



Conflict management and organizational cohesion in the selection of Vice Chancellors in federal universities, South-west Nigeria

*Emmanuel Chinuikem Nwobi & Adebola A. Alade

*Department of Politics and International Relations,
Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Lead City University, Ibadan – Nigeria.*

*Corresponding Email: c.emma.nwobi@gmail.com

Abstract

Conflict is inevitable in human interactions; thus, conflict management is essential in order to accomplish organisational cohesion which implies the extent to which personnel working within an organisation experience a feeling of unity with one another. Organisational cohesion during the selection process of university Vice Chancellors has now become a thing of interest with reference to cohesiveness of groups; an important asset for all interest groups. While there exist divergent interests and conflicts during the selection in Nigerian Southwest universities, conflict management is understood to be a major factor in dealing with the critical situations. There are various actors at play, such as the Visitor, governing council, the university senate and faculty members. The theory of collectivism was adopted to explain the research. Primary and secondary sources of data were used to gather information for the study. Interviews were conducted with various principal officers in the university environments. The study revealed that conflicts do arise as a result of different interests within the university stakeholders (the university senate, the trade unions and the faculty members). Also, majority of university staff instinctively respond with a negative attitude towards any issues that seem unfavourable to them. The research further found out that conflict management has fostered stakeholder involvement in decision-making at the universities of study. However, the research concluded that mechanisms that have the potential to promote organizational cohesion and heal wounds, should be deployed to foster a conducive environment for academic excellence and institutional advancement. Transparency, accountability, clear communication channels, consultation and involvement through input and feedback, harmonisation of concerns of university stakeholders, and mechanisms for addressing grievances in order to uphold fairness and trust among stakeholders are some of the recommendations made in the study.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Organisational Cohesion, Stakeholder, Southwest Universities, Vice-chancellor

1. Introduction

Wherever humans are, there is bound to be conflicts largely due to individual differences, preferences and interests. These conflicts need to be managed in order for relationships to become better and for progress in groups and organisations. The university is also an organisation that deals with various conflicts especially in the selection of Vice Chancellor who is the chief executive officer of the university. The process of selecting and appointing Vice Chancellor in Nigerian universities is

not left out in this discourse. It is usually flawed with various issues ranging from external influences, nepotism, tribalism to corruption. It is primarily influenced by personal connections rather than qualifications or abilities. Candidates are granted preferential treatment due to the practice of god-fatherism and their connections with influential leaders in the state. In addition, nepotism has been prevalent in the selection and appointment process for the position of Vice Chancellor. This type of nepotism occurs due to the



prevalence of ethnocentrism, as well as bribery and corruption in the society. The individuals in leadership positions in the specified ministry and parastatals show a preference for candidates who come from their hometown, have the same dialect, or have the same religious affiliations. Tribalism exists due to the presence of numerous tribes inside the state (Visigah, 2019).

Following the crisis that trails the selection of new Vice Chancellors for some of Nigeria's public universities, there have been several cases of inconclusiveness amid clashing interests of differing parties. This has made the terrain and the selection process of the appointing vice-chancellors become problematic in some Nigerian public universities. Under this radar and investigation are some public universities in Nigeria which in their history, have experienced crisis over the selection of Vice Chancellors. For the sake of a few limitations, the study covers some selected public Universities in the southwestern region of Nigeria where there have been documented crises in the selection of their Vice Chancellors in the recent times. For instance, there was a delay in the selection process for the 13th VC of the University of Ibadan, as revealed by a past Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Prof. Idowu Olayinka, stating that speculations on the selection process had been an age-long phenomenon that has led to the use of various antics by interested parties (Qosim, 2022).

Cohesion within an organisation is a multidimensional concept that may be characterized and evaluated in a wide variety of different ways. For the purpose of this study, organizational cohesiveness is described as the degree to which personnel working within an organisation experience a feeling of unity with each other (Wojciechowska-Dzięcielak, 2020; Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). When seeking to analyse organisational coherence, practitioners frequently find

themselves in a position where they lack assurance over the essential assessment tools.

Organisational cohesion during the selection of process of university Vice Chancellors has now become a thing of interest with reference to cohesiveness of groups; an important asset for all interest groups. The selection team sets up as a regular occurrence, selection techniques and strategies that would be the most valuable to accomplish organizational objectives and goals (Amadi & Visigah, 2019).

While there exist divergent interests and conflicts during the selection of vice-chancellors in the Nigerian Southwest universities, conflict management is understood to be a factor in dealing with critical situations (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021; Alabi, 2022). However, the study analyses what roles organisational cohesion could play, with specific reference to Vice Chancellor selections in universities and how the conflicts that arise as a result of the selection are managed.

2. Literature Review

Concept of Conflict Management

The efforts or means undertaken in order to reduce the adverse and destructive ability of conflict by means of various processes or actions and by way of cooperating with and effective among the parties involved in a conflict can be described as conflict management. It requires the comprehensive phases of dealing with conflicts constructively at different levels, such as those pre-emptive attempts undertaken to avert conflicts, comprising conflict containment, litigation, and restriction. Burton (1990) describes it as "conflict prevention," which he views as conflict containment owing to measures instituted to advocate circumstances in which combined and respected interactions regulate the conduct of conflicting parties. The term "conflict management" consents to the point that conflict is inevitable,



however that not all conflicts can outrightly be settled or resolved, hence, some conflicts would exist to be managed in the manner of transformation, management, or regulation of the conflict.

Concept of Organisational Cohesion

The construct of cohesion is especially important in organizations as it is linked to innovation, satisfaction, and increased performance. Cohesion is an important group process that may lead to the formation and maintenance of groups (Olie, Klijn, & Leenders, 2020; Shokri, Moradi, Bolbanabad, Moradpour, Younesi & Ebrazeh, 2022). There is a variety of situations in which cohesion can manifest. It should be noted that social cohesion cannot be directly pursued as it is a performance variable dependent on the outcomes of other activities and conditions. However, organizations could help create environments that facilitate the predictors of cohesion. In modern societies, cohesion may be based less on actual friendship relationships between colleagues and more on 'the shared belief in the collective ability to achieve common organisational goals (Tackenberg & Lukas, 2019).

Despite this growing general interest, little is known about the conditions that promote or undermine social cohesion, or about its tangible and intangible benefits. One important strand of scholarly research has focused on the challenging task of defining social cohesion (Ntontis, Drury, Amlôt, Rubin & Williams, 2020).

On the other hand, the causes and effects of social cohesiveness, also known as the correlates of social cohesion, are not yet understood in their whole. One of the shortcomings of this study as well as other cross-national studies is the observation of a universalist "one-size-fits-all" perspective, which occurs when studying the correlates of cohesion (or of a closely related social phenomenon) across a large set of countries that are vastly different from one another. Because of the nature of this method, it is challenging to identify

correlations that are limited to a single region of the world (and, in this sense, particularistic). It is generally agreed upon that cohesion is a component of a community's overall quality of life. Cohesion refers to both the degree to which and the calibre of the communal "togetherness" in a group of people. The quality of cohesiveness is one that can only exist in a group. Also, the vast majority of academics are in agreement about the multi-faceted and graded character of cohesiveness, which refers to the fact that it is made up of numerous, more or less interdependent components that can be present to varying degrees.

There is some disagreement, however, regarding the constitutive elements of cohesion. Social phenomena such as social relations and networks, social and political trust, tolerance, civic-mindedness, participation, and the absence of conflicts are regarded as components in almost all approaches, but others, such as inequalities, value consensus, ethnic homogeneity, or subjective well-being remain contested. Broad approaches, moreover, run the risk of diluting the meaning of social cohesion and complicating the exploration of its conditions and consequences.

The characteristic of social cohesion and togetherness of a collective, defined in geographical terms, that is represented in the attitudes and actions of its members is what is meant by social cohesiveness. "Resilient social bonds, a positive emotional closeness between its individuals and the community, and a marked focus on the common good are the hallmarks of a cohesive society" (Shokri, Moradi, Bolbanabad, Moradpour, Younesi & Ebrazeh, 2022). This description may be broken down into three primary categories, each of which has nine subcategories. The field of social relations is comprised of the horizontal linkages that exist between different individuals and groups in a society.



This term is used to refer to the robustness of social networks, the level of generalized interpersonal trust, and the degree to which varying ways of life are tolerated. As the second domain, connectedness places an emphasis on the vertical relations that exist between individuals, their social entity, and the institutions that make up that social entity. This domain demonstrates a sense of affiliation with the social entity, faith in the institutions, and a belief that justice prevails in society. Focus on the common good is the third category, and it encompasses attitudes and actions connected to solidarity and responsibility for others, respect for social laws, and community participation. This domain crosses both horizontal and vertical components of social interaction.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Collectivism

Collectivism is the tendency, on the individual and societal level, to view oneself as interdependent, and a member of a group, rather than as an independent being (Vertigans & Gibson, 2020). In collectivist cultures, people feel as if they belong to larger in-groups or collectives which care for them in exchange for loyalty (Mishra, 2022). As a result, collectivist cultures value collaboration, communalism, constructive interdependence, and conformity to roles and norms (Mariani, Trivellato, Martini, & Marafioti, 2022). A collectivist culture is especially likely to emphasize the importance of social harmony, respectfulness, and group needs over individual needs (Berrone, Ricart, Duch, Bernardo, Salvador, Piedra & Rodríguez, 2019).

Collectivism has some key cultural traits.

1. Firstly, the definition of the self as interdependent — in relation to other people rather than in the abstract traits of an individual (Herrero, Thornton, Mason-D'croz, Palmer, Bodirsky Pradhan & Rockström, 2021).

2. Secondly, an alignment of personal and communal goals — meaning that the individual makes decisions accounting for the wants of the collective and what they are bringing or taking away from the group.

3. Thirdly, a greater consideration of social norms than individual attitudes when making decisions. And lastly, an emphasis on relationships, even if disadvantageous for individuals.

These cultural traits result in societies divided into in-groups. While any given person is likely to belong to few in-groups, the dynamics and closeness of those in in-groups are closer than those in individualistic cultures (Deas, Haughton & Ward, 2021).

As such, collectivists value security, good social relationships, harmony within in-groups and personalized relationships, and collectivistic societies rely on mutual obligations based on status (Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier, 2018). The personal is merely a component of the social, and as such in-groups, rather than individuals, are considered to be the basic unit of a collectivist society.

In collectivism, people are interdependent, rather than independent. The well-being of the group defines the success and well-being of the individual, and as such, one protects oneself by considering the needs and feelings of others. Collectivist relationships are centred around the in-group. Collectivists value interpersonal harmony, and will maintain established relationships even if these relationships are not in their best interests (The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News, 2021). This is not to say, however, that collectivists do not make some calculations as to whether or not to maintain a relationship.

Regardless, collectivists' relationships tend to be deeper and more emotionally invested than those of individualists, as



these relationships are tied to the belief that by helping others, one is contributing to the wellbeing of the self. Collectivism also alters how people see social situations (Fatade, 2021).

In relating this theory to the study, members of staff within the institution or organisation, who are stakeholders have their loyalty tailored towards their different candidates in these higher institutions of learning which can and do lead to conflicts in the selection process.

The selection of vice-chancellor is dependent on various factors such as favouritism, lack of due process, external interventions, tribalism (indigenisation agenda), among others. These factors are usually not well managed, thereby leading to conflicts in the universities. However, the effective and efficient management of the conflict can lead to organisational/institutional cohesion, as the study implies and it is characterised by trust and mutual respect, shared vision and goals, teamwork and collaboration which are dependent variables in managing conflicts.

3. Methodology

Descriptive research design was utilised in this study. University of Ibadan, University of Lagos and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife were selected for the study area. The information collected came from key stakeholders in the selected universities such as principal officers and other members of staff in these higher institutions, as well as others that are considered relevant to this study. Purposive sampling method was adopted in selecting the respondents used for the study due to availability and readiness. Ten (10) respondents were chosen from each of the selected universities. The study utilised both Primary and Secondary sources of data. Therefore, the research instrument used are Interview sessions, that is, In-depth Interviews (IDI), and Key-Informant Interviews (KII). The Secondary source of

data includes, journals, books, newspapers, library (both physical and online) materials, articles, reports, and magazines. The data collected was analysed using content analysis and descriptive procedure.

4. Results and Discussion

From the responses of the respondents, various themes emerged regarding the conflict resolution mechanisms to resolve crises and ensure organisational cohesion in the universities.

In majority of the cases, it is often left to the members of university to settle the crises by employing mechanisms such as open communication, mediation, compromise and reconciliation among others. In majority of the cases where conflicts have broken out during and after the selection process, the leaders that emerged have been reported to extend the olive branch to aggrieved parties. A respondent opined that;

“One of the successful tactics include the use of various communication channels for exchange of views and opinions. Encouraging open and transparent communication channels can help address conflicts at an early stage. This often include regular team meetings, suggestion boxes, and open-door policies. Also, the use of third party being called into the conflict in order to resolve it” (Interview, 2023).

It was also reported that some leaders adopt mediation. This is often done through the use of neutral third-party mediators to facilitate constructive dialogue between conflicting parties. Mediators help parties understand each other's perspectives and



work towards mutually beneficial solutions. In the case of Obafemi Awolowo University, prominent people such as the governors of Osun and Ondo states, Monarchs and politicians intervened to ensure that Professor Bamire's appointment was not reversed. In addition, the Vice Chancellor himself dialogued with concerned parties in order to ensure smooth relationships. Similarly, in the case of Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, the National University Commission had to intervene. At the intervention meeting held at the NUC office on December 8 2020, the executive secretary of the regulatory agency, Abubakar Rasheed, ordered a fresh start of the selection process, warning concerned parties against flouting the university's law.

In the case of the university of Ibadan, the federal ministry of education was the mediator as it directed that the contentious selection process should be cancelled and a more transparent process initiated. According to a report from one of the interviewees;

"The then Minister of education, Professor Adamu Adamu directed that all the 18 applicants who had initially satisfied the requirements outlined in the advertisement for the position of the vice-chancellor should be re-invited, and the final selection process must be conducted in full compliance with laid down procedures in an open and transparent manner, and in total compliance with the provisions of the Universities Miscellaneous Act" (Interview, 2023).

Documentary sources however suggests that educational administrators appeared to have been unresponsive to the potential risks of conflict in higher institutions, which could hinder the advancement and growth of these institutions if not effectively addressed. An example of this is the 2015 crisis that disrupted academic programs at Lagos State University (LASU), where the union prevented Vice Chancellor Prof. John Obafunwa and other important officials from entering the main campus to carry out their duties. They expressed their dissatisfaction by singing and shouting 'Obafunwa must go'. Similar incidents also took place at Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba, Akoko (AAUA), Ondo State, Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), and University of Benin (UNIBEN), among others, where students deliberately set fire to certain school properties and caused destruction amounting to millions of dollars. As a consequence, the academic programs were suspended for several months (Mariani, Trivellato, Martini & Marafioti, 2022).

The extent to which conflict management can enhanced organisational cohesion in federal universities in Southwest Nigeria from the responses of the interviewees have shown that the university system is a complex organizational process that requires effective conflict management to address various emerging conflicts in order to achieve the goals of the institution effectively and smoothly. An example of something that should not be left ignored is the unavoidable occurrence of conflict. Conflict arises when the needs and desires of critical stakeholders in the academic community are not met, leading to dissatisfaction. The interviews shows that many stakeholders, apart from the principal officers who often have to present a united front, the majority of university staff instinctively respond with a negative attitude towards any issues that seem unfavourable to them.



Certain individuals possess a clear understanding of their desires and are willing to exert significant effort in order to attain their objectives, even if it means encountering challenges along the way. In most cases, the conflicts arising from VC selections are product of fear, perceived coercion, a sense of justice, and financial considerations. Conflict is unavoidable in any situation, including within a university setting. Conflict emerges when there are disparities in background and orientations among key stakeholders in the university. The conflicts arise from the disparities in various dimensions, including values, attitudes, needs, expectations, opinions, and personalities. However, even if disagreements are bound to happen, there are ways that can help in effectively managing, minimizing, and resolving conflicts between university staff and students.

The research findings indicate that conflict management has fostered stakeholder involvement in decision-making at these universities. These findings align with literature which highlighted that conflict management in tertiary institutions, promotes a positive communication process. This process helps negotiators by preventing them from disrupting the university's strategies and instead focuses on achieving the institution's goals. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of systematic communication of grievances by conflicting parties (Berrone, Ricart, Duch, Bernardo, Salvador, Piedra & Rodríguez, 2019)

A related study found that the conflict management board in some Nigerian universities have had substantial enhancements in terms of promoting peace and facilitating consultation since its inception. This suggests that the conflict management board in institutions implemented measures that facilitate talks and dialogue for effectively handling conflicts. These findings align with the result of similar studies which suggested

that effectively managing conflict in Nigerian tertiary institutions requires a leadership style that is democratic or participative in nature (Herrero, Thornton, Mason-D'croz, Palmer, Bodirsky, Pradhan & Rockström, 2021).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In line with nature of the university as an arena of knowledge, conflicts such as the ones arising from the selection of the Vice Chancellor are rarely left to fester. Various conflict resolution mechanisms that have been adopted to resolve crises in the universities include dialogue, open communication process, mediation, compromise and external intervention. When the right conflict mechanisms are deployed, it often works to promote organisational cohesion and heal all wounds emanating from the perceived injuries during the leadership selection process.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement:** Universities should adopt inclusive practices by soliciting the input and feedback of staff. It was discovered from literature that western universities involve various stakeholders, through different means such as focus group discussions, confidential website and roundtable discussions, and all these are still done within the laid down guidelines of the institutions. This will foster a sense of ownership and involvement among stakeholders, thereby reducing conflicts.
2. **Enhancement of Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Universities should strengthen their conflict resolution mechanisms by promoting dialogue, open communication



processes, and mediation. Training programs on conflict management should be provided to relevant stakeholders to equip them with the necessary skills for resolving disputes effectively.

3. Transparency and Accountability: Institutions should prioritize transparency and accountability among the staff. Clear communication channels and mechanisms for addressing grievances should be established to uphold fairness and trust among stakeholders.

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