

Regular Research Paper

Social audit of the Obafemi Awolowo University: Perspectives of campus transport operators

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This study examines the perspectives of transport operators at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Nigeria, focusing on their experiences and perceptions of campus transport services. Using qualitative methods, including focus group discussions and interviews, data were collected from transport operators across different age groups and levels of experience. Thematic analysis revealed that the regulatory transport system at OAU is well-structured, facilitating safer operations compared to off-campus transport. Collaboration between transport operators and the university's security system enhances campus safety. The provision of transport services has positively impacted the livelihoods of operators and contributed to the local economy of Ile-Ife. Transport operators maintain positive relationships with students, staff, and university management. The study underscores the critical role of transport operators in the socio-economic landscape of the university and provides unique insights into social evaluation at OAU. It is recommended that transport operators' perspectives be further integrated into transport policy and planning to enhance mobility, security, and community engagement on campus.

Key words: University, social audit, campus, transport, security.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not solely centers of learning; they also influence the economy, society, and culture of their host communities. They contribute to inclusive development, livelihood support, and the welfare of individuals who interact with the institution daily (Okolie et al., 2022; Ebzeeva and Smirnova, 2023). In Nigeria, universities are predominantly located in urban and peri-urban areas, and their engagement with host communities often intersects with social and economic activities such as transportation and trade (Ezekiel et al, 2024).

Transport operators occupy a strategic position within this relationship. They serve as essential intermediaries, facilitating the mobility of students, staff, and visitors, while simultaneously relying on the university population for their livelihood. Beyond providing transport services, these operators act as socio-economic agents, influencing daily

life, urban safety, and accessibility, and reflecting the social responsibility of the university. From the perspective of transport operators, understanding the functioning of campus transport provides insight into the university's interactions with informal community actors, particularly in terms of regulatory structures, infrastructure provision, and the mitigation of economic stagnation in the community.

Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), one of Nigeria's leading universities, offers a unique platform to examine these dynamics. Located in Ile-Ife, OAU has significantly shaped the town's demographic and economic landscape (Odunlade and Abegunde, 2023). The university hosts a large population of students and staff and interacts with various categories of employees, including market traders, artisans, and transport operators. Campus transport providers—such as bus drivers (Sabo/Lagere),

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commercial motorcyclists (Okada), and union leaders—play a vital role in mobility on and around the campus. However, their experiences also reveal structural challenges, including security concerns, communication breakdowns, regulatory inconsistencies, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. These experiences are critical for the social evaluation of universities, as they offer insights into the institution's broader societal impact and relationships with stakeholders.

Despite their importance, campus transport operators, like other informal service providers, often face hardships arising from breakdowns in university–community relations. Recent studies in Nigeria show that informal service providers frequently bear the economic consequences of industrial disputes or campus closures without compensation (Madichie and Agu, 2023). Transport operators are often the most affected, highlighting the need for their involvement in campus governance (Madichie and Agu, 2023). International research similarly emphasizes that transport systems in higher education reflect institutional commitments to sustainability, equity, and safety (Hassan et al., 2025; Barnett-Itzhaki et al., 2025).

Despite their critical role, few empirical studies have explored the perspectives of campus transport operators. Existing research often overlooks the socio-economic challenges they face, such as security risks, inconsistent regulations, and lack of integration into university policy and planning.

In light of this, the present study explores the lived experiences of transport operators within the OAU community. It seeks to capture their narratives, highlighting how the university functions as a socially responsible institution. Specifically, the study examines operators' perceptions of campus regulations, security measures, interpersonal relationships with students and staff, and the socio-economic impact of the university. The study contributes to the literature on university–community relations, social responsibility in higher education, and the role of transport in sustaining university communities in Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative approach and specifically a case study. (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Nowell and Albrecht, 2023) This method was used to document the transport operators' experience and perceptions as well the institutional social responsibility. The case study approach facilitated a detailed understanding of the transport operators in their socio-institutional context or at the interface of the practices of OAU and community livelihood.

Study setting

The study was conducted in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, focusing on the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) community and the transport terminals in its surrounding areas. Founded in 1961, OAU has a student population exceeding 35,000 and employs over 10,000 staff

members (Ojo et al., 2023). The university's daily activities generate substantial transport demand, creating opportunities for transport operators, including bus drivers, commercial motorcyclists, and union leaders, to facilitate mobility and accessibility within and around the campus. The university's social responsibility to its host community is reflected, in part, through the regulation, inclusion, and welfare of these transport operators.

Participants

Participants were purposively sampled to capture the full range of experiences of transport operators associated with OAU. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to target individuals directly relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample included bus drivers and commercial motorcyclists (okada riders) operating within the OAU community. Inclusion criteria were: (i) being an active transport operator within the OAU community, (ii) having at least one year of work experience in the area, and (iii) willingness to provide informed consent. Fifteen interviews were conducted to ensure diversity in age, gender, years of experience, and type of transport service. The variation among participants enhanced the validity of findings by representing multiple generational, occupational, and experiential perspectives.

Data collection

Data were collected between August and September 2025 using three qualitative methods.

1. In-Depth Interviews (IDIs): Conducted with individual bus and motorcycle drivers to explore their experiences, understanding of campus regulations, and perceptions of the university's socio-economic impact.
2. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Conducted with transport union leaders and senior operators to capture broader perspectives on engagement with the university.
3. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Conducted with groups of transport operators to discuss emerging narratives, challenges, and opportunities within the campus transport system.

Interviews were conducted in Yoruba or English, depending on participant preference, and lasted 45–75 min. All sessions were audio-recorded. Open-ended questions explored participants' demographic background, knowledge of campus rules, safety, daily interactions with students and staff, access to university services, and perceptions of institutional responsibility.

Data management

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and Yoruba responses were translated into English. Bilingual research assistants verified the translations to ensure cultural relevance and accuracy. Transcripts were anonymized, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect identities.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2021)'s six-step framework: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being pre-determined. NVivo 12 software was used to organize and manage data, ensuring consistency in coding and facilitating extraction of

illustrative quotations.

Demographic profiling summarized participants' socio-demographic characteristics, including age, marital status, education, household size, and years of experience. Narratives captured the social and economic realities of operators. For example, older drivers with dependents emphasized financial insecurity, while younger riders focused on enforcement challenges and livelihood risks. Triangulation of IDIs, KIs, and FGDs enhanced the credibility of findings. Researchers maintained reflexivity throughout, balancing empathy with analytical rigor (Berger, 2015).

RESULTS

Participant demographics

The study included commercial cyclists, bus operators, and union leaders among the participants. Their ages ranged from 35 to 60 years, all were male (100%), and the majority were married (83%). Educational backgrounds varied from secondary school to post-secondary education. Participants had been part of the OAU community for between five and more than twelve years, indicating their familiarity with the local context and campus operations. Household sizes ranged from four to seven members, highlighting the importance of transport income for family sustenance.

Thematic findings

Six major themes emerged from the analysis: (i) regulatory frameworks, (ii) operational experiences on a daily basis, (iii) safety and security management, (iv) socio-economic impacts and livelihood outcomes, (v) university–community relations, and (vi) challenges and opportunities for better engagement. Each theme is presented with supporting quotations and interpretations.

Regulatory frameworks

Participants indicated that OAU has a well-established transport regulatory system. Campus transport is governed by rules such as stopping only at designated bus stops, prohibiting bikes in certain areas, refraining from phone use while driving, and observing speed limits and safety protocols. These regulations are implemented jointly by the university security unit and the operators' union. One participant noted:

"...note that you cannot open the door of the bus while you are in the campus but you can open it after the gate."

A 54-year-old bus driver added:

"...no phone calls while driving... all in the interest of the safety of members of the university community."

Operators viewed compliance as a professional duty, with

union rules often stricter than university regulations. However, there were concerns about potential policy changes, such as replacing buses with tricycles, which operators feared would threaten their livelihoods:

"They want to use tricycles rather than buses. How many people are able to ride tricycles? This is one of our top concerns."

This highlights a mismatch between institutional regulations and the practical realities of operators' work, suggesting the need for participatory planning.

Operational Experiences on a Daily Basis

Daily operations were sometimes disrupted by student sporting events, public holidays, staff strikes, and demonstrations. Operators reported challenges from passengers, particularly students, requiring patience, flexibility, and negotiation skills. One bike rider explained:

"Many students who bike make phone calls or video calls while biking along... we feel concern about their uncared attitudes while plying the road, and we transport operators also need to exercise patience."

Despite these challenges, campus operations were perceived as safer and more predictable than off-campus transport due to institutional control and regulations. A bus driver emphasized:

"Inside the school, all is well; outside, a driver can fight with an outsider, but here, we are protected by the rules."

This demonstrates the link between regulated systems, occupational safety, and workers' well-being.

Safety and security management

Operators reported close collaboration among bike riders, bus drivers, union leaders, and campus security. Security measures included working permits, activity monitoring, and tighter campus surveillance compared to off-campus areas. A participant noted:

"Here, we have very tight security; if we see anything unusual, we call the security."

However, concerns remained about night-time security when fewer operators and security personnel were present. Operators emphasized the need for systematic inclusion in campus security planning.

Socio-economic impacts and livelihood outcomes

Participants described transport work as a primary source of daily income that supports their families. They recognized the university's role in providing opportunities that positively impact the local economy of Ile-Ife. One

participant stated:

“Without the University, my financial activities would be so poor... and generally, Ile-Ife would not be Ile-Ife without this University.”

However, income was less certain during holidays, strikes, or student demonstrations, highlighting the vulnerability of informal transport operators to external disruptions. Despite this, operators were generally able to meet household needs, pay school fees, and support their families.

University–community relations

Transport operators reported generally cordial relationships with students, staff, and university management, facilitated by union activities and periodic meetings with university officials. Mutual respect was maintained, particularly when formal communication channels were functional. Nevertheless, poor communication was a significant barrier, especially when changes to rules or regulations were not effectively conveyed:

“...the university authorities most of the time do not involve us whenever there is a need to change the rules or modify some of the existing regulations.”

Operators suggested that greater inclusion in decision-making would enhance the university's social responsibility and the effectiveness of campus transport.

Challenges and opportunities for better engagement

Participants identified operational and structural challenges, including night-time security, inconsistent policy enforcement, and regulatory changes (e.g., replacing buses with tricycles). They also reported limited access to campus facilities such as health centers, piped water, and public toilets. One participant noted:

“We should have public toilets here, health centre, all the things we are supposed to be benefiting from.”

Operators recommended improved communication, participatory decision-making, and alignment of university policies with transport realities. Enhancing dialogue between the transport union, university management, and stakeholders was seen as crucial for maintaining cooperation and optimizing socio-economic benefits in campus transport.

DISCUSSION

This paper discusses the experiences, problems and the

socio-economic impact of the transport operators in the community of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU). However, they are also an expression of the general trend with respect to the informal transport sector in Nigeria. The findings reflect the multi-faceted interaction between regulation and security, operational practices and community engagement, which impact the well-being of operators and the university. The findings of this study highlight the importance of organized regulations in ensuring the safety and orderly operation of campus transport. Transport operators reported compliance with rules regarding speed limits, designated stops, mobile phone usage, and passenger safety. These findings align with recent studies emphasizing the role of effective regulation in reducing accidents and enhancing passenger safety in informal transport systems (Cheberiachko et al., 2023; Oguntimehin et al., 2025).

However, concerns were raised about inconsistent enforcement of policies, particularly regarding proposed changes such as the introduction of tricycles. As noted in institutional governance literature, policies enacted at higher levels may not always reflect operational realities on the ground, highlighting a tension between regulatory intent and practical implementation (Pot et al., 2023). This underscores the need for participatory policy-making that involves transport unions and operators in decision-making processes, ensuring that planning is grounded in reliable evidence and operational realities.

Operators demonstrated adaptability and resilience in managing student behavior, academic calendars, and external disruptions such as strikes. Patience, negotiation, and flexibility were identified as critical occupational competencies, consistent with research on informal transport in sub-Saharan Africa, which emphasizes improvisation and resilience as key skills (Kerzhner et al., 2025; Essien, 2024). On-campus operations were perceived as safer and more predictable compared to off-campus work, with institutional vigilance, union coordination, and respect from students contributing to occupational safety.

The study also illustrates how safer and sustainable informal transport systems can be supported by institutional culture and regulatory frameworks. Transport operators collaborated with campus security, unions, and peers to prevent theft, accidents, and misconduct. Security gaps, particularly at night, highlighted the need for flexible and adaptive security management strategies, including the deployment of skilled personnel and coordinated oversight.

This confirms prior studies advocating for structural and adaptive security mechanisms in informal transport systems (Ermoshin et al., 2022; Oguntimehin et al., 2025; Lerch et al., 2024). Transport work was recognized as a key source of livelihood, providing income for daily needs, children's education, and family welfare. Despite fluctuations in demand caused by holidays or strikes, campus transport offered more stability than off-campus

alternatives. These findings support the notion that organized informal transport contributes significantly to the economic empowerment of low- and middle-income operators (Oguntimehin et al., 2025; Kerzhner et al., 2025). Integrating livelihood considerations into transport planning can enhance both operational efficiency and socio-economic outcomes.

The study also highlighted strong social capital among operators, students, and university staff. Cordial relations, facilitated by union engagement and mutual respect, reflect trust, reciprocity, and networked relationships that sustain community enterprises (Saz-Gil et al., 2021; Julsrud, 2023; Kerzhner et al., 2025). Yet, participants noted ongoing communication gaps between university authorities and operators, calling for more prompt and inclusive communication to improve decision-making and operational efficiency.

Several challenges were identified, including night-time security gaps, inconsistent policy enforcement, and limited access to university services such as health facilities, piped water, and sanitation. These findings align with existing literature on informal transport systems, which emphasizes infrastructural deficits and regulatory mismatches as key constraints (Oguntimehin et al., 2025). Participants recommended strengthening communication, adopting participatory processes, and fostering strategic collaboration between transport unions and university authorities to enhance occupational safety, operational efficiency, and socio-economic benefits.

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of campus transport operators, it has limitations inherent to qualitative research. The small sample size limits the generalizability of findings. Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches, incorporating surveys, operational data analysis, and cross-campus comparisons. Additionally, examining gender dynamics in campus transport operations and the broader impact of policies on livelihoods would provide a more comprehensive understanding of these systems.

Conclusion

This research seeks the opinion of the campus transport operators concerning the social impact of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Qualitative data were gathered from the key stakeholders in the university. Findings revealed that the majority of the transport operators survive based on the income that is earned from transport operations in the university. The operators testified to the great positive influence that the university had in their individual and communitarian life. The study concluded that the university has shown great social relevance in its immediate community by providing not only a citadel of learning, but also an important source of economic activity

and prosperity to transport operators within the university campus. Strengthening of current forms of communication and engagement between the university and transport operators is key to the further development of the transport system, as well as expansion of the contributions from the university to the economy of the host community.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors did not declare any conflict of interest.

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