

# AFRICAN JOURNAL ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION

*Volume 20, Number 1, 2020*



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farmers-herdsmen conflict in Nigeria**

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National Peace and Reconciliation Commission of Zimbabwe**

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Manya-Yilo conflict in Ghana**

**Students' Union–Management relations and conflict resolution  
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**What works? The African Union's ad hoc approach,  
the African Standby Force or the  
African Capacity for Immediate Response to Conflict?**



# African Journal on Conflict Resolution

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Lay-out by Immins Naudé.

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# Students' Union–Management relations and conflict resolution mechanisms in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

*Odunayo Salmot Ogunbodede, Harrison Adewale Idowu and Temitayo Isaac Odeyemi\**

## Abstract

Conflict is inevitable in any human relationship. The situation is the same in the university system where several groups with diverse interests exist. While scholarly attention has focused on conflict and conflict resolution in the larger human society, less attention has been directed towards conflict and its resolution between and among various groups within a university. This article empirically examines the relations between the Students' Union

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(the body representing the students) and the management of Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), and the conflict resolution mechanisms available to the groups. The article adopts secondary and primary data sourced from semi-structured interviews, and analyses the data using descriptive and content analysis methods. Findings show that the relations between the Students' Union and the management of OAU are mixed, largely depending on the strategies adopted by the union leaders and the university administrators; that conflicts are mostly triggered by issues bordering on students' welfare; and that mechanisms such as mediation, negotiation, and consultation are some of the conflict resolution mechanisms between OAU students and management. The article concludes that the central issue between the Students' Union and management of OAU is student welfare, and that to avert future conflicts, student welfare must be management's priority at all times.

**Keywords:** Students' Union, Management, conflict, conflict resolution, relations, Obafemi Awolowo University

## **Introduction**

In standard global practices, students' unions are 'saddled with the responsibility of managing the affairs of students to represent the interest of students' (Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009:52). They are often established in institutions of higher learning where most students are adults. In Nigeria, student unionism can be traced to 1925 when the West African Student Union (WASU) was formed. It was a body which was partly pioneered by some Nigerian students in London who fought the colonial masters for the rights of Africans (Okeke 2010). The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), established in 1956, inherited that same idealism which affirmed the view that a student union could consistently be a platform for change and for informed activism. Referring to the current situation, Okeke (2010) posits that such unions usually also enjoy support from radical intellectuals.

The history of Nigerian and indeed African universities shows how the recommendations of the Elliot and Asquith Commissions (set up in 1943

by Winston Churchill and Cyril Asquith respectively), which highlighted the urgent need of universities in West Africa, were followed (Abdulrahman 2017:34–36). Against this background, Utomi (2006:134) compares Nigerian universities with those of Europe in terms of tradition and modes of operation. Given their unique position as young intellectuals, most university students – at various places and times – aligned themselves with ideologies that could help them play certain significant roles in inter-student politics, and in the politics which dealt with the leadership and administration of their universities and countries at large (Lipset 1967; Califano 1970; Jonas 2000; Hu 1981:237–255). For instance, student unions played critical roles in the Russian, English and French revolutions. Student groups have also been linked with the fights against colonialism, imperialism and socio-economic policies which they considered destructive to their future and that of their country (Lipset 1967; Califano 1970; Jonas 2000).

When in 1956, student unionism began on the campus of the University College, Ibadan, followed by the emergence of the National Union of Nigerian Students – an umbrella body for the universities and colleges in Nigeria – the same global tradition of student unionism flowed into Nigeria (Akinboye and Eesuola 2015:146–158). Alada (2011) posits that student unions assist students in developing their organisational abilities and strength of character that prepare them for greater responsibility in the near future. Also, a good student union leadership provides the opportunities and avenues for the student community to engage with the socio-economic and political spheres of the institution and the larger society. The Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) was formally opened in the year 1962 (Darah and Taiwo 1989:223), and the character of the student union which emerged the next year was a function of the historical circumstances within which the institution developed. It was affected by political administrative crises which rocked the OAU in its early years.

As is commonplace in most organisations, conflicts and conflictual issues also feature in the activities of student unions and university managements. On university campuses, therefore, there is a need for efficient and effective management of conflicts, which is a fundamental requirement for the

development of any society (Holton 2008). It could be argued that many of the conflicts in tertiary institutions, including those which degenerate into violence and insecurity, are due to the fact that their triggers were not properly managed or that the conflicting parties (in this case, the university management and the Students' Union) did not explore the power of communication and adequate conflict management mechanisms in resolving the crises (Agbonna, Yusuf and Onifade 2010:109–123). Conflict results from human interactions, especially where there is clash of interests and/or incompatible ends and where one's ability to satisfy needs or ends depends on the choices, decisions and behaviour of others. Thus, the argument that conflict is endemic to human relationships and societies is not misplaced. It is the result of interaction among people, which is an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence (Adejuwon and Okewale 2009:79–90). Basically, conflict occurs when there are divergent interests over distribution of scarce resources and ideas (Armstrong 2009).

Many countries have not appropriately interpreted the role of student unions in the effective administration of their universities and the development of their polities in general. In Nigeria, many universities still regard student unions as impediments to peaceful administration (Mimiko 2017). Existing unions are proscribed, the establishing of new ones is avoided, and the government is indifferent about the situation (Akinboye and Eesuola 2015:146–158).

Darah and Taiwo (1989:222–223) mention that various views have been canvassed on the nature of the relationship between institutional administrators and students; and the administrators' perception of their role. An attempt to identify the character of this relationship is therefore not misplaced in light of the unravelling pattern of endemic and multifarious crises in the Nigerian university system which often involve students and university administration conflicts. Over the years, the OAU community has witnessed a series of conflicts/misunderstandings between the Students' Union and the university management. For instance, in 2014, when the university management increased fresh students' acceptance

fee from 2 000 naira to 20 000 naira, the Students' Union rose against the decision, which clashed with their interest (Adeniyi 2014). Other disagreements have been about living conditions on campus, and generally, on students' welfare. Eventually, student unionism in the OAU has been placed on indefinite ban since 2015.

Little or no attention has been given to the issues causing these disputes (Aluede 2001:10–26; Aluede et al. 2005:17–22) and/or to the adoption of proper conflict resolution mechanisms aimed at resolving these conflicts when they arise and at preventing future conflicts. Almost no attempt has been made to empirically assess the activities of the Students' Union, the relations between the union and the university management, and the various conflicts and corresponding conflict resolution mechanisms within the OAU, hence, this study.

## **Theoretical framework**

Conflict is unavoidable in any group or any social interrelationships (Lester 2008:391–400). The following three prominent theories of conflict are relevant to this study: Human relations theory of conflict, which postulates that conflict is not unnatural in group relations; Interaction theory of conflict, which states that interaction is an inevitable factor in any social organisation; and Scientific management theory, which views conflict as destructive to the attainment of an organisational goal. The three theories portray conflict dimensions as both positive and negative. Kreitner and Kinicki (2012:250) summarised the three dimensions into one. Positively, conflict is characterised by increased efforts, improved performance, growth enhanced creativity and personal development. Negatively, symptoms of dysfunctional conflict include indecision, resistance to change and emotional outbursts. Furthermore, Lester (2008:391–400) confirms that no group can be entirely harmonious since negative and positive aspects build group relations. He sees conflict in interrelationships as normal, inevitable and functional in the sense that the functional aspect of conflict can enhance positive personality development as a result of opportunities provided by dysfunctional conditions.

Throwing more light on causes of conflict, Maslow (1943:370–396) theorised that man is always in need and that as soon as one need is satisfied, another need emerges. He arranged these needs in hierarchical form and explained that in any circumstance or situation where any of the needs are not satisfied or where there is a threat to the prospects of meeting those needs, individual/group behaviours would be negatively influenced. But if the needs are met, the individual would be motivated to aspire to achieve self-actualisation. Owens, Daly and Slee (2005) hold a similar perspective as they recognise conflict as a normal and legitimate aspect of social systems. For them, conflict is inevitable in relationships and can be useful because its main function is to stimulate creative solutions to problems. To understand the sources of any conflict, Owens, Daly and Slee (2005:1–12) advanced four possibilities that can precipitate a conflict: attitude, when the individuals have differences in feelings and perspectives about persons and issues; different opinions about facts, goals, ends/means; emotional attachment to issues or goals; and a communication gap. Such possibilities may appear in any interrelationship situation, even in best-friend interactions.

Laursen, Finkelstein and Betts (2001:423–449) highlighted five levels of conflict: the parties concerned may undertake to solve the existing problem; while solving the problem the objectives of the parties could shift slightly towards the pursuit of selfish interests; the conflict increases in dimension to become a full contest; and each party wants to have its own way. Lastly, the objective of the parties might drift into possible break up of relationship. In that condition, the conflict becomes difficult to manage. These levels of conflict are also very common in the university environment among friends. Also, Owens, Daly and Slee (2005:1–12) identified one major class of conflict which they called individual conflict. They explained that individual conflict emanates from an individual's decision about issues, that is, an individual's stand/opinion which may be contrary to the opinion of the other parties. In their own contribution on causes of conflict, Laursen, Finkelstein and Betts (2001:423–449) held that conflict becomes inevitable when an individual's effort is only to satisfy his

own needs. However, the combined effort of all concerned might reduce the friction to a minimum.

It is also important to highlight the sources of conflict, which in Underwood, Galen and Paquette's (2001:248–266) opinion, include the following: differences in personal traits, viewpoints, background, poor communication skills, perceptions, attitude and values. They emphasised people's differences in their levels of aggressiveness, self-esteem and behaviour. They conclude that these differences can decrease the degree of interpersonal rapport and collaboration among friends, associates and groups.

The human relations theory of conflict is therefore applicable to this study. This theory will help to provide an explanation for the various conflicts which ensue between the university management and Students' Union within the university community. It will be useful to characterise the university community as a human setting which becomes necessarily and inevitably prone to one sort of conflict or the other. Also, the theory posits that conflict cannot be traceable to a singular cause, as several factors may account for various forms of conflict. Some of the causes/factors put forward by the theory are differences in personal traits, viewpoints, backgrounds, perceptions, attitudes and values, and poor communication skills.

Furthermore, the theory assumes that conflict can arise when certain needs of individuals and/or groups are not met. This should provoke attempts to get a better understanding of the various needs behind the demands made by the Students' Union to the university management, to explore to what extent these needs/demands were met and how these efforts shaped the relationship between the bodies. By so doing therefore, this theory becomes important for ascertaining whether the conflicts which usually erupt between the university management and the Students' Union are a result of the fact that the needs/demands of the Students' Union are neglected or not fully met. The human relations theory of conflict further posits that when one group only strives to meet their own needs to the detriment or

without consideration of the other group(s) involved, there is bound to be conflict. Thus, the need aspect of the conflict is elucidated through use of this theory.

The conflict management theory will also be used in the study to explain how conflicts between management and the Students' Union might be managed. Conflict management scholars such as Thomas (1976), Tosi, Rizzo and Carroll (1986), De Bono (1985) and Best (2006:93–115) discuss different methods of managing crises. For instance: violence and coercion, bargaining and negotiation, problem solving and mediation. Violence/coercion (in physical or psychological form) is a win or lose style of managing crisis. It is coercively asserting one's view point at the expense of another. Negotiation and bargaining is a way of dealing with crisis, particularly when the parties have relatively equal power and mutually independent goals. It is based on the belief that a middle route can and should be found to resolve the crisis situation. This will include concern for personal/group/organisational goals as well as relationships. In the process of negotiation, there are gains and losses for each party. Problem solving will involve identifying causes of crises and eradicating such so as to make the situation normal again. Mediation, with the involvement of a third party such as a traditional ruler, an opinion leader or a non-governmental organisation will help settle differences/disputes between the parties in crises.

### **Student unionism**

A Students' Union is an association of students in a particular institution of education, usually guided by certain stipulated rules and regulations to regulate their operations and activities; and primarily intended to protect and defend their common interest in line with the society (Isah 1991:2). Student unionism is a practical and theoretical system derived from labour unionism and adapted to an educational setting to pursue students' interests. Students need to come together to discover their personal competences, attributes, worth and resilience, and, with one voice, to assert their opinions on issues, take independent positions, ask questions

about issues and express their passion in a well-organised environment. Thus, Alada (2011) posits that it is the students' unions that assist students to develop their organisational abilities and strength of character which prepare them for greater responsibilities in the near future. A good student union leadership provides the leverage for the student community to enter into the socio-economic and political spheres of the institution and the larger society.

Generally, a students' union on any college campus serves two traditional purposes. One is to provide certain critical services to newly admitted students in the university, so as to guide them to experience a successful social transition from home to the beginnings of the adult world, to acquire personal responsibility, and to create a new social configuration. These functions also affect returning students. This is usually achieved through various clubs and societies, student affairs, and the provision of a whole network of social activities where, at the end of the day, students can be productive. Students' union activities normally complement other guidance and counselling services that colleges and universities provide.

The second function of students' unions globally, is to serve as flashpoints of social conscience. Regardless of divergent religious, social and political ideologies in their respective societies, students all over the world are, arguably, one of the most united groups. Students are held together by common biological factors affecting their transition from adolescence to adulthood, the common ground being the college environment which provides a readily available conduit for the expression of their newly acquired social freedom and conscientiousness. Most often, students' activism and its aftermath are not restricted to the university campus, but spill over to the larger society and lead to clashes with established authorities, and even to deaths and destruction. Due to the colourful nature of student unrests in various social contexts, it is often too easy to ignore the many important functions of student unionism, and clearly perceive that it goes beyond organising protests against the establishment.

## **The inclusion of students and youths in decision making in Africa**

It is important to note that the social group (youth) to which students belong, has been largely marginalised in terms of decision making, political participation and national inclusiveness across the African continent. Although the World Bank (2009) and the United Nations Development Programme (2013) reports show that youth accounts for over 70% of Africa's population, the social group is largely relegated to the back seat in decision making at institutional and national levels. There is a generational gap as the older generation has edged out the more youthful population. Despite the fact that youths have been largely marginalised in Africa, Mengistu (2017) avers that the will and desire of African youths to engage in political, social and economic activities remain vigorous. He further argues that when the right conditions are set for youths, such as creating favourable legal ground for them, they can invest their skills, efforts and knowledge in decision making (social, political and economic) in the society.

Unfortunately, however, this favourable situation is not usually made use of. The older population who are supposedly the minority group continue to lord it over the youths who constitute the majority group. This also extends to the political realm where an African president or Prime Minister is rarely below age 60 (Mengistu 2017), and where youths are consistently side-lined in critical decision-making processes. Their views are regarded as trivial and are treated with levity. Because Africa has failed to invest in its largely youthful population and empower them appropriately, youth action has become synonymous with violence, crime and irrational decisions (United States Agency for International Development 2005). There are cases, however, where such behaviour has been recognised as justified forms of reaction to the marginalisation and economic and social exclusion they continuously face (Mengistu 2017). This general situation in Africa is not different from what obtains specifically in Nigeria.

The same youth marginalisation has also crept into university administration systems where students' unions, representing the largest population in

the university, are often side-lined in decision making. Students' unions generally lack representation in university management and in important university reference groups. Even though the student group is the largest, they remain the least involved in critical decision making (Mennon 2003; 2005; Persson 2003). Being democratic establishments, universities are supposed to include the opinion of a cross section of staff and students (Longing 2002), including management. Unfortunately, this is not the case across most Nigerian universities, including OAU.

### **Conflict and conflict resolution mechanisms**

Conflict involves a situation of disagreement between two parties (Amusan 1996:93–99). It can be described as a disagreement among groups or individuals that has led to antagonism and hostility. This is usually caused by the opposition of one party to another, in an attempt to reach an objective different from that of the other party (cf. Folger, Poole and Stutman 2012; Hocker and Wilmot 1985), but more principles and values may be involved (Posigha and Oghuvwu 2009). Causes of conflict may include opposed values; actions/behaviour designed to destroy, thwart or control another person; attempts to acquire power or actual acquisition of power. Conflict can also result from disagreement on the procedure of distributing power and resources in an organisation. The possibility of all of the foregoing to take place is more likely among adolescents, who strive for superiority in peer interaction, often resulting in the use of violence, withdrawal of love and support, defamation of character, hostilities and break up in relationships. Horowitz and Bordens (1995) defined conflict as disagreement over social issues, beliefs and/or ideologies. When such disagreements occur, Gross and Guerrero (2000:200–226) advise the adoption of adequate communication.

According to Posigha and Oghuvwu (2009), many people view conflict as an activity that is almost totally negative and has no redeeming qualities, while others consider it as dysfunctional, destructive, but also serving as a catalyst for change, creativity and production. While conflict can cause deep rifts in the framework of an institution, it can also be used as a tool

to take the institution and the people from a non-progressive status to a more progressive and result-oriented level. What can make this significant difference in the effect of conflict, according to Holton (1998), is conflict management.

Conflict resolution processes are many and can range from collaborative, participatory, informal, non-binding processes (such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation and other alternative dispute resolution options) to adversarial, fact-oriented, legally binding and imposed decisions that arise from institutions such as the courts and tribunals (Afolabi, Idowu and Forpoh 2019; Idowu and Afolabi 2018; Boulle 1996).

## **Research method**

The study has adopted an exploratory research design and used primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews. A total of 20 respondents were purposively selected from OAU. The respondents were carefully selected based on their expertise, experience and involvement in the subject matter of the research over time. They were: former and serving officials of OAU Students' Union (8 respondents); past and present university officials (6 respondents); an official of the OAU security unit (1 respondent); and lecturers who specialise in peace and conflict management in OAU (5 respondents).

The following guiding questions were used to conduct the interviews:

- How would you describe the Students' Union in OAU?
- In your own opinion, what can you say about the relationship that exists between the Management and Students' Union of OAU?
- What would you say is responsible for conflicts between the Management and the Students' Union of OAU?
- What in your own perception are the noticeable effects of conflicts that ensue between the Management and Students' Union of OAU?
- What mechanisms have been used over time, in resolving conflicts that ensue between the Management and Students' Union of OAU?

- What mechanisms would you suggest can be adopted in resolving conflicts between the Management and Students' Union of OAU?

Secondary data were sourced from relevant literature such as textbooks, journal and magazine articles, and the Internet. Data collected were subjected to discourse analysis.

## **Data presentation and analysis**

### **The nature of the relations between the Students' Union and the management**

The nature of the relationship between the Students' Union and the university management has been discussed in the interviews. The structure, composition and operations of these bodies are grounded in the extant rules governing their management. Most of the respondents held that relations can be cordial or conflictual, depending on the mode of operation of the Students' Union executives. According to the Dean of Student Affairs,<sup>1</sup> there was a cordial relation between the Students' Union and university management, but sometimes it degenerated into conflict, mostly over the Students' Union's approaches to issues affecting the governing of the institutions.

Furthermore, according to the same interviewee, there seem to be harmonious relations between the Students' Union and university management on the inputs and interactions between the bodies. The Students' Union has been part and parcel of decision making and policy implementation in the university. They work with numerous organs or committees through which they make contributions towards issues central to the governing or administration of the university.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, some of the respondents were of the view that the behavioural traits and dispositions of the Students' Union executives

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1 Interview with the Dean, Student Affairs, held on 1 March 2019.

2 Interview with the Dean, Student Affairs.

largely determine the nature of the relations between these organisations. The Chief Security Officer<sup>3</sup> posits that:

The relationship between the Students' Union and the university management is not that cordial due to youthful exuberance from a group of students. The Students' Union, over the years, have been infiltrated by bad elements. In flagrant abuse of freedom of expression and association, [they engage in] subversive publications ... These elements in the university's Students' Union government constitute themselves into agents of confrontation to the university management and perceive themselves as a special breed that are above the law. They want to see themselves as a body; always confrontational, they are always aggressive, always violent, no constructive protest.

On a similar note, some respondents argued that the differing purposes of the Students' Union and the Administration usually made for irreconcilable positions. For instance, a former Secretary-General of the Students' Union posits:

Any union that wants to defend the rights of its members, cannot have a smooth relationship with the management in any institution. In OAU particularly ... the relationships between the Students' Union and the management over the years have not been cordial at all. And the reason is, the management wants to manage their resources, they want to exploit the students, which the Students' Union will stand to defend. So, their relationship has never been cordial.<sup>4</sup>

However, some of the respondents averred that the relationship has been mixed – sometimes harmonious and at other times conflictual. On this perspective, it is argued by a Professor of Political Science that:

Well, looking at the past few years, it will be difficult to say there is a particular pattern, because I have seen instances where Students' Union officials proved to be very difficult and gave the university administration a lot of

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3 Interview with the Chief Security Officer, held on 22 February 2019.

4 Interview with the 2009 Students' Union Secretary-General, held on 22 February 2019.

troubles, I have also seen a few instances where students were showing some form of understanding, being sensitive to the insensibilities of management, recognising that there are several of the things that students will ordinarily love to have, but are not practically doable. So, it is not a straight line as it were, there are ups and downs. There have been instances where student leadership brought the university management to a standstill in the past few years, and as I said, I have seen instances where there were some forms of cooperation. It has to do with number one, the personalities involved, driving the Students' Union, the personalities running the administration of the university and the realities in terms of the resources that are available to be deployed to the specific tasks that has being set.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, some of the respondents were of the opinion that ideological inputs characterise the Students' Union–management relations. According to this perspective, there is usually an ideological confrontation between the bodies as members of the university management have an operational philosophy. According to a former president of the Students' Union,

The students' union–management relations largely depend on the administration and the philosophy that is driving the administration. When the philosophy is that of the leftists, most of the time, there will be agitation, misunderstanding and conflict. And also, when it involves the welfarist, you see a lot of negotiation and reforms going on at the centre.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, a Professor of Political Science opined that there is a master-servant relationship between the actors; the OAU management seeing the Students' Union members as deviant groups that should not be given any chance in university administration.<sup>7</sup> In retrospect, the Students' Union–management relations have been an admixture of conflict, confrontation and harmony. The management and Students' Union swing from conflict to harmony, depending mostly on the leadership traits of the Students' Union leaders, its mode of operations, style of leadership, the nature of

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5 Interview with a Professor of Political Science, held on 12 February 2019.

6 Interview with the 2009/10 Students' Union President, held on 4 March 2019.

7 Interview with a Professor of Political Science.

communication, the release of subventions to the union, and the content of information disseminated to the students.

### **The causes of conflicts between the Students' Union and the management**

The conflicts between the OAU Students' Union and the management are mainly caused by existential issues affecting the student community. The fact that human wants are numerous but resources available to satisfy them are finite, usually engenders conflict. In OAU, some of the students live in hostel facilities provided by the management, which makes the university a habitat for disparate sets of people with numerous interests.

Some of the respondents blamed the cause of the conflict on Students' Union executives who often use complaints to make excuses. A former Registrar<sup>8</sup> pointed to the prejudice of many students:

They [students] take off under the assumption that there is a management who has no humane feeling, who does not care about them. So, sometimes they say because they don't want to write exams, so they will start trouble. So, when activities like that are coming up, we expect them, they will start complaining about things they've been managing for weeks. There are 13 weeks in a semester; they would have been managing for ten weeks, and now that exam is approaching, that's when they will start 'no light o, no water o'. And they will start looking for reasons, they just turn things upside down. And this is a pattern.

Students' behavioural attitude has also been identified as the mainspring of conflicts between the Students' Union and management. The Chief Security Officer stated:

The Students' Union tries to defend the rights of the students against the actual exploitation and exploitative tendencies of the management. But of late, it's so shameful that the fight between management and the Students' Union is even caused by the students themselves ... of late, the Students'

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8 Interview with a former Registrar, held on 28 February 2019.

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Union has played into the hands of the management. So, anytime the management manipulates them and they don't follow what the management wants, the management just ban the Students' Union.<sup>9</sup>

A former Dean of Student Affairs averred that resistance, as well as irreconcilable differences between the two bodies are the major causes of conflict. According to her:

It can be said that lack of confidence and lack of trust between the Students' Union and management can lead to conflict. And also, the existence of complex divergent students, that is, students of different ideological groups which tend to have various conflicting interests. Other factors include the existence of highly politically conscious students who are always active anytime any matter arises on campus which spurs the occurrence of protest which can be conflictual and violent in nature.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, for a former Students' Union president, egotism on the part of Students' Union and management; lack of mutual understanding; the lack of will power on the part of management to meet some demands from the Students' Union; unnecessary agitation by students; and some unwholesome activities of students are the major causes of conflict between OAU management and the Students' Union.<sup>11</sup>

Discussing the matter with some possibly profound insight, a Professor of Political Science elucidated the major causes of conflicts thus:

The first one is unmet expectations. There are a lot of things students desire that they don't get. In frustration aggression theory, we talk of the space between value expectations and value accomplishments. If the gap between what you think you deserve and what you eventually get ... is so wide, it generates frustration, and frustration leads to aggression. Another one is that some administrations tend to be a bit high-handed in the way they relate to students on students' issues ... As a leader, you cannot afford to

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9 Interview with the Chief Security Officer.

10 Interview with a Former Dean of Student Affairs, held on 26 February 2019.

11 Interview with the 2009/10 Students' Union President.

be annoyed, especially if you are presiding over institution who have scores of thousands of students under you, you must find a way to bottle up your anger and ensure that you take the best decision at all times.<sup>12</sup>

It suffices to make the point that the provision of essential welfare services such as robust students' welfare, good health care facilities, constant and regular supply of water and electricity that meet the expectation of the students, are major responsibilities of management. Since the Students' Union leaders are not members of Senate, University Council and other top echelon organs in university administration, it follows therefore, that students' varied interests are better met when there are constant provisions of those essential services and utilities to the students.<sup>13</sup> Corroborating this is the view that when there is lack of water and light on campus, increments in school fees, among others, there is bound to be conflict between the Students' Union and management.<sup>14</sup>

Attempts by some Students' Union leaders to create a 'government within government' by employing all forms of plots and subterfuge including thuggery/riots and embezzlement of funds to undermine the authority of the university management, often trigger conflict between the groups.<sup>15</sup>

To sum up, conflicts between and among groups within organisations are inevitable and OAU is not an exception in this regard, as there has been re-occurrence of conflicts between the Students' Union and university management. These conflicts often arise from the use of complaints to make excuses on the part of the Students' Union, their behavioural attitude and issues that do not align with the mission and vision of the university, irreconcilable differences, ideological disputations, power tussles, unmet expectations as a result of lack of provision of welfare services and/or utilities, and misdemeanour.

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12 Interview with a Professor of Political Science.

13 Interview with the 2014 Students' Union President, held on 4 March 2019.

14 Interview with the 2017 Students' Union Vice-President, held on 28 February 2019.

15 Interview with the Chief Security Officer.

## **Conflict resolution mechanisms between the Students' Union and management**

Since conflict is natural where there are unceasing human activities or interaction, it is necessary to devise mechanisms for solving them when they arise. Particularly, in the Students' Union–university management relations, conflict can frequently be reduced and conflagration avoided when mechanisms are adopted. Dialogue and round-table discussions have been identified as the major workable mechanisms for resolving conflicts between the Students' Union and management. Some respondents view the setting up of committees as one which gives the students a sense of belonging and confidence in the university management. According to a former Registrar, 'There is the whole Division of Student Affairs that is set up primarily to look into the welfare issues of students ... they [students] are members of some committees, there is provisions for them to lodge complains and we have counselling units to take care of some other problems. And all these things are working'.<sup>16</sup>

Round-table discussion whereby the Students' Union and management dialogue on matters which concern the welfare of students and the smooth running of activities on campus has been widely used as a conflict resolution mechanism.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the following mechanisms were recommended by a former Dean of Student Affairs:

Leadership and mentorship programmes must be used which serve as a means of training the students occupying or intending to contest for one leadership position or the other. Effective communication between the management and the students' union. Credible electoral process and election must be assured by the management. Proactive means of addressing issues and irresponsible behaviour among students. Management must be able to take care of irresponsible behaviour among students. Engaging of students in the decision making through their representatives. Responsible organisations in the institution must be registered, that is, the various

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16 Interview with a former Registrar.

17 Interview with a Former Dean of Student Affairs.

departmental associations. Responsible behaviour on the part of all. Positive political consciousness among students and monopoly of interest of others. Institutional spirit and dialogue with good intentions between management and Students' Union of OAU.<sup>18</sup>

The need for effective communication between the bodies was highlighted by a former Public Relations Officer of the Students' Union:

The management and Students' Union leadership should actually embrace effective communication the more; dialogue ... In the union, ... we have these three Cs; consultation, consolidation and confrontation. We believe that it is after you have exhausted or explored the measures of consultation and consolidation that you can resort to confrontation. So, I would advise that this is further solidified ... there should be negotiation ... with proper and effective communication, we can actually compromise our stance sometimes and make a very peaceful community.<sup>19</sup>

Throwing more light on the three Cs of conflict resolution, a former president of the Students' Union posited that:

The three Cs of conflict resolution ... consultation, consolidation and confrontation, those are the traditional ways of resolving conflict and it has been what we've always been using over time. So, consultation is, we try to meet – that's round-table meeting whereby you want to settle it out because everybody believes that violence does not actually give answer; so let's all come on the round table and meet ... consolidation means you are reaching out to external people to come and see witness to it, come and help us dabble into it, you bring people, maybe past alumni, notable people in the society ... and if it doesn't yield result, they go to the next one which is confrontation.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to dialogue, discussion, and the three Cs, there is also the view that the proper training of Students' Union leaders to equip them with the

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18 Interview with a Former Dean of Student Affairs.

19 Interview with the 2017 Students' Union PRO, held on 22 February 2019.

20 Interview with the 2014 Students' Union President.

requisite leadership skills which will make them responsible and mature in discharging their duties, is a veritable mechanism for averting conflict between OAU management and the Students' Union.<sup>21</sup> Also, there is the recommendation of open sessions of students where their grievances can be aired and settled. A Professor of Political Science innovatively advocated for the support and institutionalisation of the existing Students' Union Court System. According to him:

The Students' Union itself has an organ for conflict resolution – a court system. I think that's a veritable platform that the university should support and encourage to be able to resolve some of these issues. It is also a matter for the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs to be very proactive. They must allow every student to know that there is a pathway through which you could seek and get justice, through which your [students'] concerns could be heard. If you create such opportunities for students ... it's going to be much easier for you to stem some of the crises that we find. For instance, create an e-mail platform into which students can send their perspectives, their concerns and their opinions, create opinion boxes all over the campus where students will be able to drop some write-ups. And so, we must create these several opportunities and platforms for students to give expression to their desires<sup>22</sup>.

Also sharing his opinion on the mechanisms which could be adopted to manage conflicts between the Students' Union and the university management in OAU, a former Secretary-General of the Students' Union averred:

Negotiation. When you negotiate for about two to three weeks, there's no way there won't be a solution to a certain issue ... when you lay your premises well, with good conclusion, the person that is listening to you won't have any choice than to accept.<sup>23</sup>

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21 Interview with the Dean, Student Affairs.

22 Interview with a Professor of Political Science.

23 Interview with the 2017 Students' Union Secretary-General, held 21 February 2019.

## **Discussion of findings**

The study finds that the Students' Union–management relations in Obafemi Awolowo University have been a mixture of conflict, confrontation and harmony. The pattern of relationship often depends on a number of factors. The management and the Students' Union swing from conflicts to harmony depending on the leadership traits of the Students' Union executives, its mode of operation and style of leadership, the nature of communication, the release of subventions to the union, and the content of information disseminated to the students. It also finds that to a large extent, the OAU Students' Union does not participate in university management because they are not involved in Senate committees and other top decision-making meetings/committees. This is also corroborated by Mennon (2003; 2005) and Persson (2003), who posit that students' unions in general experience lack of participation in university management.

The study also finds that the principal causes of conflicts between the OAU Students' Union and the university management are the use of complaints to make excuses on the part of the Students' Union; their behavioural attitude that generates controversies and issues that do not align with the mission and vision of the university; irreconcilable differences; ideological disputations; power tussle; unmet expectations (lack of provision of welfare services and/or utilities); and misdemeanour. The finding has also been buttressed in the literature, where it is fairly established that revolts, protests, unrests and violence, as well as incessant closure of schools for months in the wake of unrest, are often due to the activities of Students' Union, and have become a regular characteristic of Nigerian tertiary institutions (Adeyemi 2009:156–163).

The study also reveals that the conflict cannot be traceable to a singular cause, as several factors account for various forms of conflicts. Some of the causes/factors put forward by the human relations theory are differences in personal traits, viewpoints, background, poor communication skills, perceptions, attitudes and values. Just as the human relations theory posits that conflict can also arise when certain needs of individuals and/or

groups are not met, it was found to be the case with the conflict between the OAU Students' Union and the university management. The university community consists of individuals with varying needs, interests, values, personalities, opinions and ideologies. Therefore, conflict in such a setting can be seen as a by-product of group dynamics. But these dynamics also flow from specific identifiable material conditions at the university. Reactions can be due to stringent university rules and regulations, problems of the academic curriculum, the catering services, the water and electricity supply, the intra-campus transport system, student union politics and increases in fees. Ojo (1995) gives examples of stringent university rules and regulations affecting students' behaviour on campus, like dress code, male-female access to halls of residence, and hours of opening and closing of the student bar/buttery and the university library. Other problems are the representation of students on boards and committees of Council and Senate or even representation on Council and Senate itself; the grading system; irregularity in the supply of light, water, health facilities and food services; and lack of communication and consultation between students and the authorities on a variety of issues.

The study shows that various mechanisms have been employed over time and can be deployed in future conflicts between the Students' Union and the management of Obafemi Awolowo University: dialogue and round-table discussion; negotiation; mediation and conciliation; engaging of students in decision making through their representatives; leadership and mentorship programmes for union leadership and intending leaders; rewarding of good leadership values and sanctioning of bad behaviour. Other methods include the deployment of the three Cs – consultation, consolidation and confrontation; effective communication; establishment and strengthening of an Open Court system under the rubric of the Dean of Student Affairs. These mechanisms are in line with the provisions of the conflict management theorists such as Best (2006:93–115), Thomas (1976), Aluede (2001) and Ladipo (1997:1–2).

## Summary of findings

The following is a summary of the findings made in the paper:

1. The relations between the OAU Students' Union and the management are mixed (cordial, conflictual and harmonious), mostly depending on the style and personalities of those at the helm in the Students' Union and the university management.
2. The causes of conflicts between OAU Students' Union and the university management include, increments in tuition fees, poor welfare services (health care facilities, electricity supply) delivery to students, an arrogant and unruly attitude of some union leaders, irreconcilable differences between the union leadership and the university management; lack of, or poor, communication and consultation between the union and management; and lack of mutual understanding and trust between the two bodies.
3. The conflict resolution mechanisms that have been employed in addressing the Students' Union and management conflict over the years include dialogue and round-table discussion; negotiation; mediation and conciliation; and consultation, consolidation and confrontation. Other conflict resolution mechanisms that could be deployed in future include engaging students in university decision making through their representatives; leadership and mentorship programmes for union leaders; rewarding of good leadership values and sanctioning of bad behaviour; effective communication; establishment and strengthening of an Open Court system under the rubric of the Dean of Student Affairs.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The paper has been able to examine the Students' Union and management relations and conflict resolution mechanisms in Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria. The relations between the university management and the union have always been mixed (conflictual, cordial and harmonious).

The various causes of conflict arising between the union and OAU management have been explored, as well as mechanisms of resolving such conflicts. Conflicts have continued to ensue between the two, however, and hence, the study contends that students' welfare must be taken seriously to address the incessant conflicts.

Owing to the findings so made, the article makes the following recommendations:

### **To the university management**

- Efforts must be put in place to reinstate the Students' Union body which is still currently banned by the university management.
- To kick start the union reinstatement process, management can offer seminars and workshops for those students who may be interested in the leadership of the union.
- There is the need for management to constantly engage the Students' Union leadership in the decision making process of the university, since these decisions affect the students one way or the other.
- Issues that have to do with students' welfare, such as clean and habitable halls of residence, clean and regular water supply, and reliable electricity supply, must be taken very seriously by the management.
- Management should organise, from time to time, leadership and mentorship programmes for Students' Union leadership to equip them with effective leadership skills.
- There is the need for management to reward good leadership values and sanction bad behaviour among union leadership.
- The communication system between management and the Students' Union must be revisited and made more effective and efficient.
- The Dean of Student Affairs must be watchful for early warning signs of issues that may degenerate into serious conflict and disagreement between the union and management.
- The management should establish and strengthen an open court system that will be overseen by the Dean of Student Affairs.

- Management must be sincere with the students' body and leadership at all time.
- Management must stop the habit of intimidating the Students' Union body with the threat and actual ban on the union whenever there is misunderstanding between the two.

### **To Students**

- The general OAU students' body must realise that confrontation is always the last resort after consultations and negotiations fail, hence, they must learn to exhaust these two before they resort to confrontation.
- Students must ensure they vote for only responsible students with integrity and character, who will represent them well.
- There is the need for OAU students to reawaken their desire to have their union back and make the necessary and productive moves towards same.
- Students must put in effort to maintain cordial relations with the university management at all time, rather than constantly seeing management as potential enemies who mean nothing good for them.

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