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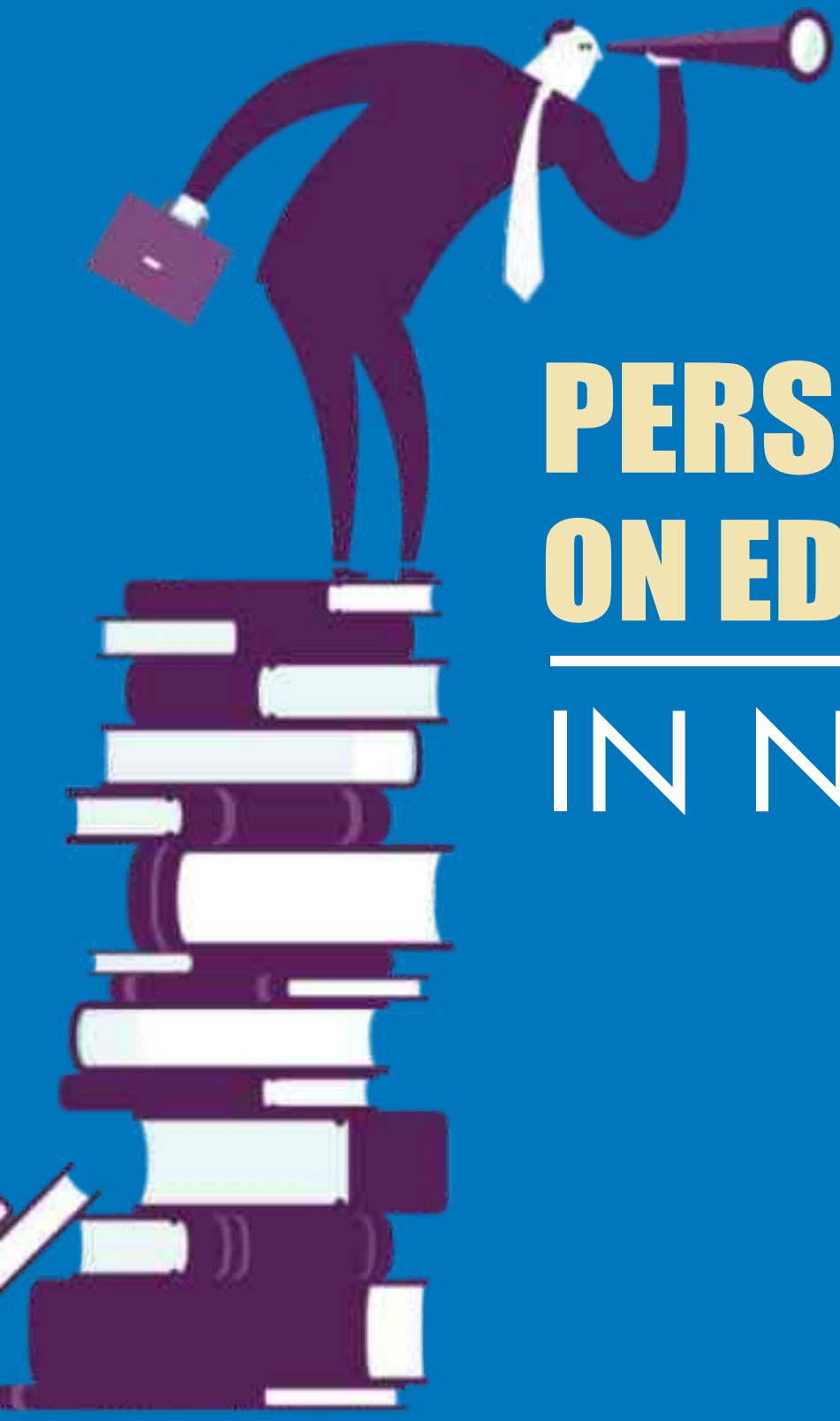

PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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CHAPTER TWELVE

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOMENT IN NIGERIA

BY

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1.0 Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction and organizational life, and tertiary institutions in Nigeria are no exception. Universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education bring together diverse groups of students, academic and non-academic staff, and management personnel, each with distinct interests, values, and expectations. This diversity often gives rise to disagreements and disputes, which, if not properly managed, can disrupt academic activities, reduce institutional productivity, and negatively affect the overall learning environment.

Conflict in tertiary institutions may arise from a variety of sources, including poor communication, limited resources, leadership challenges, differences in values and beliefs, competition for promotion, and student unrest. According to Nwankwo (2018), unresolved conflicts in Nigerian universities have led to frequent strikes, destruction of property, and a decline in academic standards. Therefore, effective conflict management strategies are essential to maintaining institutional harmony, promoting collaboration, and ensuring the achievement of educational goals.

Conflict management strategies involve the identification, prevention, and resolution of disputes through structured approaches such as negotiation, mediation, arbitration, collaborative problem-solving, and policy formulation. Employing these strategies in tertiary institutions not only minimizes disruptions but also fosters a culture of mutual respect, dialogue, and sustainable institutional growth.

This chapter examines the concept of conflict in tertiary institutions, explores the causes and consequences of conflicts in Nigerian universities, and discusses practical strategies for managing conflicts effectively. It emphasizes that proactive conflict management is critical for sustaining academic excellence, enhancing stakeholder relationships, and promoting a conducive learning environment in Nigerian higher education. Thus, this chapter is discussed under the following subheadings.

1. Concept of Tertiary education

2. Features of conflict

3. Causes of Conflict in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

4. Impact of Conflict on Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

5. Conflict Management Strategies in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

2.0 Conceptual Terms

2.1 Concept of Tertiary Education

Federal Republic of Nigeria national policy on education (2013), noted that, tertiary education is an education given after Post Basic Education in institutions such as Universities and Inter-University Centres such as the Nigeria French Language Village, Nigeria Arabic Language Village, National Institute of Nigerian Languages, institutions such as Innovation Enterprise Institutions (IEIs), and Colleges of Education, Monotechnics, Polytechnics, and other specialized institutions such as Colleges of Agriculture, Schools of Health and Technology and the National Teachers' Institutes (NTI). Tertiary education is a system that is teaching, research inclined for the production of skilled professionals for the total development of the nation.

Ogunode et al (2023) conceptualized tertiary institutions as micro section of the larger society. Tertiary institutions is an organized fraction of the whole society carved out for teaching programme, research and provision of community service. Tertiary institution can also be seen as a subset of the general society that is made of collection of different people, different culture,

different life style and different value. Societies globally have been known to have some peculiar social problem and social issues. Social problems of most societies are migrated into the tertiary institutions because the societies and the tertiary institutions are inseparable to some extent. Tertiary education also called post-secondary education, is any level of education pursued beyond high school, including undergraduate and graduate credentials. These credentials encompass certificates, diplomas or academic degrees. Tertiary education is specialized education in a specific field, taken on after finishing high school. Tertiary education is non-compulsory and provided in a specialist institution, usually a college, polytechnic or university. This form of education may be delivered virtually or at a distance (Top hat, 2021) .

The concept of higher education also includes such post-secondary institutions like Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, and "grandesécole." Under the umbrella of higher education come all forms of professional institutions. Even this wide spectrum does not exhaust the possibilities of forms of higher education (Assié-Lumumba, 2005). Tertiary education is a front liner amongst the tiers of education and is considered as the icon for national development and transformation, implying that every skill, knowledge and information gained through this means is the vehicle for productivity, wealth creation, prosperity, good health and healthy living, competitiveness, communication, expansion, scientific and technological advancement (Ofojebe & Chukwuma,2015). Tertiary education is an educational system designed to solve local, national and international pressing problems (Ogunode & Musa 2024).

2.2 Sustainable development

Sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) (1987).. This foundational definition emphasizes two key concepts: Needs, especially the essential needs of the world's poor. Limitations imposed by technology and the environment

Sustainable development is a pathway of economic, social and environmental development that ensures the well-being of people today while safeguarding the planet for future generations (United Nations, 2015)." This definition aligns with the three pillars of sustainability—economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection—especially as reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Sustainable development is "the integration of conservation and development to ensure that modifications to the planet do indeed secure the survival and well-being of all people (International

Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). (1991).” The IUCN highlights ecosystem protection, arguing that true development must preserve ecological processes while supporting economic and social advancement.

2.3 Concept of Conflict

Conflict is “a process that begins when one party perceives that another has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about (Robbins 2009). This definition emphasizes the subjective perception of interference and the potential for disagreement in social and organizational interactions. Conflict is “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals (Thomas 1992). This definition highlights the relational and goal-oriented nature of conflict. Rahim (2002) defines conflict as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities.” This definition focuses on the dynamic and interactive nature of conflict, recognizing that it occurs at individual, group, or organizational levels. Coser (1956) views conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals.” This definition underscores the structural and resource-based dimensions of conflict, often linked to competition and power struggles.. Deutsch (1073) defines conflict as “a condition in which two or more parties have incompatible goals, interests, or needs, leading to opposition and tension between them.” This definition stresses the existence of opposing goals and the resultant tension, highlighting the potential for both destructive and constructive outcomes. Across these definitions, conflict is consistently understood as a perceived incompatibility of goals, interests, or values between individuals or groups, often accompanied by tension or opposition. The definitions also recognize that conflict is interactive, can occur at multiple levels (individual, group, organizational), and may have both constructive and destructive consequences depending on how it is managed.

2.4 Causes of Conflict in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions is a common phenomenon that can disrupt academic activities, lower productivity, and negatively affect the learning environment. Understanding the root causes of such conflicts is essential for developing effective management strategies. The major causes of conflict include:

1. Poor Communication

Poor communication is one of the most persistent and significant causes of conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions. When information is not clearly conveyed or is delayed, distorted, or withheld,

it creates misunderstanding among administrators, staff, and students. For example, unclear communication regarding examination schedules, fee adjustments, hostel allocations, changes in academic regulations, or disciplinary actions often leads to tension and mistrust. Many institutions still rely on informal communication channels, which increases the spread of rumors and misinformation. Inadequate feedback mechanisms—such as ineffective meetings, lack of town-hall sessions, or weak communication desks—also mean that grievances remain unheard, eventually escalating into protests. When students feel disconnected from management decisions or lecturers do not receive timely administrative directives, frustration grows. In essence, poor communication weakens relationships, reduces transparency, and creates fertile ground for conflict. Ineffective communication between management, staff, and students is a major source of conflict in tertiary institutions. Misunderstandings, rumors, and lack of timely information can escalate tensions and create disagreements. According to Nwankwo (2018), poor communication in Nigerian universities has often led to misinterpretation of policies, distrust among stakeholders, and subsequent conflicts.

2. Leadership and Administrative Issues

Leadership quality and administrative style strongly influence the level of harmony within tertiary institutions. Autocratic leadership, poor decision-making, favoritism, lack of accountability, and opaque governance systems frequently trigger conflict. University and college administrators who ignore participatory management exclude essential stakeholders—staff unions, student unions, department heads—from critical decisions. This often results in feelings of marginalization and unfairness. Conflicts also emerge when administrators implement unpopular policies without consultation or fail to address staff welfare, promotions, and working conditions. Ineffective conflict-resolution mechanisms within management further escalate disputes that could have been settled early. Inadequate leadership training and political interference in the appointment of vice-chancellors, rectors, and provosts reduce administrative credibility and fuel internal power struggles. Altogether, weak leadership and administrative lapses create an environment where disagreements grow unchecked. Leadership styles and administrative inefficiencies contribute significantly to conflict. Autocratic or biased leadership, lack of transparency in decision-making, and delayed responses to staff or student grievances can create dissatisfaction and unrest. Okoli and Nwachukwu (2016) note that ineffective leadership in Nigerian universities often results in strikes, protests, and staff-student disputes.

3. Limited Resources

Resource constraints are common in Nigerian tertiary institutions and are a major source of conflict. Insufficient funding from government leads to shortages in essential infrastructure, such

as lecture halls, laboratories, hostels, libraries, and ICT facilities. When too many students compete for limited resources—classroom space, water, electricity, or internet access—conflicts emerge. Staff also experience frustration due to inadequate working materials, outdated equipment, poor remuneration, and delayed salaries. These conditions often spark strikes organized by academic and non-academic unions. Students, on their part, may protest poor living conditions, overcrowded hostels, and deteriorating learning environments. Limited resources also make administrators prioritize certain departments or groups over others, creating perceptions of bias and unfair allocation. Thus, scarcity of resources fuels tension across all levels of the institution. Competition over scarce resources such as funding, teaching materials, research grants, and infrastructural facilities often leads to tension among staff and students. Resource scarcity can exacerbate feelings of inequity, favoritism, or neglect, triggering conflicts. As Akinola (2015) observes, disputes over resource allocation remain a major cause of strikes and unrest in Nigerian universities.

4. Staff–Student Disagreements

Disagreements between staff and students represent a frequent cause of conflict in tertiary institutions. These disputes may arise from academic issues such as grading, supervision, examination malpractice allegations, lecture attendance policies, or teaching quality. Students sometimes perceive certain lecturers as being unfair, harsh, or insensitive to their academic challenges, leading to resentment. On the other hand, staff may view student behavior as disrespectful, unserious, or disruptive, which affects the teaching-learning process. Non-academic staff may also clash with students over hostel management, security, sanitation, or administrative processes. When grievances are not properly addressed, minor misunderstandings escalate into protests, class boycotts, or confrontations. Furthermore, lack of emotional intelligence training for staff and poor counseling services in institutions worsen these conflicts. Differences in expectations between staff and students often result in conflict. Issues such as examination malpractices, grading disputes, and disciplinary actions can provoke confrontations. According to Eze and Okeke (2017), strained staff-student relationships due to perceived unfair treatment or neglect of student welfare contribute significantly to campus unrest.

5. Political and Socio-Economic Factors

Political and socio-economic pressures influence the level of stability in tertiary institutions. Political interference in the appointment of governing council members, vice-chancellors, and other top administrators often creates internal factions and power struggles. Conflicts also arise when government policies, such as funding cuts or fee regulations, affect institutional operations. Socio-economic challenges in the wider society—poverty, inflation, unemployment, and high cost of living—shape students' expectations and frustrations. Many students struggle to pay fees,

purchase learning materials, or afford basic needs, which increases their sensitivity to institutional policies. On the staff side, poor economic conditions fuel agitation for salary increases, allowances, and improved welfare. Broader national issues such as ethnic tensions, insecurity, and union strikes also spill over into campus life. Thus, political and socio-economic factors create a volatile environment that easily triggers or intensifies conflict. Political influences and socio-economic pressures, such as government policies, funding irregularities, and labor disputes, often trigger conflicts in tertiary institutions. For example, delayed salaries or disagreements over staff promotions can escalate into strikes and protests. Obi and Okafor (2019) highlight that political interference and economic challenges frequently intensify conflicts between university management, staff unions, and students.

3.0 Impact of Conflict on Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Conflict is a frequent occurrence in Nigerian tertiary institutions, often arising from disagreements among students, academic and non-academic staff, and management. While some conflicts can be constructive if properly managed, unresolved or poorly managed conflicts tend to have negative consequences for institutions. The following are five major impacts of conflict on tertiary institutions in Nigeria:

1. Disruption of Academic Activities

One of the most immediate and visible consequences of conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions is the disruption of academic activities. Strikes, protests, sit-ins, or staff walkouts often lead to the suspension of lectures, examinations, and practical sessions ((Akinola, 2015). Students lose valuable instructional time, which may delay graduation, affect performance, and create backlogs in course completion. Academic calendars are frequently extended, leading to overcrowded sessions and rushed syllabi, which compromise the quality of teaching and learning. Continuous disruptions make it difficult for institutions to plan and execute academic programs efficiently, undermining the overall educational process ((Ojika, 2024). One of the most immediate impacts of conflict in tertiary institutions is the disruption of academic activities. Strikes, protests, and industrial actions often lead to the closure of universities, postponement of lectures, examinations, and academic programs. Nwankwo (2018) notes that frequent strikes in Nigerian universities have disrupted academic calendars, causing delays in graduation and reduced student productivity.

2. Damage to Institutional Property

Conflicts sometimes escalate into violent confrontations between students, staff, or external groups, resulting in damage to institutional property. Lecture halls, administrative offices, laboratories, hostels, libraries, and vehicles may be vandalized. Such destruction is costly to repair

and strains already limited financial resources, which could have been invested in academic programs, research facilities, or staff development (Bua,, Ada, & Akinde, 2015). Repeated incidents of property damage create an unsafe campus environment, discouraging investment and deterring prospective students and staff. Conflicts in universities often result in the destruction of property, including classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and administrative buildings. Vandalism during student riots or staff protests leads to significant financial losses and diverts resources away from academic development. According to Okoli and Nwachukwu (2016), property destruction during conflicts in Nigerian tertiary institutions imposes heavy economic burdens and slows institutional growth.

3. Decline in Academic Standards

Frequent conflicts negatively affect the academic standards of tertiary institutions. When teaching and examinations are repeatedly disrupted, curriculum coverage becomes incomplete, and students may graduate without mastering essential knowledge and skills. Staff may rush through lessons to compensate for lost time, affecting the depth and quality of instruction (Ndum, & Okey, 2024). Moreover, some conflicts force institutions to adopt shortcuts in assessment, such as postponing rigorous examinations or adjusting grading standards, which undermines the credibility of degrees awarded and the institution's academic reputation. Prolonged conflicts adversely affect teaching and research quality. Delays in lectures, research activities, and academic supervision can lead to poor student performance and reduced research output. Eze and Okeke (2017) argue that repeated conflicts in Nigerian universities contribute to declining academic standards and lower global competitiveness.

4. Low Staff and Student Morale

Conflict significantly lowers staff and student morale. Constant disputes, strikes, and unrest create a hostile environment, leading to stress, anxiety, and frustration. Staff may feel undervalued, unsupported, or unsafe, reducing their productivity and engagement. Students, on the other hand, experience disrupted learning, fear of violence, and uncertainty about their academic future. Low morale negatively affects participation, commitment to institutional goals, and overall satisfaction, making it difficult to maintain a motivated and productive campus community (Ojika, 2024).. Frequent conflicts create an atmosphere of uncertainty, tension, and fear, which negatively affects the morale of both staff and students. Staff may become disengaged, and students may experience stress and anxiety, impacting productivity and learning outcomes. Akinola (2015) notes that unresolved disputes and constant institutional instability demotivate academic and non-academic personnel, reducing their commitment to institutional goals.

5. Negative Public Image and Reduced Enrollment

Conflicts damage the public image of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Media coverage of strikes, violence, and property destruction can tarnish an institution's reputation locally and internationally. Parents and prospective students may lose confidence in the institution's ability to provide a safe and high-quality education, leading to reduced enrollment. Low enrollment impacts revenue, particularly in private universities that rely on tuition fees, and can also reduce government funding for public institutions (Mukoro, 2013). Over time, a damaged reputation can hinder collaborations, partnerships, and research opportunities with external organizations. Persistent conflicts tarnish the reputation of tertiary institutions, making them less attractive to prospective students, faculty, and donors. Parents may hesitate to enroll their children in universities known for unrest, and international collaborations may be affected. Obi and Okafor (2019) highlight that recurrent conflicts in Nigerian universities contribute to a poor public image and can lead to decreased funding and enrollment (Eze, & Okeke, 2017)..

4.0 Conflict Management Strategies in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Effective conflict management is essential in Nigerian tertiary institutions to ensure a harmonious learning environment, maintain academic standards, and promote sustainable development. Conflicts, if properly managed, can become constructive, fostering innovation and collaboration. The following are six strategies commonly employed in Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions:

1. Negotiation

Negotiation is a direct and voluntary process where conflicting parties—such as university management, staff unions, and students—come together to discuss issues and reach a mutually acceptable solution. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, negotiation often occurs during disputes over salaries, allowances, academic schedules, or welfare concerns. Through negotiation, parties exchange views, identify interests, and make compromises without resorting to disruptive actions like strikes or protests. Effective negotiation requires trust, patience, and willingness to compromise (Osakede, 2018).. When well-handled, it resolves conflicts efficiently, restores normal academic activities, and fosters a culture of dialogue and mutual respect on campus. Negotiation involves direct dialogue between conflicting parties to reach a mutually acceptable solution. In tertiary institutions, negotiation often occurs between management and staff unions, or between student leaders and administrative authorities, to resolve issues such as salary disputes, academic calendar adjustments, or hostel allocations. Nwankwo (2018) emphasizes that negotiation is effective when both parties are willing to compromise and maintain open communication.

2. Mediation

Mediation involves a neutral third party who facilitates communication and understanding between disputing parties to help them find a solution. In tertiary institutions, mediators may be senior administrators, external consultants, or members of academic councils. Mediation is particularly useful when disputes are highly emotional or entrenched, such as student–staff disagreements or factional conflicts among staff. The mediator guides the parties toward common ground, clarifies misunderstandings, and ensures that each side feels heard. By reducing tension and promoting consensus, mediation prevents conflicts from escalating into strikes, vandalism, or prolonged academic disruptions (Eze, 2022). Mediation involves the intervention of a neutral third party to facilitate dialogue and resolution between disputing parties. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, mediation can be conducted by senior administrators, ombudsmen, or external consultants to handle conflicts between staff and management or among student groups. According to Oladipo (2016), mediation helps reduce hostility and fosters collaborative solutions without resorting to strikes or unrest.

3. Arbitration

Arbitration is a formal conflict resolution process in which a neutral arbitrator listens to both parties and makes a binding decision. Unlike mediation, the arbitrator has the authority to impose a solution. In Nigerian universities, arbitration is commonly used in disputes involving staff unions, such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) or Non-Academic Staff Unions (NASU), especially when negotiations fail. Arbitration ensures that disagreements are resolved based on established rules and institutional policies, providing clarity and finality. While it may not always satisfy all parties fully, it prevents prolonged disruptions and legal battles. Arbitration is a formal conflict resolution process where a neutral party listens to both sides and makes a binding decision (Aina, 2022).. This strategy is often used when negotiation or mediation fails. For instance, labor disputes involving academic staff unions and university management in Nigeria are sometimes resolved through arbitration panels established by the government or the National Universities Commission (NUC). Akinola (2015) notes that arbitration provides a structured mechanism to resolve disputes and maintain institutional stability.

4. Collaborative Problem-Solving

Collaborative problem-solving is a proactive strategy where all stakeholders—administrators, lecturers, non-academic staff, and students—jointly identify problems, analyze causes, and develop solutions. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, this approach can be applied to recurring issues like poor infrastructure, overcrowded lecture halls, or examination scheduling conflicts. By involving all parties in decision-making, collaborative problem-solving fosters ownership, reduces

resentment, and encourages innovative solutions (Idung, Igligli, & Ugaba, 2022). It also strengthens teamwork and trust, which are critical for sustaining peace and smooth academic operations. Collaborative problem-solving emphasizes teamwork and joint decision-making to address the root causes of conflict. In tertiary institutions, this strategy involves engaging all stakeholders—management, academic staff, non-academic staff, and student representatives—to identify problems and develop mutually beneficial solutions. Eze and Okeke (2017) argue that this participatory approach fosters trust, reduces tension, and promotes sustainable resolution.

5. Effective Communication

Effective communication is both a preventive and corrective strategy for managing conflicts. It involves the timely, transparent, and accurate dissemination of information to all stakeholders. In Nigerian tertiary institutions, effective communication includes clear announcements about policy changes, academic schedules, fee adjustments, welfare provisions, and grievance mechanisms. By ensuring that students and staff are well-informed, institutions minimize misunderstandings, rumors, and speculation that can escalate into conflicts (Olaleye, 2013). Open communication channels, such as suggestion boxes, town-hall meetings, notice boards, and digital platforms, encourage feedback and participation, promoting a peaceful campus environment. Open, transparent, and regular communication is critical to preventing and managing conflicts. Keeping staff and students informed about institutional policies, changes, and decisions helps reduce misunderstandings and rumors that can escalate into disputes. Okoli and Nwachukwu (2016) highlight that effective communication channels between university management and stakeholders are essential for minimizing conflict and promoting a cooperative environment.

6. Policy Formulation and Enforcement

Policy formulation and enforcement is a structural strategy that involves creating clear rules, guidelines, and procedures to manage behavior and resolve disputes. Nigerian tertiary institutions adopt policies related to student conduct, staff responsibilities, examination regulations, grievance handling, and conflict resolution protocols. Enforcement ensures consistency, fairness, and accountability. Well-defined policies help prevent conflicts by providing clear expectations and consequences for violations. Moreover, when stakeholders perceive policies as fair and impartial, compliance increases, and the likelihood of disputes reduces. Continuous review and adaptation of policies to emerging challenges strengthen institutional resilience and sustainable academic operations. Establishing clear institutional policies and procedures for conflict resolution helps manage disputes systematically. Tertiary institutions should develop policies on grievance handling, labor relations, disciplinary actions, and student conduct. Obi and Okafor (2019) assert

that well-formulated policies, when consistently enforced, reduce uncertainty, provide a reference point for resolving disputes, and strengthen institutional governance.

5.0 Conclusion

The causes of conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions are multidimensional, encompassing communication gaps, leadership issues, resource scarcity, interpersonal disputes, and socio-political pressures. Understanding these causes is critical for implementing effective conflict management strategies that promote harmony, academic excellence, and sustainable institutional development.

Conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions has far-reaching impacts, including disruption of academic programs, damage to property, decline in academic standards, low morale, and reputational harm. These consequences underscore the urgent need for effective conflict management strategies that promote harmony, institutional stability, and sustainable educational development.

Conflict management in Nigerian tertiary institutions requires a combination of negotiation, mediation, arbitration, collaborative problem-solving, effective communication, and policy enforcement. When these strategies are appropriately applied, they reduce the destructive impact of conflicts, promote harmony, and ensure that academic and administrative functions proceed smoothly. Effective conflict management is therefore a cornerstone for sustainable growth and development in Nigeria's higher education sector.

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