

Conflict Management in the Nigerian University System

Ndum, Victor Etim

*Institute Of Public Policy And Administration,
University Of Calabar, Nigeria*

Stella-Maris Okey

*Faculty Of Education, Cross River University Of Technology,
Calabar-Nigeria*

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Abstract

Conflict is an attendant feature of human interaction and cannot be eliminated; however, its proper management and transformation are essential for peace and progress in human society. It has been observed that Nigerian universities has for decades been faced with so many crisis ranging from conflict between academic staff and university administrators, students versus academic staff, students versus university authorities , non-academic staff versus university administrators. The conflicts have given rise to distrust and hostility among professionals and academics, thus, contributing in hampering smooth, effective and efficient administration in the universities. It also appeared that despite this situation, stakeholders in education seemed to develop non-challant attitude towards these conflicts. If this role conflict is not checked it can be descriptive and negative as people involved will often see one another as enemies. This is unwholesome for the University community and Nigeria educational system as a whole. This paper examined conflict management in higher institutions of learning with specific reference to Nigerian Universities. Some causes of conflict were identified as well as ways these conflicts could be managed. Well-fashioned recommendations on how conflict could be more effectively managed for the achievement of the system's mission, goals and objectives and in particular the pursuit of industrial harmony in the system were also made.

Keywords: *conflict, conflict management, university system, violence, collective bargaining*

1. Introduction

The nature and character of the university as an academic organization entails the achievement and maintenance of a harmonious environment conducive for the working together of various groups of staffs and the management team for the attainment of preselected missions and objectives. However, in recent years, the industrial relations terrain in the Nigerian University system has been saturated with series of industrial conflicts with consequent adversities on the advancement of knowledge (Ajayi, Modupe, 2000).

Conflict today has become part of organizations. This is more so in an organization as a university with a structure that allows two or more units or groups to share functional boundaries in achieving its set objectives. In universities, people with differing nature -students, lecturers and administrative staff - have to work harmoniously together. Hence, the organizational structure is such that staff and staff, students and students, and staff and students share functional boundaries of exchange of knowledge.

Conflicts will always occur but a well-managed conflict will not degenerate to violence. Since

violence will not erupt without conflict as antecedents, one can assume that many of the conflicts in tertiary institutions and insecurity degenerated is because their antecedents (causes) were not properly managed or that the conflicting parties did not explore the power of communication and conflict manager's personality in resolving the crises (Agbonna; Yusuf & Onifade, 2009).

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This paper examines conflict and conflict management in higher institutions of learning with specific reference to Nigerian Universities. Some causes of conflict are identified and possible ways of managing such conflicts are examined.

2. Conceptual Underpinnings

Many people view conflict as an activity that is almost totally negative and has no redeeming qualities. Some consider it as dysfunctional, destructive, and the same time as a catalyst for change, creativity and production (Posigha & Oghuvwu, 2009).

Conflict involves a situation of disagreement between two parties (Amusan, 1996). Accordingly, a conflict situation is characterized by the inability of those concerned to iron out their differences and reach an agreement on issues of common interest. This inability manifests in one form of protest or the other such as strikes and other work disruptions (slow-downs, sabotage and planned absenteeism). Ejiogu (1990) also perceived conflict as mutual hostility and all kinds of opposition or antagonistic interaction including disagreements or controversies about ideas, values, and ways of life. The major types of conflicts identified by Ejiogu (1990) are:

1. Conflict due to hierarchy of positions
 - a. subordinate conflict - between the boss and his subordinate (such as between lecturers and students);
 - b. superordinate conflict - between the administrator and an authority over him (e.g. Vice Chancellor and the Visitor);
 - c. lateral conflict - between an administrator and his peer (e.g. between Vice Chancellors of two universities);
2. Conflict based on the relationship between the objective state of affairs and the perceived state of affairs by conflicting parties (this conflict could be veridical, contingent, displaced, misattributed or latent);
3. Conflicts based on antagonistic source such as conflict between cultural values and institutional expectations, role expectation and personality roles, and deriving from personality discord.

Organizational conflict is defined as the behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of some other person's goals. Conflict is therefore a product of incompatibility of goals and it arises from opposing behaviours. It can be viewed from the individual group or organization levels.

Mullins (1999) identified three potential sources of organization conflict. They are:

- i. Individual - such as attitude, personality characteristics of particular person, needs, illness and stress.
- ii. Group - such as group skills, the informal organization and group norms.
- iii. Organization - such as communications, authority structure, leadership style and management behaviour.

We need to know that individual sources of conflict often develop into groups as well as organizational conflict. From the potential sources highlighted above the nature of the union leader will determine to a large extent the achievement of the union's demand.

The management styles employed by the organization would then determine whether the conflict will be subdued or aggravated for example. An autocratic leader will use coercion rather than persuasion to achieve his own goals. If the calibers of the ideologues of Karl Marx who believed in radicalism are the Union Leaders, then the organization runs a risk of heading for precipice.

In many cases, lack of synchronization of individual goals within the organizational goals may make an individual to work contrary to the corporate goals of the organization. There is also departmental conflict, which can inhibit the attainment of the organizational goals a department requires. Organizations that disregard the existence of informal group run the risk of being run aground. A union may also take up complaints of individual members of the union as it relates to job content. Where the union feels that the union member concerned is being over- employed the union may take up the case on behalf of the employee in question and the refusal of the organization to bow to the threat of the union may generate conflict of a higher magnitude.

Robins (1998) believed that conflict is a positive force and necessary for effective performance. This approach encourages a minimum level of conflict within the group in order to encourage self-criticism, change and innovation and to help prevent apathy or too great a tolerance for harmony and the status quo. Conflict is an inevitable feature of organizational life and should be judged by its own performance.

The contemporary world is increasingly multicultural and the identity crisis resulting from this sometimes threatens sustainable human development. This makes the promotion of understanding and dialogue to be a prime issue in the management of multiculturalism, global peace and security (Oloyede, 1999). Conflict is an inevitable friction in any organization.

Efficient and effective management of conflicts is fundamental to the development of any society, but the prevailing situations in Nigerian universities constitute a reversal of this reality. Conflict in higher education is inescapable. Conflict exists at every level of our academic world. And while conflict can be negative and can cause deep rifts in the framework of the institution, it can also be used as a tool to take the institution and the people in it from stagnation to a new level of effectiveness. What makes the difference is conflict management (Holton, 1998).

The importance of tertiary education to the national development cannot be overemphasized. Fatile& Adejuwon (2011) indicated that no meaningful development can take place in a crisis-ridden system torn apart by crisis as witnessed in the educational institutions in the country today. Experience has shown that students' crisis is as old as the tertiary institutions in Nigeria itself. Today, students' militancy in the nation's tertiary institutions has come to be an issue of serious concern.

However, revolts, protests, unrests and violence, as well as incessant closure of schools for months in the wake of unrest have become a regular characteristic of Nigerian's tertiary institutions (Adeyemi; Ekundayo & Alonge, 2010).

Conflict results from human interaction in the context of incompatible ends and where one's ability to satisfy needs or ends depends on the choices, decisions and behaviour of others. It is therefore, possible to argue that conflict is endemic to human relationships and societies. It is the result of interaction among people, an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence (Adejuwon & Okewale, 2009).

Conflicts on campus are growing in number, kind, and complexity. The current university context is clearly more challenging than in the past. The range of conflicts and the forums available for their management are much more far-reaching than ever before. In short, society has changed, and so has the university.

There are basically four forms of conflict. Intra -personal, Inter-personal, Intergroup or Intra group. Conflicts become interpersonal or inter-group when they take the form of open actions such

as hostile reactions, strike actions, etc. against another persons or groups but until the hostile feelings are acted upon, it remains at the level of intrapersonal problem only. In an organization a person's role can be in conflict with another person's, individuals or groups emanating from the responsibilities entrusted to them in an organization. Roles conflicts arise as a result of role ambiguity where people are not clear about what they expect of each other or of one another, where roles are not properly spelt out and individuals' or groups' responsibilities are not clearly stated, workers may not be able to build up expectations of one another because of role ambiguity (Olutade 2005).

3. Causes of Conflicts

Potentials for conflicts are multifarious within the university system. Some of these are indicated below:

Continuous competition for scarce resources: Research, teaching, student amenities, staff pay and other welfare services all have their claims on the limited resources at the disposal of the university. Hence, there is deprivation (relative or absolute) of the needs of all the groups within the system. The consequences of inadequate provision of financial resources to the university system are the decay of structures and the decline in services and functions. According to Sanda (1992), there is direct connection between deprivation which leads to frustration, and aggression. The conflicts which result from the frustrated are often directed against the defined aggressors or perpetrators of the undesirable state of affairs. Gross mismanagement of available resources could also result in conflicts. These conflicts could take the form of strikes, demonstration, boycott of lectures and violent riots.

Perceived goal incompatibility: The potential for conflict is likely to be high where groups or individuals perceive and interpret the same phenomenon differently. In the university system, attention needs to be focused on the critical point of contact between the teacher and the learner.

The psychology of learning suggests that students will not learn well unless they are actively involved in the process, and so accept responsibility for their learning activities. So, if students do really feel that they are learning, much else will be forgiven. If not, they need to be listened to; otherwise, they might engage themselves in other activities they consider worthwhile.

Autonomy and academic freedom: Autonomy drives are those when one group either seeks to exercise control over some activity that another party regards as its own domain or seeks to insulate itself from such control (Idowu, 1985). Academic freedom, according to Sanda (1992) connotes freedom to organize the university, design and teach courses, associate with others, project, imbibe, exchange and hold ideas without any fear of harassment or victimization, and challenge established orthodoxies without any fear of contradiction, all in the pursuit of truth.

However, events such as outright ban of university staff and students' associations fear of premature retirement, or rationalization of programmes as a result of government overregulation all result in decreasing autonomy, decline in morale, goal displacement and ultimately, conflicts.

Management style of universities: Though a university is an academic enterprise, a lot of academic effectiveness rests on administrative support machinery. Hence, the management competencies of university managers determine to a large extent, the severity of conflicts within the university, irrespective of the origin of the conflict (internal or external). Managers who have tendencies to authoritarianism and dogmatism are particularly conflict-prone. In university administration, eight spheres are identified for the goal of quality education to be attained (Sanda, 1991). These spheres are finances, students, academic programme, committee system, personnel, welfare, reward system and physical facilities. Any significant lapse (s) in any of these areas might lead to a revolt. Role Ambiguity/Role Dissatisfaction, Conflicts occur when the role prescriptions are vague and uncertain

Difference in values and lifestyles: Probably because of the concentration of young adolescents, possibly experiencing freedom and independence for the first time, the university

campuses are filled with and threatened by, noise, aggressive styles of dress, sexual behaviours, aesthetics and secret peer associations (e.g. cultism). The older members - academic and administrators - impose rules and regulations. The young may answer back by demanding for, and claiming, their democratic rights, culminating in minor conflicts or even ghastly skirmishes between the students and the university authority.

Politics and national issues: In addition to conflicts arising from situations intrinsic to the university, some arise due to political objectives outside the university. Political control of education in terms of financial and administrative policies bring about conflicts between the university and the government. The Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Education and National Universities Commission (NUC), controls the structure, curriculum, budget and calendar of the universities. Also through Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), all admissions to the universities are controlled and manipulated (Quota system). Moreover, national issues, especially with political undertones, do bring about conflict. Policies such as privatization, university autonomy and democratization of university management usually spark off controversies. Politics especially on campus relating to appointment of key officers such as Vice Chancellor also result into conflicts. These conflicts often lead to disruptions of academic activities and university calendars.

Similarly, causes of role conflict in the university includes work interdependence, differences in performance criteria and reward systems, differences in units and subunits orientation and goals and differences in status and jurisdictional ambiguities. Personal or behavioural such as differences in background, personal traits, values, communication, perceptions, attitudes, and emotions.

4. Possible Ways of Managing Conflicts in Nigerian Universities

Efficient and effective management of conflicts is fundamental to the development of any society, but the prevailing situations in Nigeria constitute a reversal of this reality. Managing conflict towards proactive and constructive action is the best approach in resolving conflict in the university. When conflict arises, we need to be able to manage them properly, so that it becomes a positive force, rather than a negative one, which would threaten the individual or group. If conflicts arise and are not managed properly, it will lead to delays of work, disinterest and lack of action and in extreme cases, it might lead to complete breakdown of the system.

In resolving university conflict, developing a constructive communication process and influential conflict negotiator's personality are very important. No doubt, schools cannot avoid experiencing one conflict or the other but a great deal of such conflict can be managed and be guided from disrupting school efforts towards attaining its manifest and latent goals if the conflicting parties are systematic in the way they communicate their grievances, situation of the conflict and their readiness to negotiate for peace and if the negotiator mediating the resolution process is of good personality (Agbonna; Yusuf & Onifade, 2009).

Conflict management in schools demands appropriate leadership style of the school administrator or chief executive.

Leadership and administrative expertise remains central. A more participatory and supportive style of leadership and management behaviour is likely to assist in conflict management. Demers in Magaula (2007) articulated three strategies of peaceful crisis resolution between and among warring parties; mediation, arbitration and reconciliation. Magagula (2007) also argued that each of the approaches of Demers could be used by universities to resolve crisis among and between aggrieved parties.

Clarification of goals and objectives is also vital. The clarification and continual refinement of goals and objectives, role definitions and performance standards help to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts.

Focusing attention on super-ordinate goals, that are shared by parties in conflicts, may also help to defuse hostility and lead to more cooperative behaviour. Providing valid information and avenue for expression of views Information is needed to avoid blocking of communication flow that

may lead to differences in perceptions. Effective management information system (MIS) is essential to provide requisite information which minimizes delays and ensures maximum utilization of resources. Most Nigerian universities lack effective computerized management information system for capturing, processing, storing, retrieving and disseminating relevant information (Alabi, 2002).

There is need for better understanding and cooperation between the University system as a whole and the government. The decision-makers and their advisers need to be better informed on how the universities operate, while the university community needs to acquaint itself with the ways of the government, generally. Invariably, the universities will neither develop attitudes of hostility or servility towards the government, nor the government intolerant of the universities.

Ibukun (1997), highlighted some conflict resolution measures such as the use of authority, and command, problem solving, appeal to superior organisation goals, changing the structure of the organisation, prevention and avoidance, expansion of opportunities and resources, compromise and agreement and changing the behaviour of people involved in conflict through dialogue.

5. Conclusion

Conflict potentials in the universities are varied. Hence the need for all the groups within the system to recognize these potentials and deliberately make concerted efforts to curtail the negative consequences of conflicts. This curtailment could be achieved through meaningful interactions and effective communication; resourcefulness and resource management; and cooperation between the universities and the state. All these measures would culminate in drastic reduction in negative conflict potentials and consequent high goal attainment potential.

6. Recommendations

The following strategies for future conflict resolution in Nigerian Universities are worthwhile:

- In the events of any organizational conflict the personalities involved in union activities should not be attacked, instead, the problem should be the focus.
- The management should give room for bargaining rather than using coercion such as sign- back register
- Conditions that promote effective conflict management should include consideration of a wide range of alternative solutions, a cooperative climate, an organized and orderly process, and avoidance of artificial conflict-reducing devices such as voting or relying on a leader to make the final decision.
- Thus, conflict management should not be seen to connote a rigid approach that suits all situations, rather, it should involve a series of concerted efforts to prevent and or arrest a seemingly serious crisis

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