

INSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT, GOVERNANCE AND UNION-ADMINISTRATION RELATIONS IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Institutional conflicts between university administrations and staff unions remain a persistent global governance challenge, undermining institutional stability, organisational effectiveness and educational quality. Although previous studies have examined industrial disputes, collective bargaining and labour relations, limited attention has been given to how governance practices influence conflict outcomes, particularly in Nigerian public universities. This study analyses the governance factors driving recurrent conflicts, examines the roles of trust, legitimacy and stakeholder participation, and develops an integrated conflict governance framework for public universities in south-west Nigeria. Kriesberg and Dayton's Conflict Governance, Douglass North's Institutional and Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theories anchored the study. Adopting a qualitative exploratory case study design, primary data were generated from 64 participants comprising 20 key informants (Vice-Chancellors and Union Chairmen) and 44 in-depth

interviews with Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars, union secretaries and treasurers involved in joint negotiation meetings across four public universities. Data were analysed thematically and narratively. The findings identified weak governance, inconsistent implementation of agreements, ineffective communication, political interference and limited stakeholder participation as the principal drivers of recurrent conflicts. Conversely, transparent leadership, procedural fairness and continuous dialogue strengthened legitimacy, fostered trust and promoted constructive labour relations. The study concludes that sustainable union-administration relations require accountable, participatory conflict governance and recommends institutionalising inclusive decision-making, strengthening conflict prevention mechanisms and ensuring consistent implementation of negotiated agreements to promote industrial harmony in Nigerian public universities.

Keywords: *Institutional conflict, Conflict governance, Union-administration relations, Institutional trust, Nigerian public universities.*

INTRODUCTION

Institutional conflicts persist across organisations despite formal governance mechanisms designed to regulate workplace relations and reconcile competing interests. Although conflict scholarship has traditionally concentrated on violent, political and communal conflicts, increasing attention has shifted towards non-violent institutional conflicts that exhibit comparable patterns of contestation, escalation and negotiated settlement. Universities provide a particularly important context for examining these dynamics because they bring together diverse stakeholders whose competing interests are mediated through formal governance arrangements. However, recurrent conflicts between university administrations and staff unions continue to undermine organisational stability, disrupt academic activities and weaken institutional legitimacy, raising concerns about the effectiveness of governance systems in managing labour relations.

The challenge is especially pronounced in public universities, where governance involves interactions among university management, academic and non-academic staff unions, governing councils and government authorities (Akoma & Ibeh, 2026). Although collective bargaining, consultation and grievance procedures are intended to resolve disputes and

sustain cooperative labour relations, industrial conflicts frequently recur. This persistence suggests that formal governance structures alone are insufficient to prevent conflict, prompting a broader question of how governance practices shape organisational trust, legitimacy and conflict outcomes.

In Nigerian public universities, recurrent strikes and industrial disputes have become a defining feature of institutional governance. These conflicts are widely associated with inadequate funding, inconsistent implementation of negotiated agreements, political interference, weak leadership accountability and limited stakeholder participation. Rather than representing isolated employment disputes, they reveal deeper governance deficiencies relating to transparency, procedural fairness and institutional capacity. Recent studies similarly identify governance failures and weak institutional capacity as important drivers of organisational conflict and declining institutional trust (Bryson et al., 2023).

Despite an extensive literature on industrial relations in Nigerian universities, existing studies have largely examined the causes, consequences and management of labour disputes, with particular emphasis on negotiation, collective bargaining and dispute resolution mechanisms (Ogunode et al., 2022). While this body of research has enhanced understanding of conflict management practices, it provides limited explanation of the governance conditions under which these mechanisms succeed or fail. Consequently, insufficient attention has been given to the ways governance quality influences organisational trust, institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation, or how these factors shape the escalation, resolution and transformation of institutional conflicts. Furthermore, universities remain largely absent from the broader conflict governance literature, which has focused predominantly on interstate, communal and political conflicts.

This study addresses these gaps by conceptualising union–administration disputes as manifestations of governance failure rather than merely conflicts arising from competing interests or resource constraints. Drawing on Conflict Governance Theory, Institutional Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, it argues that deficiencies in accountability, transparency, participation and policy implementation undermine institutional legitimacy, erode trust and reinforce adversarial labour relations. Sustainable conflict management therefore depends on governance systems that promote inclusive decision-making,

consistent implementation of agreements and continuous dialogue rather than relying solely on formal dispute resolution mechanisms.

Empirically, the study investigates four public universities in South-West Nigeria—University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Lagos State University and Olabisi Onabanjo University. These institutions provide an appropriate comparative setting because they operate under different federal and state governance arrangements yet have experienced recurrent industrial conflicts involving multiple staff unions. Examining these cases offers valuable insights into how governance structures shape conflict dynamics within complex organisational environments.

The study contributes to conflict governance scholarship by extending its application beyond political and communal conflicts to institutional conflicts within higher education. It develops an integrated conflict governance framework that explains how governance quality influences trust, legitimacy, stakeholder participation and conflict outcomes in Nigerian public universities. In doing so, it broadens the empirical scope of conflict governance research and provides a theoretically informed framework for strengthening governance and promoting sustainable union–administration relations. The remainder of the article presents the literature review, methodology, findings and discussion before concluding with the study's theoretical, policy and practical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict is an inherent feature of organisational life, arising from differences in interests, values, responsibilities and expectations among individuals and groups. Within universities, these differences are amplified by shared governance arrangements involving administrators, academic staff, non-academic employees and government authorities. Although conflict can stimulate organisational learning and institutional reform, poorly managed disputes undermine organisational effectiveness, institutional cohesion and employee commitment (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008). Contemporary scholarship therefore conceptualises conflict management not merely as dispute resolution but as a governance process that shapes organisational trust, institutional legitimacy and long-term labour relations (Ansell & Torfing, 2023).

Nigerian public universities provide an important context for examining these dynamics because they perform central functions in higher education, research and national development while operating within complex governance arrangements involving governments, governing councils, university management and staff unions. Academic and non-academic employees are represented by unions including the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), the Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Institutions (NASU) and the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT). Despite formal governance mechanisms such as collective bargaining and consultation, recurrent industrial disputes continue to disrupt academic activities and undermine institutional effectiveness (Alamu & Ajayi, 2023).

Institutional and Governance Factors Driving Recurrent Conflicts

Institutional conflict remains a persistent feature of governance in public universities despite formal mechanisms intended to promote accountability, participation and organisational stability (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022). Rather than reflecting the absence of governance structures, recurrent disputes increasingly arise from weaknesses in governance implementation, institutional legitimacy and decision-making processes. In Nigerian public universities, fragmented authority over funding, remuneration and policy implementation constrains managerial autonomy and weakens the implementation of negotiated agreements (World Bank, 2022). Empirical studies consistently identify inadequate funding, ineffective leadership, delayed implementation of agreements, weak communication, and political interference as major drivers of industrial conflict within the Nigerian university system (Akoma & Ijioma, 2026). These findings suggest that recurrent labour disputes are manifestations of broader governance failures rather than isolated employment disagreements.

Governance, Trust and Conflict Management

Recent governance scholarship identifies organisational trust as a central mechanism linking governance practices to conflict outcomes. Governance extends beyond compliance with formal regulations to encompass transparency, accountability, procedural fairness and stakeholder participation (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022). Consequently, dialogue, consultation, negotiation, mediation and collective bargaining are most effective when

embedded within governance systems perceived as legitimate and trustworthy. Research on higher education governance demonstrates that transparent communication, credible leadership and participatory decision-making strengthen organisational trust, improve institutional cooperation and reduce conflict (Kezar, 2018; Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2023). Conversely, opaque governance, inconsistent implementation of agreements and weak accountability erode confidence in institutional processes and increase the likelihood that routine disagreements escalate into prolonged disputes (Bryson et al., 2023).

Institutional Conditions Influencing Conflict Escalation and Transformation

Contemporary conflict scholarship increasingly conceptualises conflict escalation as the cumulative consequence of governance failures rather than isolated disagreements (Christensen & Lægheid, 2022). Leadership responsiveness, timely implementation of agreements, stakeholder participation and effective communication therefore constitute critical institutional conditions shaping conflict trajectories. Participatory leadership strengthens institutional legitimacy and stakeholder confidence, whereas exclusionary governance reinforces adversarial labour relations (Kezar, 2018). Conflict Transformation Theory similarly argues that institutional conflicts should be understood as opportunities for organisational learning and governance reform rather than merely episodes requiring settlement (Lederach, 2003). This perspective shifts attention from reactive dispute resolution to governance systems that promote dialogue, mutual trust and collaborative problem-solving.

Governance Reform and Sustainable Labour Relations

Contemporary governance scholarship increasingly identifies governance reform as the foundation of sustainable labour relations within higher education. Effective governance requires institutional arrangements that promote inclusive decision-making, transparent implementation of agreements, credible grievance procedures and sustained engagement between university management and staff unions (Ansell & Torfing, 2023). Emerging evidence further indicates that organisational resilience depends more on governance quality than administrative authority, with participatory governance and institutional trust strengthening institutional effectiveness and reducing organisational conflict (Bryson et al., 2023).

Despite these advances, important gaps remain. Existing studies on Nigerian public universities continue to focus primarily on the causes and consequences of industrial action, paying comparatively little attention to the governance processes through which conflicts emerge, escalate and are transformed. Similarly, most studies concentrate on ASUU, with limited analysis of governance interactions among multiple academic and non-academic unions operating within shared institutional structures (Ogundiminyi & Ojo, 2020.). Moreover, university labour disputes remain underexplored within the broader conflict governance literature, which has focused predominantly on political, communal and interstate conflicts. In response to these gaps, the current study conceptualises disputes between unions and administration as institutional conflicts. It also formulates a comprehensive conflict governance framework that elucidates the influence of governance quality on organisational trust, institutional legitimacy, and sustainable labour relations within public universities in South-West Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three relevant theories, namely: **Conflict Governance Theory**, **Conflict Transformation Theory** and **Institutional Theory**. These complementary perspectives provide a multi-level explanation of why institutional conflicts persist despite formal governance arrangements and how governance quality influences organisational trust, institutional legitimacy and sustainable union-administration relations in Nigerian public universities. While Conflict Governance Theory explains the institutional mechanisms through which disputes are regulated, Conflict Transformation Theory emphasises long-term relational and structural change, and Institutional Theory explains how formal and informal institutional arrangements shape organisational behaviour and governance outcomes.

Conflict Governance Theory

Conflict Governance Theory explains how formal and informal institutions regulate disputes through rules, procedures and collaborative decision-making to prevent conflict escalation and sustain institutional stability. Kriesberg and Dayton (2017) argue that effective conflict governance depends on credible institutions, inclusive participation, enforceable agreements and continuous dialogue among disputing parties. Similarly, Walter (2002) contends that durable conflict resolution requires credible commitment

mechanisms that strengthen compliance and confidence. The theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding union–administration relations in public universities, where collective bargaining, consultation and mediation constitute the principal institutional mechanisms for managing labour disputes. However, these mechanisms achieve legitimacy only when they are implemented transparently, consistently and fairly. Where governance is characterised by weak accountability, limited participation and inconsistent implementation of agreements, institutional trust declines, and conflicts become recurrent. Accordingly, Conflict Governance Theory provides the principal analytical lens for explaining how governance quality shapes conflict outcomes and influences sustainable labour relations in Nigerian public universities.

Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, developed by Lederach (1995, 2003), conceptualises conflict as an opportunity for constructive institutional and relational change rather than merely a problem requiring settlement. Unlike conventional conflict management approaches that focus primarily on resolving immediate disputes, the theory emphasises transforming the underlying structural conditions, relationships and governance practices that generate recurring conflict. Sustainable peace is therefore achieved through dialogue, trust-building, institutional reform and inclusive participation. The theory is particularly relevant to Nigerian public universities, where recurrent industrial disputes often reflect deeper governance challenges, including unequal power relations, inadequate consultation, inconsistent implementation of agreements and declining organisational trust. It therefore complements Conflict Governance Theory by explaining how governance reforms can reshape relationships between university administrations and staff unions, strengthen institutional legitimacy and promote long-term cooperation rather than temporary settlements.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory, as developed by North (1990), elucidates how the conduct within an organisation is affected by a blend of established rules and unwritten social norms. Formal institutions establish the regulatory framework for organisational action, while informal practices influence how these rules are interpreted, implemented and enforced. Helmke and Levitsky (2004) further argue that informal institutions frequently emerge where formal

rules are weak, inconsistently enforced or lack credibility. This perspective is highly applicable to Nigerian public universities, where collective bargaining agreements, university statutes and administrative regulations often coexist with informal practices such as political influence, selective implementation and personalised negotiations. These institutional inconsistencies weaken governance effectiveness, reduce organisational trust and undermine institutional legitimacy, thereby increasing the likelihood of recurrent union–administration conflicts. Institutional Theory therefore explains why formal governance structures alone cannot guarantee effective labour relations unless supported by transparent, accountable and consistently implemented governance practices.

Theoretical Integration

The three theories are complementary and collectively provide the analytical foundation for this study. Conflict Governance Theory explains the institutional mechanisms through which disputes are managed; Conflict Transformation Theory explains how governance reforms reshape relationships and generate sustainable cooperation; and Institutional Theory identifies the structural conditions that strengthen or weaken governance effectiveness. Together, they explain how governance quality, organisational trust, institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation influence conflict dynamics in Nigerian public universities. Accordingly, these theoretical perspectives guide the analysis of the institutional and governance factors driving recurrent union–administration conflicts, explain how governance practices shape trust and conflict outcomes, and provide the conceptual basis for developing an integrated conflict governance framework for strengthening labour relations in public universities in South-West Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative case study design to investigate institutional conflict within union–administration relations in Nigerian public universities. A qualitative case study was appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of complex governance processes, organisational interactions and conflict dynamics within their real-life contexts, where contextual factors cannot be separated from institutional practices (Yin, 2018). The design also enables the exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions and meanings, which are central to understanding institutional conflict and

governance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted in four purposively selected public universities in South-Western Nigeria, involving the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Lagos State University and Olabisi Onabanjo University. These institutions were selected because of their recurrent union-administration disputes, contrasting federal and state governance structures and active academic and non-academic staff unions, thereby providing rich comparative evidence (Patton, 2015).

Using purposive sampling, 64 participants with direct experience of collective bargaining and conflict governance were recruited, comprising 20 Key Informant Interviews with Vice-Chancellors and union chairpersons and 44 In-Depth Interviews with Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Bursars and union executives. Non-participant observation and documentary analysis complemented the interviews, enabling methodological triangulation and enhancing the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach. Codes and themes were developed inductively and interpreted in relation to institutional governance and conflict transformation perspectives. Ethical approval, informed consent, confidentiality and participants' right to withdraw were strictly observed throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What institutional and governance factors contribute to recurrent conflicts between university administrations and staff unions

Resources Constraints

Resource constraints consist of one of the fundamental structural causes of recurrent institutional conflict. Participants consistently argued that inadequate government funding limited universities' capacity to implement negotiated agreements, meet staff welfare obligations and sustain effective governance. One participant observed, "Without adequate funding, management cannot honour agreements, and conflicts become unavoidable." Another explained,

"Internally generated revenue cannot sustain the university when government allocations remain inadequate because it is insufficient to

finance staff welfare, infrastructure, research and other essential operations, making the institution increasingly dependent on unpredictable government funding."

These findings indicate that persistent underfunding weakens institutional capacity, erodes organisational trust and undermines governance credibility. Although the 2024 Federal Budget allocated approximately ₦2.18 trillion (7.9% of total expenditure) to education, this remained well below UNESCO's recommended 15–20% benchmark. Consequently, inadequate funding constrained infrastructure development, delayed implementation of negotiated agreements and contributed to recurrent industrial disputes in Nigerian public universities. Rather than constituting purely economic challenges, resource shortages become governance problems when they impede the implementation of negotiated commitments and weaken institutional accountability. Similar evidence suggests that persistent underfunding reduces institutional effectiveness and contributes to labour unrest across higher education systems (Marginson, 2022). The findings support Institutional Theory, which argues that institutions lose legitimacy when they fail to fulfil their formal responsibilities (North, 1990), and Conflict Transformation Theory, which views structural inequalities as underlying causes of recurring conflict that require institutional reform (Lederach, 2003).

Governance Failures

Governance failures emerged as a central explanation for recurrent conflicts between university administrations and staff unions. Participants associated industrial disputes with limited accountability, opaque decision-making, inconsistent implementation of institutional rules and political interference. As one union leader explained,

"Management often makes important decisions without consulting us, leaving industrial action as our only option." Another participant observed, "Political interference in the appointment of vice-chancellors and irregular promotion processes undermine confidence in the university system."

These results demonstrate that conflicts persist not because governance structures are absent but because they are inconsistently implemented and perceived as lacking

legitimacy. Weak governance erodes organisational trust, diminishes procedural fairness and reinforces adversarial labour relations despite the existence of formal governance mechanisms. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary public governance scholarship, which emphasises accountability, transparency and institutional legitimacy as prerequisites for effective governance (Bryson et al., 2023; Christensen & Lægreid, 2022). The findings also reinforce Institutional Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory by demonstrating that governance legitimacy depends on the consistent application of institutional rules and the inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making processes (North, 1990; Lederach, 2003).

Ineffective Leadership Practices

Participants consistently identified ineffective leadership as a major contributor to institutional conflict. Leadership was characterised by exclusionary decision-making, inadequate consultation and weak stakeholder engagement. A union leader remarked, "Management makes critical decisions on staff welfare and promotions without involving the unions, leaving us feeling excluded." Another participant noted, "Selective promotions and irregular recruitment have weakened confidence in the integrity of university leadership." Findings alluded that leadership practices influence conflict not only through administrative decisions but also through their effects on organisational trust and perceptions of procedural justice. There is no doubt that leadership failures have fueled recurrent conflicts in Nigerian public universities. For example, the prolonged non-implementation of the 2009 agreement with the Academic Staff Union of Universities contributed to the nationwide 2022 strike.

Similarly, the 2020 leadership crisis at the University of Lagos highlighted how opaque decision-making and inadequate stakeholder consultation undermine trust and institutional stability. Participatory leadership enhances institutional legitimacy by encouraging dialogue, fairness and shared responsibility, whereas authoritarian leadership reinforces exclusion and adversarial labour relations (Kezar, 2024). The findings therefore support Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasises inclusive leadership and relationship-building as foundations for sustainable conflict management (Lederach, 2003), while reinforcing Institutional Theory's proposition that governance legitimacy depends on fair and consistent leadership practices (North, 1990).

Inconsistent Implementation of Negotiated Agreements

The findings reveal that inconsistent implementation of negotiated agreements remains a significant source of institutional conflict. Participants argued that governments and university administrations frequently failed to implement agreements relating to salaries, staff welfare and conditions of service, thereby weakening confidence in collective bargaining. One union leader stated, "Negotiated agreements have little value when implementation is repeatedly delayed or ignored." A management representative similarly acknowledged, "Funding constraints often prevent the timely implementation of agreements despite management's commitment."

There is no misgiving that implementation failures widen the gap between institutional commitments and organisational practice, thereby undermining trust and governance credibility. For example, the conflict between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities over the implementation of the 2009 FG–ASUU Agreement. Successive university administrations and government authorities were criticised for failing to implement agreed provisions on funding, earned academic allowances and university autonomy. The International Labour Organisation (2024) similarly identifies poor implementation of collective agreements as a major factor contributing to recurrent labour disputes. Consistent implementation therefore represents a critical dimension of effective conflict governance. These findings align with Institutional Theory, which emphasises the importance of enforcing formal rules consistently (North, 1990), and Conflict Transformation Theory, which identifies unresolved structural grievances as drivers of recurring conflict (Lederach, 2003).

Communication Breakdown

Communication failures emerged as another important driver of institutional conflict. Participants linked disputes to delayed feedback, inadequate information sharing, poor listening and the absence of sustained dialogue. A union leader explained,

"Our letters are ignored until we threaten industrial action, making conflict the only language management understands." Conversely, a management representative remarked, "Negotiations often fail because some union leaders are unwilling to listen or compromise."

The aforementioned findings indicate that ineffective communication reinforces mutual suspicion, delays grievance resolution, and weakens collaborative governance. For example, communication breakdown has repeatedly triggered conflicts in Nigerian public universities. The 2022 dispute between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities was prolonged by inadequate dialogue, delayed responses and poor information sharing over the implementation of agreements. These communication failures eroded trust, heightened mistrust and intensified industrial conflict.

Similar studies in higher education demonstrate that transparent communication and continuous dialogue strengthen organizational trust and reduce industrial conflict (Kezar, 2024). The findings also support Conflict Transformation Theory, which identifies sustained dialogue as central to transforming adversarial relationships (Lederach, 2003), and Institutional Theory, which recognizes responsive communication as an important source of institutional legitimacy (North, 1990).

Transparency and Organizational Trust

Participants consistently identified limited transparency and declining organisational trust as important contributors to recurrent conflict. They reported that inadequate disclosure of financial information, weak accountability and inconsistent implementation of agreements reduced confidence in university leadership. One union representative stated,

"We cannot trust management when financial decisions are made behind closed doors." Another participant observed, "Consistently honouring agreements would restore confidence between both parties."

Transparency and organizational trust have significantly influenced union–administration relations in Nigerian public universities. For example, repeated allegations by the Academic Staff Union of Universities regarding non-disclosure of university finances and delays in implementing negotiated agreements have undermined trust between management and staff unions, fostering suspicion, weakening institutional legitimacy and contributing to recurrent industrial disputes.

The findings suggest that trust is cultivated through transparent governance rather than solely through formal institutional arrangements. Governance scholarship similarly demonstrates that transparency strengthens institutional legitimacy, promotes cooperation

and improves organisational performance (Bryson et al., 2023). The findings therefore reinforce Institutional Theory, which associates legitimacy with transparent and consistent governance (North, 1990), and Conflict Transformation Theory, which identifies trust-building as fundamental to transforming institutional relationships (Lederach, 2003).

Power Asymmetries

Power asymmetries also emerged as a significant governance factor shaping institutional conflict. Participants argued that management's dominance over decision-making and institutional resources constrained meaningful negotiations and encouraged industrial action. A union leader remarked,

"Management expects us to accept decisions without genuine negotiation, leading to frustration and resistance." Similarly, an administrator observed, "Conflicts persist when one side seeks to dominate instead of negotiating."

Power asymmetries have contributed to recurrent union–administration conflicts in Nigerian public universities. For example, the 2022 dispute between the Federal Government and the Academic Staff Union of Universities reflected unequal decision-making authority, with key policies imposed without meaningful union participation. These imbalances weakened collective bargaining, eroded organisational trust and prolonged industrial action. The above findings demonstrate that unequal power relations weaken procedural fairness, reduce employee voice and undermine collaborative governance. Contemporary governance research similarly shows that equitable participation enhances organisational trust, whereas concentrated authority intensifies workplace conflict (Bryson et al., 2023). These findings support Conflict Transformation Theory's emphasis on addressing structural inequalities through inclusive dialogue (Lederach, 2003) and Institutional Theory's proposition that legitimate governance depends on equitable participation and fair institutional processes (North, 1990).

Political Interference

The findings further indicate that political interference undermines institutional autonomy and contributes to recurrent union–administration conflicts. Participants explained that external influence over leadership appointments, funding decisions and implementation of

collective agreements constrained institutional decision-making and delayed conflict resolution. One participant observed,

“Political interference prevents universities from implementing agreements already negotiated because external directives often override institutional decisions, delay implementation, weaken university autonomy, create uncertainty and generate persistent conflicts between management and staff unions.”

Another administrator remarked,

“Management often lacks the authority to fulfil commitments because government directives override institutional decisions. For example, the 2020 leadership crisis at the University of Lagos, involving the removal and subsequent reinstatement of the Vice-Chancellor following federal intervention, illustrated how external political influence can compromise university autonomy, weaken institutional governance, erode stakeholder trust and intensify union–administration conflict.”

Political interference has frequently undermined governance in Nigerian public universities. These findings suggest that political interference weakens institutional autonomy, reduces accountability and erodes organisational trust. Studies of higher education governance similarly show that excessive external control compromises institutional effectiveness and weakens governance capacity (Marginson, 2022). The findings therefore support Institutional Theory, which emphasises autonomous, rule-based governance as essential for institutional effectiveness (North, 1990), and Conflict Transformation Theory, which advocates institutional empowerment, dialogue and locally owned governance processes as foundations for sustainable conflict management (Lederach, 2003).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that recurrent union–administration conflicts are rooted primarily in governance deficiencies rather than in isolated employment disputes. Resource constraints, weak governance, ineffective leadership, inconsistent implementation of agreements, poor communication, limited transparency, unequal power relations and political interference interact to undermine organisational trust and institutional legitimacy.

These governance conditions collectively explain why formal conflict management mechanisms frequently fail to prevent recurring industrial disputes in Nigerian public universities.

Research Question 2: How do trust, legitimacy and stakeholder participation shape the governance and outcomes of institutional conflicts?

Trust, institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation

The findings demonstrate that trust, institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation are mutually reinforcing governance conditions that shape the management and outcomes of institutional conflicts. Participants consistently reported that mutual trust facilitated open communication, strengthened confidence in negotiated agreements and encouraged collaborative problem-solving. As one union chairman observed,

"When trust existed, both parties negotiated confidently because they believed agreements would be honoured." Similarly, a Registrar noted, "Staff were more willing to accept difficult decisions when the process was transparent and everyone had an opportunity to participate."

These accounts indicate that governance effectiveness depends not only on formal institutional arrangements but also on stakeholders' confidence in the fairness and credibility of governance processes.

The findings further suggest that participatory governance strengthens institutional legitimacy by promoting transparency, procedural fairness and accountability. Inclusive decision-making fostered a sense of ownership over negotiated outcomes, reduced resistance to institutional policies and enhanced organisational commitment. These findings support collaborative governance scholarship, which argues that trust, dialogue and inclusive participation improve institutional performance and strengthen governance outcomes (Bryson et al., 2023). They also corroborate Conflict Governance Theory, which emphasises that durable conflict management depends on legitimate institutions capable of fostering cooperation through participation rather than coercion (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017).

Institutional legitimacy

The findings identify institutional legitimacy as a critical determinant of staff acceptance of administrative decisions and the effectiveness of conflict governance. Participants consistently maintained that decisions perceived as transparent, impartial and procedurally fair attracted greater compliance and generated less resistance. A Deputy Vice- Chancellor explained,

"Even unpopular decisions were accepted when staff believed the process was transparent and consistent with established procedures." Likewise, an ASUU chairman observed, "Our members rarely challenged decisions reached through fair consultation and implemented without bias."

Participants further indicated that legitimacy was derived not merely from formal authority but from accountability, consistency and faithful implementation of negotiated agreements. Conversely, arbitrary decision-making and selective enforcement weakened confidence in university leadership and intensified institutional grievances. These findings are consistent with institutional governance literature, which demonstrates that perceptions of procedural fairness and legitimacy enhance organisational trust and voluntary compliance (Tyler, 2006; Christensen & Lægreid, 2022). They also support Institutional Theory, which argues that institutions derive legitimacy through the consistent and equitable application of formal rules (North, 1990).

Stakeholder participation

Stakeholder participation emerged as a fundamental governance mechanism for strengthening institutional cooperation and preventing conflict escalation. Participants consistently reported that meaningful union involvement in governance processes improved communication, strengthened trust and enhanced commitment to negotiated outcomes. A union secretary remarked,

"When management involved us from the beginning, implementation became easier because everyone felt represented." Similarly, a Vice-Chancellor observed, "People are more willing to support decisions they helped to make because participation creates a sense of ownership,

strengthens trust and commitment, reduces resistance and encourages the successful implementation of agreed outcomes.”

Participants further explained that joint negotiation committees provided opportunities to reconcile competing interests before disagreements escalated into industrial disputes. In contrast, exclusion from governance processes generated perceptions of marginalisation, weakened organisational commitment and increased resistance to administrative decisions. These findings demonstrate that participation strengthens governance by creating shared responsibility and reinforcing institutional legitimacy. They support collaborative governance theory, which identifies inclusive participation and shared decision-making as essential conditions for effective institutional governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021), while reinforcing Conflict Transformation Theory's emphasis on dialogue and relationship-building as foundations for sustainable conflict management (Lederach, 2003).

Power asymmetries

The findings further reveal that unequal power relations significantly weakened organisational trust and constrained effective conflict governance. Participants reported that unilateral decision-making, unequal access to information and limited union participation in strategic decisions created perceptions of exclusion and procedural injustice. One union chairman stated, *"Management often makes decisions alone and informs us afterwards, leaving little room for genuine participation."* Similarly, a Registrar remarked,

"When one party dominates the process, trust declines, collaboration becomes difficult and genuine dialogue is undermined. The other party feels marginalised, making consensus, mutual understanding and sustainable conflict resolution increasingly difficult to achieve.”

These findings indicate that institutional conflicts are sustained not only by divergent interests but also by governance arrangements that privilege authority over participation. Participants further explained that persistent power imbalances encouraged confrontational rather than collaborative approaches, as unions increasingly relied on industrial action to secure recognition and influence decision-making. Similar evidence suggests that unequal governance arrangements weaken employee voice, diminish organisational trust and

intensify workplace conflict (Bryson et al., 2023). These findings reinforce Conflict Governance Theory, which argues that equitable participation is fundamental to institutional legitimacy and sustainable conflict management (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017).

Negotiation breakdown

The findings identify negotiation breakdown as the immediate mechanism through which governance failures culminate in prolonged industrial disputes. Participants consistently linked unsuccessful negotiations to declining trust, weakened institutional legitimacy and repeated failures to implement negotiated agreements. An ASUU chairman observed,

"When agreements are repeatedly ignored, dialogue loses credibility and industrial action becomes the only option." Similarly, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor noted,

"Negotiations collapse when either party doubts the other's commitment to implementing agreed decisions. Once confidence in the implementation process is lost, dialogue becomes ineffective, mutual suspicion increases, and parties become reluctant to make further concessions. This ultimately prolongs disputes, weakens trust and undermines the prospects for sustainable conflict resolution."

Participants further explained that repeated failures to implement agreements entrenched mistrust, hardened bargaining positions and reduced opportunities for constructive engagement. These findings demonstrate that negotiation breakdown reflects cumulative governance deficiencies rather than isolated bargaining failures. They align with governance scholarship emphasising that effective implementation of agreements, credible institutions and continuous dialogue are essential for preventing recurrent institutional conflict (Bryson et al., 2023). The findings also support Conflict Governance Theory, which posits that sustainable conflict management depends on trust, legitimacy and institutional arrangements capable of maintaining credible commitments between disputing parties (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017). Overall, the results demonstrate that trust, legitimacy and stakeholder participation are not peripheral governance attributes but central institutional conditions through which conflicts are either contained or transformed into constructive labour relations.

Research Question 3: How can an integrated conflict governance framework explain the relationship between governance practices and conflict outcomes in public universities?

Integrated Conflict Governance Framework

The findings demonstrate that governance quality constitutes the principal mechanism through which institutional conflicts are either transformed or intensified within Nigerian public universities. Participants consistently emphasised that accountability, procedural fairness, continuous dialogue and stakeholder participation functioned as complementary governance practices that strengthened organisational trust and reduced the likelihood of industrial conflict. A Vice-Chancellor explained,

"Conflicts rarely escalated when communication was continuous, decisions were transparent, and agreements were implemented as promised." Likewise, a union chairman observed, "Trust increased when management was accountable, and unions were treated as partners rather than opponents."

These findings indicate that governance practices influence conflict outcomes not in isolation but through their cumulative effect on institutional trust, legitimacy and collaborative relationships. Where governance was perceived as transparent, accountable and participatory, both management and staff unions demonstrated greater willingness to negotiate, honour agreements and resolve grievances constructively.

Conversely, weak governance eroded confidence in institutional processes, reinforced adversarial relationships and increased the likelihood of industrial action. The findings support Institutional Theory, which argues that organisational stability depends on governance arrangements regarded as legitimate, predictable and procedurally fair (North, 1990). They also reinforce Conflict Transformation Theory, which maintains that sustainable conflict management requires transforming institutional relationships and governance structures rather than merely resolving immediate disputes (Lederach, 2003). Within the context of this study, governance quality emerged as the institutional pathway linking administrative practices with conflict outcomes in Nigerian public universities.

Interactive Governance Mechanisms and Organisational Trust

The findings further reveal that organisational trust developed through the interaction of accountability, transparent communication and procedural fairness rather than from successful negotiations alone. Participants consistently explained that trust increased when university management implemented negotiated agreements, maintained continuous consultation and communicated decisions openly. A Registrar remarked,

"Trust is built through continuous dialogue and by implementing what was agreed during negotiations." Equally, an ASUU chairman stated, *"When management demonstrates accountability, unions become more willing to negotiate rather than confront."*

These findings suggest that organisational trust functions as an institutional resource generated through consistent governance practices. Transparent implementation of agreements reduced suspicion, strengthened confidence in university leadership and created conditions for constructive engagement between management and staff unions. Consequently, trust mediated the relationship between governance quality and conflict outcomes by encouraging cooperation and reducing adversarial behaviour.

The findings are consistent with Institutional Theory, which emphasises that legitimacy derives from the consistent application of institutional rules and governance practices (North, 1990). They also support Conflict Transformation Theory, which identifies trust-building and sustained dialogue as essential conditions for transforming conflict into constructive institutional relationships (Lederach, 2003). They further align with collaborative governance scholarship, which demonstrates that accountability, transparency, and inclusive participation enhance institutional trust and improve governance outcomes (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Conflict Transformation through Participatory Governance

Participants consistently emphasised that meaningful stakeholder participation transformed adversarial labour relations into collaborative institutional partnerships. Early involvement of staff unions in policy formulation and implementation enhanced transparency, improved

communication and generated shared ownership of institutional decisions. One Vice-Chancellor explained,

"Conflicts become easier to manage when unions are involved from the beginning rather than after decisions have already been taken." A union secretary similarly observed, "Participation changes the relationship because both sides begin to see themselves as partners rather than opponents."

These findings indicate that participatory governance extends beyond consultation by reshaping institutional relationships and addressing governance deficiencies that generate recurring disputes. Continuous engagement enabled grievances to be resolved before escalating into industrial conflict, thereby strengthening institutional cooperation and collective responsibility. For this study, stakeholder participation emerged as a preventive governance mechanism that transformed conflict from confrontation into collaborative problem-solving.

These findings support Conflict Transformation Theory, which argues that sustainable conflict management requires inclusive dialogue, relationship-building, and institutional reform (Lederach, 2003). They likewise reinforce Institutional Theory, which maintains that institutional legitimacy depends on equitable governance processes and stakeholder inclusion (North, 1990). The findings are also consistent with collaborative governance literature demonstrating that shared decision-making enhances organisational resilience and improves institutional performance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Preventive Governance and Early Conflict Detection

The findings further demonstrate that continuous consultation, institutional monitoring and joint governance structures functioned as preventive mechanisms capable of identifying emerging grievances before they developed into industrial disputes. Participants explained that regular consultative meetings, joint committees and informal engagement created opportunities for early intervention and reduced misunderstandings. A Deputy Vice-Chancellor observed,

"Many conflicts can be prevented when issues are addressed immediately rather than waiting until they become crises." Likewise, a union chairman stated, "Regular meetings help both parties resolve misunderstandings before they result in strikes."

Participants further explained that systematic monitoring of negotiated agreements strengthened accountability and reinforced confidence in governance processes. Rather than relying on crisis-driven interventions, preventive governance institutionalised continuous engagement, responsiveness and organisational learning. These findings suggest that early conflict detection is an essential component of effective conflict governance because it enables institutions to address structural grievances before they escalate into prolonged industrial disputes. The findings reinforce Institutional Theory, which emphasises that stable organisations depend upon predictable and responsive governance systems (North, 1990). They also support Conflict Transformation Theory, which advocates sustained dialogue and proactive engagement as essential mechanisms for preventing destructive conflict and strengthening institutional relationships (Lederach, 2003).

Governance Pathways from Conflict to Institutional Stability

Overall, the findings demonstrate that governance quality provides a coherent pathway through which institutional conflicts are transformed into stable labour relations. Participants consistently associated transparent leadership, accountability, stakeholder participation and timely implementation of agreements with stronger organisational trust, more productive negotiations and improved conflict management. A Vice-Chancellor remarked,

"Stable relationships depend on trust, and trust comes from consistent governance rather than promises." Also, a union secretary observed, "When agreements are implemented on time, negotiations become productive, and conflicts rarely escalate."

The findings indicate that governance shapes conflict outcomes through interconnected processes involving trust, legitimacy, dialogue and collaborative decision-making rather than through isolated administrative actions. Sustainable labour relations therefore depend

on governance systems that institutionalise participation, accountability, transparency and procedural fairness.

Within the context of this study, these governance dimensions formed an integrated conflict governance framework that strengthened institutional resilience and reduced recurrent disputes across the selected Nigerian public universities. The findings integrate Institutional Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory by demonstrating that legitimate governance arrangements, inclusive participation and sustained dialogue collectively transform adversarial labour relations into cooperative institutional partnerships (North, 1990; Lederach, 2003). They also support collaborative governance scholarship, which identifies inclusive governance, institutional trust and shared decision-making as the foundations of resilient organisations and sustainable conflict management (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

Theoretical Contribution

This study advances Conflict Governance Theory by demonstrating that governance quality—not merely formal conflict-management mechanisms, determines whether institutional conflicts escalate or are transformed into constructive labour relations. While Conflict Governance Theory explains the importance of inclusive institutions, accountability and enforceable agreements for preventing conflict escalation (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017; Walter, 2002), the present findings show that these governance elements operate through organisational trust, institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation. Conflict Transformation Theory complements this explanation by demonstrating that sustainable industrial peace depends on transforming governance relationships through dialogue, institutional reform and trust-building rather than simply resolving immediate disputes (Lederach, 2003). Institutional Theory further explains that governance structures become effective only when institutional rules are implemented consistently, transparently and fairly (North, 1990; Scott, 2014).

By integrating these perspectives, the study develops an Integrated Conflict Governance Framework in which governance quality shapes organisational trust, institutional legitimacy and stakeholder participation, which in turn determine negotiation effectiveness, conflict escalation and sustainable union–administration relations. The framework

therefore extends conflict governance scholarship beyond political conflicts by demonstrating that recurring industrial disputes in Nigerian public universities are fundamentally governance problems requiring institutional reform rather than merely improved dispute-resolution mechanisms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research illustrates that the quality of governance serves as the fundamental factor influencing conflict management, organisational trust, and sustainable relations between unions and administrations in public universities. Institutional conflicts do not merely stem from competing interests; rather, they are predominantly fueled by governance failures, which are evident in weak accountability, inconsistent agreement implementation, ineffective communication, limited stakeholder involvement, and a decline in institutional legitimacy. In contrast, inclusive governance, fair in its procedures, characterised by ongoing dialogue, and marked by transparent decision-making cultivates trust, enhances negotiation processes, and transforms adversarial interactions into collaborative partnerships. By synthesising Conflict Governance, Institutional, and Conflict Transformation theories, this study proposes a comprehensive conflict governance framework that elucidates how governance practices influence conflict outcomes through interrelated mechanisms of trust, legitimacy, accountability, and participation. The results broaden the scope of conflict governance scholarship beyond political contexts by highlighting that universities are vital environments where governance dynamics shape the trajectories of conflict. Furthermore, the findings indicate that sustainable industrial relations rely less on sporadic dispute resolution and more on the establishment of governance systems that can avert conflict, bolster organisational resilience, and encourage enduring cooperation among university administrators, staff unions, and government.

Policy and Practical Implications

The results carry significant implications for the governance of higher education and public policy. At the policy level, it is essential for governments and university governing bodies to focus on governance reforms that embed transparency, accountability, participatory decision-making, and the prompt execution of negotiated agreements as fundamental principles of university administration. Additionally, regulatory frameworks should

mandate the establishment of permanent joint consultative committees and institutional early warning systems that can detect and address emerging grievances before they escalate into industrial disputes. In practice, university administrators ought to embrace collaborative leadership strategies that foster ongoing dialogue, procedural fairness, and mutual trust with staff unions. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives focused on negotiation, conflict governance, and consensus-building should be incorporated into the development of university management and union leadership. The implementation of these strategies would enhance institutional legitimacy, bolster organisational trust, mitigate recurring industrial conflicts, and improve the stability and effectiveness of public universities.

Areas of Further Studies

Future research should validate the proposed integrated conflict governance framework through comparative and longitudinal studies across diverse public universities. Employing quantitative and mixed-methods approaches may yield more profound insights into the causal relationships between governance quality, organisational trust, institutional legitimacy, and conflict outcomes in various national and institutional contexts.

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