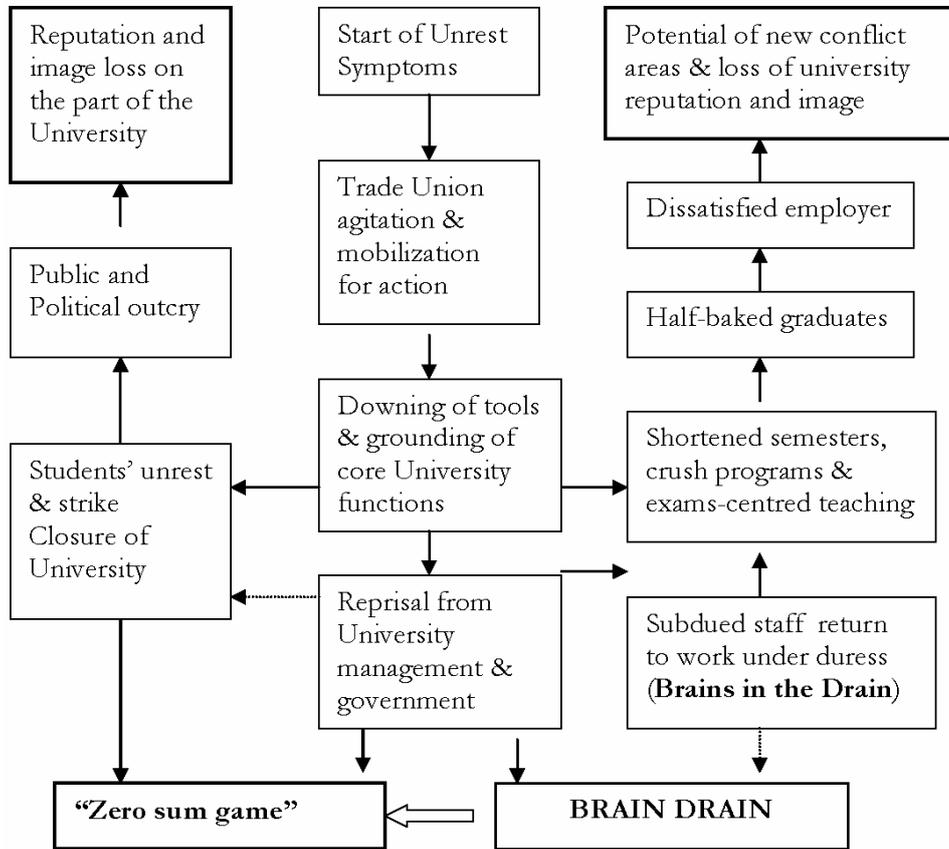
1.2 Objective

The objectives of this study were to: (1) assess the causes and management of strikes from an academic staff perspective as a first initiative in addressing this recurrent problem in public universities in Kenya and (2) suggest innovative ways of preventing and managing industrial actions for sustainable quality assurance.

1.3 Theoretical and conceptual framework

This study was guided by ecosystems theory on the basis that a university is a complex, multi-stakeholder system. For the university to achieve its mandate of learning and teaching, research, outreach and community service, all system components must work together for the common good through synergistic partnerships. When industrial action takes place, it communicates to outsiders the failed efforts in terms of conflict resolution, and often triggers a chain reaction whose cumulative effects have far-reaching negative socioeconomic and political impacts (Figure 1). Reprisals from university authorities and government have traditionally been perceived as being autocratic and counterproductive in the long run, particularly when viewed from a quality service perspective. This autocracy also seems to contradict the inherent spirit within the philosophy, vision and mission statements detailed in various university strategic plans (Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, 2004; Moi University, 2005; Kenyatta University, 2005; Maseno University, 2005; Egerton University, 2005). According to Goleman (1998), contradictions between vision/mission statements and reality inevitably result in emotional fallout exemplified by self-protection, cynicism, anger and despair. Further, Goleman notes that the firm, whose profits are won at the price of violating the implicit shared values of its labour force, pays an emotional price of shame, guilt and a sense of tainted rewards. Where academic staff have returned to work under duress, it may be assumed that their productivity is often at its lowest ebb.

Figure 1 Relationship between industrial actions and loss of quality assurance in higher education



In some cases, highly trained academic staff have resigned and secured better paying jobs abroad. This is the basis for the now global problem of brain drain (Waswa et al., 2004). Ultimately, a zero-sum if not negative-sum game can arise – i.e. the university closes, students riot and are sent home, university programmes and the academic calendar are disrupted, working relationships between academic staff and university authorities become strained, non-academic staff earn salaries for no real work undertaken, parents (general public) react and the government must absorb consequent political shocks. Industrial actions have been traditionally associated with private sector manufacturing firms. It is, however, abnormal when strikes are called by a country’s top intelligentsia on the basis of poor remuneration. Therefore, deliberate efforts to predict and amicably pre-empt industrial actions are in the interest of the higher education sector and national development.

2 Methodology

An opinion survey design was used to collect data from Kenya's public university academic staff. The staff involved in the survey were those who took part in a VicRes conference in Jinja, Uganda, in March 2008. In this way, opinions were able to be solicited from virtually all the seven public universities in Kenya. A few more responses were obtained from the authors host institution. For purposes of anonymity, the names of the universities, names of respondents and their sexes were excluded from the units of analysis. From a targeted sample size of 100, only 49 respondents returned their completed questionnaires.

Secondary data were obtained from official records from within and outside the universities. While results from this study offer only general trends, it can be assumed that they represent opinions of staff in all public universities in Kenya given that industrial actions have traditionally occurred at the same time in all Kenyan universities. This is because the actions have invariably been coordinated by the same University Academic Staff Union (UASU), and have been further managed by one government and an *ad hoc* association of Vice Chancellors and University councils – namely, the Inter Public Universities Council Consultation Forum (IPUCCF).

Individual responses from questionnaires were cleaned and thematised before being fed into an SPSS spreadsheet for descriptive statistical analysis that focused on frequency distributions only. Standard procedures were used to represent these findings. Secondary data were subjected to content analysis and basic computations.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Causes of industrial unrest

Up to 88% of the respondents singled out low salaries and poor welfare as extremely critical in causing industrial actions (Table 1). The perception of being undervalued and hence underpaid was particularly benchmarked on salary structures of their 'juniors' in the public (civil) service. Another income-related concern within the Kenyan public university system was the perceived inter-grade disparities, as discussed later in this paper. At least 73% of the respondents rated insensitive policies and management as being critical causes. Other causes included poor communication between university management and academic staff, heavy workloads and promotion-related problems.

Promotion criterion was viewed as unnecessarily inflexible with an overemphasis on chronological teaching duration and refereed publications in international journals. Combined, these problems appear to undermine the quality of service delivery, as do various counter-reactions from staff, such as 'moon-lighting' (engaging in extra income-generating activities), the use of old teaching notes, zero research-based teaching and learning, a lack of commitment in mentoring of students and examination-oriented teaching rather than education for sustainable development.

Under such circumstances, it is to be expected that the system would produce 'half-baked' graduates with an associated loss of image for the concerned universities. The rather high frequency of industrial actions in public universities in Kenya could also indicate that sustainable solutions to the root causes of system failure are yet to be found. According to Garvin (1998), before people and companies can improve their

overall performance, they must first learn by looking beyond their traditional rhetoric and high philosophies. Instead they must focus on the fundamentals and modify their behaviour in tandem with the dynamic knowledge economy. Perhaps this is the challenge that should be overcome by universities and governments in this region.

Table 1 Relative importance of the causes of industrial actions ($n = 49$)

SN	Causes of industrial unrest	% Likert Scale-based order of importance				
		EC	VC	C	FC	NC
1	Low salaries and poor welfare	88	20	17	12	4
2	Poor communication practices	6	19	9	12	–
3	Insensitive policies and management	6	26	41	27	12
4	Heavy workloads and poor facilities	–	19	11	6	9
5	Promotion-related problems	–	14	9	8	5
6	Missing data	–	–	12	35	69
	<i>Total</i>	100	100	100	100	100

Note: EC, Extremely Critical; VC, Very Critical; C, Critical; FC, Fairly Critical; NC, Not Critical.

3.2 Managing causes of industrial actions

Up to 76% of respondents singled out improvements in salaries and benefits as very important in preventing industrial actions and, by extension, the enhancement of performance and productivity of academic staff. A further 70% thought that improvements in communication and public relations was very important, while 62% indicated that inclusive management was important (Table 2).

Table 2 Organisational learning-based relative importance of industrial action preventive factors

SN	Industrial unrest prevention factors	% Likert Scale-based order of importance				
		EI	VI	I	FI	NI
1	How to improve salaries and benefits	53	23	10	10	0
2	How to improve communication and PR	27	28	14	8	0
3	How to implement inclusive management	14	21	27	16	14
4	How to implement a fair promotion policy	6	9	12	6	0
5	How to improve the working environment	–	13	14	10	8
6	Missing data	–	3	22	49	76
	<i>Total</i>	100	100	100	100	100

Note: EI, Extremely Important; VI, Very Important; I, Important; FI, Fairly Important; NI, Not Important.

Although several commissions or task forces of government have recommended improvements in staff remunerations (Republic of Kenya, 2006), little has been implemented in this regard. This adds to the widely held perception that academic advancement is not a viable investment, and that a career in university academia destines one to material and income poverty. While it must be appreciated that recent adjustments

have generally enhanced the status of academic staff, inter-grade disparities seem to have widened, particularly between the Universities' Chief Executives and equally qualified professors (Table 3). For instance, the ratio of the Professors' salary to that of the Vice Chancellors now stands at 0.38 (or 1:2.6) from an initial value of 0.8 (or 8:10). It is on this basis that the Public Universities' Inspection Board recommended that the ratio prior to the 2004 increment (i.e. 0.8) should be used to derive the rational salary scales of other academic staff (Republic of Kenya, 2006, p.180). If the current salaries and house allowances were adjusted by this ratio without disadvantaging the chief executives (Vice Chancellors), the highest paid professor would be earning a minimum gross salary of Kenya Shillings (KES) 321,920 and a maximum gross salary of KES 432,000. This would represent increments of 106% and 112%, respectively. To enhance equity and to boost the collective morale of all staff, such an adjustment would also need to be extended to other grades in the system.

Table 3 Estimated remunerations for public university academic staff, effective 1 July 2006 (US\$)

<i>Position (grade)</i>	<i>Minimum basic</i>	<i>Maximum basic</i>	<i>House allowance</i>	<i>Total min*</i>	<i>Total max</i>	<i>Ratio*</i>
Ass. Lecturer	590	886	646	80,400	99,600	1
Lecturer	775	1163	692	1468	1846	1.2
S. Lecturer	886	1329	738	1625	2068	1.3
As. Professor	1108	1662	831	1938	2492	1.6
Professor	1477	2215	923	2400	3138	1.9
DVC	2628	4477	1077	3705	5554	3
VC	4960	7077	1231	6191	8308	5

Note: Ass., Assistant; S., Senior; As., Associate; D, Deputy; VC, Vice Chancellor; 1 US\$ = Kenya Shillings 65.

* Computed by author based on total minimum.

Source: Official 2007 salary structure document

The public university inspection report further recommends the separation of grading and remuneration schemes for senior management (VCs, DVCs and Principals), academic/teaching staff and administrative/non-teaching staff (Republic of Kenya, 2006, p.182). This would effectively invalidate the 'academic equivalent policy' (Table 4) and thus reclaim the glory and value of investing in education. The effect of this policy is perceived as being worst when assessed from: (1) a promotional perspective; (2) the duration of one's career development and (3) a professional competence perspective. According to the 'equivalent policy' in public universities, when it comes to job grading and remuneration in the administrative division, a PhD qualification is on a par with a wide range of qualifications, including a Master's degree, a Bachelor's degree and even a Diploma. For instance, an academic staff member must be assessed on at least eight stringent items – the long duration of their career development notwithstanding – while their 'equivalents' are assessed in principle on fewer items for the same promotion (Table 5).

Furthermore, equating a full Professor to a Registrar whose qualification may only be a PhD or a Master's degree is difficult to justify. The same would apply when a lecturer with a PhD is equated to an administrative staff with a first degree or diploma; or when

an administrative staff member with a Master's degree is graded lower than an academic staff with a Master's or a Bachelor's degree. The existence of these anomalies contradicts fairness in an upward mobility and reward-based system, and can only be justified from the perspective of political expediency and not professional guidelines.

Table 4 Root of remuneration disparities associated with the 'equivalent policy'

<i>Academic and research grades</i>		<i>'Equivalent' administrative grades</i>	
<i>Category</i>	<i>Qualification ranges</i>	<i>Qualification ranges</i>	<i>Category</i>
Professor	PhD +++++	PhD, Masters, Bachelor's plus CPA	Registrar, Librarian, Finance Officer
Associate Professor	PhD ++++	PhD, Masters BSc+ Professional Qualifications, etc.	Deputy Registrar, Deputy Librarian Chief Accountant/Deputy Finance Officer
Senior Lecturer	PhD +++	Masters Bachelors Post Graduate Diploma General Diploma	Senior Assistant Registrar Senior Assistant Librarian Estates Manager, Farm Manager, Auditor Chief Hostels Officer Senior Accountant, Catering Manager, etc.
Lecturer	PhD ++ Masters+	Masters Bachelors+ Post-graduate Diploma Certificate	Assist. Registrar, Assist. Librarian Accountant, Estates Officer Chief Technician, Transport Officer Chief Security Officer, Internal Auditor
Assistant Lecturer	Masters	Masters, PG, BSc, BA, Diploma	Senior Administrative Assistant, Senior Secretaries, Senior Technicians, etc.

Note: The + signs are indicative of extra achievements particularly from research and publications.

Source: Public University calendars of 2003

Heavy workloads, on the other hand, manifest themselves in the form of very large classes brought about by increasing enrolments and the integration of government-sponsored and self-sponsored students. Inequitable compensation from such an integration arrangement has been a key cause of industrial action in the past. This adds credence to the perception of university authorities as being insensitive to the welfare of academic staff. This scenario may explain the weight attached to the need for inclusive management by the respondents which, on the other hand, would require improved communication and public relations from the university authorities. This paper holds the view that the culture of open, honest and proactive communication is critical in managing causes of industrial actions. Further, it can thrive only in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. This would require academic staff and union leaders to learn the art of tact and diplomacy. From past experiences, this paper strongly argues against abrasive confrontations between the staff union and universities authorities as it only entrenches resistance to change that would otherwise occur through firm yet constructive dialogue.

Table 5 General summary of promotion assessment items for academic and administrative grades in public universities

<i>Item</i>	<i>Academic division</i>	<i>Administrative division</i>
1. Basic requirements	+	+
2. Postgraduate supervision	+	-
3. Administrative responsibilities	+	+
4. Conferences/seminars/workshops	+	-
5. Research and publications	+	-
6. Quality of teaching, performance, etc.	+	-
7. Community service/national/intern. recognition	+	-
8. Academic leadership	+	-
<i>Total score</i>	80%	20%

Source: Promotion criteria guidelines

3.3 *Relative importance of industrial action management stakeholders*

On stakeholder institutions that are considered critical in managing industrial actions within public universities, the UASU topped the score with 82%, followed by University Management (78%), Council (76%) and Government (67%) (Table 6). This indicates that, despite perceived failures in the past, academic staff still consider their union as an important avenue for airing their concerns. They equally recognise the importance of council and the role of senior management in immediate university administration. As such, to effectively manage industrial action and transform universities into entrepreneurial and development institutions, the three arms (Academic Staff Union, University Administration and Government) need to work together through synergistic partnership for the common good. There is the need for the last two arms to begin viewing UASU as a potentially helpful partner and not as an antagonistic party that must be fought all the time, and everywhere. Furthermore, divergent opinion should be encouraged and the tacit information inherent in resistance behaviour tapped for utilisation in the spirit of team work.

This general opinion was also supported by the recent Public Universities Inspection Board, which noted that current Acts of parliament providing for the establishment, governance, and management of public universities and the government regulatory dimension brought in by the state corporations Act are inconsistent with the needs of modern management and good governance practices. Further, in order to accommodate change, enhance creativity and innovation, and increase democratic space and representation of all stakeholders, it is recommended that councils embrace staff unionisation and allow them to flourish and function in partnership with other university governance units (Republic of Kenya, 2006, pp.239 and 406). By implication, council memberships would need to be revised to include people with requisite competences in partnership development.

Table 6 Relative importance of stakeholder institutions in strike management

<i>SN</i>	<i>Stakeholder institution</i>	<i>% Frequency</i>					<i>100</i>
		<i>VI</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>FI</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>Missing data</i>	
1	University Council	75.5	20.4	4.1	0.0	0.0	100
2	University Management	77.6	12.2	4.1	6.1	0.0	100
3	Senate	59.2	22.4	10.2	8.2	0.0	100
4	School Executive Boards	32.7	28.6	22.4	12.2	4.1	100
5	UASU	81.6	10.2	4.1	2.0	2.2	100
6	Student Associations	16.3	22.4	22.4	30.6	8.2	100
7	Religious Groups	10.2	16.3	22.4	44.9	6.1	100
8	Government	67.3	16.3	6.1	4.1	6.1	100

Note: VI, Very Important; I, Important; FI, Fairly Important; NI, Not Important.

At a 59% score, the Senate was rated rather low as a stakeholder institution. Being comprised of professors, the Senate has traditionally taken a backseat when industrial actions have been recommended. This may imply that professors either attach very low monetary and societal value to their huge investment in education, or their opinions in decision-making forums do not really count. Further still, most of them could be simply too busy with extramural activities (additional income activities) to be concerned with their basic welfare in the university. On the other hand, the low rating of student associations indicates that academic unions traditionally do not expect students to join them in industrial actions, although students often find themselves hoodwinked by default, as conceptualised in Sub-section 1.3 above.

3.4 *Required paradigm shifts in the prevention of industrial actions*

It is apparent that with the increasing paradigm shift in higher education from ‘Ivory Towerism’ to ‘Entrepreneurial and Developmental’ institutions, innovative organisational and leadership approaches will have to be tapped into to maximise the individual and collective stakeholder creativities and competencies in pursuit of core university functions. Increased democratisation and participatory decision-making based on mutual gains among university system components will need to be researched and utilised. A lot in this regard may be borrowed from Eade’s (2006) description of ‘Motivational Management’, which focuses mainly on unlearning autocratic styles, understanding and managing change and breaking ‘established’ patterns. Focusing on people’s welfare is based on the truism of ‘doing unto others what we would wish them to do unto us’. According to Losey (1998) and Cole (2002), people are ultimately more important in organisational stability and sustainability than organisational material endowment and benefits alone. Similarly, in emphasising the importance of emotional intelligence competence in leadership, Goleman et al. (quoted in Roberts, 2007) noted that 50–70% of employees’ perception of their environment relates to the climate established by leadership, and that every 1% improvement in the service climate correlated with a 2% improvement in revenue for profit settings.

Acceptance and appreciation of the negative effects of low pay would pave the way for an ethically driven debate and rationalisation of salaries, taking into account inter- and intra-grade disparities. Being a national problem, this paper argues for comprehensive

equity-based re-structuring and rationalisation of basic salaries on the basis of qualifications and ability to perform as the initial common denominators. In this way, holders of the same or similar qualifications – albeit working in different professions – should in principle earn the same starting basic salaries, but allowances may vary to reflect the different responsibilities. For instance, in all public universities in Ethiopia, the university Presidents (Vice Chancellors) and full professors earn the same basic pay, being all qualified professors, but differ only in allowances, which are paid to the presidents by virtue of the responsibilities of their offices (Ethiopia Unistaff Participant, 2008). Were this principle to be followed in Kenya, all university chief executives would need to be full professors and earn the same as fellow professors, except for allowances.

Extending this principle to all public service jobs would represent the single most important revolutionary strategy towards equitable remuneration and job placement in Kenya. For instance, a university professor appointed as a Judge would earn a basic salary like any other professor but, in addition, receive commensurate allowances that accompany the office of a judge. A Permanent Secretary with a Bachelor's degree would earn a basic salary for that qualification in addition to allowances of that office. Such straightforward rationalisation would effectively depoliticise remuneration processes and prevent offending disparities that often destroy morale, thus lowering overall productivity and hence the quality of services delivered. An added advantage of such a policy would be the natural death of the equivalent policy, without disadvantaging any service providers therein. This approach has worked in other countries and has effectively reduced income inequalities, thus promoting fair competition and equitable human development. The societal value of higher education would also be reclaimed and quality assurance enhanced through reduced cases of brain drain and brains in the drain.

Clear and fair promotion policies, designed along a bottom-up approach (i.e. assessment from a relevant department to a final University Promotions Committee) would add credibility to the decisions in this regard. Since academic staff members know one another well at departmental levels, they can unambiguously tell whether promotion was based on laid down guidelines or on other non-professional considerations. Adopting motivational management would mean that a 'fast-tracking system' would also be developed to reward service providers that excel, particularly in publications and fund raising. The old and universal dictum 'publish or perish' attests to the importance of this dimension. In addition, while all academic staff have equal opportunity to compete and prove their academic leadership, opportunities to hold administrative positions are not equal, and those who hold such positions are already compensated in the form of extra responsibility allowances. For instance, in a department of 15 members, it would take 28 years for the 15th member to become chairperson if each is to serve for a term of 2 years only. As such, factoring administrative responsibilities in promotion criteria amounts to double compensation, and may need to be revised.

Another challenge for a learning organisation is how to delink promotion from 'establishments' and the availability of funds given that this ends up denying deserving persons their rightful upward mobility. A paradigm shift in favour of case specific merit analysis would add value in this regard. One way to ease the problem of limited funds would be to audit all cadres in academia by an independent commission so that 'pseudo-professors and lecturers' are identified and rightfully regraded. The added advantage of such radical surgery would be the reclamation of academic respect among colleagues and the establishment of expected academic and professional quality for universities and the nation at large.

A most critical aspect towards operating beyond industrial actions is the need to institutionalise regular and open communication channels between university authorities, academic staff unions and government. Constant communication would yield a wealth of latent information valuable in averting conflicts and guiding positive policy changes. Such an approach has worked well in Germany, where it would not be an exaggeration to state that public universities are generally operating beyond strikes. The university Presidents and service provider representatives (*Personal Rat*) are required by law to meet once every month in order to keep communicating on matters affecting them. The President is obliged to consult government on raised issues. The representatives of university service providers channel their concerns to the umbrella Trade Union for the Public Sector (*Ver.di*), which then enters into dialogue with the government on behalf of all public workers. If no agreement is reached, the union is allowed by law to call for industrial action only after 75% of workers in question vote for the strike. Any agreement reached in such a dispute is rationalised to cover all other public servants in order to maintain established standards of income equity (Ruwe, 2008).

This approach could provide a learning platform for the UASU, university management and council, and the government of Kenya. Where negotiations between the union and university authorities fail, a committee with representation from all the three groups would be required to seek an audience with the government and the Public Service Remuneration Authority (PSRA). The mandate of the suggested PSRA would include the rationalisation and restructuring of remuneration packages across the public service in pursuit of equity. Agreed upon Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA) would then be legalised to guarantee their implementation. Where no agreement is reached, the UASU would be required to issue the requisite strike notice, supported by at least two-thirds (67%) vote from the membership, in favour of the industrial action. Since the law would have been strictly adhered to and all avenues exhausted, there would be no justification for the victimisation of academic staff that have gone on strike. In this way employees and employers would be forced by law to do what is right, and not just to do things the right way.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

Low pay as perceived by academic staff was benchmarked on salary scales of other supposedly less qualified yet senior civil servants, paid by the same exchequer (government). This together with inter-grade disparities within the university system, perceived insensitive cum autocratic management and poor communication between university management and academic staff stand out as the main causes of industrial actions. This calls for radical rationalisation of remunerations within the university system and also between universities and other senior public offices. Basic salaries should be pegged first and foremost on earned qualification and competence for the task. Allowances may, however, vary so they are commensurate with the responsibilities attached to different offices. The apparent failure of previous politically driven commissions to harmonise remunerations across the civil service calls for the establishment of body specifically for this task (e.g. a PSRA as described in Sub-section 3.4 above). Harmonised schemes that evidently attach value to a combination of qualifications, expert performance and competence are likely to eliminate industrial actions all together.

Further, a people (employee) centred management system stands out as the single most important element in higher education governance for quality assurance. The challenge of its implementation is how to embrace synergistic partnership in university decision-making among integral stakeholders. Sustainability of this approach would need appropriate institutional and organisational changes in order to detect the need for change and its subsequent management. The long time it takes to negotiate salaries should encourage university authorities and the staff union to explore other motivational avenues as potential trade-offs instead of emphasising salaries alone. In the Kenyan context, reinstatement of the duty free car facility, but under streamlined guidelines, enhanced medical cover and insurance policy, and the establishment of attractive modalities for fees waiver for staff and their dependants are good entry points.

Such options would show that the university authorities are committed to their staff and do not see them as mere tools to yield expected results. With such incentives in place, measurement of progress through such tools as performance contracts with appropriate reward and sanction guidelines should be enhanced and institutionalised for both academic and non-academic staff. People-centred management strategies and approaches are thus the best ways to ensure that universities operate beyond industrial actions, thus guaranteeing sustainable quality in the delivery of their core mandates: teaching, learning, research and community service.

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