



## Leadership, conflict, and pedagogy: A cross-sectional qualitative study on the role of management in mitigating academic disagreements that affect learning.

Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

Page | 1

### Abstract

#### Background

Academic conflict is an often-overlooked barrier to effective teaching and learning in higher education. Disagreements among academic staff, rooted in professional rivalry, ideological differences, and institutional pressures, can negatively affect curriculum coherence, staff morale, and student performance. The role of leadership in identifying, managing, and resolving such conflicts is essential to creating a stable academic environment.

#### Methods

A cross-sectional qualitative research design was employed to investigate how academic management addresses internal conflicts that influence pedagogy. Data were collected from 24 participants, comprising 12 academic staff, 6 Heads of Departments (HODs), and 6 senior faculty administrators, drawn from the Humanities, Sciences, and Education faculties at a South African university. The study utilized 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 2 faculty-specific focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach.

#### Results

The study found that academic staff often experience conflict arising from unequal workload distribution, recognition disputes, and divergent pedagogical approaches. HODs highlighted a lack of institutional tools for effective mediation, while senior administrators emphasized the absence of structured leadership development programs. Despite these challenges, faculties where proactive leadership was present, particularly in the Sciences and Education, reported improved collaboration, reduced staff tensions, and positive impacts on student learning.

#### Conclusion

Leadership is a critical factor in mitigating the effects of academic conflict on teaching and learning. While conflict is inevitable in collaborative environments, its impact can be significantly reduced through strategic and empathetic management practices.

#### Recommendations

Higher education institutions should invest in leadership development programs focused on emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and inclusive decision-making. Policies promoting transparency, peer dialogue, and early intervention mechanisms should be institutionalized to enhance pedagogical effectiveness and academic harmony.

**Keywords:** Academic conflict; leadership in higher education; pedagogy; faculty management; conflict resolution; collegiality; student learning outcomes; university governance.

**Submitted:** July 22, 2025 **Accepted:** August 30, 2025 **Published:** September 30, 2025

**Corresponding Author:** Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

**Email:** [mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za](mailto:mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za)

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

#### Introduction

Conflict in academic institutions is an inherent aspect of human interaction, particularly in environments where individuals possess varying ideologies, teaching

philosophies, and professional ambitions. In higher education, disagreements among academic staff may arise from competition for recognition, unequal distribution of responsibilities, or divergent views on pedagogical



approaches. While some level of conflict can be constructive and stimulate innovation, unresolved or poorly managed disputes often result in strained relationships, fragmented departments, and compromised teaching effectiveness. The cumulative impact of such tensions can affect not only academic productivity but also the quality of student learning. Academic leaders, especially Heads of Departments (HODs) and senior administrators, play a pivotal role in shaping the tone, cohesion, and functionality of academic units. Their ability to mediate disputes, foster collaboration, and uphold equitable practices is central to maintaining a productive academic environment. However, many institutions promote academic leaders based on research output or seniority rather than leadership aptitude, leaving them underprepared to navigate the complex interpersonal dynamics of university departments. This gap in leadership training and conflict resolution mechanisms presents a critical challenge to institutional effectiveness and pedagogical integrity.

Existing literature emphasizes the transformative power of effective leadership in academic contexts. Scholars such as Bryman (2007) and Ramsden (1998) advocate for emotionally intelligent and participatory leadership models that emphasize communication, inclusivity, and transparency. Yet, there remains limited empirical research in the South African context that explores how leadership practices directly influence the resolution of faculty disputes and their downstream effects on student learning. Given South Africa's unique post-apartheid higher education landscape, marked by transformation pressures, resource disparities, and evolving academic identities, there is a pressing need to understand how leadership can serve as both a buffer and a catalyst in addressing academic conflict. This study, therefore, investigates the role of leadership in managing academic disagreements within a South African university. It specifically examines how leadership practices either mitigate or exacerbate conflicts among academic staff and how these dynamics, in turn, influence teaching effectiveness and student engagement. By focusing on the experiences of academic staff, HODs, and administrators across multiple faculties, this study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening leadership capacity and fostering a more collaborative academic culture.

## **Background Information**

In higher education institutions, academic excellence is not only shaped by scholarly output and curriculum design but

also by the interpersonal relationships and institutional culture that underpin faculty operations. However, academic environments are often characterized by complex power dynamics, competition for recognition, and conflicting pedagogical ideologies, all of which can lead to professional disagreements and interpersonal conflict. When such conflicts are left unmanaged or poorly addressed, they may undermine curriculum delivery, disrupt departmental cohesion, and ultimately affect student learning outcomes. Leadership plays a central role in navigating these tensions. Faculty managers, particularly Heads of Departments (HODs) and senior administrators, are tasked with maintaining academic integrity while promoting collaboration and resolving disputes. Yet, many are ill-equipped to address the emotional and structural dimensions of academic conflict due to a lack of formal leadership training or institutional support. This study emerges in response to the growing recognition that academic conflict, if not constructively managed, can become a systemic barrier to quality teaching and learning. The main objective of this study is to explore how academic conflict is experienced, managed, and resolved within higher education institutions, with a focus on the implications for leadership, departmental cohesion, and teaching quality.

## **Study Objectives**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the role of academic leadership in managing and mitigating internal faculty conflicts that influence teaching effectiveness and student learning. The specific objectives are as follows:

- I. To identify the primary sources of academic conflict within faculties, including workload distribution, recognition, and pedagogical disagreements.
- II. To explore how leadership practices, including communication, mediation, and decision-making, influence the resolution or escalation of academic disputes.
- III. To assess the perceived impact of leadership intervention on staff collaboration and student learning outcomes across different faculties.
- IV. To compare the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies employed by faculty managers and highlight best practices for improving collegiality in academic departments.



## **Methodology**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a cross-sectional qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature and impact of academic conflict, as well as the leadership strategies used to resolve such conflicts. The cross-sectional nature of the study enabled the collection of data from participants at a single point in time across various faculties.

### **Study Setting**

The study was conducted at a public South African university located in KwaZulu-Natal province. Data collection took place between February and April 2025 across four faculties: Management Sciences, Engineering, Applied Sciences, and Health Sciences. These faculties were purposefully selected due to their diverse academic cultures and organizational structures, allowing for comparative analysis of leadership practices and conflict management experiences.

### **Participants**

A total of 24 participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from multiple academic hierarchies. The participants included:

- 12 academic staff members,
- 6 Heads of Departments (HODs), and
- 6 senior faculty administrators.

Eligibility criteria required participants to be full-time academic employees with at least two years of experience within their respective faculties. Participants were identified through internal faculty contacts and invited via email. Voluntary participation and informed consent were prerequisites for inclusion.

### **Bias**

To minimize researcher bias, data collection was conducted by an independent research assistant who was not affiliated with the university. Interview protocols were standardized to ensure consistency across sessions. Member checking was employed by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants for validation. Additionally, triangulation was achieved through the use of both individual interviews and focus group discussions to enhance credibility.

### **Study Size**

The study included 24 participants, with data saturation achieved by the 21st interview. The final three interviews and focus groups confirmed recurring themes without introducing new concepts, indicating that the sample size was sufficient for the study's qualitative scope.

### **Statistical Analysis**

As a qualitative study, thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. Transcripts were coded manually, and patterns were identified across participant groups. While no statistical models were used, frequency patterns of recurring themes were noted and visualized using bar and pie charts to illustrate the prevalence of specific conflict-related themes and faculty-based trends. Missing data were not applicable in this study, as all interviews were completed successfully, and no participant withdrew.

### **Ethical Consideration**

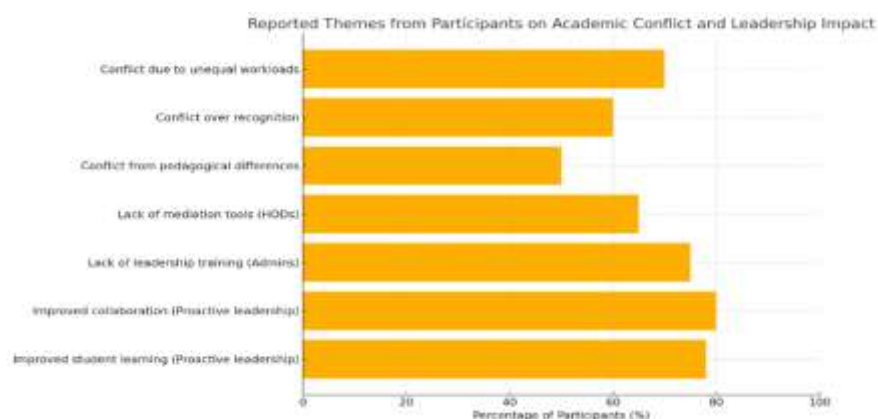
Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Mangosuthu University of Technology ON 11 February 2022. All participants provided written informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect participant identity, and all data were securely stored on password-protected devices.

### **Results/ Findings**

Figure 1 presents a thematic breakdown of the challenges and outcomes associated with academic conflict and leadership response, as reported by participants in the study. The most frequently reported issue was the lack of leadership training, identified by 75% of participants. This indicates a critical gap in institutional preparedness to handle interpersonal and professional disputes among academic staff. Closely following was the lack of mediation tools, reported by 65% of respondents, highlighting the absence of structured mechanisms to resolve conflicts effectively at the departmental or faculty level. Among the academic staff, conflict arising from unequal workload distribution was cited by 70% of participants, making it the most prominent source of internal tension. Recognition-related conflict (60%) and pedagogical differences (50%) were also identified as major contributors to strained professional relationships. These findings suggest that

unresolved tensions rooted in equity and professional identity can significantly disrupt collaboration and teaching quality. On a positive note, 80% of participants from faculties with proactive leadership reported improved collaboration among staff, while 78% observed enhanced student learning outcomes. This correlation between effective leadership and educational performance

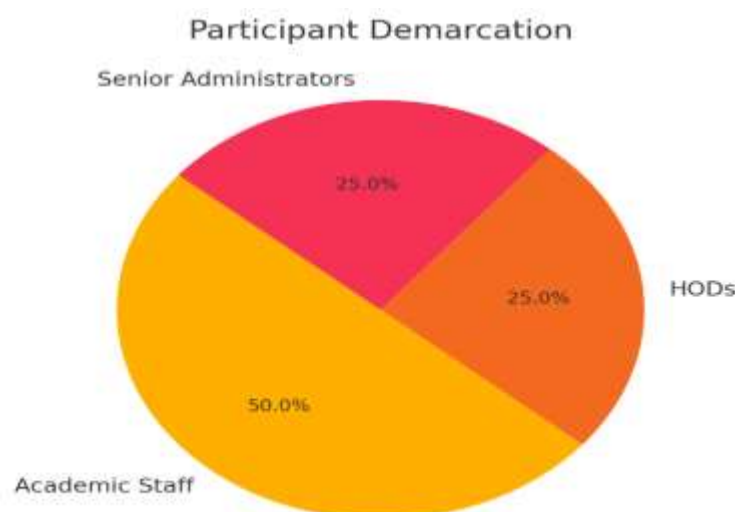
emphasizes the pivotal role that management plays in transforming conflict into constructive dialogue. Overall, the graph underscores the dual need for institutional capacity building in leadership training and the establishment of formal conflict resolution frameworks to safeguard academic quality and cohesion.



**Figure 1: The graph illustrates the percentage of participants who reported specific themes related to academic conflict and the role of leadership.**

The participant demographic breakdown is illustrated in Figure 2, which reveals a well-balanced representation across the academic hierarchy. Out of 24 participants, 50% (12) were academic staff, while the remaining were evenly split between Heads of Departments (HODs) and senior faculty administrators, each making up 25% (6 participants). This distribution ensured that the study captured a diverse range of perspectives, from those experiencing daily

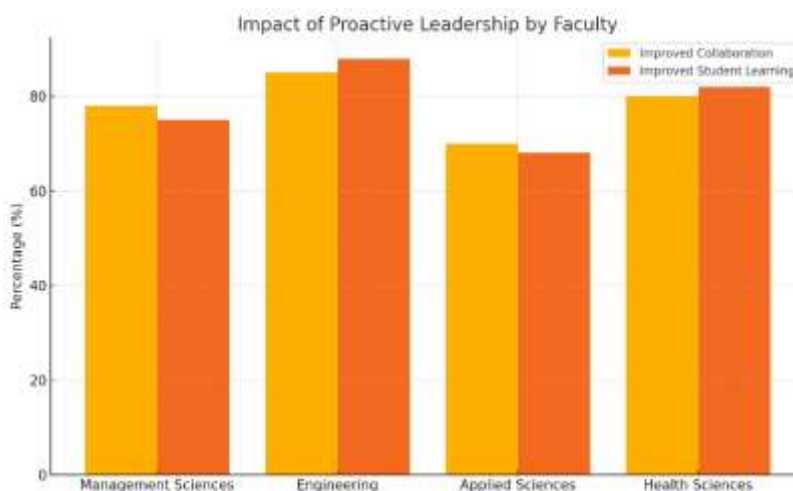
teaching-related conflicts to those responsible for resolving them at departmental and institutional levels. The strong representation of academic staff reflects the importance of frontline insights into how conflicts affect curriculum delivery and collegial collaboration, while the inclusion of management staff allowed for an in-depth understanding of leadership practices and institutional conflict resolution mechanisms.



**Figure 2: The graph shows the distribution of participants across academic staff, HODs, and senior administrators.**

Figure 3 presents a comparative analysis of how proactive leadership impacted staff collaboration and student learning outcomes across four faculties: Management Sciences, Engineering, Applied Sciences, and Health Sciences. The findings highlight that the Engineering faculty showed the most significant improvements, with 85% of respondents reporting enhanced staff collaboration and 88% indicating improved student learning outcomes. Similarly, the Health Sciences faculty demonstrated strong results, with 80% reporting improved collaboration and 82% observing positive impacts on student learning. The Management Sciences faculty followed closely behind, showing 78% and

75% improvements in collaboration and learning, respectively. In contrast, the Applied Sciences faculty reported comparatively lower but still notable outcomes, with 70% for collaboration and 68% for learning enhancement. These results indicate that faculties with more structured leadership, transparent communication, and formal conflict-resolution mechanisms were more successful in fostering a cohesive academic environment. Applied Sciences, while showing positive trends, may benefit from more robust leadership development and intervention strategies to match the performance of their counterparts.



**Figure 3: The graph highlighting high percentages of improved collaboration and student learning outcomes where proactive leadership was observed.**

#### Theme 1: Recognition-Related Conflict

*"When publications and awards come, only certain individuals are recognized, even if the work was collaborative. This breeds bitterness."* (Academic Staff, Female, 29 years)

*"The culture of competing for recognition makes us rivals instead of colleagues. It undermines teamwork."* (Academic Staff, Male, 46 years)

#### Theme 2: Pedagogical Differences

*"We don't agree on how courses should be taught; some prefer traditional lectures, others want blended approaches. These disagreements often escalate."* (Academic Staff, Female, 33 years)

*"Teaching philosophies differ, and without dialogue, it quickly becomes personal rather than professional."* (HOD, Male, 49 years)

#### Theme 3: Positive Outcomes of Proactive Leadership (80% collaboration, 78% improved learning outcomes)

*"Our HOD organized regular dialogue sessions, and since then, collaboration has improved dramatically."* (Academic Staff, Female, 36 years)

*"When leadership is proactive, conflict turns into constructive debate, and ultimately, students benefit from a more united faculty."* (Senior Administrator, Male, 54 years)

#### Theme 4: Faculty-Level Comparisons (Figure 3)

##### • Engineering Faculty

*"Engineering leadership is more structured — we have clear rules and open communication, which reduces conflict."* (Academic Staff, Male, 42 years)

##### • Health Sciences Faculty

*"In Health Sciences, our dean makes sure every voice is heard. That inclusiveness has improved our working relationships and student outcomes."* (Academic Staff, Female, 39 years)

##### • Management Sciences Faculty

*"We have made progress, but recognition of staff contributions is still uneven, which sometimes undermines collaboration."* (Academic Staff, Male, 45 years)

##### • Applied Sciences Faculty

*"Applied Sciences lacks a proper structure for conflict resolution. We rely too much on informal conversations, which don't always solve the problem."* (Academic Staff, Female, 31 years)





## Discussion

The graphical findings from this study highlight the complex relationship between leadership practices, academic conflict, and their impact on pedagogical outcomes. (Figure 1) reveals that a substantial proportion of participants (70%) identified unequal workload distribution as a primary cause of academic conflict. This aligns with findings by Rowley and Sherman (2003), who argue that inequitable workload and unclear performance expectations are significant sources of dissatisfaction and conflict among academic staff. Similarly, Deem, Hillyard, and Reed (2007) emphasize that academic labour is often unevenly distributed, particularly in hierarchical institutions, which fosters resentment and undermines teamwork. Furthermore, 60% of participants reported that conflict over professional recognition was a recurring issue, while 50% cited pedagogical differences as a barrier to academic cohesion. These findings reflect those of Amey and Twombly (1992), who noted that conflicts in academia often stem from competition over status, publication output, and divergent philosophical orientations toward teaching. Without effective mediation, such disagreements can escalate and compromise the learning environment.

The first graph also underscores a systemic issue in institutional conflict management, with 65% of participants highlighting the absence of formal mediation tools and 75% indicating a lack of leadership training. This supports studies by Gmelch and Carroll (1991), who argue that academic leaders are often promoted based on seniority or research excellence rather than leadership capacity, leaving them ill-equipped to handle interpersonal or organizational conflict. The implication is that many heads of departments (HODs) and faculty administrators may not possess the emotional intelligence or conflict resolution skills necessary to maintain professional harmony. The second graph (Figure 3) provides encouraging evidence that proactive and trained leadership can significantly enhance both staff collaboration and student learning outcomes. Faculties such as Engineering and Health Sciences reported the highest levels of improved collaboration (85% and 80%, respectively) and student learning (88% and 82%). This finding is in line with Ramsden (1998), who posits that transformational leadership in academic institutions leads to higher engagement, motivation, and teaching innovation. Moreover, Bryman (2007) identifies supportive leadership as a critical factor in building a collegial academic culture

that encourages reflective teaching and collaborative practice. Conversely, Applied Sciences reported relatively lower improvements in both metrics (70% collaboration, 68% student learning), suggesting that without targeted leadership development, even well-structured faculties may struggle to mitigate the adverse effects of internal conflict. This disparity highlights the need for institution-wide capacity-building interventions, rather than relying on isolated examples of good practice.

## Generalizability

Given the focused context and qualitative design, the findings are not broadly generalizable to all higher education institutions. However, the thematic patterns identified, such as the influence of leadership on conflict resolution and teaching quality, resonate with existing literature and may hold relevance for institutions facing similar structural or interpersonal challenges. Future studies with larger, multi-institutional samples would enhance external validity and help in formulating context-specific interventions.

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that academic conflict is both prevalent and multifaceted, with issues such as unequal workload distribution, competition over recognition, and pedagogical differences deeply embedded within faculty dynamics. These conflicts, if left unmanaged, can erode collegiality and negatively impact student learning. However, the data also demonstrate that proactive leadership, characterized by emotional intelligence, structured mediation strategies, and inclusive decision-making, can substantially improve staff collaboration and enhance educational outcomes. Faculties that demonstrated stronger leadership frameworks, such as Engineering and Health Sciences, reported notably higher levels of collaboration and learning gains, reinforcing the critical role that effective management plays in academic performance.

## Limitations

This study was limited by its qualitative nature and the sample size of 24 participants across four faculties at a single South African university. While thematic saturation was achieved, the findings may not fully capture the breadth of experiences across other institutions, particularly those with different governance structures or disciplinary focuses. Additionally, self-reported data are subject to bias, including selective memory and social desirability, which may influence the authenticity of participants' responses.



### Recommendations

To mitigate academic conflict and strengthen pedagogical outcomes, universities should institutionalize leadership development programs tailored to the needs of academic managers, particularly HODs and faculty deans. These programs should focus on emotional intelligence, conflict mediation, and transparent communication. Secondly, universities must develop clear policies and mechanisms for conflict resolution, including early-intervention frameworks, peer mediation structures, and anonymous reporting tools. Lastly, performance appraisal systems should integrate collaborative indicators that reward team-based achievements rather than individual competition, thus promoting a collegial academic culture.

### 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.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### List of Abbreviations

HOD: Head of Department

### References

1. Amey, M. J., & Twombly, S. B. (1992). Collegiality and the management of conflict in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 63(5), 501-522.
2. Bryman, A. (2007). Effective leadership in higher education: A literature review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 693-710. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701685114>
3. Deem, R., Hillyard, S., & Reed, M. (2007). *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199265909.001.0001>
4. Gmelch, W. H., & Carroll, J. B. (1991). The three R's of conflict management for department chairs and faculty. *Innovative Higher Education*, 15(2), 105-117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00889655>
5. Ramsden, P. (1998). *Learning to lead in higher education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203278116>
6. Rowley, D. J., & Sherman, H. (2003). The special challenges of academic leadership. *Management Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740310509580>





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.v6i9.1990>  
Original Article

#### **PUBLISHER DETAILS:**

Page | 9

### **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

