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The Challenges of University Strikes on Students: A Case Study from Madagascar

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Achieving higher education in Madagascar is a challenge given the various barriers students must overcome to gain admission into university. However, once enrolled, students often face additional challenges that affect their ability to obtain education. One such challenge is the frequent occurrence of labor strikes at the university. Using a qualitative approach, this study conducted a survey among alumni and current university students in Madagascar to investigate the perceived causes and consequences of university strikes in Madagascar. The findings from the survey (N=31) showed that all students have experienced delays in their education program ranging from 1-6 months and that strikes were the primary cause of these delays. Governmental lapses in salary payments and scholarship disbursements were identified as the primary catalysts for these disruptive strikes. Despite expressing frustration with the strikes, students directed their discontent primarily at a national level, underscoring a more extensive disillusionment with the government's management of the education sector. Notably, students affirmed their belief in the genuine dedication of their teachers to their education. The study unveils the emotional and financial toll of university strikes, with participants reporting anxiety, frustration, and concerns about education quality. Financially, the strikes compound challenges, affecting job market entry, rent payments, family dynamics, and overall education costs. Alarmingly, there was a consensus among participants that university strikes have led to student disenrollment. These findings serve as a crucial warning for Madagascar, signalling potential erosion of trust in the education system. If students lose faith, there is a risk of reduced educational pursuit or even international migration, contributing to increased brain drain. This poses serious implications for the holistic development and progress of Madagascar. Urgent interventions are imperative to address the root causes of university strikes, restore confidence in the education system, and mitigate the far-reaching consequences on the nation's future.

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INTRODUCTION

Madagascar grapples with significant challenges in ensuring educational access for its young population. Numerous barriers impede students' pursuit of education, creating a formidable obstacle for many. Amidst these challenges, enrolled students encounter a pervasive issue in their academic journey – strikes.

Strikes are, "forms of struggle, coercion and power in which a group of workers collectively stops working to enforce economic, social and/or political demands that matter to those

directly concerned and/or others (Van Der Linden, 2008)". During a strike, employees typically refrain from performing their regular job duties, partially or entirely, to exert pressure and draw attention to their grievances. Strikes can take various forms, including work stoppages, slowdowns, or other forms of industrial action. They are often initiated and coordinated by labour unions or other organised groups representing the interests of the workers. A strike aims to bring about changes in workplace conditions, such as improved wages, better working conditions, or changes in company policies (Luyten, 2010).

The reasons behind university strikes vary, often stemming from labour disputes between academic staff and university administrations or governments. These disputes encompass issues such as salary negotiations, working conditions, job security, and benefits (Chukwudi and Idowu, 2021). Additionally, strikes may be driven by perceived inadequate government support for higher education, reacting to policies or actions seen as detrimental to the university system, students, and staff, such as budget cuts, tuition fees, or changes in governance structures (Chukwudi and Idowu, 2021). Furthermore,

university strikes can be influenced by broader social and political issues, becoming a protest against social injustices, political repression, or discriminatory policies (Awe et al., 2022).

The consequences of these strikes are profound, causing considerable stress, frustration, and uncertainty among students. Academic disruptions, delays in course completion, and program setbacks ensue, negatively impacting academic progress, graduation timelines, and future employment prospects (Baker, 2013). Extended strikes impose financial burdens on students and families, and reduced instructional time is linked to lower academic achievement (Ewah et al., 2023; Jaume & Willén, 2019).

Research also suggests that strikes lead to a lack of student motivation, an increase in societal crimes, and a desire among students to migrate abroad, posing risks to national socio-economic development (Anonaba, 2015). Concerns about graduation timing, fears of poor exam performance post-strike and worries about producing inadequately prepared graduates further exacerbate the impact (Ajayi, 2014; Anonaba, 2015). Moreover, faith in the educational system diminishes, instructional quality suffers, and a decline in interest in education is noted (Ajayi, 2014; Ewah et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, existing studies on the consequences of university strikes have predominantly focused on Nigeria. There is a notable scarcity of research on this subject from other African nations, such as Madagascar. This gap in the literature emphasizes the necessity for a separate study in Madagascar to understand how university strikes impact students within the Malagasy context. Given the global lack of information on how university

strikes may impact students, more case studies on this topic are needed before larger generalizations can be made (Gomm et al., 2011). Consequently, this research aims to offer initial insights into the effects of university strikes on students in Madagascar.

Understanding Education in Madagascar

The Malagasy education system spans 12 years, encompassing primary, secondary, and upper-secondary levels. Beyond this, students may pursue a License (Bachelor's degree) and potentially advance to a Masters or doctorate. Nevertheless, reaching the License level in Madagascar is a noteworthy accomplishment, given the significant barriers students face throughout their educational journey.

One prominent challenge is the variation in education accessibility across regions, with the plateau area exhibiting superior accessibility to rural coastal areas. Language also poses a considerable obstacle; while Malagasy is predominantly used in primary schools, French dominates in secondary and tertiary education. This linguistic gap contributes to elevated rates of grade repetition (D'Aiglepiere, 2012; Wills et al., 2014).

Social factors further compound these challenges. Student pregnancies and the impact of unstable national governance have been identified as contributors to students not completing their secondary or upper-secondary education (Hayward, 2022; Randriamahenintsoa, 2013). Additionally, issues like teacher absenteeism and insufficient teacher training are recognised as significant concerns within the education system. The combination of these factors underscores the complexities faced by students in pursuing education beyond the primary and secondary levels in Madagascar.

Hence, when considering the myriad obstacles students overcome to reach university enrolment, witnessing their educational journey face yet another disruption due to university strikes becomes disheartening. Despite demonstrating resilience in overcoming multiple barriers, the

occurrence of university strikes adds layer of complexity to the educational landscape.

METHODS

A qualitative research methodology was used, employing an online survey to gather data, as outlined by Braun et al. (2021). Crafted in the Malagasy language, the survey was disseminated among alumni and current students representing diverse school programs in Madagascar. The questionnaire was meticulously designed to delve into the direct and indirect repercussions of school strikes on participants' education, well-being, and future prospects. The survey garnered a total of 31 responses and was analysed using Microsoft Excel following guidance from Leahy (2004). In qualitative research, the sample size is not determined by statistical considerations, but rather by the concept of data saturation, where new information ceases to emerge from the data (Boddy, 2016). Thus, the sample size of 31 respondents in this study is justified based on the qualitative research methodology employed, the narrow scope of the study and the resource constraints of administering and promoting surveys in Madagascar.

RESULTS

Respondent Profile

The following section presents a detailed analysis of the demographic and profile information garnered from a survey conducted among 31 participants. This study aimed to capture a comprehensive snapshot of the characteristics of individuals within the higher education landscape.

The age distribution of the survey respondents showcases a diverse range, with a predominant representation in the 21-25 age group, constituting 33% of the total participants. Following closely, the 17-20 age bracket accounted for 28%, while respondents aged 26-30 comprised 20%. The demographic profile further extends to individuals aged 31-35 (13%), 36-40 (3%), and those aged 41 and above (3%). Gender diversity within the survey cohort is noteworthy, with 53% of respondents identifying as female and 47% as

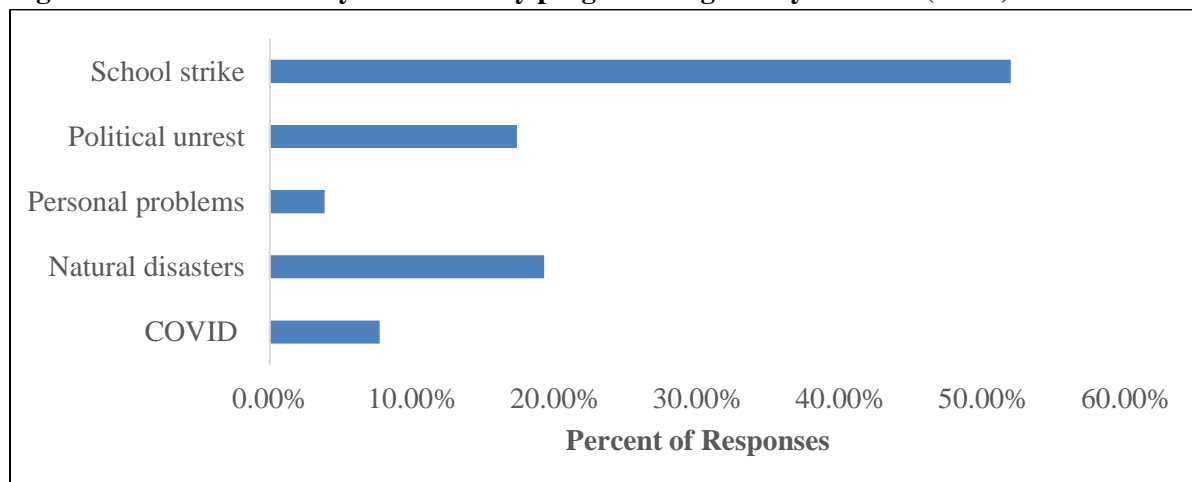
male. The majority of participants hail from public educational institutions, representing an overwhelming 97%, while a marginal 3% are affiliated with private universities. Survey respondents are distributed across various regions, with Antananarivo emerging as the primary location, hosting 44% of participants. Fianarantsoa follows with 24%, Analamanga with 17%, and Mahajanga with 6%. Matsiatra Ambony and Ampefiloha each account for 3% of the respondents. The participant pool encompasses a mix of academic statuses, with 57% identified as current students, 37% as graduates, and 7% as individuals who have discontinued their studies. The academic pursuits of the respondents are delineated by program enrolment. The majority,

constituting 77%, are engaged in undergraduate studies, while 19% are pursuing master's degrees, and 3% are enrolled in doctoral programs.

Cause and Length of Delay in Education Program

All students reported that they experienced some short delays during their education program. When asked what the main cause of the delay in their education was, 51% of undergraduate students cited school strikes as the primary factor delaying their academic progress, followed by other causes such as political unrest (17%), natural disasters (19%), and COVID-19 Pandemic (8%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Reasons for delays in university programs as given by students (N=31)



Reported delays in university education programs from students in Madagascar

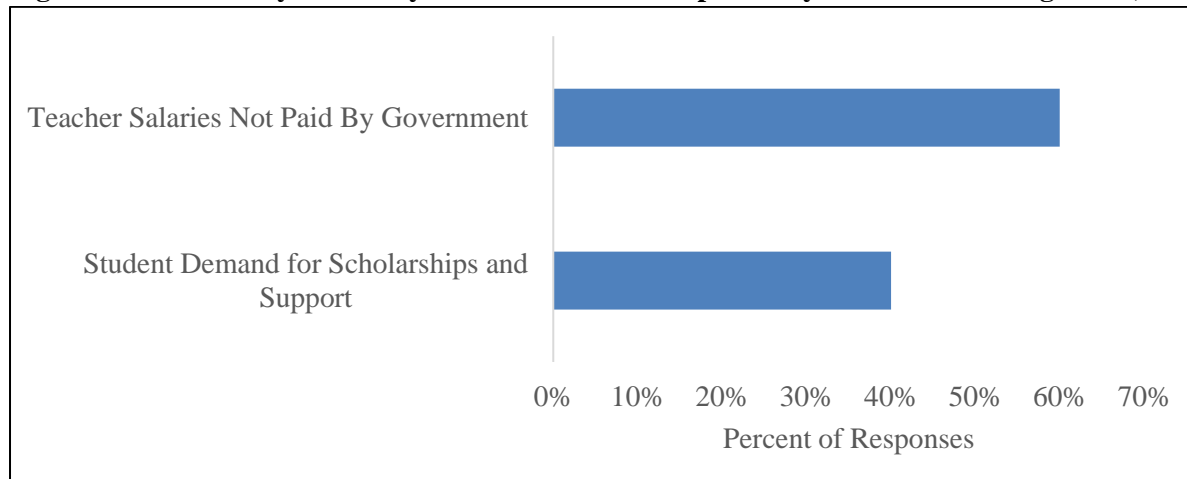
When students were asked how long of a delay they had experienced, a majority of respondents, comprising 52%, reported a delay of one month in their educational programs. Subsequently, 31% of participants acknowledged a two-month delay in their academic pursuits. 10% of respondents encountered a delay spanning three months. 7% faced educational delays surpassing the three-month threshold.

Cause of University Strikes

When asked why the university strike occurred, two main themes occurred: strikes occurring due to student demands or strikes occurring due to

teacher and faculty demands (Figure 2). According to respondents, teachers repeatedly led strikes aimed at getting the attention of the government, as their salaries were not being paid correctly. This included the regular salary, overtime salaries, vacation time, and retirement. Students also led strikes. Some of these were aimed at the university level, but some were also aimed at the government level. These mainly had to do with scholarships or lack of infrastructure. Some students strike because the government did not release their promised scholarships. Others asked for more scholarship support from the University or for improved facilities and infrastructure.

Figure 2: Reasons why university strikes occurred as reported by students in Madagascar (N=31)



While students unequivocally identified teachers as a significant force behind university strikes, intriguingly, their frustration did not manifest as animosity toward the educators themselves. When confronted with statements probing their perspectives, a nuanced and empathetic viewpoint emerged from the survey responses. Survey

participants were asked to assess their agreement with the statement, "I know that it is sometimes necessary for teachers or school administrators to strike." 79% of respondents concurred, suggesting an acknowledgment of the complex dynamics necessitating such actions (*Table 1*).

Table 1: Likert responses on agreement or disagreement on select statements (N=31)

Response Statements	SA	A	NAD	D	SD
I believe that my teachers care about my education and my success.	17%	52%	17%	4%	9%
I know that it is sometimes necessary for teachers or school administrators to strike.	25%	54%	4%	8%	8%
It is not the teachers or the school administrators that frustrate me, but the government	54%	38%	4%	0%	4%
Sometimes students run away from their studies because of school strikes	42%	46%	8%	4%	0%

Key: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, NAD = Neither Agree or Disagree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

imilarly, students were queried on their sentiments toward teachers and school administrators, specifically gauging whether their frustration was aimed at this group or directed more broadly at the government. An overwhelming 92% of students expressed that their dissatisfaction primarily lay with the government, not with the educators (*Table 1*). Moreover, when participants were asked to reflect on their perception of teachers' dedication to their education and success, a significant 69% affirmed their belief in the educators' commitment (*Table 1*). Finally, in response to the statement, "Sometimes students will abandon their educational pursuits due to university strikes," a

resounding 88% of participants expressed agreement, underscoring a prevalent recognition among respondents that university strikes can indeed be a decisive factor leading some students to discontinue their education (*Table 1*).

Impact of University Strikes on Education Perception

When asked how University strikes impact their perception of education in Madagascar, nearly half of the respondents, comprising 47.83%, expressed a perception that this makes them feel like the quality of the government in Madagascar is not adequate. One-third of participants, totalling 28.99%, expressed a belief that pursuing

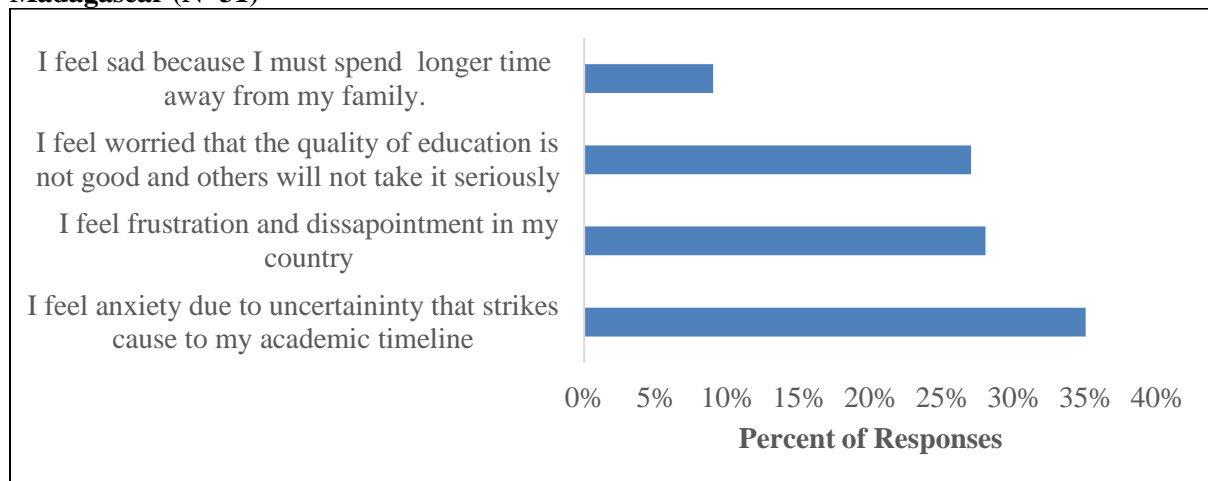
education outside of Madagascar would yield greater success, indicating a significant impact on their aspirations and preferences. 14.49% of participants conveyed a belief that university strikes have a detrimental impact on the quality of school management. 7.25% of respondents, indicated a perception that the quality of teaching staff at their respective schools is compromised by the occurrence of university strikes.

Emotional impact of University Strikes in Madagascar

When students were asked how University strikes impact them emotionally, four different themes emerged (Figure 3). A substantial 35% of respondents expressed a sense of anxiety stemming from the uncertainty introduced by

university strikes, particularly concerning their academic timelines. Students worry that the strikes might have to cause them to delay graduation or repeat a semester. A notable 28% of participants conveyed a deep emotional response, expressing feelings of frustration and disappointment directed towards their country. Approximately 27% of respondents articulated concerns about the perceived impact of university strikes on the quality of education, coupled with apprehensions that others may not view their education seriously. 9% of participants reported a sense of sadness, specifically linked to the prolonged separation from their families necessitated by the extended duration of university strikes.

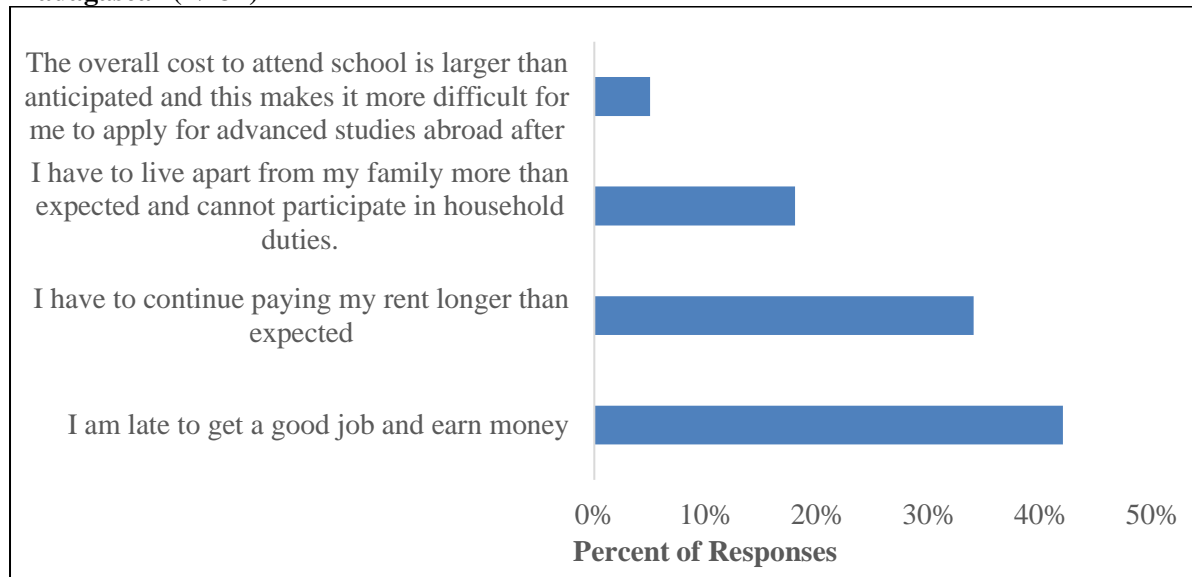
Figure 3: Emotional impacts of university strikes on students as reported by students in Madagascar (N=31)



Financial impact of University Strikes in Madagascar

When asked how University strikes impact students financially, four themes emerged (Figure 4): 42% of respondents expressed concern about the delayed entry into the job market, perceiving that the university strikes could potentially hinder their ability to secure lucrative employment opportunities promptly. Approximately 34% of participants reported an extended financial burden due to the necessity of continuing rent payments for a longer duration than initially anticipated,

accentuating the strain on their financial resources. 18% of respondents highlighted the impact of university strikes on their family dynamics, reporting prolonged separation and an inability to contribute to household duties, underscoring the social and familial consequences of extended academic disruptions. A smaller proportion, 5% of participants, expressed concern about the escalated overall cost of education, particularly its potential hindrance to pursuing advanced studies abroad in the aftermath of university strikes.

Figure 4: Financial impacts of university strikes on students as reported by students in Madagascar (N=31)

DISCUSSION

This study contributes novel insights into the repercussions of university strikes in Madagascar, shedding light on the pervasive challenges faced by students. The overarching theme that emerged from the survey data is the ubiquity of delays in education programs, with all respondents reporting some form of disruption. While political unrest and natural disasters contributed to these setbacks, the predominant factor, as indicated by 51% of undergraduate students, was university strikes. This prevalence underscores the recurrent nature of strikes in the educational landscape of Madagascar.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the revelation that the root cause of university strikes, according to survey respondents, is predominantly financial. The government's failure to fulfil financial commitments, such as salary payments and scholarships, emerged as the leading trigger for these disruptions. This sheds light on the underlying challenges within the financial framework of the education system in Madagascar.

Despite the frustration expressed by students in response to the strikes, it is noteworthy that their discontent is predominantly directed at a national level. Students appear to harbour disappointment in the broader governmental management of

education, with a prevailing sentiment that their teachers genuinely care about them. The crux of their dissatisfaction lies in the perceived mismanagement by the government rather than any shortcomings in the quality of instruction provided by teachers. This underscores the need for targeted interventions at the systemic level to address the root causes of strikes and enhance the overall management of the education sector.

The emotional and financial constraints resulting from university strikes are further highlighted in the survey findings. Financially, these strikes compound challenges for students, impacting their job market entry, rent payments, family dynamics, and overall education costs. This financial strain, coupled with the alarming agreement among participants that university strikes have led to students disenrolling from their education, is a cause for concern. The potential long-term consequences on the educational aspirations and outcomes of students are evident, emphasising the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate the impact of these disruptions.

This study aligns with findings from other scholars notably from Nigeria (Ajayi, 2014; Anonaba, 2015; Ewah et al., 2023). However, as stated earlier, there is still a lack of information on this topic. Major news outlets have reported the

occurrence of university strikes in Tanzania, South Africa, and Ghana in the last decade, yet no research exists on strikes in these countries. Research efforts should continue to investigate the causes and consequences of university strikes on students.

CONCLUSION

In Madagascar, students encounter formidable obstacles just to reach the university level and gaining admission is a remarkable achievement. However, the impact of university strikes, as revealed by this study, poses a significant threat to this hard-fought progress. The findings indicate that these strikes cause negative emotional and financial stress and may cause students to abandon their education altogether. Not only does this impact students' personal goals and career prospects, but it also has repercussions for the national development in Madagascar.

If students are frustrated and distrust education in Madagascar, they may seek education abroad. This could increase the country's "brain drain". This not only diminishes the local talent pool but also hampers the country's intellectual capital, vital for addressing pressing socio-economic challenges and fostering innovation. The education landscape in Madagascar requires robust leadership and sustained, consistent management to address the root causes of strikes and fortify the resilience of the system.

Recognising the broader implications of student disenrollment due to strikes, stakeholders must prioritise strategic interventions to safeguard the nation's educational investments. Implementing measures to enhance financial stability, address systemic inefficiencies, and provide consistent support to both students and educators is imperative. The significance of education in propelling national development cannot be overstated, and concerted efforts are needed to ensure that the journey to University for Malagasy students remains a pathway to empowerment and progress rather than an uncertain and disrupted trajectory.

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