

**COMMUNICATION PERCEPTION ON MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT IN THE FIRST GENERATION  
UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH WESTERN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Conflict is inevitable in any human society, most especially in a complex environment such as the university. The university system has diverse people of varying interest which could generate distrust and hostility that can hamper effective administration. Today several Nigerian universities are facing one form of conflict or the other due to poor institutional governance. Descriptive survey design of the correlational type was adopted. Multistage sampling procedure was used. Three universities (University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University and University of Lagos) were selected south western Nigeria using simple random sampling technique. Systematic sampling was used to select three faculties from each university. Simple random technique was used to select four departments within each faculty and seven lecturers in each department. Purposive technique was used to select 63 non-academic staff and 32 students from each university and department respectively. Communication channel ( $r=0.78$ ) and conflict management ( $r=0.79$ ) scales were used. Key informant interview was conducted for six senior academic staff with administrative responsibilities and three students' representatives. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson product moment correlation and Multiple regression at 0.05 level of significance while the qualitative data was content analysed.*

*Sixty-one percent of non-academic staff was male while 39.39% were female also 69.1% of the students were male while 30.9% were female. The average mean age of non-academic staff was  $45 \pm 1.5$  years, while that of students was  $25 \pm 3.50$  years. Communication channel ( $r=0.43$ ) had significant correlation with conflict management. The senior academic staff and student representatives unanimously agreed that university personnel and students were usually involved in decision making in the universities. Effective feedback mechanisms should be put in place, thereby ensuring that adequate dialogue, cooperation and required communication be allowed to play significant roles when discussing issues of common interest within the university system.*

*Keywords: Communication, Communication channel, Conflict, Conflict Management, University System*

**Introduction**

Conflict, an inevitable feature of human interaction, has been prominent in Nigerian universities. The university system encounters various dimensions of academic staff-management, non-academic staff-

management, students-management and students-academic staff conflicts which at times give rise to distrust and hostility among interest groups thereby hampering the smooth running and effective administration of the universities.

University education from a global perspective is fundamental to the construction of a knowledge economy and society in all nations (World Bank, 2008). The importance of university education cannot be overemphasised. Universities determine the tone of a country's entire education system, and ultimately the tone and pace of its national development. Yet, the potential of the educational system especially at the tertiary level in developing countries like Nigeria is frequently thwarted by long-standing problems of conflict, policy changes or reform programmes. It is a truism that every human organisation, formal or non-formal has conflict potentials. That is to say that conflict is ubiquitous in all human interaction and organisational behaviour, be it social, economic, cultural, political or academic.

The university as an organisation is not immune from conflict. This is because in any circumstance where two or more people co-exist to form an organisation, conflict is anticipated. The dynamics within the university setting inclines its environment towards the occurrence of conflicts. These dynamics are evident in the structure of universities which allow the sharing of functional boundaries among students, staff, and administrators; the complexities of the resultant interactions result in conflicts.

Universities are complex organisations. They seldom have a single clearly articulated mission statement and as a result, are susceptible to goal ambiguity; they are people-processing institutions which serve students who can be regarded in this context as clients, and these students typically demand to have a say with respect to the decision-making processes in matters

that concern them; and, they are professionalised organisations in which members of staff (both teaching and non-teaching) demand a large measure of control over institutional decision processes. More than ever before, in contemporary times, they are vulnerable to external political, economic and demographic pressures which make internal decision-making more problematic.

It has been observed that conflict situations in Nigerian universities are a result of the grievances expressed by staff and/or students. In the case of students, these grievances are either directed against the government, university administration, the host communities or even fellow students. There has been a preponderance of student-related crises in the Nigerian university system, which is becoming worrisome to many stakeholders.

A major consequence of strike actions is the elongation of the period students are meant to spend in school in pursuit of academic degrees. However, many Nigerian universities respond to the situation by compressing the academic calendar to accommodate the lost period, leading to the production of half-baked graduates. One of the most easily visible negative effects of strike on students is the demonstrated capability of the phenomenon in lowering the quality of products of our public universities. There is no doubt that the quality of graduates at the various levels of the nation's university system has continuously been denuded over the years.

This study focuses on the management of Conflict. Conflict management helps to find a middle way, an alternative to any problem and successful

Journal of African Contemporary Research. implementation of the idea. Conflict management implicitly holds that conflict is inevitable in human relations and so, the process of defusing antagonism in members of an organisation is referred to as conflict management.

Institutional governance covers the indices of communication channel, accountability, participatory leadership, the committee system, trade unionism and student participation in decision-making process of universities. The place of institutional governance in any institution cannot be overemphasised.

The need for constructive communication in school conflict management cannot be overstated. It is central to the success of any university it is better to err on the part of over-communication in times of crises. Constructive communication process puts into consideration who says what, to whom and by what means. If communication is hampered in the administration of any organisation, the entire organisation suffers; when it is accurate, thorough and timely, the organisation can move effectively toward goal achievement. Effective communication within the university is crucial because it enables the various actors within the institution to clarify individual perceptions and discern institutional precepts. It also helps individuals to produce the cooperation needed to reach institutional goals. As an important aspect of culture, communication within the university affects the academic staff in all they do, as they organise and establish goals for their work, interact with students, balance their diverse responsibilities, participate in institutional affairs, and proceed through their careers. School conflict communication should be

devoid of propaganda and cognitive discrepancy. Cognitive discrepancy is a condition that occurs when each conflicting group develops totally opposite explanation for the causes and situation of the conflict. Messages of the situation of conflict when developed on propaganda and cognitive discrepancy tend to breed rumour, distort third party's understanding of the conflict and may hamper its involvement in the management of the conflict.

The perception of inadequate communication, that is, flow of information between the students on campus and the institutional authorities; and between the students' central organisation and the government has resulted in a communication gap thereby making students feel as though they are not a part of the system. Involving the leaders of student union groups in the decision-making process through committees relating directly to the welfare of students is a welcome development as far as conflict management in Nigerian universities is concerned.

In the light of the above, this study seeks to situate conflict management within the purview of communication as it relates to the first generational universities in South Western Nigeria. The first generation universities in south western Nigeria were established between 1948 and 1965 following the recommendation of the Ashby Commission set up by the British Colonial Government to study the necessity of university education for Nigeria. Those in South-West, Nigeria include the University of Ibadan, Ibadan; the University of Lagos, Lagos; and, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. The first generation universities are considered for this study because they have been in existence for a much longer time

than other Nigerian universities, and so, have the potential of experiencing more conflicts over time. This study is also narrowed down to the South-West, region of Nigeria because in it, there are three of the six first generation Nigerian universities.

### **Problem**

The frequent closure of Nigerian universities as a result of industrial action by academic and non-academic staff as well as student unrest is an issue of concern to stakeholders including the government, parents/guardians, employers of labour and students especially when the cost implication and time lost are considered. The cost and time implications could be seen in unplanned expenses being incurred by stakeholders, students experience delays with regard to their graduation time. Therefore, this study investigated the impact of communication on conflict management in first generation universities in southwestern Nigeria.

### **The Following Research Question was Answered:**

1. What is the respondents' level of communication in the first generation universities in South Western, Nigeria?

### **The Following Hypothesis was tested for the Study:**

$H_{01}$ : There was no significant relationship between communication and conflict management in the first generation universities in South Western, Nigeria.

This research focused on conflict management in the Nigerian university system. The study covered the South-West geo-political zone of Nigeria: comprising Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Lagos, Ondo and Ekiti

States. The three first generation universities in this zone were selected for this study; they are University of Ibadan, University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife. With respect to students, this study is also focused on undergraduates alone. Conflict management bothers on legality conferred on the parties in conflict.

### **Communication and Conflict Management in Nigerian universities**

There exists an interdependent relationship between communication and conflict; a challenge in communication can engender conflicts, can escalate conflicts and it also can prevent conflicts, while effective communication can help in conflict management and resolution activities. Communication is very important to conflict management. Conflict management starts from clarification of communication and checking of perception. When dealing with any conflict, communication represents a very important factor. It is important to understand first the sources of most conflict situations. Communication is important in managing conflicts because it can increase understanding and reduces the risk of jumping to conclusions or making generalisations. Communication is the 'lifeblood of an organisation'; it permeates all activities in an organisation, represents an important work-role, and integrates the various sub-units.

The university community comprises various stakeholders both within and outside the school environment, and these include the government, students, parents/guardians and employers of labour. Communication in the university can either flow top-down or bottom up. The formal and informal lines of communication

Journal of African Contemporary Research. between the differentiated groups in the university, and between the university micro and macro environment serve to enhance the complexity of the Nigerian university. These lines of communication also define the institution's goals, absorb its outputs and either alleviate or complicate the university's problems.

Conflict emanates from the different levels of university organogram; however, just two of these permutations have been vigorously studied in Nigeria context, which are students versus government conflict, and academics/non academics staff versus government conflict.

Effective communication diffuses tension among students and authorities in the institution. The emphasis on the communication being effective is not misplaced because there is need for the message being communicated from the school authorities to the student body or other members of staff to be unambiguous or clear enough, timely and relayed through the most appropriate channel so as to avoid conflicts. Within an effective communication is an entrenched functional feedback mechanism. Whether the communication is done via written or oral means, the tone of the message must be appropriate as conflicting parties oftentimes react negatively to messages whose language is stern. There are some instances where the concerned university leader towards whom a grievance is directed is expected to address the leaders of the angry party directly rather than sending a representative.

When students are denied the opportunity of being part of policy making decision in matters related to their welfare they feel disenfranchised and dehumanised. Students believe they should have a

significant voice in determining some issues relating to their welfare. When they ask to be heard and refuse being heard, and when legitimate channels are closed there is bound to be crisis. When the student body or its representatives are excluded from participating in the deliberation on issues that significantly influence their educational objectives, a feeling of isolation and ostracism is created. This increases the probabilities of constant student-authority clashes in universities. Many factors hinder direct and open communication within the university setting, and the result of this is a high risk of conflict situations. If university managers apply direct communication on time, the conflict can be avoided, or its impact can be minimised.

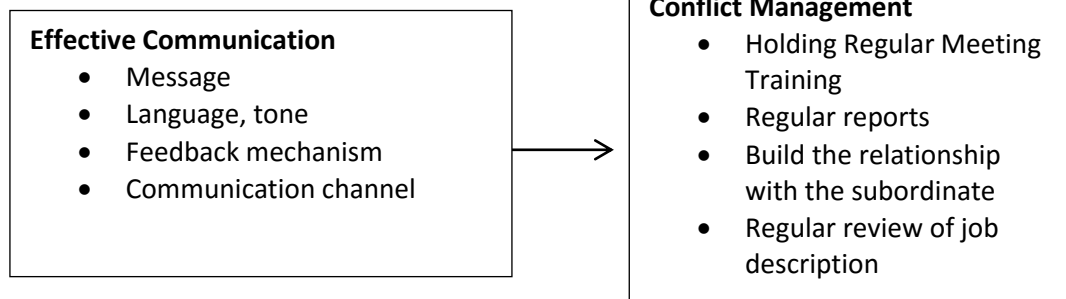
Various channels of communication exist among the different units in the university. These channels include, among others, the written, oral (face to face) and electronic channels. In spite the availability of these channels, various conflict situations attributed to ineffective communication have continued to plague Nigerian universities

The media and all the channels of communication and information flow or dissemination are very crucial in gathering information about disputes or conflicts as well as dissemination of information on conflicts or peaceful messages or signals to people around the world. It is observed that the media can promote conflicts if it chooses to. In this era of information and communication technologies, information spreads like wild fire. Communication, in this context, has to do with the presence and sharing of accurate information about a conflict or conflict situation, being able to talk about feelings and concerns of parties, speaking about what parties would like to

change, and discussing the nature and type of the conflict, touching on the positions, interests, needs, and fears of each party. Communication, therefore, has come to represent a key strategy of conflict prevention and management. Poor communication or the absence of communication can easily worsen the already strained relationships between the parties or individuals in conflicts. The

exchange and sharing of information can help in a great way to resolve crises and build confidence between the parties in conflicts and bring about peace. Thus, it is essential to open and utilise many communication channels as well as effectively use language and communication skills in the process of sharing and exchanging information while settling disputes.

**Conceptual Framework**



**Conceptual Model of Communication and Conflict Management**

The conceptual framework of this study is derived from the contextual understanding of institutional governance as communication. It is believed that communication contributes to conflict management. Thus, communication is considered to be as important and should be accorded priority if effective conflict management is the goal of the university

administrator otherwise any neglected index has the potential of becoming a conflict trigger.

**Hypothesis One**

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant relationship between communication and conflict management in the first generation universities in South-Western Nigeria.

The result is shown in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Correlation of communication with conflict management**

Variables	N	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation	R	Sig.
Communication	722	29.8312	2.05979	0.192	0.000
Conflict Management	722	13.5065	1.72825		

Table 1 shows that there is significant relationship between communication and conflict management in the first generation universities in South-Western Nigeria. This is based on the result which shows that Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) is 0.192. Based on this,  $H_{01}$  is rejected since  $p < 0.05$ .

### Findings

The findings of this present study reveal that the perception of the level of communication in the first generation universities in South-West, Nigeria is relatively high (*Total Average Mean=2.9137*). A sizeable proportion of the respondents claim to be satisfied with the communication flow in the university (*Mean=2.8336*). Satisfaction with the communication flow or better still, the level of communication could be basically predicated on the choice of channel of communication, the official language of communication, appropriateness of the choice of channel of communication, the message being communicated and the tone of the message being sent, the timing of the message being sent, and the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms. Having all respondents hold the same opinion as to satisfaction with all the elements of communication is a tall order, and so, varied responses as regards these elements are expected. For example, a very large proportion of the respondents claim to have a good grasp of the official language of communication in my university (*Mean=3.6488*) while a considerable proportion of the respondents claim to understand the meaning of every message received in the course of activities that have to do with the university (*Mean=2.8965*).

It could be argued then that having a good grasp of the official language of communication doesn't necessarily translate to understanding the meaning of the message being communicated as communication

problems could lie in the communicator, the tone of the message or the channel of communication. It appears that the channel of communication in the university is appropriate (*Mean=3.6225*) while the area of effectiveness of feedback mechanism (*Mean=2.7156*) seems to be a potential source of conflict as it is lower than other indicators. The implication of this can be brought into perspective when the place of communication within the university is examined.

### Recommendations

It is believed that conflict is inevitable in communities, and the university being an academic community is not excluded. The future growth, development and intellectual vibrancy of the universities will depend on the collective ability and willingness to make them out of the prevailing vicious circle of conflicts. Therefore, based on findings of this study, the following recommendation is made to manage the conflicts in the first generation universities in South-Western, Nigeria.

It is recommended that tertiary institutions in Africa including Nigeria should be more democratic, dialogue oriented and consultative in decision-making so as to enhance stakeholder participation in conflict resolution.

It is also recommended that tertiary institutions should adopt effective conflict management strategies that would empower the tertiary institutions in conflict consultation. Also universities should establish rules and regulations that should be made available to all the stakeholders (students, academics and management) to avoid communication gaps and conflict within the university system.

The conflict management board should involve well-experienced and trained people in the area of human management

Government and university leaders should pay close attention to the choice and

use of communication channels as well as the timing of communication so as to clear out issues that could lead to conflict and cripple the university system. Effective feedback mechanisms should also be put in place.

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