



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1951>

Original Article

Leadership, conflict, and pedagogy: Examining the role of management in mitigating academic disagreements that affect learning – A qualitative case study design.

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Abstract

Background

Conflict among academic staff is an inevitable part of university life, often arising from competing priorities, power dynamics, and differing pedagogical philosophies. When unresolved, such conflicts can negatively affect collaboration, morale, and ultimately the student learning experience. Leadership and departmental management play a crucial role in either exacerbating or resolving these tensions. This study explores how university leadership intervenes in academic disputes and assesses the impact of these conflicts on teaching and learning within a South African university department.

Methods

A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 academic staff members and 3 faculty managers at a mid-sized South African university. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in or exposure to departmental conflicts. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's framework to identify patterns related to leadership, conflict management, and pedagogical disruption.

Results

Three dominant themes emerged: (1) Leadership Silence and Avoidance, where managers failed to address conflicts early, allowing them to escalate; (2) Pedagogical Disruption, where conflicts led to breakdowns in team teaching and inconsistent student engagement; and (3) Restorative Leadership Practices, where inclusive dialogue, mediation, and clear role boundaries helped restore collaboration. Staff widely agreed that unresolved conflicts affected curriculum coherence, delayed marking, and confused students about academic expectations. Managers who engaged proactively in transparent conflict resolution were credited with improving departmental cohesion and restoring trust.

Conclusion

Leadership plays a decisive role in managing academic disagreements. Silence or inaction reinforces division, while proactive, inclusive leadership promotes a healthier departmental culture and supports student learning.

Recommendations

Universities should train academic managers in conflict resolution and implement early-intervention frameworks. Clear communication protocols, mediation practices, and regular reflection spaces should be institutionalized to foster an environment where disagreement does not compromise pedagogy.

Keywords: Academic conflict; University leadership, Pedagogy, Professional jealousy, Conflict resolution, Teaching effectiveness, Siloed teaching, Higher education management, Collegiality, Institutional culture.

Submitted: 2025-07-15 **Accepted:** 2025-08-23 **Published:** 2025-09-11

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Background information

Academic departments are traditionally viewed as collaborative environments where knowledge sharing and teamwork enhance teaching and research outputs. However, underlying interpersonal tensions, often fuelled by professional jealousy, resource competition, or unclear role boundaries, can result in academic conflicts that undermine these goals. When left unresolved, such conflicts can lead to siloed teaching practices, disrupted curriculum delivery, and diminished student learning experiences. Leadership plays a pivotal role in either diffusing or escalating these tensions. In the context of South African higher education, universities are navigating transformation agendas, curriculum decolonization, and performance-based pressures. These institutional challenges often heighten intra-departmental conflicts, especially when leadership is either absent or reactive rather than proactive. Research by Blackmore (2004) and Jansen (2017) has emphasized that unresolved academic disputes hinder institutional transformation and erode collegiality. Despite this, few empirical studies have examined the leadership practices used to mitigate such conflicts or how these practices influence teaching quality and departmental cohesion. This study addresses this gap by investigating how university management intervenes in academic disagreements and the resulting pedagogical consequences.

Objectives

This study was guided by the following objective:

- To explore how academic conflict manifests within university departments, including patterns of professional jealousy, exclusion, and opposition.

Methodology

Study design

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of how academic disagreements unfold and how leadership influences their resolution within a real-world university context. The case study approach was ideal for capturing complex interpersonal dynamics, leadership behaviours, and their pedagogical implications through participants' lived experiences.

Study setting

The study was conducted within the Faculty of Education and Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

(UKZN), South Africa. This faculty was selected due to reported occurrences of interpersonal tensions, leadership turnover, and staff division, making it a relevant setting for exploring leadership and conflict. The study was carried out over a period of five months, from November 2023 to March 2024.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct experience or awareness of academic conflict within the department.

Inclusion criteria

- Full-time employment as an academic staff member (lecturer, senior lecturer, professor) or as a faculty manager (e.g., Head of Department, Dean)
- At least one year of continuous service at the University of KwaZulu-Natal
- Willingness to participate and share personal experiences regarding departmental conflict and leadership dynamics

Exclusion criteria

- Administrative staff without academic or managerial responsibilities
- Academic staff with less than one year of experience at the institution
- Individuals unwilling to provide informed consent

A total of 15 participants were involved in the study, comprising 12 academic staff members and 3 management staff members, including Heads of Department and faculty managers.

Bias

To address potential biases:

A semi-structured interview guide was used to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing for flexibility and participant-led insights.

The researcher engaged in reflexivity, keeping a journal to document personal assumptions and interpretations throughout the research process.

Member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate thematic interpretations and enhance the study's credibility.



Study size

The final sample size of 15 participants was deemed sufficient to reach thematic saturation, which is a key indicator of data adequacy in qualitative research. Care was taken to ensure variation in participants' roles, levels of experience, and perspectives within the faculty.

Data measurement / sources

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interview questions focused on:

The nature and source of academic conflict
Leadership response to the conflict
Impact of conflict on teaching, assessment, and collegiality
Suggestions for conflict resolution and improved leadership

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. To enhance validity and contextual understanding, document analysis was also performed on relevant faculty meeting minutes, internal emails, and departmental policy reports.

Statistical analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study, no inferential statistical tests were conducted. Instead, a thematic analysis was applied using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

- Familiarization with the data
- Generation of initial codes

- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the final report

All data were managed and coded using NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software. As all participants completed the interview process in full, there were no major instances of missing or incomplete data.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided written informed consent before the interviews commenced. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and no identifying information was linked to the data. Participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with departmental leadership nor used in performance assessments. All data were securely stored on a password-protected device and were only accessible to the research team.

Results and findings

Descriptive data

A total of 15 participants were included in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic and professional characteristics, including their academic rank or managerial role, years of experience, and gender.

Table 1: Participant demographics (n = 15)

Participant Code	Role	Gender	Years of Experience	Faculty Position
P01	Lecturer	Female	6	Academic Staff
P02	Senior Lecturer	Male	12	Academic Staff
P03	Professor	Female	18	Academic Staff
P04	Lecturer	Male	4	Academic Staff
P05	Lecturer	Female	7	Academic Staff
P06	Senior Lecturer	Male	10	Academic Staff
P07	Lecturer	Female	5	Academic Staff
P08	Senior Lecturer	Male	11	Academic Staff
P09	Professor	Male	20	Academic Staff
P10	Lecturer	Female	3	Academic Staff
P11	Lecturer	Male	8	Academic Staff
P12	Senior Lecturer	Female	9	Academic Staff



Participant Code	Role	Gender	Years of Experience	Faculty Position
P13	Head of Department	Male	13	Faculty Manager
P14	Faculty Manager	Female	15	Faculty Manager
P15	Dean	Male	22	Faculty Manager

Thematic analysis

academic conflict, leadership behaviour, and the institutional context in which they occurred.

Using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, data analysis yielded four overarching themes derived from 12 initial codes. These themes captured key aspects of

Table 2: Summary of themes and associated Codes

Theme No.	Theme	Number of Codes	Sample Codes
1	Sources and Nature of Conflict	3	Power struggles, Communication breakdown, Role ambiguity
2	Leadership Response and Style	4	Passive leadership, Authoritative response, Mediation attempts, Inconsistency
3	Impact on Teaching and Collegiality	3	Staff demotivation, Fragmented teamwork, Affected assessment standards
4	Suggestions for Conflict Resolution	2	Transparent processes, Capacity-building workshops

Figure 1 reveals that leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes of academic conflict within university departments. The first graph highlighted "Leadership Silence and Avoidance" as the most frequently mentioned theme, where staff expressed frustration at management's reluctance to intervene in disputes. This inaction allowed conflicts to escalate, contributing to "Pedagogical Disruption", such as

breakdowns in team-teaching, disjointed content delivery, and delays in marking. However, "Restorative Leadership Practices", which included mediation and transparent dialogue, were recognized as effective in rebuilding departmental trust and collaboration. These findings suggest that leadership's response, or lack thereof, directly influences whether conflicts deepen or are resolved constructively.

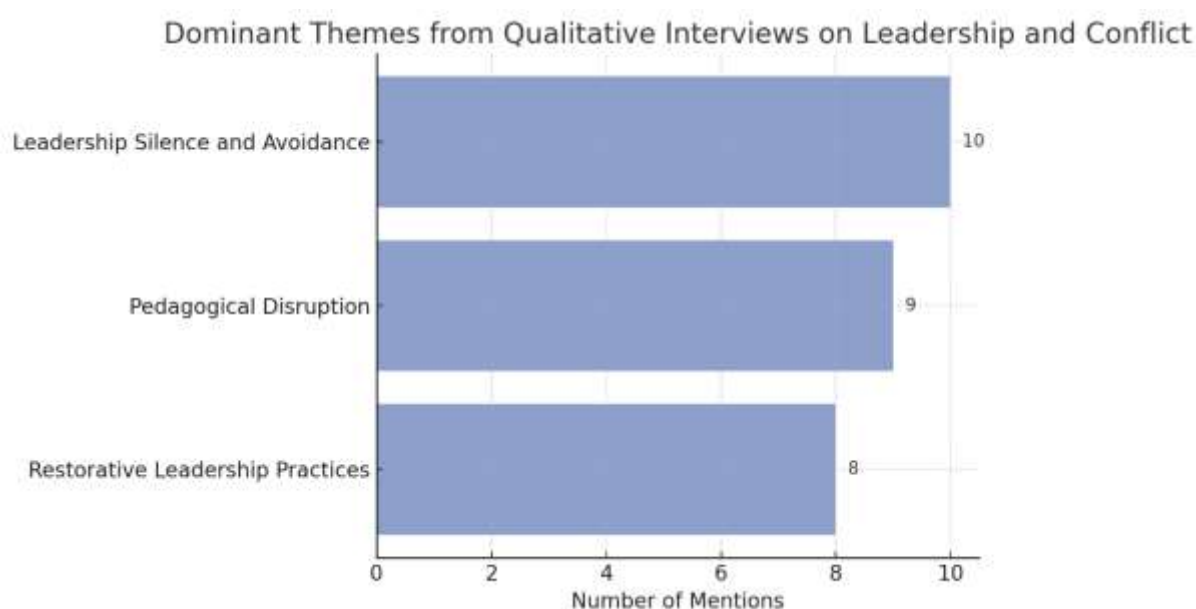


Figure 1: The bar graph illustrates the dominant themes that emerged from interviews exploring leadership and academic conflict

Figure 2 expanded on these insights by illustrating specific subthemes affecting the teaching and learning environment. A "Lack of Transparency from Leadership" emerged as a key grievance, contributing to staff exclusion and administrative confusion. Meanwhile, conflicts led to "Delayed Assessment and Feedback" and "Fragmented Curriculum Delivery", undermining the academic experience for students. On a positive note,

"Effective Mediation Outcomes" were acknowledged as beneficial when employed early and fairly. Furthermore, "Inconsistent Student Engagement" reflected the ripple effect of internal staff tensions on learners. Together, these patterns underscore the urgent need for leadership development in conflict resolution, ensuring that academic environments remain collaborative and student-centred.

Subthemes Related to Conflict and Leadership Impact on Teaching

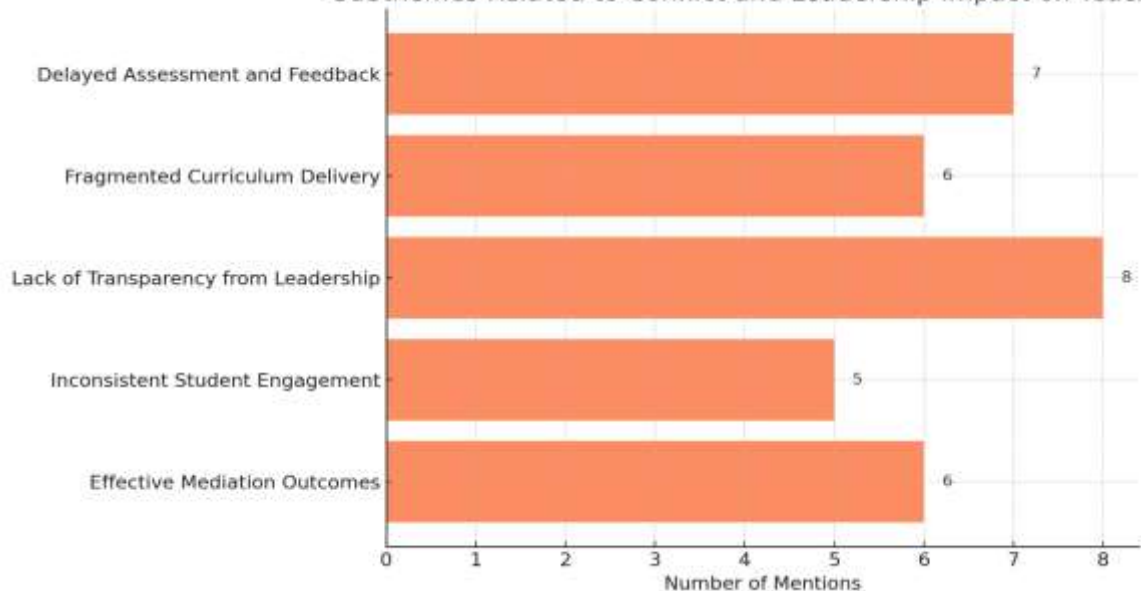


Figure 2: This graph highlights key subthemes that emerged from qualitative interviews on how academic conflict and leadership affect teaching

Discussion

The results from Figure 1 strongly suggest that professional disagreements, when mishandled by leadership, pose significant threats to teaching effectiveness and departmental cohesion. The theme “Leadership Silence and Avoidance” was most prominent, indicating a recurring concern that academic managers often ignore or delay conflict resolution. This passivity contributes to pedagogical disruption, as evidenced by delayed assessments, fragmented curriculum delivery, and a decline in collaborative teaching practices. These findings support Baldwin and Blackburn’s (1981) assertion that unresolved interpersonal tensions reduce productivity and collegiality in academic departments. Further insights revealed that a lack of transparency in decision-making, as well as inequities in communication, foster environments of mistrust and exclusion. When leadership fails to intervene early, conflicts manifest in ways that compromise student learning, particularly through inconsistent engagement, assessment delays, and the absence of coordinated curriculum delivery. However, respondents also identified positive instances of restorative leadership, where structured mediation and inclusive dialogue helped restore professional trust and academic alignment. These practices are echoed in Blackmore’s (2004) work, which emphasizes that conflict-sensitive leadership can

transform academic cultures and support pedagogical integrity. Ultimately, the findings affirm that effective leadership is not only administrative but also pedagogical, responsible for shaping the climate in which teaching and learning occur.

Generalizability

Given the qualitative, context-specific nature of this research, findings are not statistically generalizable. However, the insights are analytically generalizable to similar academic settings experiencing structural or interpersonal tension. The patterns identified, especially regarding leadership silence, fragmented pedagogy, and mediation, are relevant across institutions navigating collegiality in competitive or transformation-driven environments.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that academic conflict, left unmanaged, has tangible impacts on curriculum coherence, student engagement, and departmental productivity. Leadership inaction intensifies tensions, while proactive, transparent, and inclusive management strategies foster resolution and restore collaboration. Departments that institutionalize conflict resolution



frameworks and prioritize open communication are more likely to maintain stable teaching environments and uphold academic standards.

Limitations

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This study was limited to one department within a single South African university, which did not capture the full diversity of leadership styles or conflict dynamics across different faculties or institutions. Additionally, the sensitive nature of professional conflict led some participants to withhold information or underreport negative experiences, despite confidentiality assurances.

Recommendations

To improve academic leadership and mitigate interpersonal conflicts that hinder learning, institutions should implement leadership training programs emphasizing emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and effective team dynamics for all Heads of Departments and faculty managers. Early-intervention mechanisms such as confidential mediation services and peer facilitation should be institutionalized to address disputes before they escalate. Additionally, the development of clear and inclusive departmental communication policies will ensure transparency and shared decision-making among academic staff. Promoting a culture of reflective practice through regular staff dialogues, feedback sessions, and collaborative planning workshops can further enhance mutual understanding and professional growth. Lastly, integrating collaborative performance indicators into staff appraisals will shift the focus from individual achievements to collective success, fostering a more cooperative and supportive academic environment.

List of abbreviations

HOD	Head of Department
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
NVivo	Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing and Organizing (Qualitative Analysis Software)
REC	Research Ethics Committee
CBR	Case-Based Research
P	Participant (e.g., P01, P02, etc.)
SA	South Africa

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds

a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the moral support and encouragement from the Deans and HOD of the Department of Nature Conservation, Faculty of Natural Science, Mangosuthu University of Technology

Funding

This work was not supported by any grant. The author did not receive research support from any company. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

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Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1951>

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PUBLISHER DETAILS

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Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)

(ISSN 2709-9997) Online

(ISSN 3006-1059) Print

Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization

Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com

WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261

**Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,
Entebbe Uganda, East Africa**

