



## Conflict and innovative management styles for enhanced performance in public universities in Rivers State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

The study investigated conflict and Innovative Management Styles for Enhanced Performance in Public Universities in Rivers State, Nigeria. Conflicts in public universities 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. University-based conflicts vary from campus to campus and reflect university size, location, student population, mission, specialization governance and unionization. Conflicts have made management of educational institutions to be the spotlight throughout the state. The study xrayed the meaning of conflicts, identifying conceptual framework, theoretical perspectives of conflicts as Marxism social theory and interactionism theory as it were, moreso, types of conflicts, sources, effects, concept of Management and Educational Management, Conventional and Innovative Management Styles of conflict were considered. The study concluded that conflict in the universities cannot be avoided as far as there is human interaction. The outcome of a conflict can mar or enhance teaches performance depending on the nature of the conflict and management styles or strategies adopted.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Innovative Management Styles, enhanced performance, public universities

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### Introduction

Conflict is unavoidable in all organizations that involve human beings especially in learning institutions. In a formal organization which is characterized by a group of people with diverse backgrounds (heterogeneous) different personalities come together with different attitudes and behaviours, conflict could occur when your desires, preferences, views, opinions, ideas differ from the other person. Conflict is definitely unavoidable. In Conflict can have positive and negative effect on organization, depending on the organization and administrative styles adopted by the leader.

It should be of note that organizational agility mediates the relationship between compromising and integrating conflict styles and Innovation performance.

Conflict exists in all facets of life and the world of higher education (universities) is hardly exempted, infact conflict is particularly inevitable in an academic setting, where independent thought is encouraged.

Higher Education like university, has its normal share of this, but from time to time, disputes arise which, unless they are contained, can bring the whole institution to a halt.

A lot of issues can cause conflicts in the university like difference in perceptions, limited resources, over lapping authority among others. Some conflicts are better seen as the result of structure and innovation/charge within the university or interpersonal problems though, most of these issues could also be effectively resolved by the university management, in order to enhance performance as it were.

This study was specifically relevant now when Academic Staff Union of Universities had to embark on a prolonged strike over non-revitalization of the university education system in Nigeria and non-payment of lots of benefits due academic staff by the Federal Government.

There are difference in opinions and interest of various groups in tertiary institutions which may induce conflicts between staff and management, as well as students and school authority, thereby warranting the university management and individuals in higher institutions to engage themselves in conflict situations which results to strikes, thereby affecting university administration and consequently reducing productivity (Adeyemi&Ademilua, 2012) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Conflict has been defined in different ways by different authors. The commonest among these definitions holds that conflict is perceived divergence of interest. It is a belief that the current aspirations of the parties in a conflicting situation are incompatible (Pruit& Kim, 2004) <sup>[23]</sup>. In a similar vein, Wallen Stein (2007) <sup>[27]</sup> defined conflict as “a social situation in which a minimum of two actors (Parties) strive to acquire at the same moment in time an available set of scarce resources. In the words of Yusuf & Ibrahim (2019) conflict could be described as all forms of opposition, disagreeing, friction between two or more parties and it manifests in form of arguments, protest, demonstration, aggression and other destructive behaviours. All these are common occurrences in organizations these days.

In Nigerian Universities like the Rivers State University, system, there has been claims of conflict which had led to gradual but steady disruption of academic activities various forms of conflict occurs at varying degrees in universities. Amuseghan (2007) <sup>[5]</sup>, for instance, found that the level of occurrence of student authority conflicts in the Canadian Universities was high, while Oyebade (2000) <sup>[22]</sup> and Awosusi (2005) <sup>[6]</sup> reported that the level of occurrence of staff authority conflicts in Nigeria tertiary institutions was high. Folutile 2010, reported that there was a visitation panel inaugurated on March, 2009, to investigate the cause of crisis that actually engulfed the University of Benin, when the university was deeply embroiled in crisis in 2009.

The cost of conflict includes direct cost, production cost, continuity cost and emotional cost (Nwofia, 2015) <sup>[15]</sup>. In another development, Demer (2002 and Adebayo (2007) <sup>[1]</sup> identified dialogue, mediation, negotiation, reconciliation, suppression and the use of force as conflict management strategies in organizations. Dialogue is “the art of thinking together” and it is sustained collective inquiry. Communication is a method of resolving conflict among tertiary institutions especially, Rivers State University, whereby, the management ensures that both staff and students are carried along the activities of the institutions (Umoren, 2001, Nwfoia, 2015) <sup>[26]</sup>. Mediation could be regarded as the process of providing intervention between conflicting parties to promote reconciliations, settlement or compromise (Adomi & Anie, 2005; Okotoni & Okotoni, 2003) <sup>[3, 19]</sup> Negotiation is essentially, the process that takes place within conflict resolution and guided the agreement resulting in the target goal, weather it is peace or better understanding. Reconciliation is a multifaceted and ongoing process of building relationships, it is however more complex than just repairing relationship (Freeman, 2014; Shed, 2015) <sup>[12, 24]</sup>.

In the words of Babalola (2004) <sup>[7]</sup>, effectiveness is the extent to which the goals and objectives of an institution are accomplished in relation to quality and quantity.

However, conflicts should be managed and controlled to reduce their harmful and dysfunctional effects (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014) <sup>[21]</sup>.

### Conceptual Framework

Most persons see conflict as an activity which is absolutely negative and has no redeeming qualities, while other school of thought view it as been dysfunctional and destructive, conflict, as a catalyst for innovation, creativity and production, results from human interaction which arises from disagreement, 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.

Some schools of thought advocate that there is need to occasionally cause crises so as to have innovations and improvements in formal organizations like universities, or institutions of learning. Generally, conflict is seen as a “necessary evil” which finds expressions in human interactions. Conflicts between individuals causes fewer problems than conflict between groups because individuals can act independently and resolve their differences, members of groups on the other hand, may have to accept the norms, values, goals, rules and regulations of their group.

The concept of conflict is multidimensional and many scholars have tried to describe what the term is from various perspectives. Conflict simply means a disagreement or an argument between two or more parties. It is a struggle over something (could be power tussle), an issue or existing object. Whenever there is a conflict, each of the parties involved either tries to win or lose, and sometimes might want to come to a compromise or an agreement. Conflict breeds competition resulting to parties awareness of mutually incompatibility wants in which each party desires to eliminate the realization of the wishes of the other.

In the words of Mutiullah (2013) in Olubor, Abdulkereem Alabi & Adeyanju (2017) Conflict is attempts of actors who utilize a brute force to eliminate opponents obtain scarce values. The foregoing showed that a conflict arises as a result of cross-purposes of essential ideals and resources. Ughamadu, 2006 <sup>[25]</sup> in Oluboretal (2017) <sup>[20]</sup> also conceptualized conflict as a disagreement over an issue, sometimes, such disagreements may be positive or negative in whichever way, whether in the family, community, industry, national, international or university setting, it is a normal occurrence in human relations because society or mankind needs to disagree in order to agree. To Ughamadu, conflict is functional when it brings the real peace or truth out of any situation. On the other hand, it is dysfunctional when it brings about hostile manifests in insults, name-calling, defamation of character or blackmailing, stepping into another’s shoes, sarcasm, false accusations, withdrawal of services, incentives, strikes, termination of appointment, demotion, maginalization, deprivation, boycott of classes, violence or even killing. This can hinder progress and bring about definite frustrating or desperate attitude.

Conflict is a form of socialization because institutions have goals that students have to adopt at the expense of their interest, conflict therefore exist in universities whenever it is impossible for the interest of students to tally with the goals, mission and vision of the university management or when students feel that their needs are likely to be denied.

### Theoretical Perspectives

Conflict perspectives emphasize the essential material in equality of social groups. They draw attention to differences

in power, manifest in class and contrast ideologies. Olubor *et al.* (2017) <sup>[20]</sup> categorized conflict perspectives into two: Marxism Social Theory and Interactionism Theory.

### Marxism Social Theory

Karl Marx (1818-1883) brought up the view that the history of class struggles exists in all known societies, he also noted that prominent sociologists contributed to the growth of the theory. Conflict theory from this school of thought argues that the social class within society has different routes to material and non-material resources and that the more powerful groups exploit the weaker ones which results into clashes (conflict). The nature of the description of the conflict by Marx which accounted for class struggle is called a dialectic materialism. Karl Marx, the key proponent, posited that capitalism would definitely produce inherent tension that would usher radical change leading to revolution and freedom of the masses from the ruling classes. This theory draws attention to causes of conflict which emanate from social stratification by class, gender and race in all known periods. It is therefore, a macro analysis of the society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change. Other theories which evolved later from Marxism social conflict theory are interactionism and exchange theory respectively.

### Interactionism Theory

The interactionism theory is also known as the symbolic interaction. The main propounders were Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, George Homans and Peter Blau. It is a sociological theory that places emphasis on conflicts occurring from human social interactions. This approach created a frame work for seeing the product of everyday interactions of individuals as the basis for conflict. Society is therefore, an outcome of shaved reality that people develop as they interact in countless settings using symbolic communications. The phenomenon called society is therefore complex and dynamic. This perspective explains conflict in a diametrically opposite way from the earlier orientations. It noted that conflict can either play negative or positive roles. Conflict in this instance is a part of people, organizations and institutions.

### Types of Conflicts

Generally speaking, conflicts is multifaceted because it involves different parties, in institutions of learning, there exist various types of conflicts and such includes: student versus school authority/management conflict, management versus teacher conflict, student versus student conflict, student versus teacher conflict, teacher versus teacher conflicts, non-teaching versus non-teaching staff conflict and so on. Ejiogu in Ndum and Okey (2013) <sup>[14]</sup> viewed some types of conflicts thus:

1. Hierarchical conflict due to power relations;
  - a. The type witnessed between the leader and the led (such as lecturers – students)
  - b. Super-ordination or proprietorship (ownership – control)
  - c. Lateral non-alignment (e.g between vice chancellors)
2. Reality-normative ideological conflicts
3. Cultural values and institutional expectation conflict, Ughamadu (2012) <sup>[6]</sup> identified other types of conflicts as;
  - a. Intra-personal conflict (internal/within)
  - b. Inter personal conflict (External/outside)
  - c. Inter-group conflict
  - d. Structural conflict

- e. Strategic conflict
- f. Constructive conflict
- g. Destructive conflict

### Sources of Conflict

Conflicts could exist in different contexts and develop from same sources. In the words of Oboegbulem and Onwurah (2011) <sup>[16]</sup> conflict could be structural-based and Non-structural based.

#### A. Structural-based conflict

This is the disagreement which stems from the way an organization is designed in terms of size, characteristics and nature of environment. Such sources include task interdependence, differences in status, inadequate facilities and equipment, inadequate evaluation mechanism, differences in performance criteria and reward system, role dissatisfaction and disagreement over needs.

#### B. Non-structural based conflict

This is attributed to personal behaviour of individuals as they relate with one another. It includes differences in personality traits, background, values, perceptions, style of management, incompetence, poor attitude to work, issues of generation gap, anti-authority and pre-judice.

Ndum and Okey (2013) <sup>[14]</sup> identified some causes of conflict in the university system as follows

- Continuous competition for scarce resources
- Differential perception of goals
- Autonomy or academic freedom
- Administrative leadership
- Differential in values and lifestyles
- Communication barrier
- Political agitation
- Adolescent exuberance
- Indiscipline exhibited by staff and students
- Arbitrary increase in tuition fee by the management

### Effects of Conflicts

The management of conflicts in a higher institution of learning may produce a positive or negative outcome. According to Okotoni and Okotoni (2003) <sup>[19]</sup> proper conflict handling styles may show problems that have been swept under the carpet and improve cooperation among parties. Conflicts are therefore a warning signal for a quick intervention. Since conflicts are part of human existence, no organization is spared. Conflicts should be handled realistically without pretence. Effective management of conflict is highly essential for peace and progress. Conflicts is found in all institutions of learning especially in tertiary institutions but its management would determine its positive or negative end for enhancement of organizational performance.

### Positive Effects

Conflicts exhibits challenges that can promote the understanding of others' positions and ideas, it facilitates innovation and progress, conflicts could therefore be functional and constructive. Omisore and Abiodun (2014) <sup>[21]</sup> pointed out that the following positive effects of conflicts are functional to an organization because they:

- a. Stimulate individuals to work harder because talents and capabilities are exhibited

- b. Fulfil certain psycho-social needs (dominance, aggression, esteem and ego) for constructive use.
- c. Provide creative and innovative ideas which enhance employees benefits
- d. Add varieties to organizational life which might be monotonous.
- e. Facilitate an understanding of problems, coordination among individuals and departments.
- f. Inspire creativity especially when organizations utilize conflict as an opportunity to generate creative problems mechanisms.
- g. Promote sharing of opinions that could promote workers synergy in accomplishing organizational goals.
- h. Improve communication by bringing group members to understand the most effective communication styles.

### Negative Effects

Conflict can produce negative emotions when it reduces opportunities for disputants. It may push educational managers (leaders or management) to resort to authoritarian decisions. Mgbeke (2004)<sup>[13]</sup> opined that conflict can cause stakeholders to withhold information or resources from others. It may force skilled employees out of the organization, thus resulting in brain-drain which reduces performance. Conflict can also lead to absolute sack of an employee, transfer and destruction of life and property. It could lead to students' dismissal, withdrawal, expulsion from the university.

Omisore and Abiodun (2014)<sup>[21]</sup> further list the following negative effects of conflict relating to individual responses:

1. Psychological Responses: Manifesting in lack of motivation
2. Behaviourial Responses in form of smoking, alcoholism, social eating problems, aggression or work sabotage and decreased communication.
3. Physiological Responses: These are often ignored or unnoticed but they generate diverse challenges.

### Concept of management and educational management

Management is said to be the process of getting things done effectively and efficiently with and through people. Salami and Ufoma (2013) in Aleru (2015)<sup>[4]</sup> assert that management involves human, activities directed towards planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and controlling human and material resources for the achievement of the organizational goals.

The word management is derived from an Italian word "maeggere" which means to handle. It involves strategy, innovation, initiating ideas, creativity, problem solving and decision making. It also entails formulation and reformulation of goals, scrutiny, planning, control, coordination, redeployment of resources, resolving conflicts, active leadership and evaluation of policies implemented. However, management is the utilization of material and human resources for the achievement or attainment of goals in the organization.

Educational management, according to Olubor *et al.* (2017)<sup>[20]</sup> therefore, is the application of management principles, procedures and practice to issues and problems of education while Oyediji (1998) in Olubor (2017)<sup>[20]</sup> sees educational management as a control of men and materials devoted to education in order to attain teaching and learning, thus, using management principles and procedures, the available human,

financial, physical and material resources in the educational organizations are expected to be effectively directed towards achievement of educational objectives and goals".

### Innovative Management Styles/Strategies of Conflict

Conflicts are unavoidable consequences of human interaction in the university system especially in Rivers State University. Proper handling of such conflicts would promote peace and progress in higher institutions like ours. These conflicts handling styles refer to the internal mechanisms adopted and implemented by various university authorities. An effective, innovational and transformation management of conflicts in educational system is necessary for its development.

When a conflict arises, a transactional and transformational education manager or leader should handle it with discretion and transform it to a positive instead of a negative force. Failure to properly manage a conflict, may manifest in delay of implementation and performance and in extreme cases, a complete breakdown of the system. In resolving conflict, negotiations are important. As a matter of fact, conflict management in tertiary institutions demands an appropriate style or strategy that is beyond the conventional styles, which is more transformational and innovative.

The conventional conflict management strategies identified by Mutiullah (2013) are:

- Accommodation
- Avoidance
- Collaborating
- Competition
- Compromising
- Negotiation
- Mediation

In recent past, cases in the universities could be resolved among warring parties, it could take the form of mediation, arbitration and reconciliation. Conflicts could also be resolved through:

- Authority
- Command
- Problem solving
- Restructuring of the organization and
- Reorientating parties as it were.

It is worthy to note here that university education is the level of education one attains after secondary education, it is therefore known as third-tier level of education.

### Conclusion

This study discussed the meaning of conflict management in organizations generally and public universities specifically. It explained the types, sources, effects, strategies, conceptual and theoretical perspectives. Concepts of management and educational management, conventional and innovative management style and strategies of managing conflicts.

The term "conflict" entails disagreements, debates, disputes and active efforts by one party to prevent another from obtaining his needs. It could be a struggle between two parties, in the public university system, conflict occurs but it is the responsibility of the vice-chancellor as the administrative head to resolve it accordingly but when neglected, it will cause further havoc or crises in the system. The stability and development of the university system lies on the ability to maintain peace and harmony in the campus.

### Way Forward

- The administrative/academic leadership of the university (vice-chancellor) must be familiar and given appropriate training on how to manage conflicts in the university by adopting and implementing both the conventional and innovative styles and strategies. This will generally lead to enhanced performance, educational growth and sustainable development in the state and country.
- The vice chancellors as the administrative/academic head of the university should recognize when conflict arises and address it immediately to avoid escalation.
- Principal officers of the university and administrators should update their knowledge on conflict management styles through seminars, conferences and workshops.
- Lecturers and students should be involved in decision-making in the university, especially decisions that affect them directly.
- Head of universities and education managers should be clear and transparent when addressing students on issues to avoid ambiguity.

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