



**Politics in the department: A qualitative case study on the influence of academic rivalry on curriculum delivery and student outcomes.**

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**Abstract**  
**Background**

Academic departments are designed to foster collaboration, shared governance, and scholarly growth. However, internal politics and rivalry among staff can undermine these goals, creating power struggles, resistance to innovation, and competition for recognition. Such dynamics disrupt curriculum coherence, hinder teaching continuity, and negatively affect student learning. This study examines how departmental politics influence curriculum delivery and undergraduate student experiences at a South African university.

**Methods**

A qualitative case study was conducted between February and April 2023 in the Faculty of Humanities. A purposive sample of 16 participants was selected, including 10 academic staff and 6 final-year students from two departments previously affected by political tensions. Data were gathered through 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews and one student focus group. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, with triangulation and member-checking ensuring trustworthiness.

**Results**

Participants included 7 males and 9 females, aged 22–54 years. Academic staff (n=10) had an average of 12 years of teaching experience, while students (n=6) were predominantly aged 22–26. Findings revealed that rivalry stemmed from competition for promotion, research visibility, and curriculum control. Staff reported exclusion from decision-making, resistance to peer-led innovation, and withholding of teaching materials. These practices contributed to fragmented curricula, overlapping content, inconsistent assessments, and duplication of teaching. Students described confusion, disengagement, and frustration over perceived academic disunity. Both groups highlighted how politics eroded trust, weakened curriculum integrity, and compromised teaching quality.

**Conclusion**

Internal departmental politics present significant barriers to cohesive curriculum delivery and student development, extending beyond interpersonal conflict to structural dysfunctions.

**Recommendations**

Universities should establish transparent curriculum review structures, institutionalize conflict resolution, and prioritize professional development focused on collegiality, accountability, and collaborative design. Addressing internal politics is essential to protecting teaching quality and student learning.

**Keywords:** Academic rivalry; departmental politics; curriculum delivery; collegiality; higher education; student engagement; qualitative case study; South Africa

**Submitted:** July 15, 2025 **Accepted:** August 30, 2025 **Published:** September 30, 2025

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## **Introduction**

In higher education, academic departments are intended to function as collaborative units that advance scholarship, teaching, and institutional development. Ideally, they operate under principles of collegiality, academic freedom, and collective responsibility. However, in practice, these environments are often marked by internal competition, political manoeuvring, and academic rivalry. Such dynamics, while sometimes subtle, can become deeply entrenched in departmental culture, influencing not only interpersonal relationships among staff but also critical academic functions such as curriculum development, teaching delivery, and assessment strategies. Academic rivalry in university settings typically arises from competition for status, promotion, publication recognition, access to research funding, and control over curriculum direction. When left unmanaged, this rivalry can lead to exclusionary practices, interpersonal tension, and resistance to innovation. Instead of fostering collaboration, departments can become fragmented spaces where decisions are made by a select few, often sidelining junior or less powerful academics. Gillespie et al. (2021) note that these patterns of academic incivility can erode trust, stifle intellectual exchange, and diminish the overall effectiveness of academic programs. Kadiyono et al. (2020) similarly assert that healthy team dynamics are critical for delivering coherent and effective teaching, especially in contexts where multiple lecturers are responsible for shared modules. One of the most significant consequences of internal departmental politics is the fragmentation of curriculum delivery. When lecturers operate in silos or are in conflict, the result is often disjointed teaching, overlapping content, inconsistent feedback, and misaligned learning outcomes. Students, in turn, experience confusion, reduced motivation, and disengagement, particularly when they perceive division among faculty members. According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), students' academic engagement is not only shaped by curriculum content but also by the relational and organizational culture within which learning occurs. In the South African context, the effects of departmental politics are further compounded by historical inequalities, institutional transformation pressures, and limited academic resources. Universities continue to navigate the legacy of hierarchical structures, while also being expected to innovate and deliver inclusive, decolonized curricula. These competing demands often exacerbate internal competition, as academics seek to assert influence over how curriculum reforms are designed and implemented. Despite these

realities, there remains a gap in empirical research that specifically links departmental politics to pedagogical outcomes in the South African higher education sector. This study seeks to address that gap by exploring how academic rivalry within departments influences curriculum delivery and student outcomes. By examining the lived experiences of both academic staff and students within politically fragmented departments, the research provides insights into the hidden but powerful ways institutional politics shape the quality of teaching and learning.

## **Research objectives**

This study aims to explore how internal departmental politics and academic rivalry influence curriculum delivery and student outcomes in a South African university. The specific objectives are:

1. To investigate the nature and sources of academic rivalry among staff within selected departments.
2. To examine how academic politics affect curriculum planning, teaching coherence, and the implementation of learning outcomes.
3. To explore students' perceptions of how departmental dynamics impact their academic experience and performance.
4. To recommend institutional strategies for mitigating the negative effects of academic rivalry on teaching and learning.

## **Methods**

### **Study design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design within the tradition of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how internal departmental politics and academic rivalry influence curriculum delivery and student outcomes. IPA was chosen because it emphasizes participants' lived experiences and meaning-making, offering insights into complex social and organizational dynamics that quantitative approaches may overlook. The case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of experiences, perceptions, and power relations within a bounded institutional context.

### **Study setting**

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the University of Technology, a South African public university located in an urban area. This faculty was selected because of its history of implementing team teaching and



multidisciplinary curricula, settings where academic politics are often most visible. Data collection occurred between February and April 2023, coinciding with active teaching and assessment activities. The University serves a diverse student population drawn from multiple socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, making it an ideal context for investigating departmental dynamics.

### **Participants**

A total of 16 participants were purposively selected, comprising 10 academic staff and 6 final-year undergraduate students from two departments within the faculty.

- Inclusion criteria (staff): minimum of two years' teaching experience, active participation in curriculum development or departmental meetings, and involvement in team-taught modules.
- Inclusion criteria (students): enrolment in modules taught by multiple lecturers, final-year status, and willingness to reflect on academic and interpersonal dynamics.
- Exclusion criteria (staff): temporary lecturers, newly appointed staff with less than one year's service, and those not directly engaged in curriculum delivery.
- Exclusion criteria (students): first- to third-year students, those not exposed to team-taught courses, or those unwilling to participate in discussions about departmental experiences.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides, which allowed participants to share experiences while enabling the researcher to probe emerging themes. For staff, 10 individual interviews were conducted, each lasting 45–60 minutes. For students, one focus group with six participants was held, lasting 90 minutes. Audio recordings were made (with consent) to ensure accuracy, and field notes were taken during and after interviews to capture contextual observations and researcher reflections. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Methodology bias**

To minimize bias, the study employed triangulation of data sources by including both staff and student perspectives. An interview guide with neutral and open-ended questions was used to reduce interviewer influence. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants to verify accuracy and ensure that their perspectives were authentically represented. Additionally, the principal researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis to reflect on their own positionality and avoid interpretative bias.

### **Study size**

The study included a purposive sample of 16 participants, which is appropriate for qualitative research focused on depth rather than breadth. Saturation was reached when no new themes emerged in the final interviews, indicating that the sample size was sufficient to capture the core issues under investigation.

### **Statistical analysis**

Given the qualitative nature of the study, no statistical tests were used. Instead, data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data coding was conducted manually. There were no missing data, as all scheduled interviews and focus group sessions were completed, and transcripts were validated for completeness.

### **Ethical consideration**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University's Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC). The application was reviewed and approved on 11 February 2022. All participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study, their rights, and how data would be used. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage.



## Results

### Descriptive data of participants

| Category                    | Sub-category        | n  | %   | Notes                       |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|----|-----|-----------------------------|
| Gender                      | Male                | 7  | 44% | Staff (5), Students (2)     |
| Gender                      | Female              | 9  | 56% | Staff (5), Students (4)     |
| Age (years)                 | 22–26               | 6  | 37% | All students                |
| All students                | 30–39               | 3  | 19% | Early mid-career staff      |
| Age (years)                 | 40–49               | 4  | 25% | Mid-career staff            |
| Age (years)                 | 50–54               | 3  | 19% | Senior staff                |
| Academic role               | Saff                | 10 | 63% | Teaching & curriculum       |
| Academic role               | Final-year students | 6  | 37% | Humanities                  |
| Teaching experience (staff) | 2–5 years           | 2  | 20% | Early career                |
| Teaching experience (staff) | 6–15 years          | 5  | 50% | Majority                    |
| Teaching experience (staff) | 16+ years           | 3  | 30% | Senior lecturers/professors |

### Coding and thematic analysis

Number of coders: Two independent coders analysed the transcripts. Themes were inductively derived from the data using Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework.

#### Codes identified

Competition for promotion  
Resistance to peer-led innovation  
Withholding of teaching materials  
Overlapping content in modules  
Inconsistent assessment practices  
Student confusion and frustration  
Exclusion from decision-making

#### Themes developed

Academic rivalry, and power struggles  
Barriers to innovation and collaboration  
Knowledge hoarding, and lack of trust  
Curriculum fragmentation  
Erosion of academic standards  
Negative student experiences  
Lack of participatory governance

Thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data revealed four major themes: (1) competition for academic power, (2) exclusionary practices, (3) curriculum fragmentation, and (4) student confusion and disengagement.

### Thematic findings with illustrative quotations

#### Theme 1: academic rivalry and power struggles

Staff described competition for promotion, research visibility, and curriculum control as key drivers of conflict.

- “Promotion here is like a battlefield. People fight for recognition, and students suffer because lecturers don't cooperate.” (Staff 07, male, 48 years)

#### Theme 2: barriers to innovation and collaboration

Resistance to peer-led initiatives was common, with junior staff feeling undermined.

- “Sometimes colleagues deliberately withhold teaching materials because they don't want others to shine in class.” (Staff 03, female, 42 years)

#### Theme 3: curriculum fragmentation

Rivalry among staff led to duplicated content and inconsistent assessments.

- “We often feel like we are caught in the middle of lecturers' disagreements. The syllabus overlaps, and

sometimes we don't know whose notes to follow.” (Student 02, female, 23 years)

#### Theme 4: negative student experiences

Students expressed disengagement, frustration, and loss of trust in the academic process.

- “There is no consistency in assessment; two lecturers teaching the same module give us very different marking schemes.” (Student 05, male, 24 years)

#### Theme 5: lack of participatory governance

Exclusion from decision-making left staff disempowered and suspicious of leadership practices.

- “When decisions are taken, some of us are left out. It creates an environment of mistrust.” (Staff 09, male, 36 years)

#### Competition for academic power

Participants described an environment where academic rivalry was driven by competition for promotions, research visibility, and influence over departmental decisions. Senior academics were often perceived as gatekeepers, resisting initiatives led by junior staff. This rivalry translated into contested control over course content, with competing individuals often pushing for their preferred approaches, regardless of alignment with departmental goals.

#### Exclusionary practices

Staff members highlighted systematic exclusion from curriculum planning processes, with decisions often made

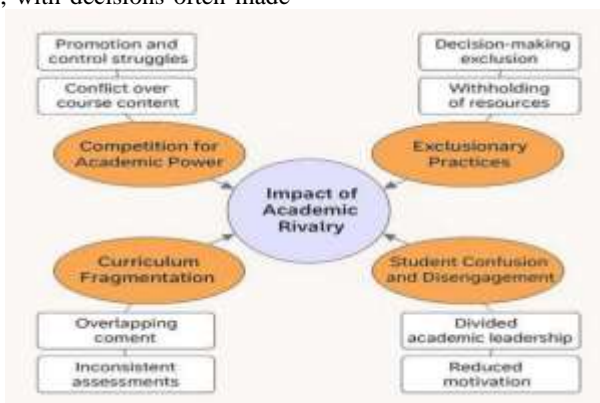
informally by dominant figures within the department. Some lecturers reported that access to teaching materials and shared resources was deliberately restricted by colleagues in an attempt to maintain control or assert seniority. These exclusionary behaviours created internal divisions, discouraged innovation, and eroded collaborative teaching practices.

#### Curriculum fragmentation

Students and staff alike reported overlapping course content and inconsistent delivery of learning materials. Some modules featured duplicated lectures or conflicting viewpoints between co-teachers, reflecting the lack of cohesion within the teaching team. Furthermore, varied assessment criteria and uncoordinated assignment deadlines caused confusion and academic fatigue among students.

#### Student confusion and disengagement

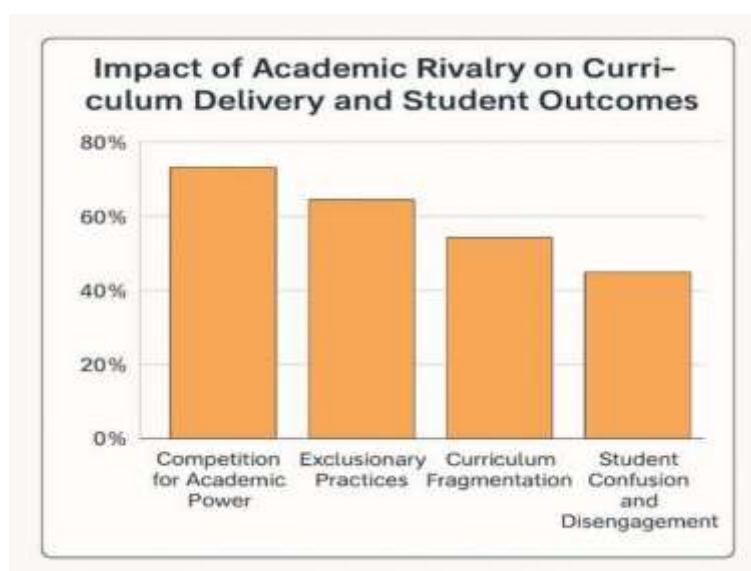
Students in the focus group expressed that they were often unsure who to approach for academic guidance due to perceived divisions among lecturers. They reported feeling caught in the middle of faculty disagreements, which contributed to reduced motivation and a general distrust of the academic process. This disengagement was compounded by inconsistent grading, a lack of continuity in feedback, and contradictory advice from different lecturers within the same module.



**Diagram 1: The diagram illustrates the impact of academic rivalry.**

The bar graph illustrates the varying degrees of impact that different dimensions of academic rivalry have on curriculum delivery and student experiences. Competition for Academic Power emerged as the most prominent issue, affecting approximately 70% of participants. This theme reflects struggles over influence, course ownership, and promotional pathways, which often derail collaborative curriculum planning. Following closely is Exclusionary Practices (around 65%), highlighting the deliberate marginalization of certain staff members from decision-making processes and resource access, further fragmenting departmental cohesion. Curriculum Fragmentation, reported by just over half of participants (approximately 55%), is a direct consequence of these rivalries, resulting in duplicated

content, inconsistent assessment standards, and an incoherent pedagogical flow. Student Confusion and Disengagement, although slightly lower at around 45%, represents a significant downstream effect: students become disoriented and demotivated as they navigate conflicting instructions, misaligned lectures, and a visible lack of unity among their lecturers. This progression, from power struggles to student disengagement, demonstrates the cascading nature of internal academic conflict, where interpersonal politics at the faculty level have tangible negative consequences for teaching quality and learner outcomes. The results support the argument that institutional culture and collegial dynamics are central to delivering a consistent and student-centered curriculum.



**Figure 1: The graph demonstrates the impact of academic rivalry on curriculum delivery and students' outcomes**

## Discussion

The findings from the thematic diagram and bar graph collectively illustrate the multifaceted ways in which academic rivalry influences curriculum delivery and student engagement. The most prominent theme, competition for academic power, was reported by the majority of staff, as visualized in the bar graph, where it showed the highest impact level (approximately 70%). This theme was characterized by struggles for curriculum control, recognition, and leadership roles, and is consistent with the

diagram's depiction of "promotion and control struggles" and "conflict over course content" as sub-components. Such internal competition mirrors findings by Kadiyono et al. (2020), who observed that unresolved rivalry erodes trust and disrupts collaborative teaching environments, particularly in departments lacking inclusive decision-making processes.

The diagram also highlights exclusionary practices, including the withholding of resources and marginalization from curriculum discussions, which were reported by 65%





of participants in the graph. This finding aligns with Gillespie et al. (2021), who describe how professional silos and gatekeeping behaviours create academic environments characterized by distrust and isolation. These dynamics foster curriculum fragmentation, identified in the diagram through overlapping content and inconsistent assessment practices. As visualized in the bar chart, this theme affected more than half the participants and reflects the breakdown of pedagogical coherence when academic staff operate in competition rather than collaboration.

The downstream effect of these conflicts is captured in the fourth theme, student confusion and disengagement, which, though lower in frequency (approximately 45%), represents the most troubling consequence. The diagram illustrates the connection between this theme and divided academic leadership, as well as reduced student motivation, both of which were frequently mentioned by students in the focus group. This supports Umbach and Wawrzynski's (2005) assertion that students' academic satisfaction and engagement are highly responsive to the internal dynamics of teaching teams. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that academic rivalry is not a peripheral interpersonal issue but a structural challenge that undermines curriculum integrity and student success. The visualization tools reinforce how each form of conflict, whether exclusionary or competitive, converges to produce fragmented learning experiences. Without institutional intervention to promote collaboration and accountability, academic rivalry will continue to act as a silent barrier to effective teaching and equitable student outcomes.

### **Generalizability**

The findings of this study are contextually specific but offer conceptual generalizability to other higher education settings where similar dynamics of academic rivalry and departmental politics exist. Institutions with comparable team-teaching structures, resource constraints, and hierarchical cultures may find these results applicable. However, broader generalization would require replication across diverse institutions and faculties.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that academic rivalry within university departments significantly disrupts curriculum delivery and negatively affects student outcomes. Thematic analysis revealed that competition for power, exclusionary practices, and fragmented teaching approaches compromise the

pedagogical coherence necessary for effective learning. As a result, students experience confusion, disengagement, and dissatisfaction, stemming from faculty tensions and inconsistent academic practices. These findings highlight that internal departmental politics extend beyond interpersonal conflict, representing structural barriers to effective teaching and learning.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to a single faculty within one South African university, with a purposive sample of 16 participants. While this allowed for in-depth exploration, the limited scope may not reflect the full diversity of academic politics in different faculties or institutions. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research restricts the ability to quantify the impact of rivalry on measurable academic outcomes such as grades or dropout rates.

### **Recommendations**

To address these challenges, institutions must prioritize the development of inclusive and transparent academic structures. Key recommendations include the institutionalization of shared curriculum governance bodies, regular inter-staff collaboration workshops, and the enforcement of collegiality standards through performance appraisals and academic codes of conduct. Additionally, conflict resolution training, mentoring programs, and anonymous feedback systems should be introduced to foster trust, reduce academic gatekeeping, and enhance the effectiveness of team teaching. Collectively, these measures can help mitigate academic rivalry, restore curriculum coherence, and safeguard student learning outcomes.

### **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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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.v6i9.1953>  
Original Article

#### **PUBLISHER DETAILS:**

**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](mailto:studentsjournal2020@gmail.com)  
WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261  
Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,  
Entebbe Uganda, East Africa

