

Functional or Dysfunctional? An Analysis of the Outcomes of Students-Management Conflicts in the University for Development Studies from 1999 to 2009

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Abstract

This paper sought to ascertain the outcomes of the conflicts between students and management of the University for Development Studies from 1999 to 2009. Data were collected using questionnaires and interview guides. Forty respondents were used for the study. Data analysis was done qualitatively by using narratives and direct quotes from respondents. The paper established that the conflicts exhibited both negative and positive outcomes. The negative outcomes included: the loss of productive teaching and learning contact hours, shortening of the academic calendar, closure of the School, prevalence of insecurity, increased social vices, low student performance in examinations and withdrawal of students for poor performance. The positive outcomes included: helping build, define and balance students' needs with management and helping them face and address issues in a clear and conscious manner, helping enhance interpersonal communication, improving the University climate, and improving the capacity to respect and appreciate different perspectives. They also constructively helped in correcting some management ills and lapses. The study concluded that the conflicts led to low productivity and tarnished the reputation of the University despite the fact that they transformed governance of the University. The study recommended intensification of the teaching of courses on peace and conflicts management in the University to all students; highlighting how students are the worst affected by conflicts in the University and the need to minimize their occurrences if they cannot be avoided. Management should also take refresher courses in conflicts management to enable them handle conflicts properly and minimize dysfunctional outcomes.

Key Words: Conflicts, Students, Management, University, Outcomes

1. Introduction

Bua et al. (2015) maintained that in the academic setting as in the university, conflicts occur frequently since consensus of opinions regarding rules that govern schools do not often exist among participants who include: students, teachers, parents and school administrators who often perceive each other as opponents in several decision-making situations. Therefore, "conflicts abound in decisions administrators make about students" (Bua et al., 2015:59). Conflicts arise from the interactions of human beings in situations where ends are incompatible and where the ability of one's ends to be satisfied depends on the other's choices, decisions and behaviour (Ada, 2013). Ada (2013), thus asserted that conflicts are unavoidable in tertiary institutions, particularly, the university. Tjosvold (1993:8) viewed conflict as involving "incompatible behaviours; one person interfering, disrupting, or in some other way making another's actions less effective". Tjosvold's view of conflict helps overcome the notion that conflicts always connote negativity. That is to say that, incompatibility in behaviour does not necessarily amount to negative outcomes but equally, to positive results as well. Tjosvold (1993) thus, categorized organizational conflicts into two main types based on how they affect the organization's interests. Conflicts that lead to the achievement of organizational goals and reshape behaviours are functional conflicts. Tjosvold (1993) identified the second type of conflicts as dysfunctional or destructive which hinder organizational performance and as such are undesirable, hence the need for efforts to eradicate them or at worse, reduce them.

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Unfortunately, most organizational conflicts, especially, that of students and management of a university are dysfunctional; characterized by apathy, absence of creativity, impaired decisions and missed deadlines. As remarked by Fisher et al. (1995) students and management conflicts in universities are mostly characterized by violence, protests, unrest and turmoil. Tyson & York (1996) asserted that conflicts of dysfunctional nature impede organizational growth and success as they lead to a waste of productive working hours, tarnish the public image of the organizations concerned and reduce the goodwill the public has for them. It is worth-noting that conflicts could be dysfunctional, however, depending on how they are managed, they could be constructive with such desired outcomes as equity and fairness in the decision-making, good relationships amongst conflicting parties through the building of bridges of goodwill and trust for future use and enhanced self-awareness and creative problem-solving experience (Bennett, 1994).

The years 1999 to 2009 witnessed students-management conflicts in the University for Development Studies (UDS) across all its campuses: Nyankpala, Navrongo and Wa; posing as a source of worry to the University (UDS, 2011; 2009; Boateng, 2008). In a review, Akparep, et al. (2019) found that during the period, students-management conflicts were persistent. Students were violent, rebelled, demonstrated, boycotted and or attempted boycott of classes/exams, and engaged in verbal and physical assaults and attacks. In a follow-up study, Akparep (2019) outlined the causes of the conflicts to include: a wide communication gap between students and school management, delay in meeting students' demands by the school management, failure by the school management to guarantee the security of lives and properties, inadequate facilities such as lecture rooms, laboratories and equipment, drastic and obnoxious rules and regulations, frustration and uncertainty from the larger society, students' non-involvement in decisions which concerned their welfare, students being forced to pay special fees/hikes in students' fees, and the activities of campus secret cults. Others include: differences in the perception of group and organizational objectives, poor institutional leadership, increasing awareness of students' rights and their power to influence management decisions, the influence of complex students' social background and youthful exuberance, management role overload and widespread corruption allegations on campus. The outcomes of these conflicts are however, not determined empirically. Given the conundrum among scholars surrounding the consequences of conflicts as being functional or dysfunctional (Tjosvold, 1993; Ross, 1993; Oguntuase, 1999; Alabi, 2002; Adebayo, 2009; Fatile & Adejuwon 2011; Omemu & Oladunjoye, 2013) and the assertion that conflict outcomes vary depending on the setting in which they occur and how they are handled (Ross, 1993; Adebayo, 2009; Omemu & Oladunjoye, 2013), this paper set out to ascertain the outcomes of the students and management conflicts that plagued the University during the period 1999 to 2009.

2. A Review of the Effects of Students-Management Conflicts

The effects of conflicts in general and students-management conflicts in particular are far-reaching; often being severer on students and parents as well as university organizations (Ajibade, 2013). These range from economic through social to political effects in nature. Jude-Iwuoha et al. (2014) noted that many of the students-management conflicts truncate the university calendar, encourage lawlessness, destroy lives and properties and mostly distort academic work through insecurity on campus. In many known students-management conflicts, there is usually a haunt to overthrow authority including the readiness to kill. In such cases, administrators will often not find the atmosphere to be secure for their lives and thus abandon their duties until the environment returns to normalcy. Also, there are instances when students are chased out of campuses by military and police forces to avoid further conflict and further damage to property and live there until peace returns to the campuses; resulting in the loss of productive teaching and learning contact hours. Adepoju (2003) thus, asserted that a hostile environment in institutions of higher learning will result in low productivity, inefficiency, underutilization and hostility. Adepoju (2003) added that where there are suspicions, aggressions, insecurity and restrictions, tension and apprehension abound and that the availability of all these factors leads to little or no productivity at all. For him, conflicts and aggressive behaviours should be managed in higher educational institutions for a stable academic environment and quality academic productivity. Akomolafe & Ibijola (2011) also noted that conflicts in the university lead to the production of half-baked and unemployable graduates.

Closure of schools, loss of lives and properties, elongation of a period of study, punishment of the erring students and payment of fees as a penalty to all students are further identified as some of the effects of students' crises. Fatile & Adejuwon (2011) on their part intimated that students-management conflicts in tertiary institutions have often led to a breakdown of law and order, disturbance of public peace and loss of lives and properties.

Closure of schools, uncontrolled roaming of students and increased social vices manifested in the form of examination malpractices, cultism, indecent dressing, among others are also asserted to be the effects of students-management conflicts in universities (Bua et al., 2015).

It is noted further that, a number of students-management conflicts have led to protracted disharmony in students-management relationships, increased indiscipline among students, disarmed school authorities, obstructed channels of progressive communication and rendered institutions of learning ungovernable (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011; Alabi, 2002; Oguntuase, 1999). More so, in some situations, students-management conflicts in the university have led to the dismissal and restructuring of management. For example, in their search of literature, Fatile & Adejuwon (2011) revealed that the incidence of students-management conflicts in Nigeria in 1981 at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria led to the death of students and the dismissal of the Vice-Chancellor of the University.

It is worth emphasizing that conflicts do not produce only negative consequences as is often thought of. Conflicts are helpful in building, defining and balancing the needs of people as well as helping them to analyze problems effectively. It was observed that conflicts once effectively managed, help to foster self-control, enhance interpersonal communication skills, reduce tensions and suspensions, improve the school climate and improve the capacity to respect and appreciate different perspectives in the university (Omemu & Oladunjoye, 2013). Additionally, Ross (1993:77) believed that “for disadvantaged groups and individuals, the ability to threaten, initiate, and maintain a conflict with those who are more powerful can be critical in achieving a redistribution of resources or change in the organizations of a community”. Likened to the disadvantaged student community in any university against management, students uprising often have the ability to stop management from taking harsh decisions that affect student welfare. Adebayo (2009) in his view indicated that students have attempted to and succeeded in correcting some social and political ills and management lapses through constructive conflicts. Adebayo’s study revealed that students-management conflicts result in new challenges for the better functioning and growth of universities and that conflict stimulates creativity and spurs invention that leads to improvements in university management.

The prevailing discussion may suggest that the absence of conflicts could mean that people are simply avoiding trouble and not that they are pleased with the status quo. Cloke & Goldsmith, (2000) believed that conflict is helpful in not only making known what is wrong with a situation but most importantly, how to fix it. That is without conflict, organizations could be deluded into thinking that nothing is wrong, when in reality, so much is wrong and impeding creativity and growth. Kreitner & Kinicki (2004:487) are therefore of the view that “work groups, departments, or organizations experiencing too little conflict tend to be plagued by apathy, lack of creativity, indecision, and missed deadlines”. These arguments augment the debate that conflict is not always a negative phenomenon that should be avoided at all cost. It thus, should be emphasized that a certain minimum level of conflict is necessary in every organization, including the university community to ensure sanity in its management. Fatile & Adejuwon (2011:275) may be right in their submission that “while conflict can be negative and can cause deep rifts in the framework of the institution, it can also be used as a tool to take the institution and the people in it from stagnation to a new level of effectiveness”. Thus, the way people define conflict, act and/or react to conflict will determine whether the conflict will be productive or destructive. This makes conflict a symmetrical social phenomenon.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Setting

The University for Development Studies (UDS) was used for this study due to its peculiarity. The University was established in 1992 as a Multi-Campus Oriented University. The University at the time of this study had Campuses in three Regions of Ghana: Northern Region, Upper East Region and the Upper West Region (UDS, 2016). Another peculiar trait of the University was that it was the only University in the Country that ran a trimester system with the third trimester dedicated to community studies. Additionally, UDS was the first public university in the Country set up as an autonomous university that had no affiliation to any other University. From 1999 to 2009, the University recorded a number of students-management conflicts, despite its peculiarity (UDS, 2011; 2009; Boateng, 2008; Akparep, 2019).

3.2 Research Design

This study was done in line with the qualitative research design, both in collecting and analyzing data. This made it possible for the researcher to put the problem of the study in proper context.

Qualitative research design helps to explore and understand social and human phenomena from the views of individuals and groups (Creswell, 2014).

3.3 Selection of Research Participants

Forty respondents participated in the study. Participants in the study had fraternized with the University directly or indirectly of a sort. The study solicited the views of the various participants deemed to have knowledge of students-management conflicts in the University. It is worth noting that available and willing respondents from varied but relevant backgrounds were selected purposely for the study. Participants in the study were made up of 12 past student leaders and 28 non-student respondents as were in the University/on the campuses of the conflicts during the period considered for the study; summarized as follows: four Senior Hall Tutors, two Deans of Students, one Vice Dean of Students and six Deans-in-Charge of Campuses. Others were four Faculty Officers of the Faculties-in-Charge, two Registrars, three Pro Vice Chancellors and one Director of Works and Physical Development. The rest were one University Librarian, three Campus Heads of Security and one Retired Senior Police Officer (Knowledgeable in students oriented conflicts); totaling 40 respondents (Field survey, 2017; Akparep, et al., 2019).

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

Both primary and secondary data sources were used for this study. Primary data were collected through interviews; aided with an audio recording device. Survey questionnaires were also administered as “supplemental data collection techniques” as observed by Marshall & Rossman (1995:86) as useful for qualitative studies. Forty interviewing sessions were held in all. The modes of interviews were both face-to-face and by telephone. The mode of interview used in each case was based on the choice of the respondent concerned. Interview sessions were scheduled with respondents at their convenience. The interviews were conducted from January to March, 2017 with an average interview session lasting 45 minutes. Scheduled sessions were preceded by reminder notices. Questionnaire administration was done concurrently during the period. Questionnaires were self-administered through emails and via print copies as were convenient to respondents. Bearing in mind the relevance of ethical issues in social science research, the researcher sought the consent of all participants before engaging them in the study. To ensure anonymity for respondents’ identities, all names used in the analysis of data in the study were invented.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis for the study was done qualitatively. Raw data recorded on field notes were typed out and interview recordings were transcribed and edited appropriately. Data were arranged into themes. Data presentation was done in narratives and direct quotes for emphasis and discussions.

4. Findings and Discussions

The objective of the study was to ascertain the outcomes of students-management conflicts that plagued the University for Development Studies (UDS) from 1999 to 2009. Findings from the study revealed that the outcomes of the conflicts were both functional (positive) and dysfunctional (negative).

4.1 Negative Outcomes of Students-Management Conflicts in UDS from 1999 to 2009

The study sought views of respondents on what the negative outcomes of students-management conflicts witnessed by UDS from 1999 to 2009 were. From the study, these outcomes included: truncation of the academic calendar, rendering the school environment totally insecure for serious academic activities, the haunt to overthrow authority including the readiness to kill, and students being chased out of campuses by police force. Other negative outcomes found were: loss of productive teaching and learning contact hours, low productivity, inefficiency, underutilization of resources and hostility, the prevalence of suspicions, aggression, insecurity and restrictions, tension and apprehension, production of half-baked graduates, closure of the school, punishment to the erring students. The rest were: breakdown of law and order, disturbance of public peace and widespread campus anarchy, uncontrolled roaming of students and increased social vices manifested in the form of examination malpractices, indecent dressing, disharmony in students-management relationship, increased indiscipline among students, disarmed school authorities, obstructed channels of progressive communication, rendered the University ungovernable and tarnished the reputation of the University. These findings were found

to fall in line with those identified by (Jude-Iwuoha et al., 2014; Adepoju, 2003a; Akomolafe & Ibijola, 2011; Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011; Bua et al., 2015; Alabi, 2002; Oguntuase, 1999).

Contrary to the findings of these scholars, however, the outcome of my study showed the conflicts did not: lead to loss of lives and property, attract military intervention, lead to the elongation of the period of study, attract any penalty to students such as payment of caution fees and fees for damages, breed cultism, cause the dismissal and restructuring of management and also, did not lead to protracted disharmony in students-management relationships, even though it brought about disharmony in students-management relationships. From the study, respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the question of these being negative outcomes of the conflicts witnessed by the University with responses rated at 100%; being the sum of responses disagreeing and strongly disagreeing.

Of all the negative outcomes, the highest-ranked were found to be: loss of productive teaching and learning contact hours, truncated academic calendar, closure of the school, suspicions, aggression, insecurity and restrictions, high tension and apprehension, uncontrolled roaming of students and increased social vices; manifested in the form of examination malpractices, indecent dressing and increased indiscipline among students. This ranking was based on the unanimous (100%) response rate of both student and management respondents as either agreeing or strongly agreeing with them being negative outcomes of the conflicts. The combined response rates of the rest of the negative outcomes identified in the study ranged from 46.4% to 91.7% as agreeing or strongly agreeing by both student and management respondents. Remarking on the negative outcomes of the study, a student respondent said:

I remember how chaotic the campus became during the 2009 conflict between students and management of the University. For close to three weeks, one could not predict what would happen the following day until the authorities closed down the School and asked us to leave campus in the third week of the conflict. The environment on campus was tense, with students lobbying to court public sympathy through media engagements. One could see frustration on the faces of fresh students who were new on campus; roaming aimlessly. I can say that the situation was never a good thing for us as students and for the image of the University. I do not wish this happens again (Interviews, 2017).

A management respondent had a similar view as the student. He remarked:

When students resumed after the closure of the School, the academic calendar was never extended. Student-Lecturer contact hours were thus truncated. Lecturers could not cover course materials for the Trimester despite rushing students through them. Not only did the University record exam malpractice cases but also low student performances in the Trimester's examinations. Some students even got withdrawn from the University for poor performance. All these were the direct outcomes of the conflict in 2009 between students and management (Interviews, 2017).

The foregoing remarks by both the student and the management respondents during the interviews point to the worrying nature of the outcomes of the conflicts.

4.1.1 Stakeholders Who Suffered the Most in the Conflicts in UDS from 1999 to 2009

This study established that, of the conflicts witnessed, the stakeholders who suffered the most from the negative consequences were students. They were rated as such by 41.7% of student and 35.7% of management respondents. These were followed by management; 25% of students and 21.4% of management respondent ratings. Parents were next; rated at 16.7% by students and 17.9% by management respondents. The University as an organization and its community came next with 8.3% student and 14.3% management respondent ratings. Vendors in the University were also identified among those who suffered the most from the conflicts. They were rated at 8.3% by student and 10.7% by management respondents in that order, presented in this paper. This confirmed Adeyemi & Ekundayo's (2012) remarks that students-management conflicts in the University have often had undesirable consequences on all stakeholders in education and are severer on students, parents, the university and the government. Respondents to the study recounted that students, whilst on campus during the conflicts, lost contact hours for lectures, were later rushed through what they needed more time to learn and eventually recorded low performances in their examinations with some of them being sacked for poor performance. Students' idleness and aimless roaming increased their engagement in immoral relationships which resulted in unwanted pregnancies with their attendant consequences such as illegal abortions and anxieties. Parents not only found themselves worrying about the situation, but also, had to spend more on their children during the period. The University's image was dented and management spent time dealing with the conflicts instead of directing such time towards championing the growth of the University. Vendors lost sales whenever the University was closed down and students were made to leave campus. The conflicts not only affected students but also, student unionism in the University Community.

It was revealed by 72.5% of respondents to the study that the actions of Management in the conflicts often weakened and made student unionism less functional. Whilst acknowledging the role of strengthened and more functional student unions in effective representation of students in management decisions, respondents bemoaned how management's hard-andedness on student leaders, including the rustication of some leaders, deterred others from demanding their rights from Management.

4.2 Positive Outcomes of Students-Management Conflicts in UDS from 1999 to 2009

The study attempted to find out if the conflicts had positive outcomes of any kind. In multiple-choice rating, it was revealed by 91.7% student and 92.9% management respondents that the conflicts proved to be essential for shaping and developing individuals and the University. For 83.3% of student and 78.6% of management respondents, the conflicts helped to build, define and balance students' needs with management and helped them to assess issues in a realistic manner. Also, 75% of each category of the study respondents believed the conflicts, though to a small extent, helped foster self-control, enhanced interpersonal communication skills, reduced tensions, and suspensions, improved the school climate and improved the capacity to respect and appreciate different perspectives. These findings confirmed the views of (Omemu & Oladunjoye, 2013).

In line with the arguments of Ross (1993:77), 75% of student and 53.6% of management respondents of the study believed that students as disadvantaged groups, their ability to threaten, initiate, and maintain conflicts with management who were more powerful, was critical in achieving a redistribution of resources and change in the organization of the University which to them was a positive effect of the conflicts. Respondents; 83.3% of student and 64.3% of management believed that the conflicts stopped management from taking harsh decisions that affected students' welfare and that they constructively attempted to and succeeded in correcting some management ills and lapses, as Adebayo (2009) contended. A student remarked:

In 2008, when management failed to listen to us, we came up with a petition that was later published in The Chronicle Newspaper and in three days, health insurance cards were printed for students even on weekends. This had not been done for three years. In five days, public address systems were fixed in lecture halls. In two weeks, 1000 pieces of furniture were provided in the lecture halls for use. If they knew they could provide these facilities in such a short time, what prevented them from acting until we demonstrated against them? (Interviews, 2017).

On her part, a management member had this to say:

Through the hard experiences from these conflicts, good structures have now been put in place. At the time, there was only a Dean of students without support staff like a registrar and counselors to attend to student needs that could give prior knowledge about student concerns before they erupted as they did. Thus, the conflicts produced positive results. Now things have been streamlined and well-structured for the peaceful co-existence of students and management (Interviews, 2017).

As debated by Faleti (2006), the results of this study showed that the conflicts resulted in new challenges for better functioning and growth of the University and much more so, stimulated creativity and spurred invention that led to improvements in the University management. Moreover, the conflicts were beneficial in seeking measures to problems, encouraging ingenuity, as well as, exploring emotional and non-rational arguments and addressing them. Thus, conflict deconstructed long-standing tension and were helpful in not only making known what was wrong in the University system, but also importantly, how to fix it. They were said to have been used as tools in reshaping the University and its members towards rationalism and effectiveness.

From the study, the positive outcomes of the conflicts witnessed by UDS from 1999 to 2009 were thus, summarized to include: being a necessary part of the growth and development of individuals and the University community, helping to build, define and balance students' needs with management and helping them to face and address issues in a clear and conscious way, helping to foster self-control, enhancing interpersonal communication skills, reducing tensions and suspensions once well managed, improving the school's climate and improving the capacity to respect and appreciate different perspectives and the ability of students as disadvantaged groups to threaten, initiate, and maintain conflicts with management who were more powerful in achieving a redistribution of resources and change in the organization of the University. Other outcomes were that: they stopped Management from taking harsh decisions that affected students' welfare, they constructively attempted to and succeeded in correcting some management ills and lapses, they resulted in new challenges for better functioning and growth of the University. The rest were that: they were helpful in not only making known what was wrong in the University system, but also importantly, how to fix it and finally, they were used as tools to take the University and the people in it from stagnation to new levels of effectiveness. Of all the ratings from both student and Management respondents, the sum of responses for strongly agreed and agreed was more than

50% in each case with the least summed up response being 50.4%. This was an indication that they were constructive outcomes of the conflicts witnessed by the University.

These findings go to corroborate the views of Bennett (1994), Tjosvold (1993), Cloke & Goldsmith, (2000) and Fatile & Adejuwon (2011) that conflicts are not always negative. Ultimately, participants in the study believed there had been a cut back on the incidences of conflicts between students and management in the University in the years after 2009 which was suggestive of good students and management relations and potentially, goodwill towards the University. Reduction in the prevalence of the conflicts however, was not conclusive of the effectiveness of the strategies used in managing them.

5. Conclusions

The outcomes of students-management conflicts in UDS from 1999 to 2009 were both negative and positive. The most disturbing negative outcomes of the conflicts were the loss of productive teaching and learning contact hours, the shortening of the academic calendar, the closure of the School, aggression, insecurity, high tension and apprehension, uncontrolled roaming of students and increased social vices; leading to low student performances in the Trimester examinations and in some instances, the withdrawal of students from the University for poor performances. The study found the key positive outcomes of the conflicts to include: helping build, define and balance students' needs with management and helping them face and address issues in a clear and conscious way, helping foster self-control, enhancing interpersonal communication skills, improving the University climate, and improving the capacity to respect and appreciate different perspectives. They helped in the redistribution of resources and constructively attempted to and succeeded in correcting some management ills and lapses. Overall, the study concluded that the conflicts led to low productivity and tarnished the reputation of the University despite the fact that they transformed the governance of the University.

6. Recommendations

This study recognized and emphasized Akparep's (2019) recommendation for intensification of teaching of courses on peace and conflict management in the University to all students. Efforts should be made to highlight how students are the worst affected by conflicts in the University and the need to minimize their occurrences if they cannot be avoided. Management of the University should be made to take refresher courses in conflict and conflict management on a regular basis. These will equip them with conflict management skills that will enable them handle conflicts properly and minimize dysfunctional outcomes as and when they occur.

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