

# Aligning Theories with Conflict Management in Higher Institutions of Learning: Averting Looming Crises to Ensure Success and Stability

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## Abstract

Higher institutions of learning (HIL) occasionally face conflict situations. These range from minor confrontations and demonstrations to violent strikes. The aim of this study was to align theories with conflict management in HIL to avert looming crises that might affect the core businesses of HIL. Given that conflicts are miscellaneous and disputable, managing them requires integration of various approaches and theories. Therefore, the researchers employed dual concern theory, complexity theory, and contingency theory. The empirical part of the study used the mixed approach with open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires. Data were collected from stakeholders including students, academic staff, non-academic staff, and management members of a selected HIL. The data analysis techniques used computation of means, standard deviations, frequencies, skewness, and correlations to examine the relationship between dependent and independent variables in the study. The findings of the study revealed that when students act as a group during conflicts, it more often than not becomes boundless, unpredictable, and destructive. Therefore, managers should learn when to react, how to react, and in what ways to react to find an amicable solution using conflict management theories. Because this study used the pragmatic approach to align theories with conflict management with the aim of averting looming crises in HIL, other researchers can use purely qualitative methods to validate their findings.

**Keywords:** conflict management, conflict theories, complexity, contingency, dual concern, strike

## 1. Introduction

This study sought to align theories with conflict management in higher institutions of learning (HILs) to avert looming crises that might affect the core businesses of HILs and to ensure success and stability in the higher education arena. Conflict begins when at least two parties believe they have incompatible goals (Novta & Pugacheva, 2021). This incompatibility may result in disagreements, struggles, fights, demonstration, and strikes. Conflict management is the process of limiting the negativity of conflict while increasing its positive aspects (Melin, 2021). Conflict management is seen as the coordinated and timely application of measures such as political, economic, military, and or security measures in response to a situation endangering peace in an organisation. Unquestionably, HILs find it difficult to operate amid conflicts and devote an enormous amount of time and resources to deal with conflicts. This results in decreased productivity, lowered motivation, decreased morale, and poor decision-making. Managing conflicts at higher institutions requires adoption of various approaches, strategies, and theories. This study explored several theories and strove to align them with conflict management at higher institutions. The study not only focused on the previous literature and theories but also incorporated findings from an empirical study the researcher conducted.

In any organization, a conflict considered insignificant can make the organization prone to discrepancies and low productivity. Furthermore, substantive conflicts can cause an institution to stagnate in many ways, such as by failing to make timely decisions, promoting hostility among stakeholders, and creating an unproductive work environment.

One of the major roles managers should play is to recognize, comprehend, and detect various kinds of conflicts and handle them in a manner that would enhance positive outcomes and limit the possibilities of negative consequences. Higher institutions of all sizes must put measures in place to manage conflict in a proactive and reactive manner, particularly conflicts that may emerge from both internal and external factors. Burr (2016) urged leaders to examine institutional culture, which would enable them to determine what conflict management approach, strategy, or theories to employ. An ill-suited management system may be worse than no system at all. Managers should be able to determine whether a conflict management approach can work or fail in their institutions.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

In many instances, the surge of conflicts in several HILs in South Africa has brought institutions to a standstill over the last decade. This has created several issues that led to extension of the academic calendars and failure to complete the syllabus on time because of student strikes. In 2016, the #FeesMustFall and decolonization issues, which originated in two institutions, spread across almost all other institutions. Their significant impact forced policymakers to re-examine student funding issues and make changes to the system (Griffiths, 2019). Crises in HILs over these years have led to breakdown of law and order, disturbance of public peace, and loss of life and property (Lukman et al., 2019). In 2012, the report of an independent assessor appointed to investigate the affairs of a higher institution suggested that administrators implement robust ways of managing conflict among stakeholders and promote platforms through which subordinates can voice their grievances without interrupting teaching and learning, the core businesses of any higher institution, and giving the institution a bad reputation.

### 1.2 Hypothesis

H1: A moderate amount of substantive conflict driven by legitimate expectations can stimulate success and stability in higher institutions.

H2: A substantive amount of conflict driven by non-legitimate expectations can retard success and stability in higher institutions.

This study examined the two hypotheses regardless of their opposite, that is, alternative or null, hypotheses.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conflict occurs in any institution where people interact. It can involve emotions and negative feedback from the conflicting parties. Higher institutions are not immune to destructive conflicts. Lamm et al. (2020) opined that conflict is neither wholly good nor bad in its entirety but properly managing it is pivotal to the success of any institution. Berger (2017) contended that managing conflict requires managers to ignore, accommodate, or compromise where and when necessary.

Given that no organisation is immune to conflict, Kharadze (2021) claimed that more than 80% of conflict situations occur against the will of the parties involved in it. The main triggers have their roots in individual characteristics, organisational structures, and institutional cultures. How effectively organisations manage conflict directly influences their harmony, stability, and productivity.

Furthermore, avoidance and conflict mismanagement are detrimental to any institution. Therefore, the need to adopt various methods and techniques is inevitable. Van Niekerk et al. (2017) in South Africa conducted a study with 180 participants to determine the relationship between work-related well-being and conflict management styles in higher education. The findings suggested that lower management staff are more prone to adopt the compromising conflict management style as opposed to the dominating conflict management style. The findings further highlighted the need to diversify conflict management styles, claiming that doing so may serve organisations better than adopting a single conflict management style perpetually.

In a divergent study, Akhtar and Hassan (2021) averred that academia needs to learn and implement the constructive conflict management style and not be dogmatic when handling conflict. This is in line with McKibben (2017), who conducted a study with 400 university lecturers in public and private institutions. The findings suggested that managers should compromise or use the integrating conflict management style to address burning issues while displaying a high level of concern for all parties involved in the conflict. In this regard, avoiding and dominating styles are generally discouraged because they hardly yield win-win outcomes (Akhtar & Hassan 2021).

Theory is a means of explaining how things work the way they do. A theoretical framework is a structure of a theory that a particular research study fits into (Creswell, 2014). The theoretical frameworks employed to underpin this study were as follows:

- Dual concern theory
- Contingency theory
- Complexity theory
- Theory of disruptive innovation

### 2.1 Dual Concern Theory

The dual concern model assumes that parties involved in conflict prefer using either assertiveness or empathy. The

assertiveness dimension focuses on the degree to which one is concerned with satisfying one's needs and interests. Meanwhile, the empathy (or cooperativeness) dimension focuses on the extent to which one is concerned with satisfying the needs and interests of the other party involved in the conflict. De Dreu et al. (2004) argued that dual concern theory, which divides conflict management into high and low areas of concern, is the most apt for dealing with communal conflict. Dual concern theory of conflict management can help managers and subordinates deal with conflict based on two underlying principles: concern for self (assertiveness) and concern for others (empathy) (Sadri & Wu 2013). According to Das (2017), dual concern theory suggests that conflict management requires balancing concerns about meeting one's own goals and concerns about satisfying other people and maintaining healthy relationships.

### *2.2 Contingency Approach*

This theory stresses that there is no simplistic doctrinaire approach for managing conflict, and there is no consensus on the best way to organise or lead an organisation. Hence, the optimal course of action is contingent on circumstances at hand (Csaszar & Ostler, 2020). The contingency approach is also referred to as the "situational approach." The underlying principles of contingency theory were built on the assumption that managers should always find the best approach to handle their organisation, and circumstances will determine which theory or approach will best solve the problems the organisation faces.

### *2.3 Complexity Theory and Conflict Transformation*

According to this theory, conflicts can occur at varying levels and can have the following features: non-linearity, multiple causation, and unboundedness (Miuro, 2016). Conflict can occur at varying levels, from intrapersonal to interpersonal and intergroup to international. In this regard, a manager may be aware of how conflict starts but may find it difficult to determine its extent. Therefore, there is a need to control conflict at an early stage before it escalates beyond control.

### *2.4 Disruptive Innovations in Higher Education*

The disruptive innovation model can be used to address conflict in higher education. The term "disruptive innovation," which Clayton M. Christensen from Harvard Business School coined was extra-ordinary, but remarkable (Christensen, 1997). In essence, disruptive innovation depicts the way new technologies, products, or services replace traditional ones. Mbatha (2014) highlighted the use of technology for teaching and learning in higher education, replacing traditional face-to-face education and facilitating remote collaboration between lecturers and students, as a perfect example of the implementation of disruptive innovation. Innovation tools enhance learning and creativity, assist in maintaining stability, and reduce conflict that obstructs teaching and learning in the higher educational sector.

This paradigm shift tremendously helps in minimizing conflicts and demonstrations in campuses and improves productivity in terms of teaching and learning across HILs. In sum, innovative tools bring about success and stability in campuses by limiting protests, strikes, and demonstrations, which disrupt learning and teaching and retard the academic calendar.

## **3. Method**

This study used a descriptive research design, in keeping with the postpositivist paradigm. This paradigm resonates with the study because it was the most realistic for this kind of research as it allows the phenomenon to be systematically examined through various lenses. The target population consisted of students, academic and non-academic staff, and the management staff of the institution. The data collection instrument consisted of open- and closed-ended questions. A total of 180 cumulative responses were analysed from the data collected from students and academic and non-academic staff.

In keeping with King (2021), all ethical factors were considered throughout the study, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and participants' liberty to withdraw at any point. Permission was obtained from the authorities to collect data, and ethical conduct was maintained. Fernandez Lynch (2020) concurred on the right of participants to withdraw from research without penalty.

### *3.1 Sample and Procedures*

Sampling refers to the selection of the research site, time, people, and events (Nayak & Singh, 2021). The researcher in the current study approached respondents in person and requested them to participate. The responses obtained from the questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) – Moonlight version.

The researcher used the 5-point Likert scale designed with values from 1 to 5, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Furthermore, the table used to present the data had the value "N," which indicated the number of cases

in percentage form. “Cum” represented the cumulative percentage column, which showed the percentage of cases that were equal to or less than the value obtained on the variables.

#### 4. Findings

The presentation of the findings included interpretation of the hypotheses, review of the literature, and review of the theories the researcher adopted. Findings related to the demographic data of the respondents, including their age, gender, and level of study, were presented first.

Table 1. Gender. Frequency table for GENDER

Value	N	%	Cum. %
Male	44	44,00	44,00
Female	55	55,00	99,00
Blank	1	1,00	100,00
TOTAL	100	100,00	

Missing cases: 0

The table above indicates that both male and female students participated in this study; however, the number of female students outnumbered the number of male students. Out of the 100 student respondents, 44% were male and 55% were female (Table 1). Only 1% did not categorize themselves as either gender

Table 2: Age. Frequency table for AGE

Value	N	%	Cum. %
15–19	8	8,00	8,00
20–29	85	85,00	93,00
30–39	7	7,00	100,00
TOTAL	100	100,00	

Missing cases: 0

Table 2 highlights the distribution of student respondents based on their age differences. Among the 100 student respondents, most of the respondents were aged between 20 and 29 (85%); 8% were aged between 15 and 19; and 7% were aged between 30 and 39.

#### Descriptive Statistics of the Responses

Below is an explanation of the variables that emerged.

**Variable:** The name of each variable for which descriptive statistics were calculated

**N:** Number of cases for each variable

**Mean:** The average value of the variable

**StdDev:** Standard deviation, an indication of how closely values is clustered around the mean

**Skewness:** Implies whether the distribution of values in a set of data is symmetrical or not. In this regard, skewness greater than 0 is positively skewed, meaning there are fewer cases above the mean than below. If the skewness is less than 0, the distribution is said to be negatively skewed, indicating there are more cases below the mean.

Table 3. How often stakeholders are involved in conflict. Frequency table for OFTEN

Value	N	%	Cum. %
Daily	6	6,00	6,00
Weekly	9	9,00	15,00
Monthly	26	26,00	41,00
Annually	12	12,00	53,00
Never	26	26,00	79,00
Blank	21	21,00	100,00
TOTAL	100	100,00	

Missing cases: 0

Table 4.

Variable	N	Mean	StdDev	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness
INVOLVEDCF	100	1,73	0,63	1,00	4,00	0,78

When respondents were asked how often they were involved in conflict, the following responses emerged: 6% indicated they were involved in managing conflict daily, 26% indicated they were involved in managing conflict monthly, 26% stated they were never involved in managing conflict, and 21% preferred not to answer the question.

The frequency of students' involvement in conflict indicated that conflict was not frequent in the institution at the time of study (**Table 4**;  $M = 1,73$ ,  $SD = 0,63$ ,  $SK = 0,78$ ). The substantive level of conflict was not high and did not have a significant negative impact on the institution. However, the number of participants (21%) who did not answer the question made it difficult to validate the overall findings.

The abbreviations used in the tables below explained:

SD - Strongly agree

D - Disagree

N - Neutral

A - Agree

SA- Strongly Agree

Table 5. Library services as a source of conflict

Value	N	%	Cum. %
SD	13	13,00	13,00
D	8	8,00	21,00
N	4	4,00	25,00
A	49	49,00	74,00
SA	26	26,00	100,00
TOTAL	100	100,00	

Missing cases: 0

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Library Services as a Source of Conflict

Variable	N	Mean	StdDev	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness
LIBRARY	100	3,54	1,30	1,00	6,00	-0,50

When asked whether library resources and services resulted in frustration, 13% strongly disagreed, 85% disagreed, 36% agreed, 4% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 49% agreed ( $M = 1,73$ ,  $SD = 0,63$ ,  $SK = 0,78$ ). Library services needed attention given that most respondents considered library support a source of frustration.

Ntsala and Mahlatji (2016) studied challenges facing the library profession in South Africa. Their findings showed that students raised concerns about the extension of library hours at the University of Limpopo. The Student Representative Council notified the university, "If the management does not comply to the commitment we are going to occupy the library and become the staff of the library unit until the University employs enough staff who are going to be on full operation at 08h00- 00h00." The university instituted a committee to investigate the issue, and the committee recommended that the library operate from 8 A.M. to 12 A.M. as requested. **This is a clear indication that a substantive amount of conflict based on legitimate expectations can lead to success and stability in the higher institution fraternity.**

Table 7. Fees as a source of conflict. Frequency table for INCREMENT

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
Blank	2	2,00	100,00
TOTAL	100	100,00	

Missing cases: 0

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics of Fees as a source of conflict

Variable	N	Mean	StdDev	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness
INCREMENT	100	3,88	1,25	1,00	6,00	-0,97

In response to questions about whether fee increments were a source of conflict and whether students must not be excluded from the system because of the fees they owe to the institution, 47% strongly agreed, 27% agreed, only 3% abstained from answering, and 10% neither agreed nor disagreed. A significant number of students claimed to have come from middle-class and poor backgrounds ( $M = 3,88$ ,  $SD = 1,25$ ,  $SK = -0,97$ ). Fee issues were among the major factors contributing to conflict in the institution.

To assess the conflict management style the management of the institution adopted, the **Table 9** below was created. It indicated that the majority of management staff in the institution preferred the integrating conflict management style for handling conflict as opposed to the dominating, compromising, and avoiding management styles.

### Responses from Management Staff

In the open-ended question responses, one of the most mentioned and preferred conflict management styles was the integrating style as opposed to the dominating, avoiding, and compromising styles. The statistical responses validated this finding (**Table 9**).

Table 9: Integration conflict management style as the preferred style for managing conflict. Frequency table for INTEGRATION

Value	N	%	Cum. %
N	1	6,67	6,67
A	9	60,00	66,67
SA	4	26,67	93,33
Blank	1	6,67	100,00
TOTAL	100	100,00	

Missing cases: 0

Table 10.

Variable	N	Mean	StdDev	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness
INCREMENT	15	4,33	0,72	3,00	6,00	0,68

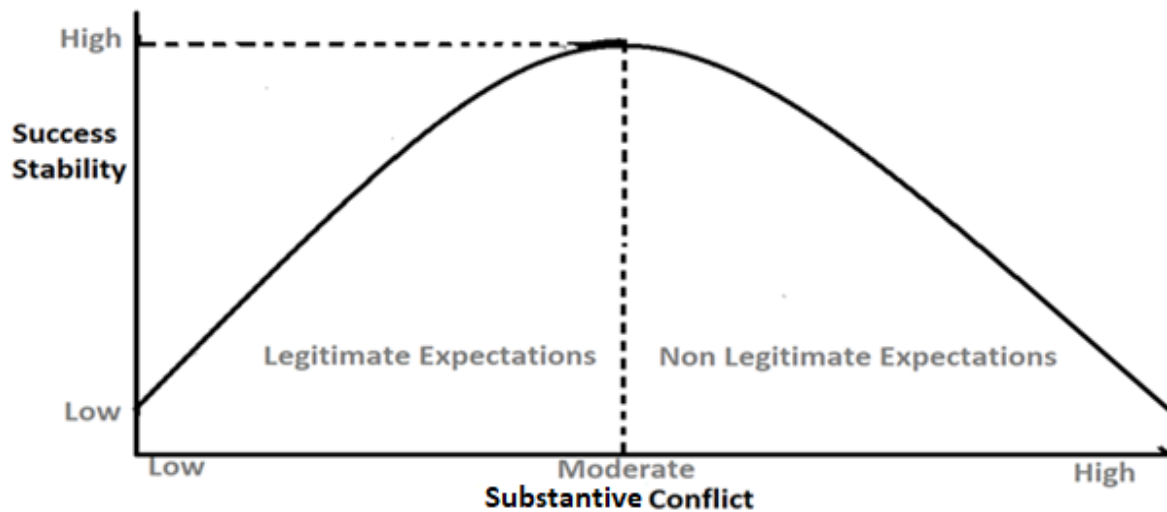
When the management staff was asked about the various conflict management styles, they adopted to handle conflicts, the majority (60%) agreed that they integrated others' opinions to attain mutually beneficial solutions. A total of 26.67% strongly agreed with this, 6.67% preferred to be neutral, and none of the respondents disagreed. The management strongly preferred the integrating management style to settle conflicts in the institution ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ , and  $SK = 0.68$ ).

### Interpretation of the findings

In keeping with the post-positivist paradigm, the researchers adopted, the theories they employed, and the findings that

emerged, the following hypotheses were accepted: A moderate amount of substantive conflict driven by legitimate expectations can stimulate success and stability in higher institutions, and a substantive amount of conflict driven by non-legitimate expectations can retard success and stability in higher institutions.

Figure 1. Inverted-U Function (Lukman, 2021)



The model in **Figure 1** provides a snapshot of how success and stability increase with an increase in substantive conflicts driven by legitimate conflict. However, success and stability decrease with increase in conflicts triggered by non-legitimate expectations as indicated in Figure 1 above. The findings of the study suggested that both hypotheses were accepted (**Figure 1**). This bolstered the findings of Ntsala and Mahlatji (2016), who stated that “the University instituted a committee to investigate the issue, and the committee recommended that the library operates from 08h00 to 00h00” after students protested. Moreover, the integrating conflict management style proved effective in managing conflict because it gave high priority to all parties involved in the conflict per dual concern theory. To maintain order and stability during crises, managers should apply complexity theory because conflict can occur at different levels. Additionally, they should use contingency theory as well because there is no simplistic doctrinaire approach for managing conflict, and there is no consensus on the best way to organise or lead an organisation. Therefore, adopting mixed approaches when dealing with conflict is paramount.

Based on the literature reviewed, the theoretical framework used, and the research paradigm adopted, it is envisaged that the findings will assist higher education managers to handle conflicts both in private and public institutions. Conflict is considered as the root of many leaders’ best ideas as well as at the core of their worst failures (Msila, 2012). In sum, policymakers can also benefit from the findings.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aligned theories with conflict management in HILs to avert looming crises that might affect the core businesses of HILs. The theories the researchers employed were dual concern theory, complexity theory, and contingency theory. None of the theories can be considered the most effective theory; all of them should be adopted dogmatically for managing conflict in higher institution. The circumstances, the magnitude of the conflict, and the time will determine the appropriate style. The findings revealed that when students act during a conflict, in most cases, the consequences can be destructive if managers do not properly handle the conflict. The nature of contemporary conflicts at HILs requires managers to adopt various theories and approaches. Furthermore, the findings revealed that constructive conflict should be encouraged, and destructive conflict should be mitigated and discouraged. Management staff members who participated in the study preferred the integrating conflict management style to manage stakeholder conflicts. A moderate amount of substantive conflict driven by legitimate expectations can stimulate success and stability in higher institutions, and a substantive amount of conflict driven by non-legitimate expectations can retard success and stability. Finally, because the researchers used a mixed approach, other researchers should replicate this study using the qualitative approach to validate the findings based on comprehensive responses and emotions from respondents. Future studies also need to replicate this study to establish clear links between the effects of disruptive innovations and conflict management in higher education.

Note: This article is partly drawn from a thesis by Y Lukman, titled “Management of conflict in higher institutions of learning in relation to stakeholder’s expectation.”

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