

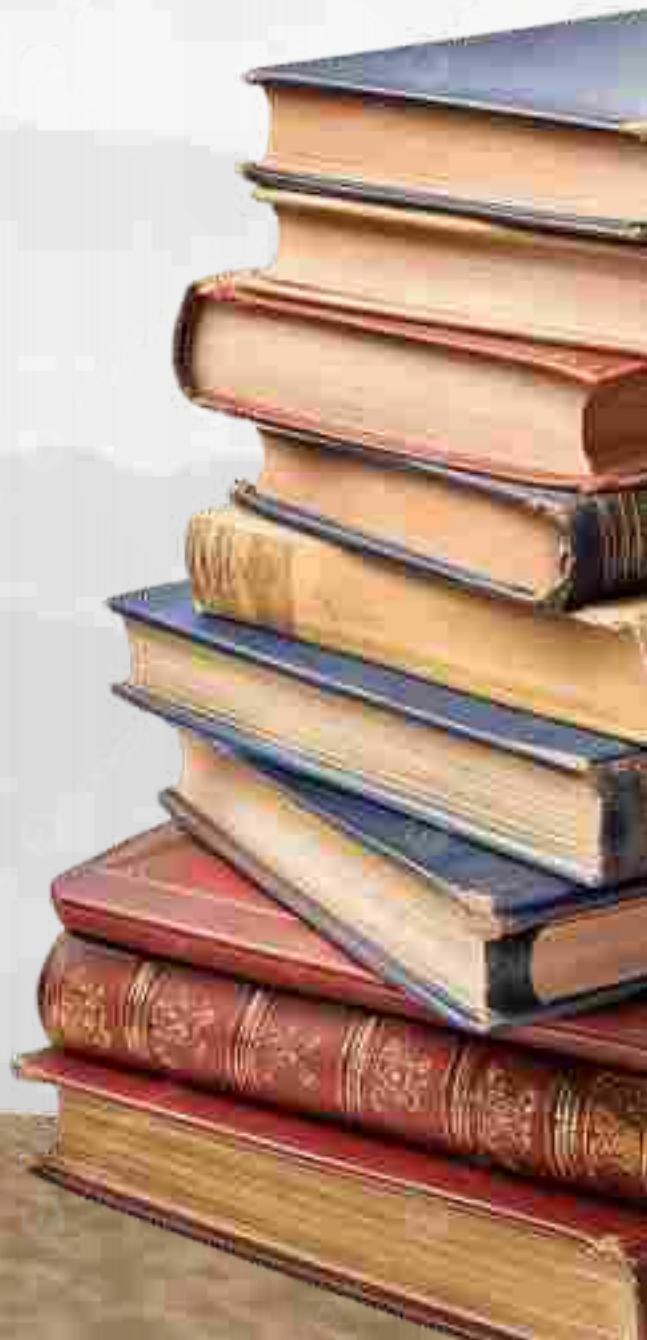


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PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AND CONFLICT
MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

By

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is an inevitable feature of tertiary institutions where diverse groups interact under sometimes-stressful conditions. In Nigeria, conflicts in universities and other tertiary institutions arise from funding shortfalls, infrastructure deficits, poor communication, union–management disputes, cultism, ethnic and political tensions, and cases of sexual harassment. This chapter clarifies the concepts of conflict and conflict management, identifies the major causes of campus conflict, and outlines practical management strategies — including dialogue and negotiation, mediation, arbitration, grievance mechanisms, conflict-resolution committees, skills training, and the promotion of a culture of peace and inclusion. The chapter argues that proactive, transparent, and participatory approaches to conflict management can transform destructive conflicts into opportunities for institutional learning and sustainable campus governance.

Keyword: conflict, conflict management, tertiary education, university strikes, mediation, Nigeria

16.1. Introduction

Conflict is a natural part of any environment where people live, learn, and work together—and Nigeria’s tertiary institutions are no different. Every day, campuses across the country bring together thousands of individuals from different ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds, all with unique goals, beliefs, and expectations. In this mix, disagreements are bound to happen—between students and lecturers, staff and administrators, unions and management, or even among students themselves (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Sometimes, these conflicts are small—like a dispute over exam results or miscommunication between departments. Other times, they escalate into strikes, protests, or campus unrest that can shut down an entire institution for weeks or months. When that happens, it doesn't just disrupt academic schedules; it affects real lives—students miss critical learning time, staff face uncertainty, and parents worry about their children's future (Thomas & Kilmann, 1976).

But conflict doesn't always have to be destructive. With the right strategies, it can be managed in ways that build understanding, restore trust, and even strengthen institutions. The key lies in how schools respond—not just with rules and punishment, but with dialogue, fairness, and a willingness to listen.

The study explores various conflict management strategies in tertiary institutions. Specifically, the chapter focus on the following: meaning of conflicts, conflict management, causes of conflict in tertiary institutions and conflict management strategies.

16.2. Clarification of concepts

i. Concept of Conflict

Conflict is a term that refers to a disagreement or opposition between two or more parties, often arising from differences in beliefs, values, interests, or goals. It can manifest in various forms, such as interpersonal conflicts, organizational conflicts, or international conflicts. Conflict can also arise from a variety of sources, including competition for resources, misunderstandings, or differences in communication styles. In academic settings, conflict can be studied from various perspectives, including sociology, psychology, or political science.

Conflict is a common occurrence in many academic fields, often arising from differing opinions or perspectives on a particular topic. It can also refer to a struggle between individuals or groups over resources, power, or other factors. In academia, conflicts can arise in research methods, theories, or findings, and can lead to debates and discussions among academics. While conflicts can be seen as barriers to progress, they also provide opportunities for growth and the development of new ideas. Through thoughtful analysis and open communication, academic conflicts can produce valuable insights and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in various fields.

ii. Conflict Management

Conflict management is simply the way we handle disagreements, misunderstandings, or tensions between people or groups. It's not about avoiding conflict entirely—because conflict is a normal part of life wherever people interact. In fact, any place filled with diverse people, opinions, and goals—like a university or college—is bound to have moments of friction. Think of conflict management as knowing *how* to respond when things go wrong. It's about staying calm when tempers rise, listening when others feel unheard, and finding solutions that don't leave people feeling silenced or defeated. It's about turning a situation that could easily break relationships or trust into one that builds respect, clarity, and progress. In tertiary institutions, this might mean

resolving a disagreement between a student and a lecturer, settling a dispute between university management and staff unions, or addressing tension between different student groups. Conflict management doesn't always mean making everyone happy, but it does mean trying to understand different sides, reduce harm, and work toward fairness. At its core, conflict management is not just a skill—it's a mindset. It's the belief that even when people don't agree, they still deserve to be heard and treated with respect. And in a place of learning like a university, it's essential. Because how we handle conflict can shape not just our institutions, but also the kind of leaders and citizens we become.

iii. Causes of Conflict in Tertiary Institutions

The following are factors responsible for conflicts in the tertiary institutions:

a. Poor Funding and Inadequate Infrastructure

Poor funding and inadequate infrastructure are major contributing factors to conflict in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Poor funding leads to a lack of resources necessary for providing quality education and maintaining basic facilities on campus. This often leads to frustration and tension among students and faculty, as they struggle to cope with subpar conditions. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure such as dilapidated buildings, limited technology, and insufficient resources for research and development can also create a breeding ground for conflict. These issues can hinder the educational experience and contribute to a sense of dissatisfaction and unrest among those involved in the institution. Ultimately, without proper funding and adequate infrastructure, tertiary institutions in Nigeria can struggle to maintain a conducive learning environment, leading to conflict and unrest among students and faculty. Imagine being a student who pays tuition but ends up learning in overcrowded classrooms with broken chairs, no electricity, and outdated lab equipment. Now picture the lecturers who have to teach in those same conditions, often without essential teaching materials or even salaries paid on time. This gap between expectations and reality creates deep frustration. It's not just about money — it's about dignity. Everyone feels neglected, and that can quickly turn into protests, strikes, or boycotts. Chronic under-funding creates overcrowded lecture halls, equipment shortages, delayed salaries and poor living conditions — all potent triggers of student unrest and staff industrial action (Njoku, 2022; Research on ASUU strikes).

b. Poor Communication Between Management and Students or Staff

Poor communication between management and students or staff is a common issue in tertiary institutions in Nigeria that often leads to conflicts. This can be attributed to the fact that when there is a lack of effective communication, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and mistrust can arise. One of the main reasons for this issue is the unequal power dynamic between management and students or staff. The management holds a higher authority and often does not prioritize or value the input or concerns of students and staff. This leads to a feeling of neglect and

dissatisfaction among the students and staff, ultimately resulting in conflicts. Another factor that contributes to poor communication between management and students or staff is the lack of proper channels for communication. In many tertiary institutions in Nigeria, there is a lack of effective communication channels such as open forums, regular meetings, or open-door policies. This makes it difficult for students and staff to voice their concerns and for management to address them, leading to conflicts. The use of ambiguous or unclear language in communication can also contribute to conflicts in tertiary institutions. When directions, instructions, or policies are not clearly communicated, it can lead to confusion and misunderstandings among students and staff. This can then escalate into conflicts if not addressed promptly and effectively. When school authorities make big decisions without explaining why — like increasing fees, changing academic calendars, or enforcing new rules — people feel ignored and disrespected. Students and staff aren't just passive recipients; they want to be heard. When they're left out of the conversation, rumors spread, tensions rise, and conflict brews.

c. Union vs. Management Power Struggles

The power struggle between unions and management in tertiary institutions in Nigeria has been a leading cause of conflict within these institutions. This ongoing battle for control and authority has resulted in a lack of communication and cooperation, leading to a breakdown in the functioning of these institutions. The constant push and pull between unions and management has also led to a lack of effective decision-making and resource allocation, further aggravating the conflicts. This power struggle has created an environment of mistrust and animosity, hindering the progress and success of these institutions. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Union vs. Management Power Struggles is responsible for conflicts in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, impacting both the students and the overall education system. Academic and non-academic unions (like ASUU, NASU, SSANU) often clash with university management over salaries, promotions, or autonomy. These struggles, while often valid, can drag on for months — and students suffer the most. Lecturers want better pay; university management wants to keep the system running. But when communication breaks down, strikes start — and the campus becomes a ghost town. (Ijecom report, 2024).

d. Cultism and Gang-Related Violence

One of the main reasons for this conflict is the desire for power and control. Cult groups and gangs often use violence as a means to assert dominance and intimidate others. This creates a sense of fear and insecurity which can lead to further conflict and tension within the institution. Moreover, these groups often recruit vulnerable students who are looking for a sense of belonging and purpose. They offer a sense of community and camaraderie, but at a price - allegiance and participation in criminal activities. This not only puts the individual at risk, but also perpetuates the cycle of violence within the institution. Additionally, the lack of effective policies and enforcement mechanisms in tertiary institutions also contributes to the problem. There is often a

lack of proper disciplinary actions or consequences for those involved in cultism and gang-related activities, which allows them to continue their behavior and escalate the conflict. The presence of external influences and rivalries also play a role in the conflict. Cult groups and gangs often have ties to larger criminal organizations, creating a wider network of violence and criminal activities. This can lead to turf wars and revenge attacks, further exacerbating the conflict within the institution. Sadly, some students are drawn into cult groups, often seeking protection, power, or a sense of belonging. But these groups sometimes clash violently with each other or with security forces. This creates fear on campus. Innocent students can get caught in the crossfire, and the whole environment becomes toxic — not just for learning, but for living.

e. Ethnic, Religious, or Political Divisions

Nigeria's diversity is beautiful, but it can also be a source of conflict when not properly managed. On campus, students from different backgrounds may clash over elections, leadership positions, or cultural misunderstandings. These divisions often mirror the larger tensions in Nigerian society, and if not addressed, they can erupt into violence, discrimination, or deeply divided student communities.

f. Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Power

Power imbalances between lecturers and students can sometimes lead to exploitation, especially sexual harassment. When students report it and nothing happens, it builds a culture of fear and silence. Students may protest, demand justice, or lose trust in the institution entirely. The emotional toll is enormous.

iv. Concept of Conflict Management Strategies

Conflict management strategies are simply the different ways we choose to handle disagreements or tensions when they come up. Whether it's a heated argument, a quiet misunderstanding, or a major institutional crisis, how we respond can either make things better—or much worse. In everyday life, we all use conflict management strategies, even if we don't realize it. Sometimes we try to avoid the problem and hope it goes away. Other times, we might confront it head-on, try to find a middle ground, or let the other person "win" just to keep the peace. These are all strategies—and each one can be helpful or harmful depending on the situation.

In Nigerian tertiary institutions, where you have thousands of students, staff, and administrators with different backgrounds and opinions, conflicts are bound to happen. For example:

- A student feels they were unfairly graded.
- A lecturer and department head disagree over workload.
- A staff union goes on strike due to unmet agreements.
- Students protest poor infrastructure or policies.

These strategies are not one-size-fits-all. What works for one conflict may not work for another. The key is choosing an approach that respects everyone involved, addresses the root cause, and builds lasting peace—not just a temporary fix. At the heart of every good conflict management strategy is **human connection**—the ability to listen, understand, and care about finding a solution that doesn't just end the conflict, but strengthens the people and systems involved.

16.3. Types of Conflict Management Strategies

i. Dialogue and Negotiation

Dialogues and negotiations are integral parts of conflict management strategies in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. These two techniques are used to facilitate effective communication and find solutions to conflicts among individuals or groups within the educational setting. The primary aim of dialogue and negotiation is to resolve disputes and reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Dialogue involves open and honest communication between conflicting parties. It allows individuals or groups to express their concerns, perspectives, and feelings towards a particular issue. Through dialogue, parties can gain a better understanding of each other's point of view, which can facilitate the resolution of conflicts. In tertiary institutions in Nigeria, dialogue is common among students, faculty members, and administrative staff. It is used to address various conflicts, such as academic disagreements, cultural differences, and resource allocation.

On the other hand, negotiation is a formal process of finding a middle ground and reaching an agreement that satisfies both parties' interests. Negotiation is often a preferred method of conflict management in tertiary institutions because it allows for a more structured and organized approach to resolving disputes. In Nigeria, negotiations often involve student associations, faculty unions, and university management. These negotiations may cover various topics, such as tuition fees, academic policies, and working conditions. Dialogues and negotiations are essential conflict management strategies in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. They promote cooperation, mutual understanding, and respect among conflicting parties, allowing them to find peaceful resolutions to their differences. These techniques also contribute to the overall development and growth of the educational setting by promoting a healthy and productive environment for learning and academic success. Overall, dialogues and negotiations are crucial tools for effective conflict management in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Encouraging open communication among stakeholders (students, staff, unions, management) to resolve issues amicably.

ii. Mediation

Mediation is a conflict management strategy that is widely used in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It involves a third-party neutral mediator who helps to facilitate communication and negotiation between parties involved in a conflict. Mediation is seen as a more collaborative and less adversarial approach to resolving conflicts, as compared to other strategies such as litigation or arbitration. In the context of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, mediation has been found to be an

effective way to manage conflicts between students, between students and faculty, and between different departments or faculties. This is due to the fact that it allows for open communication and encourages parties to come to a mutually agreed upon resolution. One of the main benefits of mediation in tertiary institutions is that it promotes a peaceful and harmonious learning environment.

This is especially important in a country like Nigeria, where there can be cultural, religious, and ethnic differences among students. Mediation allows for these differences to be acknowledged and addressed in a respectful manner, leading to a more inclusive and tolerant campus community. Moreover, mediation is a cost-effective strategy for conflict management in tertiary institutions. It does not involve expensive legal fees or prolonged court proceedings, making it a more accessible option for parties involved in a conflict. This is particularly beneficial for students who may not have the financial means to engage in traditional forms of conflict resolution. Another important aspect of mediation in tertiary institutions is that it allows for the preservation of relationships. In a learning environment, it is essential for students and faculty to maintain a positive working relationship in order for the educational process to be effective. Mediation helps to repair damaged relationships and promotes a sense of understanding and cooperation between parties.

iii. Arbitration

Arbitration is a form of alternative dispute resolution that is commonly used in tertiary institutions in Nigeria as a conflict management strategy. This process involves the use of a neutral third party, known as an arbitrator, who hears both sides of a dispute and facilitates a resolution through negotiations and discussions. This method is often preferred in academic settings as it offers a more informal and less adversarial approach to resolving conflicts. One of the main benefits of using arbitration as a conflict management strategy in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is that it allows for a timely and efficient resolution. Compared to traditional court proceedings, arbitration can be conducted and completed much faster, which is crucial in a fast-paced academic environment. Additionally, the use of a neutral arbitrator can help to reduce tensions between parties and promote a more cooperative approach to conflict resolution.

Another advantage of using arbitration is its flexibility. Parties involved in a dispute have more control over the process and can choose an arbitrator who has relevant expertise in the subject matter. This can lead to more informed and fair decisions, as the arbitrator is better equipped to understand the complexities of the academic setting. Furthermore, arbitration can also help to preserve relationships between parties. In tertiary institutions, conflicts may arise between students, faculty members, and administrative staff. By using arbitration, these parties can work towards a mutually agreeable solution and maintain a positive working relationship. This is especially important in academic settings where collaboration and teamwork are essential.

iv. Establishment of Grievance Redress Mechanisms

The establishment of Grievance Redress Mechanisms in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is an important aspect of conflict management strategies. This process involves setting up a structured approach to address and resolve grievances and disputes within the institution. It serves as a channel for individuals to voice their concerns and seek resolution in a fair and efficient manner. One of the main benefits of implementing Grievance Redress Mechanisms is that it provides a safe and neutral space for individuals to express their grievances. In an academic setting, conflicts may arise between students, faculty members, and other staff members. By having a designated mechanism in place, people can raise their concerns without fear of retribution or bias. The process of establishing these mechanisms allows for early detection and prevention of conflicts. By having a system in place to address grievances, potential issues can be identified and resolved before they escalate into larger conflicts. This ultimately leads to a more harmonious and productive environment within the institution. Another key aspect of Grievance Redress Mechanisms is that it promotes transparency and accountability. The process involves clear and defined procedures, ensuring that all parties involved understand their roles and responsibilities. This helps to build trust and credibility within the institution. The establishment of these mechanisms can also serve as a form of conflict resolution training for individuals. By participating in the process, people can learn how to effectively communicate, listen, and resolve issues in a calm and professional manner. This not only benefits the individuals involved but also contributes to a more peaceful and cooperative campus environment.

v. Use of Conflict Resolution Committees

The use of Conflict Resolution Committees has been proven to be an effective conflict management strategy in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Through these committees, conflicts between students, faculty, and staff can be addressed in a timely and fair manner. The committees typically consist of representatives from different groups within the institution, who work together to understand the root causes of conflicts and find mutually agreeable solutions. This approach promotes a sense of community and fosters trust among stakeholders, leading to a more harmonious and productive learning environment. The use of Conflict Resolution Committees also allows for a structured and systematic approach to handling conflicts, ensuring that all parties are heard and their concerns are addressed. In addition, these committees can help prevent conflicts from escalating and becoming more destructive. Overall, the use of Conflict Resolution Committees is an essential conflict management strategy in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, promoting a positive and collaborative approach to resolving conflicts.

vi. Training in Conflict Management Skills

Conflict management skills are crucial for students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Effective conflict management strategies can lead to a more productive and harmonious academic environment. Educating students on conflict management skills can greatly benefit their personal and professional lives. In order to promote peace and cooperation, it is essential that tertiary

institutions in Nigeria prioritize training in conflict management skills. This training can equip students with the necessary tools and techniques to handle conflicts in a constructive and peaceful manner. By implementing conflict management strategies, students can learn how to effectively communicate, listen, and resolve conflicts in a manner that is respectful and beneficial for all parties involved. This not only leads to a more positive and inclusive learning environment, but also prepares students for their future careers where conflict management skills are highly valued. Overall, training in conflict management skills is a crucial aspect for tertiary institutions in Nigeria and should be prioritized for the betterment of students and the academic community.

vii. Promoting Campus Culture of Peace and Inclusion

The promotion of peaceful and inclusive campus culture in tertiary institutions in Nigeria involves implementing various conflict management strategies. These strategies aim to effectively address and resolve conflicts among students, faculty, and staff in an educational setting. Effective conflict management strategies involve creating a safe and inclusive environment, promoting dialogue and communication, establishing clear policies and procedures, and providing resources for conflict resolution. Additionally, promoting a campus culture of peace and inclusion also involves promoting diversity and encouraging students to develop empathy, respect, and understanding towards others. By utilizing these conflict management strategies, tertiary institutions in Nigeria can create a harmonious and inclusive environment for all students, promoting a culture of peace and inclusion on campus.

Conclusion

Conflicts will always arise in our tertiary institutions because they bring together people with different backgrounds, interests, and expectations. What truly matters is not the presence of conflict, but how it is handled. When disagreements are managed with fairness, dialogue, and understanding, they can strengthen relationships and create healthier learning environments. Poor funding and inadequate infrastructure, poor communication between management and students or staff, union vs. management power struggles, cultism and gang-related violence, ethnic, religious, or political divisions and sexual harassment and abuse of power are some of the critical factors responsible for various conflicts in the Nigerian tertiary institutions.

On the other hand, poor conflict management only deepens divisions and disrupts academic goals. This chapter has highlighted that strategies such as dialogue and negotiation, mediation, arbitration, establishment of grievance redress mechanisms, use of conflict resolution committees training in conflict management skills, promoting campus culture of peace and inclusion, and inclusive decision-making can go a long way in reducing tension and building trust among students, staff, and administrators. If Nigerian tertiary institutions can embrace these approaches, they will not only reduce clashes but also create campuses where everyone feels heard, respected, and able to thrive.

Revise Questions References

- 1) Define conflict
- 2) What is conflict management?
- 3) List five factors responsible for conflict in the tertiary institutions
- 4) Discuss five conflict management strategies

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PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WEST AFRICA TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF WEST AFRICA COUNTRIES

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