

Managing Conflict at Institution/s of Higher Learning: A Post-Positivist Perspective

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Abstract

Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa annually face challenges that often lead to student protests and demonstrations, mostly at the beginning of every academic year, which adversely impact the smooth running of academic programs. Stakeholders' expectations were at the apex of causes that destabilise the academic environment, academic almanac and the overall academic professional reputation. The volatility of this kind retards productivity and negatively affects many tertiary institutions across the Country. This empirically grounded paper focuses on conflicting variables amongst universities, but with reference to an Eastern Cape University in South Africa spread across its Campuses. Adopting the post-positivist approach, this study obtained data from over 180 respondents and the data was analysed by using descriptive and inferential statistics, including analyses of variance and Pearson Product Moment correlations. In addition, content analysis techniques were used to analyse the data collected from the unstructured questionnaire. In this empirical study the findings highlighted two major variables that gave rise to conflicts, escalation of strikes and demonstrations at Higher Institutions of learning and recommend a conflict management style apposite for handling the conundrum. The factors dealt with in this study are not peculiar to the institution studied, but are analogous to other institutions. The findings also underscored Integrating conflict management as the most commendable style for managing conflicts at institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: stakeholder, conflicts, management style, leadership, integration, concern theory

1. Introduction

South African Universities have been forced to raise fees considering the inflation rates due to increased operating costs and higher student enrollment and decreasing real term Government funding. While free higher education or other alternative funding models are being considered, it is important to remember that the higher education sector is at stake being a sector that plays a vital role in creating better-quality lives for all South Africans. As a result of this and similar circumstances, beginning of January 2019 witnessed Renaissance of conflict at institutions of higher learning which caused the death of a Student in one Kwazulu Natal University climaxing in the then Minister of Higher Education nostalgic the profuse securitisation at institutions of higher learning (Pandor, 2019). Conflict is a condition in which people experience a clash of opposing aspirations, wants or even needs (Halevy & Cohen, 2020). And as a type of social status wherein two or more people or a group of people may be involved in a „disagreement“ on vital issues. It is an interactive process characterised by disparity, mismatch and incompatibility that may occur between or among a group of people (Akpapere, 2019). Cognisance of how to manage conflict is as imperative as the ability to run institutions effectively and efficiently. The consistent conflict in South African Universities has resulted in contemporaneous phenomenon attracting increasing attention in the academic space.

Since University is a cosmopolitan set up where individuals and group activities play a fundamental role, it cannot be immune from tensions and conflict like other social settings. Bases and magnitude of these conflicts can vary from time to time and institution to institution, but their effect cannot be underestimated. In this empirical study, two among many of the major forces that cause conflict was identified and discussed.

Prior studies (Watson, Karan, & Stanley, 2017; Kharadze, & Gulua, 2018; Delorme, 2020; Adejuwon, Kehinde, 2011; Visagie & Havenger, 2011; Adeyemi; Ekundayo & Alonge, 2010; and Agbonna, Yusuf & Onifade, 2009) alluded that competitions, stakeholders' involvement in decision making, library conditions, predatory rules, autocracy,

unresolved grievances and wrong conflict handling were the major factors that trigger conflict in educational institutions of higher learning.

Ostensibly, much as these conflicts were said to have impacted HIL system severely, there are minimum scholarly work done intently to unravel the various factors that give rise to these conflicts in teaching and learning arena (Nkomo, Mavondo, Moyo, Mkwanazi, Chikuse, & Onias, 2020). For a local perspective, Habib and Morrow, (2006) advanced that there are three key challenges facing the higher education sector - the competing demands for limited resources in an environment where policy directives are not adequately substantiated and funded. As in many developing countries, South Africa's higher education institutions evidenced a series of conflicts, many leading to a state of anarchy on campuses (Wright, 2020). Some of these violent conflicts and protests disorganise the academic calendar, devastate learning and teaching and cause severe damage to properties. Moreover, institutions pervade with conflicts, mistrust and disaffection among their stakeholders will inevitably not be immune to disruptions, decreased productivity and in certain extent boycotts of academic vicinity by students and even staff members (Linder, 2019).

Owing to students' eviction of staff from offices and lecture rooms, vandalism of infrastructure, locking out of staff, seizing of university keys and locking up of university buildings, abandoning of work stations by staff members in the studied institution, the DHET had to place the institution under administration and external Administrator was appointed to take over management of the institution (DHET, 2012).

At this juncture, the importance of managing conflicts cannot be underestimated given the rise of conflicts in the sector with many recorded dead over the last decade, it is pivotal to widen research in this domain and the output of these kind of investigations can assist in mitigating potential conflicts in any troubled University. In light of these, the aim of this study was to ascertain not only the forces that give rise to conflict, but also to assess various conflict management styles suitable for handling innumerable conflicts that engulf academic arena.

2. Literature Review

Given that conflict cannot be evaded in a work place, a worthy tactic must be applied by Universities to utilise the conflict in a manner that it can be specifically and effectively achieved desired goals. In this context, managers in Universities must be able to aptly manage it to provide positive benefits, and avoid negative consequences.

Mostly, conflict involves situations in which differences are expressed by co-dependent people in the process of achieving their needs and goals, and it arises when there is difference between two or more people or parties. Conceding the roots of conflict in higher education, Cini (2019) states that, the rise in tuition fees on the 19th of September 2016 was anticipated and the protests that erupted as a result were also no shock, considering the #FeesMustFall campaign in 2015 and other student protests nationwide whenever there is hike in tuition fee. Yusuf-Habeeb and Kazeem (2017) Evaluate conflict management and its impact on attaining industrial harmony. using a sum of 300 respondents in the study, the results revealed that poor conflict management has deteriorating effects for a suave runing of organisations that can culminate in poor performance. To mitigate conflict at the workplace, Tabitha and Florence (2019) advocate three key approaches of managing interpersonal conflicts: Domination, compromise and integration; and stressed that organizations can cope conflicts through collaborative and dominating strategies. At the top of the prompts that generate conflicts, Wagude, (2015) attributed conflict management with the age parity between manager and their subordinates. Elderly managers are more likely to manage institutions than the younger managers. On the contrary, a divergent view emerged in a study conducted by Beneke, Visagie, Havenga, and Breytenbach, (2017), whose findings maintained that, the gender spectrum is the major determining factor in organisational conflict. While female managers reported to espouse cooperative styles, the majority of male managers tend to utilise assertive management styles.

Consequent to the #Feesmustfall" campaign across South Africa" Higher Institutions of Learning, University Mangers were forced to step in by convening a "transformation" summit in mid-October 2015 with partnership of DHET which had the attendance of key government officials, various higher educational structures and academia across the country to address the issue. The Post-summit protest advocates for a zero percent fee increase. This enigma gets to a situation whereby the Government urged Universities to desist from any fee increment for 2016 academic year (Redden 2015).

Among the drives perceived to ignite the #feesmustfall campaign that brought higher Institutions of learning to stand-still in 2016 was the African National Congress Freedom Charter adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown on 26 June 1955 which pronounced in its preamble that:

“Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit”

This pledge has since then created an expectation among learners especially in higher institutions, which manifest in the contemporary #feesmustfall conundrum. A question that needs answer backed with empirical facts is whether this expectation can be released in the near future or not.

Much as conflicts have devastating effects, it is not bad in its entirety. Conflicting issues often transform to benefit the parties involved if they are aimed at addressing and achieving goals not at the detriments of the organisations. In this respect students in the University of Limpopo protest while demanding extension of library opening hours (Nasal & Mahrati, 2016). Positive outcome emerged with the decision to extend library operating hours, which affirmed that, conflict can be constructive rather than destructive perpetually if managed properly. Furthermore, Ajibade, Ayodele, Ojo, and Adetotor (2013) contend that poor communication between the authorities of institutions and students was a major cause of students-management conflicts in a Nigerian University.

Underpinning Theoretical Framework

The Dual Concern Theory and The Human Needs Theory underpinned this study. Williams (1998:3) posits that, Human Needs Theory was established during the 1970s and 1980s as a comprehensive and an all-inclusive theory of human behaviour. Keeping with this theory, humans have basic needs must be met in order to sustain a peaceful society. Beliefs, interests and concerns of the parties that interact constitute the elements which „brew“ conflict (Behrman, 2012). It is human nature to struggle to fulfil proximal and distal needs as coined Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs. According to Maslow’s theory, human being possesses basic or physiological needs which determine his/her actions in life. Maslow (1943: 86) further theorised that, these needs must be met for people to stay peacefully and in harmony. In line with these theories, expectations, concerns and needs are the elements that more often than not, give rise to conflict in higher education institutions.

Moreover, the Dual Concern Theory is apt in resolving conflicts between the superiors and the subordinates at work place. According to De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, and Dijkstrap (2004), the Dual Concern Theory puts conflict management styles into two main categories, high or low concern for self; and high or low concern for others. The level that produces a problem-solving environment has both a high level of concern for self and a higher level of concern for others (De Dreu and Van Dierendonck, 2004 and Rahim, 2002). This theory guides this study in relation to how, “concern about self” and “concern about other” motivates individuals to choose a particular conflict - handling style. This study identified the five conflict management style that could be used to manage conflicts which include: the accommodating Conflict Management Style, the Compromising conflict management styles, the Dominating conflict management style, the Integrating conflict management style and the Obliging Conflict management style. Evidently, There is no outright dogmatic style to manage conflict, but certain factors would determine which one of these styles will achieve its objectives at a given point in time.

3. Methodology

The researcher adopted the post-positivist paradigm. Spano, Giannico, Elia, Bosco, Laforteza, and Sanesi, (2020), highlighted that, research paradigm is an all-inclusive school of thought, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field. In general, a paradigm is best described as a whole system of thinking (Guetterman, & Creswell, 2015). This paradigm was adopted in order to understand the origin and circumstances under which conflict is triggered in higher institutions of learning using more than one approach to enrich the finding.

While the positivist contends that there is an objective reality out there to be studied, captured and understood, the post-positivists argue that reality can never be fully appropriated, but only approximated (Hillert, 2014). Undoubtedly, there is no distinct list of causes that trigger conflict in higher institution, but the more researchers delve into the causes, the more they discover new and more complicated causes. This justified the use of the Post-positivist as opposed to other School of thoughts to explore this study. Prochaska, (2017) avers that in the post-positivist belief, there are multiple realities out there, especially in the social world which could be explored in varied ways. This study is predicated on this foundation and thereby taps into the magnitude of individual conflict triggers at the higher institutions, mostly affect the entire culture of teaching and learning.

In keeping with the post-positivist paradigm, this study did not rely on one method for data collection. The post-positivism assumptions are based on methodologies that tend to generate hypotheses using inductive reasoning instead of following only the scientific methods (Prochaska, 2017).

As researchers grappled that characteristics cannot be fully applied in the contexts where humans are involved; this urged the adoption of this paradigm, known as the Post-positivist paradigm. This philosophy maintains that reality is out there to be studied, captured and understood, the Post positivist complement that reality can never be fully understood; but at best, only approximated (Kivunja, & Kuyini, 2017).

Since the post-positivist relates with a mixed approach, the data collected was done by means of an instrument which consisted of non-structured questions or open-ended questions. All ethical elements were taken into account viz. Respect for the participants, confidentiality, voluntary participation that they could withdraw from the research study at any time. For the qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview schedule was used. The researcher constructed knowledge claims, ethnographic design, and observation of behaviour based on post-positivist perspectives with the intent to develop a theory or patterns using open-ended and emerging data to advance predominant themes (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the researcher sought to establish the meaning of a phenomenon.

The questionnaires were administered to the respondents across the campuses of the institution earlier to this exercise and the entire process was strictly adhered to the University's ethical policies. Permission was obtained from the relevant authorities prior to data collection and participants were at liberty to withdraw at any point in the study and anonymity and confidentiality policies were strictly observed.

Sample and Procedures

Primarily 240 questionnaires were administered to respondents, but only 180 from the returned questionnaires were found to be useful for analysis. The respondents were approached in person to participate in the study, which aimed to obtain their insights regarding conflict and the consequential conflict penalties in the institution. The data were collected between July 2017 and October 2017. The responses collated from the questionnaire were analysed in line with the post-positivist approach using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software: Moonstats statistical software programs for statistical analysis and excerpts to capture additional emotional feelings of the respondents. Both the opened ended and closed ended responses gathered were used to support the findings that emerged. For the statistical part the items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale fixed by 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree.

4. Findings and Discussions

This empirical study explores two major dynamics that contribute greatly to conflict at the institution. In spite of the fact that there are a numerous scholarly documents on conflict, at the time that this study was given official approval, there was scarce of literature found dealing with conflict in Universities in Eastern Cape and how to manage it. Therefore, the findings of this study could be applicable and beneficial to not only the case studied, but the ideas explored can assist other institutions to identify and manage conflicts within their domain.

Accordingly, the researcher identified two from the findings that emerged (Fee increment and the Rule G7) to develop the conceptual framework for this study and the hypothesis verified. See figure 1 below.

Conceptual Framework of conflicts at South African Institutions

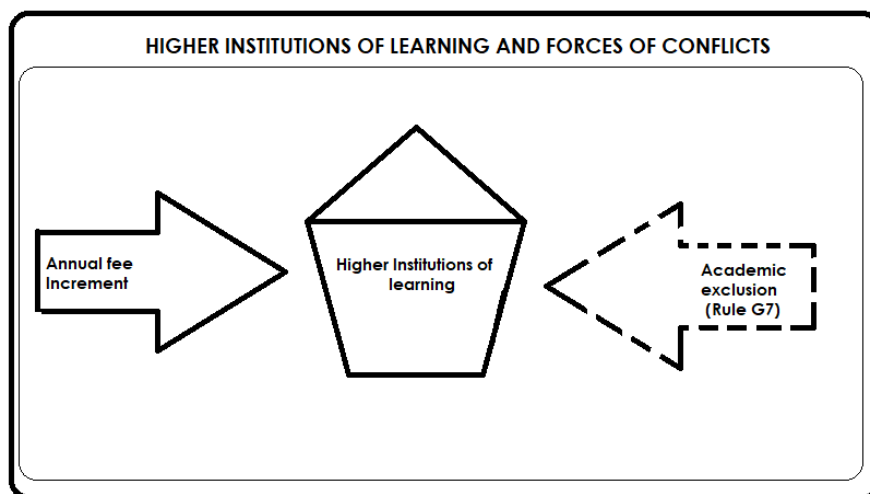


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of conflicts in HIL (Source: Authors)

Figure 1 illustrates the two forces identified in this study. These two arrows depict forces that cause conflict in Higher institutions and also represented the alternative hypothesis verified in this study which stated that there is statistical significant relationship between fee increment and conflict at higher institutions of learning and there is relationship between academic exclusion and conflict in higher institutions of learning tested in this study. The weaker arrow (academic exclusion) indicates that, few students were affected by this variable as it emerged in the results gathered.

Hypothetically, the researcher suggests alternatives and null hypothesis for both variables identified. These hypotheses are:

H1a: There is statistical significant relationship between the annual fee increment and demonstrations and violence in campus.

H1o: There is no statistical significant relationship between the annual fee increment and demonstrations and violence on campus.

H2a: There is a statistical significant relationship between the Rule G7 (exclusion rule) versus demonstrations/violence on campus.

H2o There is statistical significant relationship between the annual fee increment and demonstrations and violence in campus.

Annual Fee Increment as trigger to conflict

The table below depicts the result that emerged when participants were asked whether annual Fee Increment gives rise to conflict

Table 1. Free increments as source of conflict

Value	N	%	Cum. %
SD	8	8.00	8.00
D	8	8.00	16.00
N	10	10.00	26.00
A	38	38.00	64.00
SA	34	34.00	98.00
B	2	2.00	100.00
TOTAL	100	100.00	

In reaction to the question whether the fee increment is a source of conflict at HIL and must not be implemented annually as it causes conflict, responses from 100 students indicate that, 34% strongly agreed, 38% agreed, 10% neither agreed nor disagreed, 8% disagreed, a similar number strongly disagreed and 2 respondents to alluded nothing to this question.

Subsequently, a correlation test was carried out to determine whether a statistical significant relationship existed between the fee increment and conflict in the University and the result that emerged indicates that:

The value of r is 0.51 which can be considered a strong correlation. The p value is 0.000 which means that the correlation is statistically significant and the findings can report as: Annual fee increment and conflicts are statistically significantly correlated at the 1% level ($r=0.51$; $p=0.000$). This implies that conflict on campus erupts owing to the annual fee increment.

As established by the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H1a is accepted and hypothesis H1o is rejected.

The finding above suggests that fees increment in Universities risk conflicts. Essentially, the findings in the above correlation depict the scenario that ensues when university students protested across South Africa over plans to increase fees in 2016 and 2017. The protests, which exploded, turned violent as students clashed with police and security guards across several Universities in South Africa. Consequentially, the government proposed that universities set their own fee increases for 2017, and also recommended that the hike be no more than 8%. After this announcement, student protests intensified at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) followed by the University of Cape Town, which suspended classes, and shortly thereafter, the protest spread wide across other University campuses nationwide (Raghuram, Breines & Gunter, 2020). In a study related to this, Adeyemi, Ekundayo and Alonge, (2010)

documented that when students are compelled to pay an increased fee, and the management failed to timely and amply justify the rationale and communicate motives, such action generates conflict between students and management. These assertions are compatible with the findings that emerged in this study. Since the protest follows the announcement by the government, it could be reported that annual fee increment and conflicts at institutions of higher learning are statistically significantly correlated as proven by the findings in this study. Hence the hypothesis is accepted.

To lessen the boredom of paying tuition fees, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was established to help students pay their tuition at any of the 25 public universities and 50 public TVET colleges in the South Africa. NSFAS provides loans and scholarships that cover tuition, accommodation, living expenses. This institution supports students financially to achieve their goals. Whether the student were satisfied with the way NSFAS operates in discharging its mandate, mixed reactions emerged. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) not only benefited the qualifying students, but also “missing middle” students experienced no fee increase in 2017. The missing middle students are those with a family income of R600 000 and below per annum (DHET 2016). Furthermore, the policy suggests that universities had to adjust not more than 8% fee for the 2017 academic year for the poor and missing middle students through a gap-funding grant. Conversely, the policy stipulates that, the Government will not provide the gap-funding grant to students who received scholarships and bursaries from the private and public sector and respective funders or sponsors of these students were required to pay the 2017 tuition fees determined by the universities (DHET 2017).

The finding in this study affirmed that, there are gainsays with the existing funding mechanism. The existence of a relationship between conflicts on campus and NSFAS is expressing a concern, as some students are clearly not satisfied. In addition, and deeply debatable, the results show that there are some cases where students perform well academically but do not receive adequate funding. To sum up, Mngomezulu, Dhunpath and Munro (2017) established that, substitute funding models are required for higher institutions of learning and numerous funding groups and a large number of funds have to be administered to higher institutions to promote academic success in the sector.

Rule G7 and conflict in Higher Institutions of Learning.

The Rule G7 is a policy that regulates academic exclusion in the South Africa’s Higher Institutions of learning. It is the procedure by which universities assess the progress of their students concerning the completion of their academic program. At the end of every academic year, the courses a student passed in total are reckoned up, and compare to the ones which indicates how many the student must have passed in order to be able to proceed. The requisites differ slightly in different degrees, but in most cases, some institutions or departments use additional requirements in that a student must have passed specific modules to be endorsed to continue with the study, otherwise, a student will not be permitted to register and repeat a module after failing it more than two consecutive times.

In this regard, respondents were asked whether the Rule G7 contributes to the escalation of conflict in the Institution and the following results emerged.

Table 2. Rule G7 as source of conflict

Value	N	%	Cum. %
SD	23	23.00	23.00
D	23	23.00	46.00
A	15	15.00	61.00
A	26	26.00	87.00
SA	13	13.00	100.00
TOTAL	100	100.00	

The result of the Rule G7 implementation that excludes students who underperformed as a source of conflict elicits mixed, but unexpected reactions. A total 23% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Rule G7 must be scrapped at WSU as it has been a source of conflict over the years; 26% agreed and 15% were neutral on the belief that the Rule G7 is a source of conflict in the Institution.

Furthermore, Pearson product moment correlation for Rule G7 (exclusion rule) and demonstrations/violence on campus

$$r(x, y) = -0.04$$

$$p = 0.715$$

In this case the value of r is -0.04 which can be considered a weak correlation. The p value is 0.715 which means that the correlation is not statistically significant. In this case, it could be reported that: The Rule G7 (exclusion rule) and Demonstrations/violence on campus are not statistically significantly correlated ($r=-0.04$; $p=0.715$)

Since the correlation is not statistically significant, It could be reported that, a significant number of the participants agreed that the implementation of the Rule G7 (exclusion rule) is not related to the Demonstrations/violence in the four campuses of the Institution.

Based on the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H2o is accepted and the hypothesis H2a is rejected Subsequently, the weak correlation that emerged which is not statistically significant implies that the participants agreed that the implementation of Rule G7 is not among factors that triggers demonstrations/violence in the institution at the time of this study, (See table 2). Exclusion rules are very substantial in some universities. For example, a first-year student only needs to have passed a total of three courses out of the eight in the first year to be permitted to continue. Exclusion rules are also projected with the interests of the student in mind: if a student consistently fails a large number of courses, it becomes impracticable that the student will be able to complete the program, hence, no favors in allowing such student to remain repaying for a program beyond their capabilities.

To buttress this finding and also to validate it, a member of the University's exclusion committee asserts that: *"Recently, students stopped protesting against the implementation because of the Rule G7 (exclusion rule) in the University and this was factored through interaction and engagement between the university committee dealing with exclusion appeals and the Students Representative Council (SRC) to ensure that the standard of academic performance in the institution was not compromised"*. The SRC members are mandatory members of the G7 Appeals Committee and participate in the deliberation of the departmental capitulations for exclusion in some Universities. The SRC participates in the final resolution and report back to the affected students and that tremendously assist to curb the issue and prevent it from generating conflict in the university.

Given that various causes can instigate conflict beside the two dealt with in this study, numerous conflict management styles could be used to mitigate and manage these conflicts in higher institutions of learning. The integrating style was preferred to handle conflicts by participants in this study as opposed to dominating conflict management style. This is because the conflict management style of integrating necessitates all parties involved to work together for a responsive resolution. Readiness of the parties to work together would passably decrease opposition and tension in academic arenas. At this juncture, integrating conflict management style not only integrates both parties involved, but it is also a mutually agreed upon solution.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings presented above, the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework, it is apparent that this study revolves around a specific HIL of learning in the Eastern Cape, South Africa and over a précised period of time; therefore, it may not be entirely methodical to judge other institutions on the basis of findings obtained in this study. It is also imperative to note that the intention of the researcher was to expand on the existing body of knowledge regarding this phenomenon and not to minimize the plight of the institution studied or to undermine its management of conflict, but rather to positively contribute to the existing body of knowledge and to serve as an eye opener to policy makers.

To recap the findings in line with proposed hypothesis:

- There is a significant relationship between the annual fee increment and demonstrations and violence in the Institutions' campuses - *Based on the finding obtained in these correlations, the hypothesis H1a is accepted into this study whereas the null hypothesis H1o is rejected*
- *The Rule G7 (exclusion rule) and conflicts on campus are not statistically significantly correlated ($r=-0.04$; $p=0.715$). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis H2a is rejected and the null hypothesis H2o is accepted.*

Notwithstanding, conflict is a multilevel and complex phenomenon that mostly cannot be satisfied with only one strategy, but requires a large scale approach to solve. It also challenges managers of higher institutions of learning to incorporate various and diverse techniques and strategies successfully to find a better solution for the conflicts in their institutions. As for institutions confronted with similar conflicting variables, the post-positivist approach is recommended to handle grievances related to fee increment and the implementation rule G7. Since conflict

significantly reduced owing to the “status quo” agreed both by the management and the students governing body (See Table 2), the use of integrating style cannot be overemphasized in solving conflicts at Institutions of Higher Learning. This study has important insinuations than can assist policy-makers for policy creation and implementation at institutions of higher learning. Also, training of individuals on conflict management at management level should be a priority in higher institutions. The focus of this training must aimed at capacitating higher institution managers to analyse conflict and situations that give rise to conflict through a social justice lens. Hence, the Integrating conflict management style is found to be more suitable for managing conflict rather than the dominating conflict management style.

In precis, there should be a replication of this study with a more geographically diverse and larger sample size as this study was limited to participants from an Eastern Cape University. It is vital to state that the sample size was limited to 180 participants, which 100 were students and the remaining 80 consists of academic, non-academics and management staff of the institution. It is also recommendable that, researchers replicate the current research at other larger public and private institutions, colleges and universities using the merely interpretivist paradigm as opposed to the post-positivist approach used for this study. Finally, the paper recommended that efforts be made to enhance communication, interpersonal relations at all levels of the HIL particularly between students and management, involvement of students to a certain level of decision making will also contribute towards achieving harmony, progress, popularity and integrity across the educational sector which have positive effect on the entire culture of learning and teaching being the fundamental business of higher institutions of learning.

Note

This article is a part drawn from the thesis by Y Lukman, titled, Management of conflict in higher institutions of learning in relation to stakeholders’ expectation. A case study of a University in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. 2019.

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