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# CONFLICTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES: CAUSES AND MANAGEMENT

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## **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on conflict between individuals and between groups as a universal phenomenon of management and organizational behaviour. It recognizes conflict as an inherent feature of organization, and induced, in part, by the very structure of the organization. The structure of universities allows the sharing of functional boundaries among students, staff, and administrators. The complexities of the resultant interactions result in conflicts. Specifically, these conflicts are caused by factors such as limited resources, differences in perception, autonomy drives, role conflict, and political and national issues. The paper further examines the nature and causes of conflicts within the university system and suggests some strategies to minimize the harmful effects of conflicts.*

## **Introduction**

Conflicts are inevitable in any organization. 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.

The goal of university education is pursued through its main functions and activities of teaching, research, dissemination of existing and new information, service to the community, and being a storehouse of knowledge (FRN, 1981). In carrying out these functions, there are always conflicts within and among the categories of people within the university community, namely students, academics, administrators, non-academics and their unions. These categories of people have different purposes and expectations from the university. The non-academics who perform support- function might feel unappreciated by both the superior academics and the potentially more prestigious students. The administrators might also clash with students and staff in carrying out their functions of recruitment, admission, examination and provision of welfare services for the staff and students. Also, the academics have a complex dual role of teaching and research. The two, though reinforce one another, could be a source of much tension over the individual's division of time, energy and commitment.

The students' purposes are perhaps the most complex of all. As a heterogeneous group, they have conflict within each of them, yet they have to conform to learning certain things in order to acquire a degree. In contrast, there is the burning desire of the 'angry' late adolescents not only to belong to the world, but to reform it. This desire leads to a fierce challenging of accepted orthodox practices. It then becomes necessary to examine the resultant effects of conflicts on the attainment of the goal of university education. Conflicts usually result into activities such as disruption of university programmes, boycott of lectures, loss of lives and properties and closing down of institutions. These activities have culminated into the truncated academic programmes leading to elongated university calendars.

It should be noted, however, that conflicts have some positive roles to play in an

organisation, most especially in sensitizing groups to the needs and aspirations of others. Prompt responses to such sensitization often prevent the damaging effects of conflicts.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the intent and manifest causes of conflicts in Nigerian universities with a view to suggesting effective ways of managing their negative impact.

### **Concept and Causes of Conflicts**

Conflict has its origin in difference in objectives, interest efforts, approach, timing, attitudes and the likes. Conflict is defined as an overt behaviour arising out of a process in which one unit seeks the advancement of its own interest in its relationship with others (Lammers, 1969). The interference must be deliberate and goal directed by, at least, one part. This concept of conflicts incorporates such protest movements in formal organizations as promotion of interest, secession and seizure of power.

Conflict has also been defined as 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.

### **Causes of Conflicts**

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

**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, as posited by Geoffery (1977), they are going to find some other way to attract attention to themselves.

**Drives for 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 (p.43).***

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 over-regulation 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. Equally prone to conflicts, according to Miner (1973), are those with low self-esteem and a disposition to distrust and suspicion.

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. This is usually characterized by loose-lying power where various groups and individuals seek to grasp the power. Also, employees dissatisfied with their roles as defined by the organization are likely to be involved in conflicts. For instance, the non-academic staff are the relatively low-income group who might find it difficult to get direct financial and psychological rewards from working harder or better (since the productivity of the university workers is not easily quantified, as in other enterprises). The major manifestations of conflicts caused by dissatisfaction are failure or refusal to work, either temporarily or permanently, resulting in absenteeism or separation.

**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). A new dimension to this control is the appointment of sole administrators (Military and Civilian) to run the universities (Major General Mamman Kotangora (rtd) for Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and

Professor Gomwalk for University of Nigeria, Nzukka, from 1995.

Moreover, national issues, especially with political undertones, do bring about conflict. For instance, the issue of annulled June 12, 1993 Presidential elections brought about violent demonstrations of university students against the state, resulting to deaths, destruction and frequent disruptions of academic calendar. Furthermore, in a society filled with frustrating potentials, such as underdevelopment, and inflation due to price hike in petroleum products, government action or inaction can compel the people to direct their aggressions at agencies of the state, at the slightest sign of provocation. Figure 1 illustrates the conflict model.

Figure 1

## The Conflict Model

**Source:** Adapted from Gray & Starke (1981) Organizational

behaviour: concepts and application (3rd ed.) p.486. As shown in figure 1, causes of conflict in any organization relate to problems with available resources, work activities, work environment and communication (which culminate in goal incompatibility), and opportunity for interference. Likewise, conflict resolution techniques include, among others, forcing, compromise, consensus, confrontation and avoidance.

Nigerian Universities have had many conflict situations in the recent past cutting across the major groups within the system and against the governments. Tables 1 and 2 show sampled conflict situations from 1995 to date.

Table 1: Conflict Situations involving University Students and other Groups between 1995 and 2001

| Date       | Students' University         | Group to which the conflict is directed | Cause(s)/Effects  |
|------------|------------------------------|---|---|
| Dec. 1995  | Most Nigerian Universities   | Federal Government                      | Judicial murder of Ken Saro Wiwa and nine others (violent rallies).   |
| May 1997   | LASU UNILAG. ABU, O.A.U etc. | Federal Government                      | Increase in school fees, resulting in violent demonstrations.   |
| June 1998  | UNILORIN                     | University Administration               | N1000 restitution fee on destroyed University properties over power outage during the world cup match, leading to closure |
| June 1999  | UNILORIN (others)            | Federal Government                      | Kudirat Abiola's rally  |
| July 1999  | O.A.U                        | University Administration               | Cultic activities   |
| Aug. 1999  | UNILORIN. U.I, OAU           | University Administration               | Increase in school fees leading to students' demonstration.   |
| Jan. 2000  | UN AD                        | Police                                  | Accidental killing of a part one Law student.   |
| March 2000 | UDU                          | Federal Government                      | Sharia riot leading to closure.   |
| April 2000 | UNILORIN                     | Kuntu villagers, Ilorin                 | Shortage of water leading to destruction of taxi cabs on campus   |
| April 2000 | IMOSU                        | State Government                        | Alleged interference in Student Union Government elections by Governor  |

| leading to closure.      |        |                           |  |
|--------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--|
| May 2000                 | UNIBEN | Dean of Faculty of-Law    | Non-processing of graduating students for Law School   |
| May 2000                 | OAU    | Federal Government        | Inclusion of military apologists in newly constituted Governing Councils of                                |
| Universities nationwide. |        |                           |  |
| July 2000                | UNN    | Student cultists          | Serious clash between two groups of cult members, leading to the killing of three                          |
| Aug. 2000                | NAU    | University Administration | Lack of basic infrastructure leading to closure  |
| Sept. 2000               | UNIBEN | Federal Government        | Proposed University autonomy seen as commercialization of education  |
| Sept 2000                | UNILAG | Federal Government        | Purported removal of Vice-Chancellor (Prof. Jelili Omotola)  |
| Oct. 2000                | UNILAG | Police                    | Seizure of cocacola truck due to the banning of coke products on all campuses resulting in killing of four |
| Nov. 2000                | LASU   | Student cultists          | Anti-cult campaign by student Union leaders  |
| Nov. 2000                | UNIJOS | NEPA                      | Power outage leading to holding three NEPA officials hostage.  |
| Feb. 2001                | LASU   | University Administration | Alleged increase in fees (Vice-chancellor and principal officers held                                      |
| Feb. 2001                | OSUA   | Vice-Chancellor           | Alleged hike in school fees (attack on VC's house and car)   |

Sources: Nigerian Dailies

**Note:**

O.A.U Obafemi Awolowo University, Ilefe, UNAD University of Ado-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti. ABU Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. LASU Lagos State University, Lagos. UDU Usman Dan fodio University, Sokoto. IMOSU Imo State University, Owerri. UNN University of Nigeria, Nzukka. NAU Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka. OSUA Ondo State University, Akungba. U.I University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

A critical examination of Table 1 reveals that conflict situations involving students are usually directed at University Administration, Federal or State Government and students themselves (especially cultic groups). Law enforcement agents, particularly the police, and social service providers such as NEPA, are not spared too. Among the causes of these conflicts are provision of welfare services (water, light, reduction in fees), politics (campus and national) and defence of human rights. The resultant crises often result into destruction of properties, payment of restitution fees, disruption of academic activities ranging from boycott of lectures to shutting down of universities, and loss of lives. These resultant effects are grave and thus need special attention towards reduction to the barest minimum.

Table 2: Conflict Situations involving University Staff (Academic & Non Academic) and other Groups between 1995 and 2001

| Date        | Staff's University   | Groups Involved  | Cause(s)/Effects  |
|-------------|----------------------|--|---|
| June. 1995  | UNILORIN             | ASUU Vs University Administration<br>(Suspension of work).                                 | Non-payment of excess workload allowance                            |
| Dec. 1995   | O.A.U                | ASUU Vs University Administration  | Mass failure in the Faculty of Pharmacy                             |
| April 1996  | All Universities     | National ASUU Vs Federal Government  | Stalled negotiation on welfare package leading to banning of ASUU   |
| August 1999 | All Universities     | National ASUU Vs Federal Government  | Demand for improved conditions of service (Strike action).          |
| March 2000  | All Universities     | NASU Vs Federal Government<br>academic staff.  | Non-payment of certain allowances enjoyed by                        |
| April 2000  | Edo State University | Lecturers Vs Edo State Government  | Demand for increased subvention                                     |
| April 2000  | LASU                 | Lecturers Vs Lagos State Government<br>sacking of 22 lecturers<br>(including 6 Professors) | Opposition to reappointment of VC for the second term, resulting in |
| Oct 2000    | All Universities     | NASU Vs Federal Government<br>allowance (Strike action)                                    | Non-payment of examination administration                           |
| Jan. 2001   | UNILORIN             | ASUU Vs University Administration<br>(strike action).                                      | Demand for reinstatement of retrenched lecturers                    |
| Feb. 2001   | All Universities     | ASUU Vs Federal Government   | Need for increased funding of Universities                          |
| Fob 2001    | All Universities     | SSANU Vs Federal Government<br>(strike action).  | Non-payment of examination allowance                                |
| March 2001  | UNILORIN             | ASUU Vs University Administration<br>leading to closure                                    | Demand for reinstatement of retrenched lecturers,                   |
| May 2001    | U.I                  | Lecturers Vs ASUU Executive<br>physical assaults.  | Non-joining of strike by some Professors leading to                 |

Sources: Nigerian Dailies

ASUU Academic Staff Union of Universities

SSANU Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities

NASU Non Academic Staff Union of Universities

Table 2 shows sampled conflicts involving University workers (academic and non-academic). Like in the case of students, grievances leading to conflicts are usually directed at the governments and university administration. In a few cases, the targets are colleagues (such as lecturers against ASUU leaders). The causes of these conflicts range from demand for general

rehabilitation and restoration of university education (staff welfare package inclusive) to national polity in relation to education. 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. There is thus the need to properly manage conflicts in Nigerian universities, if the goals of university education are to be achieved.

### **Suggested Strategies for Managing Conflicts in Nigerian Universities**

It is unrealistic and in fact impossible to completely eliminate conflicts within the universities, especially since conflicts have both positive and negative dimensions. The real managerial challenge therefore, is to find some methods of managing them from becoming debilitating, while still retaining the full positive potential of competition, creativity, growth and improved job satisfaction and morale.

The literature on conflicts suggests a number of conditions that promote effective conflict management. These conditions as submitted by Putnam and Poole (1987), include a focus on the problem rather than personal or emotional issues, 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 does not connote a rigid approach that suits all situations, rather, it involves a series of concerted efforts to prevent and or arrest a seemingly serious crisis. The procedures for managing conflicts in Nigerian universities should include the following.

**Clarification of Goals and Objectives:** 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, 2000). This information system is a necessity for all Nigerian universities if valid, reliable and timely information is to be provided for all the groups within the system. This is to ensure that effective decisions are made based on information about the universities given to the end-users and received by the universities from the outside world. Legitimate avenues for the expression of views and-of seeking redress must be known by all and kept open at all times. Institutionalised mechanisms for expression of dissent or discontent within the university campuses should include unionism and representation of staffs and students' interests in committees. This mechanism will yield better results than the current practices of proscribing unions, closure of universities and drafting of armed policemen to the campuses, all of which escalate conflicts into violence.

**Leadership and Administrative Expertise:** A more participatory and supportive style of leadership and management behaviour is likely to assist in conflict management. For example, showing an attitude of respect and trust; encouraging personal self-development; and creating a working environment in which staff can work cooperatively together. The university manager, Vice Chancellor (VC), must be experienced at crisis management. The VC must have the necessary administrative and organizational capacity to enable the university attain its goal. He must ensure effective coordination of the various conflicting interests of people, complex processes and structure which are internal to the university. Moreover, the resources from both internal and external environments must be successfully harnessed, prudently used and rationally distributed.

Vice Chancellors of university are supposedly experienced administrators who had held many administrative posts within the university system. However, the need for specialized training in conflict management for VCs is imperative, in view of the increasing conflict potentials within the system. Providing for Autonomy and Academic Freedom: It is not practical to leave the universities completely on their own without any guidance about philosophy, goals and directions of university education. However, the coordination through NUC should be without undue interference. To ensure autonomy and academic freedom, constitutions of universities should ensure that the academic body is fully responsible for the following:

- i. the admission, teaching and examination of students;
- ii. the appointment, promotion and tenure of staff;
- iii. the internal budgetary allocation and control;
- iv. the responsibility of choosing or electing their managers (VCs) from within the system — no external impositors.

The new democratization process of electing deans of faculties and heads of departments and units is a welcome development. Unlike the previous method of selecting the most senior members in these units, the democratic process would ensure co-operation and better performance, thereby minimizing conflict situations among the people. In addition, the university council, senate and people should ensure the maintenance of academic freedom and its preservation from external authorities.

**Cooperation between Universities and State:** There is a need for better understanding 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 need 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.

## **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.

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