

# Role of Vice-Chancellors on Conflict Resolution Management in Nigerian Higher Institutions: Lessons from Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife

Olaiya Taiwo Akanbi\*, Benson Kunle Sehinde\*, Ajayi Adeola\*\*

## Abstract

The study examined the roles and causes of leadership crisis and management strategies adopted in the attempt to resolve conflicts involving students, lecturers, and non-academic staff versus vice-chancellors in Nigeria higher institutions with particular reference to Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. Two basic methods of primary are adopted here, viz, questionnaire and personal interview. The questionnaire was essentially utilised to assess the leadership role of vice-chancellor in conflict management. This becomes useful when one considers the fact management of conflict resolution is always focussed around the person and office of the incumbent vice-chancellor in most universities. The interview method allows for face-to-face analysis of events thereby making it possible for clarification on controversial issues. In this way, one is opportune to ask further questions germane and relevant to this study. Data derived from the secondary sources include data already provided by original investigators. In this study, the secondary data sources include books on university administration, conflict and conflict management, governance, and other relevant books and journals. Others are published and unpublished articles, official documents, dissertations, magazines, and publications. Two former vice-chancellors were examined as regards the problem of perennial crisis in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Respondents were asked to rate the two former vice-chancellors using their organisational competence, leadership style and positive relation with staff and students as rating criteria. The questionnaires were analysed using descriptive analysis such as scores and percentage. The study discovered evidences of mismanagement of conflict which made most conflicts in the universities

violent. It observed that most conflicts in Nigerian universities might have been averted if the leadership in Nigerian universities could be more democratic, sensitive, and flexible in conflict periods. The study concluded that the welfare of staff and students should be given more attention if perennial conflicts with school authority are to be overcome in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

**Keyword:** Conflict Resolution, Crisis Management, Leadership Traits, Management, Organisation, Styles

## Introduction

Conflict may occur between two or more individuals, two or more groups, or an individual and a group. Universities as a social organisation do experience conflicts between different unions within its jurisdiction. Conflict is therefore an inevitable phenomenon in any organisation (Adebayo, 2009).

It is also an attendant feature of human interaction and cannot be eliminated because of people with differing nature- management, students, lecturers, and non-academic staff members. The students as well as the academic staff have learnt to respond by being to respond by being confrontational with these authorities through their respective bodies. Even when these unions have scores to settle with the Federal Government or any State Government, they have always resorted to attacking their respective governing authorities since the management are appendages of the Federal Government (Olaiya, 2000).

\* Department of Public Administration, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.

\*\* Institute for Entrepreneurship and Development Studies Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.  
Email: [ajayifunso4christ@gmail.com](mailto:ajayifunso4christ@gmail.com)

Therefore, this study assessed the effect of leadership style on the management of conflict in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife of South-Western Nigeria.

## Statement of the Problem

The study is informed by the curiosity to discover the proximate and the remote causes of the myriad of the crises that have affected the proximate and the remote causes of the myriad of crises that affected the entire terrain of Nigeria Universities. Since the creation of the University of Ife (now OAU) and the movement to its permanent site 1967, the management has been confronted with conflicts upon conflicts, ranging from the students' unrest to the strike actions by academic staffs (Olaiya, *ibid*).

This study is particularly interested in discussing how the crises which ensue, and which seems to be becoming permanent, has been able to affect the leadership style of the institution under study i.e. Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife. Therefore, when appointed authorities find it impossible to contain recurring and violent protests and when all manners of brokering peaceful resolution have failed; crisis could be said to have erupted. Furthermore, the practice in academia in resorting to lecture boycott and declaring lecture free days as ways of registering protest against any perceived injustice or showing grievance against unfair state policy or demanding for better welfare package is equally recognised as crisis potentiality. Several others have been taken place since 1979 and the latest of which was the Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) crisis in 2013 to early 2014.

It is against these background problems, as well as the global interest in leadership crisis management and the search for a permanent solution to the hydra-headed crises bedevilling our various campuses in which Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife is one, that this study is assumed justifiable.

## Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to

- i. examine the role of leadership style on conflict resolution management in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife of South West Region, Nigeria.
- ii. identify the causes of conflict in Nigerian universities.

- iii. examine the leadership style for handling conflict in Nigerian universities; and
- iv. suggest ameliorative measures for resolving conflicts management in Nigerian Universities.

## Literature Review

### Conflict in the Nigeria Universities

Nigerian universities are crises-ridden just like the entire state of Nigeria. According to Sanda (1990), two major forms of crisis may be easily identified in Nigeria universities. The first is the "legitimacy crises". He contended that it is debatable whether or not the universities still have the moral justification and authority to parade themselves as functional universities especially when they have failed "to effectively perform those functions, which are expected of them by the society". He tagged the major crisis as that of "increasing precariousness of goal attainment" in all its ramifications within the university system. He also observed that these two categories of crises threaten to bar or bend the Nigerian Universities.

Some scholars have opined that both manifest and latent factors exist in the university and they have leading roles in breeding outburst of students. Leading this academic thinking is Robert Marsh. According to him, problems within the university in general, national issues and curriculum problem form, among others, the manifest factors precipitating conflict in the Nigeria universities. The latent factor goes beyond the boundaries of the university. They include dwindling resources, the size and age of the University, centralisation of university management and the repressive responses from the state (Marsh, 1982).

The theory of generation in conflict analysis is another school of thought led by Lewis Feuer. This depicts a situation whereby the entire adult world is rejected and detested by the youth because the latter consider the former as failures in terms of provision for their welfare needs. Consequently, violence is seen as the only means by which the adult can really sit up and respond commensurably (Feuer, 1962).

Next is the theory, which attempts to combine statism with the political control of education. This has been named David Kamens' welfare programmes. According to him, a state automatically falls into one of the following

three categories, namely the “core states”, the “peripheral states”, and the “semi-peripheral states”. Core states are expected to have less intense conflict because they can institutionalise conflict more effectively among parties. Peripheral states (the poorest) have more revolutionary potentials because they can neither institutionalise conflict effectively nor deter attempts to overthrow the ruling government. The semi-peripheral states are somewhere between the two extremes. Those with strong mobilising states are likely to inhibit all forms of protest and power struggle (David, 1983).

A final theory that attempts to make sense out of the Nigerian Universities situation is the deprivation theory. Merton and Rossi are among the earliest proponents of this theory. The major proposition of the deprivation theory is that aggressive dispositions and display is a function of deprivation. According to Merton and Rossi, a frustrated person is conflict prone and violence is mostly directed at the aggressor or those who are perceived to have occasioned this frustration by mismanaging state resources. In a relatively deprived state, the attitude of the state and her appointed university authority is often to suppress students’ protests, by treating these students as delinquents whose criticisms, grievances and yearnings must be met with aristocratic disdain. Consequently, social movements, like students groups may be set in motion occasioned by such feeling of deprivation and a concerted effort channelled redressing societal injustices (Merton & Rossi, 1950).

Again, it can be reiterated that this study is largely limited to those crises engaged in by the students through the students’ union, and in case of lecturer, through ASSU.

### **Leadership Styles for Handling Conflict in Nigerian Universities**

According to Mullins (1996), leadership is a process in which the leader and followers interact such that the leader influences the actions of the followers towards the achievement of certain aims or objectives. Thus it is the ability of influencing the behaviour of others, or exerts influence within working group in order to achieving group task or organisation objective. The followers (subordinates) perceive the leadership as having certain attributes or characteristics that endeared him/her to control or exert influence over them. Therefore, leadership, by concept, is a non-coercive capacity (i.e. is not the use of instrument of

delegated power or authority), and followers (subordinate) willing consent to be influenced or directed by the leadership. Leadership is hence conferred from below (by the electorates/subordinates) and not from above (by elites/superordinates) for constructive engagement towards cooperative, collaborative efforts and mutual benefits.

The institution of government was developed in line with the social contract philosophy to among other things promote sustainable human development in ways that reduce disparities in security, income, well-being and opportunity between groups of citizens. It also ensures that people are sovereign, mandate to govern is a contract and the say of the majority upheld. In this context, therefore, good governance implies a situation where majority say is respected, where government strives in all its policies and actions to provide a better life for the majority, where social inequities are minimised, where all stakeholders respect the rule of law, and where the conduct of government/organisation business is transparent and accountability is institutionalised (Abubakar, 2008). Thus good governance is predicated in a society where leadership and followership adhere to due process, rule of law and act responsible and responsive to set objectives (either at societal governance or corporate governance). According to John Locke (1632-1704), the social contract stipulates that when the State negate from its social responsibility (i.e. protection of life and properties, ensuring people well-being and justice) or the King becomes a tyrant and acts against the interests of the people, then people have the right, if not an outright obligation, to resist the authority. Thus a socially irresponsible and unresponsive State or leadership and that scuttle good governance simply creates the atmosphere for social disobedience, instability, up-rising and revolution (Isa, 2007).

According to USAID, effective leadership strategies must be multi-faceted and institutionalised in a position to encompass the following:

- (1) Efficiency in managerial and organisational network;
- (2) Proper Accountability;
- (3) Legitimacy and responsiveness to public opinion;
- (4) Transparent decision making exercise and process; and
- (5) Multi-dimensionality in policy option and choices.

In the same vein, Landell-Mills and Serageldin (1992) maintained that leadership style entails the utilisation of

political authority and society control in the management of resources for social and economic development. They emphasized that the concept of leadership style encapsulates institution functioning and structural arrangement of a in decision making process, formulation of policy, implementation capacity, information flows, leadership effectiveness and the relationship existing between the leader and the governed.

Hyden (1992) stressed the issue of legitimacy as the dependent factor, which can only be engendered by effective leadership. According to him, leadership entails conscious management of the structures of any regime in the search of legitimacy. This view has been complimented by Olowu and Erero (1997) when they defined leadership as relation to the “rule – ruler- ruled relationship” between the leader and the governed. To this end, they identify three styles to leadership. They are:

- (1) Functionally: It (leadership) deals with how rules are made, legitimatised are enforced.
- (2) Structurally: It comprises three distinct institutions, and the ruler or the state, the ruled or the society and the rules of law. Leadership is the relationship between the state and society institutions.
- (3) Normatively: It highlights the values associated with good leadership. These include: transparency, organisational effectiveness, accountability, predictability, legitimacy, popular participation, and plurality of policy choices.

From the foregoing, it follows that good leadership depends to a large extent on the level to which government is perceived and accepted as legitimate. It connotes commitment to public welfare improvement and responsiveness to societal needs of the entire citizenry.

Olowu (1995) ascribed the African leadership style problem to the adoption of monolithic centralised power originated by the colonial elitist, centrist and absolutist regimes and then made worsened by the prevalence of military rule. At the institutional level, He contended that authority and power are made to concentrate in the hands of very few people in the uppermost echelon of administration.

Zartman (1997) identified three leadership styles of managing conflict. These are:

1. By unilateral restraint and concession by one of the parties to a conflict;

2. By bilateral negotiation and accommodation between the two (or more) parties to conflict; and
3. By third party interventions, whether specifically constituted or coincidental.

## **Role of University Leadership in Conflict Management**

In a research conducted by this researcher, he discovered that there are two major schools of thought which then role of university leadership in the management of conflict in the university. The first school of thought considered the university management as an essentially a key factor in the cause of crisis and confusion between the management and other stakeholders within the university. They argued that although the authority do not actually mastermind crisis , their lukewarm attitude, indecisiveness, insensitivity and more often, their tactlessness and officiousness, especially in period of escalated crisis offer enabling environment in aggravating an otherwise peaceful protest on campus. They advanced that the act of the university leadership in expelling, summary dismissal, selective or general intimidation of students and staff as capable of creating problems on campus. Cases were cited when ringleaders in times of crisis are singled out for harsh disciplinary action. These cases were identified as major turbulent crisis. They also made specific mentions of 1991, when the president of the students’ union, Adeola Soetan, the Public Relation Officer, Ebunolu Adegborunwa were expelled and suspended respectively and for partaking in the Anti-Sap riot. The institution however did not witness peace until the reinstatement of Soetan in 1993. In the same vein, the President along with five others were expelled and several others suspended in 1995 following a protest by the students on welfare conditions which resulted in the disruption of the 1995 convocation ceremony.

The second school of thought considers the role of the university leadership as preventing, managing and always seeking to finding solution (s) to any crisis that erupts between the state and / or school authority on one hand and students, trade unions and associations on the other hand. They posited that university leadership in an unfortunate middleman between the active, dynamic and enlightened members of university community and the state whose policy and directives must be executed at all times. They also maintained that the leadership in the university should



be exonerated of misgivings in crisis, as they are mere executors of the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy. They stated that there is bound to be a communication between the vocal and ever-demanding unionists and the highly bureaucratised state apparatus whose attention are equally divided to other germane sectors of the economy. They argued that for instance, the attack on school authority by students on the termination of food subsidy in the 70's is a misdirected aggression. They also argued that "Ali must go" riot, the anti-SAP debacle, World Bank University sector loan resistance, the "June 12" imbroglio, etc. are instances of grievances which should be better channelled directly to the state.

## Methodology

The overall research method adopted for this study design. Like the survey researcher, we are mainly concerned with the accurate assessment of the characteristics of the entire population through samples drawn from the same. The survey method is thus considered appropriate for this study since survey research centres on people, their vital fact; beliefs, opinion, attitudes, actions and reactions.

## Sampling Research and Procedure

With regards to this study, the population refers to all students, lecturers and non-academic staff of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. The sample covers the selected key students' leaders and groups, principal leaders in the ASSU, selected University personnel and influential as well as eminent personalities in the university, notably the Chairman and Secretary of (OAU) and the President and Secretary General of OAU Students' Union to mention a few.

## Sources of Data Collection

Two sources of data collection shall be used in order to accomplish the objectives of the study. They are:

1. Primary sources; and
2. Secondary sources

## Primary Sources of Data

Two basic methods of primary are adopted here, viz, questionnaire and personal interview. The interview was essentially utilised to assess the leadership role of vice-chancellor in conflict management. This becomes

useful when one considers the fact management of conflict resolution is always focussed around the person and office of the incumbent vice-chancellor in most universities.

The interview method allows for face-to-face analysis of events thereby making it possible for clarification on controversial issues. In this way, one is opportune to ask further questions germane and relevant to this study.

## Secondary Sources

Data derived from the secondary sources include data already provided by original investigators. In this study, the secondary data sources include books on university administration, conflict and conflict management, governance and other relevant books and journals. Others are published and unpublished articles, official documents, dissertations, magazines and publications.

## Presentation of Data

The approaches to be employed here are descriptive and are explanatory, in the analysis and presentation of the data. The data obtained from the field are critically edited, examined and interpreted.

## Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion of Research Findings from Questionnaires on the Effect of Leadership on the Management of Conflict in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife of South-western Nigeria

Informants were asked to rate the two former heads who have presided over the university between 1982 -1989 and 1991-1999 using these criteria; organisational competence and positive relation with staffs and students. The respondents were asked to use the 'high', 'average', 'low', and no response.

Similarly, respondents were asked to assess the leadership style of the two former vice-chancellors using the 'democratic', 'autocratic', 'laissez-faire' and 'no response' rating criteria.

They were also asked to assess two former vice-chancellors regarding their record in conflict management

using ‘best’, ‘average’, ‘worst’ and ‘no response’ criteria.

Lastly, respondents were asked to assess the overall performance of vice chancellors as regarding welfare and condition of staffs and students using ‘high’, ‘average’, ‘low’, and ‘no response’ rating criteria scale. The need for ‘no response’ provision became necessary on the realisation that conflict discussion always carries with it a note of neutrality and biases.

Summaries of the responses are provided in Table 1 and 2.

## Discussion of the Research Findings on Questionnaires and Oral Interview

### Organisational Competence

The result from Table 1 revealed that Professor Wande Abimbola had the highest score 72% of the total respondents. Interview responses also established that Prof Abimbola is a renowned strategist in times of crisis

management. According responses from oral interview, he led the university in when the university when the prevailing socio-economic and political situation in the country assumed its most turbulent turning point. That he particularly survived the myriad of protests that greeted most of the dictatorial policies of Buhari and Babangida are a source of wonder to most respondents. During student’s protests, Abimbola was said to be present among the protesters largely to prevent arbitrary arson and above all to forestall police brutality of students and members of staff. Research evidence showed that he explored dialogue to a large extent. In fact, of the vice-chancellors assessed, Abimbola can be described as politician per excellence. This may have explained his unanimous selection for a second term of office. Although Professor Wale Omole scored 58.5% in organisational competence, personal interview responses regarding his tenure are not very impressive.

### Positive Relation with Students and Members of

**Table 1** Assessment Scores in Respect of Professor Wande Abimbola’s Leadership Style

Indices	Score	%	Score	%	Score	%	Score	%	Total(%)
Organisational Competition	High	72.5	Average	20.0	Low	29.5	NR	0	99
Positive Relation with Students & Staffs	High	72.5	Average	19.0	Low	93.5	NR	40	99
Leadership Style	Demo-cratic	79.5	Autocrat-ic	29	Laissezfaire	0	NR	15	99
Record in Management of Conflicts	Best	68.5	Average	16	Worst	0	NR	3.0	99
Overall Performance Appraisal	High	80.0	Average	32	Low	0.5	NR	6.5	99

Note: NR implies No Response, meaning that the respondents did not respond to the question asked.

**Table 2** Assessment Scores in Respect of Professor Wale Omole’s Leadership Style

Indices	Score	%	Score	%	Score	%	Score	%	Total (%)
Organisational Competition	High	58.5	Average	8	Low	29.5	NR	3.0	99
Positive Relation with Students & Staffs	High	0.5	Average	1.5	Low	93.5	NR	4.5	99
Leadership Style	Demo-cratic	0.5	Autocrat-ic	92.5	Laissezfaire	0	NR	6.0	99
Record in Management of Conflicts	Best	0.5	Average	0	Worst	94.5	NR	4.0	99
Overall performance Appraisal	High	20.0	Average	0	Low	72.0	NR	7.0	99

Note: NR implies No Response, meaning that the respondents did not respond to the question asked

## Staff

According to Table 1, Prof Abimbola scored higher than Professor Omole. He scored 72.5% while Omole scored 0.5%. This attested to the fact that Prof Abimbola was more accessible and sensitive to the problems plight of students and members of staff of the university than Professor Omole. Interview evidences further showed that Abimbola is more accessible and sensitive to the problems of his subjects than Omole who was said to hostile.

## Leadership Style

The findings revealed that Prof Abimbola was rated high (i.e. 68.5%) while Prof Omole was rated low (i.e. 0.5%). This showed that Abimbola was a democratic leader while Omole was an autocratic leader.

In the end, the respondents seemed to agree that the leadership style of vice-chancellor is an important factor to reckon with in the management of and resolution of conflicts in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, South West Region Nigeria in particular and Nigerian Universities in general.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, these following recommendations are made:

1. Nigerian university vice-chancellors need to be re-oriented in consonance with acceptable democratic and international standards in the conflict management of the system.
2. Nigerian leaders must ensure that only credible people are appointed as vice-chancellors and members of the governing councils of Nigerian universities.
3. Decision making should be collective when possible.
4. Government must show serious commitment to Nigerian universities by funding educational sector.
5. Finally, there should be accessibility, sensitivity, and timely communication between the leaders and the led.

## References

- Adebayo, A. A. (2009). Student-authority conflict in Nigerian universities. *The Social Sciences*, 4(5), 489-493.
- Agbonna, S. A., Yusuf, A., & Onifade, A. B. (2009). Communication and Conflict Manager's Personality in School Security and Conflict Management. *Being text of paper presented by the Annual National Conference on the Social Studies Association of Nigeria*, Held at Michael Otedola College of Primary Education Nofirija, Epe, Lagos State from 17th to 20th November, 2009.
- Clark, D. (2005). Concept of Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.nwlink.com>
- Kamens, D. H. (1983). Statist ideology, National Political Control of Education of and Youth Protest. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 27, 563-569.
- Fatile, J. O., & Adejuwon, H. D. (2011). Conflict and conflict management in higher institutions: The case of Nigerian Universities. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7, 273-288.
- Feuer, L. (1962). *The Conflict of generations: The character and significance of student Movement*. London: Heinemann.
- Gboyega, A. (1997). Conflict Unresolved in Zartman L. (ed) *Governance as Conflict Management Politic and Violence in West Africa*. Washington D.C: Brooking Institution Press.
- Hyden, G. (1992). Governance and the Study of Politics in Hyden and the Micheal Bratton (eds), *Governance and politics in Africa*, Boulder: Lynne Publishers pp. 7.
- Landell-Mills, P., & Serageldin, I. (1992). Governance and the external factor in Proceedings of the World Annual Conference.
- Madunagu, E. (1980). *The tragedy of the Nigeria socialist movement and other essays*. Calabar: Centaur Press Ltd.
- Magagula, C. M. (2007). Conflict resolution management: The Role of African Higher Educational Institutions Paper Presented at a Seminar Celebrating the African University Day at the University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni Nov 5.
- Marsh, R. M. (1982). Sources of Japanese University conflict: Organisational structure and issues. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 26(4), 750-756.
- Merton, R. K., & Rossi, A. K. (1950). Contribution to the theory of reference group behaviour in Merton, R. K. and P. F. Lazardfield (eds), *Communities in Social Research*, New York: Fire Press, pp. 40-105.
- Mohr, J., & Speskaman, R. (2004). Characteristics of

- partnership attributes communication and conflict resolution techniques. Newyork: *Kiley Publishing*.
- Olaiya, T. A. (2000). Management of Governance Crisis in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria MSC. *Thesis*, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife., Nigeria.
- Olowu, D. (1995). Transition to Democratic Governance in Africa in Olowu, Soremekun and William (eds), Governance and Democratisation in Nigeria, Ibadan: *Fact Finder*.
- Olowu, D., & Erero, J. (1997). Introduction: Governance of Nigeria's Villages and cities through indigenou institutions in Olowu and Erero (eds), Indigenous Governance System in Nigeria, Ile-Ife: *Ancho Prints*.
- Prutt, D. E., & Carnevale, P. J. (2000). *Negotiation and Social Conflict Buckingham*. Open University Press.
- Sanda, A. O. (1991). Crises in Nigerian University System: A Challenge to Management Administrative Capacity. *Technical Report*, Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife.
- Zartman, I. W. (1997). *Governance as conflict management: Politics and Violence*. West Africa Washington, D. C.: *Brooking Institution Press*.