

DIALOGUE AND THE MANAGEMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT IN UNION– ADMINISTRATION RELATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: Institutional conflict between university administrations and staff unions remains a persistent challenge to effective governance and industrial relations in Nigerian public universities, despite the existence of formal mechanisms for dialogue and dispute resolution. Existing scholarship has largely examined strikes, collective bargaining and industrial disputes, with comparatively limited attention to the institutional conditions that determine whether dialogue produces durable conflict management or merely temporary settlement. This study therefore examined the dynamics of union–administration conflict and the conditions under which dialogue contributes to sustainable conflict management in selected public universities in Southwestern Nigeria. Adopting Rahim’s Conflict Management Theory, with a qualitative multiple-case study design, the study drew on key informant and in-depth interviews with university administrators and union officials, supported by documentary evidence. Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns of conflict emergence, escalation, dialogue, negotiation and settlement. The findings demonstrate that institutional pressures, perceived injustice, communication failures and declining trust interact to generate conflict escalation. Dialogue was effective only when supported by meaningful participation, reciprocal recognition, procedural fairness, trust, substantive negotiation and credible implementation of agreements. Where implementation

was weak, dialogue frequently produced temporary settlement followed by renewed grievances and conflict recurrence. The study consequently advances the proposition that dialogue is a conditional rather than automatic conflict-management mechanism. Its principal contribution is to shift analytical attention from the achievement of negotiated settlement to the institutional conditions required for sustaining it, providing a basis for strengthening preventive dialogue, participatory governance and agreement-monitoring mechanisms in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: *University Governance; Union–Administration Relations; Institutional Conflict; Social Dialogue; Conflict management; Nigerian Public Universities.*

1. Introduction

Institutional conflict is an enduring feature of organisational life because institutions bring together actors with different interests, expectations, responsibilities, values and sources of authority. Universities particularly exemplify this complexity, encompassing administrators, academic and non-academic staff, governing councils, governments, students and organised labour. Their interests may converge on some issues while diverging on others. Conflict is therefore not inherently dysfunctional; when managed through legitimate and constructive processes, it can expose institutional weaknesses, stimulate learning and create opportunities for organisational adjustment. The critical issue is consequently not the elimination of conflict, but the capacity to manage competing interests without allowing disagreement to escalate into sustained institutional disruption.

In public universities, conflict becomes particularly difficult to manage when structural grievances intersect with power asymmetries, weak communication and declining trust. Dialogue can interrupt escalation by providing an arena for articulating grievances, negotiating competing interests and seeking accommodation. However, its effectiveness depends on meaningful participation, procedural fairness, mutual trust and credible implementation of negotiated outcomes (Akoma, 2024). Where these conditions are absent, dialogue may contain immediate confrontation without adequately addressing the underlying issues, allowing conflict to recur. This distinction shifts analytical attention from the mere existence of dialogue to the conditions that determine whether it facilitates effective conflict management or produces only temporary settlement.

Dialogue, understood within organisational and labour relations as negotiation, consultation and information exchange among representative actors, is increasingly recognised as an important component of effective institutional relations (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2024). Its value lies not simply in facilitating communication but in creating opportunities for actors with competing interests to articulate grievances, negotiate differences and reach mutually acceptable arrangements. Collective bargaining similarly institutionalises negotiation over employment relations and conditions of work, with effectiveness dependent on good-faith engagement, constructive negotiation, avoidance of unnecessary delays and respect for agreements reached (ILO, 2024). From a Conflict Management Theory perspective (Rahim, 2002), dialogue is therefore a process through which incompatible interests can be addressed constructively rather than necessarily eliminated. Its effectiveness depends on whether participation is meaningful, differences can be negotiated, trust is maintained and commitments are implemented. Otherwise, engagement may reduce immediate confrontation without adequately managing the underlying incompatibilities.

These issues are particularly significant in African higher education, where universities operate amid resource constraints, state intervention, changing labour relations, governance challenges and competing organisational interests. Persistent conflict can disrupt academic activities, delay graduation, contribute to staff attrition and generate wider socio-economic consequences for students and host communities (Akoma, 2024; Akoma & Ijioma, 2026). In Nigeria, public universities operate within overlapping relationships involving governing councils, government authorities and organised labour. Major unions, including the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), Non-Academic Staff Union of Educational and Associated Institutions (NASU) and National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT), represent distinct occupational interests and possess substantial collective bargaining capacity. Disputes consequently arise around remuneration, conditions of service, institutional autonomy, funding, staff welfare, leadership, governance and implementation of negotiated commitments. Existing evidence suggests that industrial conflict remains recurrent and that administrative responses, including mediation and participatory decision-making, have important implications for institutional effectiveness (Ajewole & Olaifa, 2021; Nein & Oyinmiebi, 2024).

The persistence of conflict despite formal bargaining and dispute-resolution mechanisms raises a central question: under what conditions does dialogue actually manage institutional conflict? The recent Federal Government–ASUU experience illustrates this problem. Following prolonged negotiations, the Federal Government and ASUU formalised a renegotiated agreement in January 2026, presenting it as an important basis for restoring industrial harmony and strengthening the Nigerian university system (Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation [FMINO], 2026a). Yet the subsequent establishment of an implementation-monitoring committee comprising government and ASUU representatives indicates that reaching agreement does not necessarily constitute conflict resolution. In June 2026, the National Universities Commission reported the inauguration of a committee to monitor implementation, address emerging issues and support dispute prevention (National Universities Commission [NUC], 2026). This highlights the distinction between dialogue as an event and dialogue as a sustained process. A negotiated settlement may reduce immediate confrontation, but effective conflict management requires continued engagement and credible implementation. Consistent with this, the ILO (2024) notes that social dialogue is weakened when relevant actors are excluded or institutional arrangements lack the capacity to translate participation into meaningful influence.

Existing scholarship on Nigerian higher education has generated substantial knowledge on strikes, collective bargaining, industrial disputes, administrative effectiveness and the consequences of union conflicts for university operations (Ajewole & Olaifa, 2021; Nein & Oyinmiebi, 2024). However, less attention has been paid to how dialogue functions within the day-to-day management of union–administration conflict and why its outcomes vary. The recurrence of disputes despite established consultation and negotiation structures suggests that the existence of dialogue does not guarantee effective conflict management. The central puzzle is therefore not whether unions and administrations engage in dialogue, but why dialogue facilitates accommodation in some circumstances while postponing renewed confrontation in others. Addressing this requires attention to inclusiveness, trust, procedural fairness, participation, negotiation and implementation.

This study addresses this gap by examining dialogue and institutional conflict management in union–administration relations across four public universities in South-West Nigeria: the

University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Lagos State University and Olabisi Onabanjo University. Using an exploratory qualitative case-study design, the study draws on interviews with university administrators and union leaders to examine how conflicts emerge and evolve, how dialogue is initiated and structured, how competing interests are negotiated, and how agreements and unresolved issues are subsequently managed. Conflict Management Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation, while Social Dialogue and Collaborative Governance offer complementary perspectives for examining participation, negotiation, institutional relationships and joint problem-solving.

The study makes three contributions. First, it extends Conflict Management Theory to university labour relations by demonstrating that dialogue can provide a structured means of managing incompatible interests through recognition, communication, negotiation, accommodation and problem-solving. Second, it provides comparative qualitative evidence from public universities in South-West Nigeria, contributing to the relatively limited literature on conflict management in higher-education institutions in the Global South. Third, it identifies the institutional conditions that distinguish substantive dialogue from procedural engagement. The central argument is that dialogue becomes effective not simply because actors meet or negotiate, but when it enables meaningful participation, recognition, procedural fairness, mutual trust, accommodation of competing interests and credible implementation. Sustainable union–administration relations therefore depend not on eliminating disagreement, but on strengthening the processes through which competing interests are constructively managed and negotiated outcomes translated into sustained institutional practice.

Research Questions

The study was guided by three research questions:

1. How do institutional factors shape the emergence and escalation of conflict between university administrations and staff unions in selected public universities in South-West Nigeria?
2. How does dialogue operate as a mechanism for managing conflict in union–administration relations, and what conditions influence its effectiveness?

3. How do the implementation of negotiated agreements and continued engagement influence the sustainability or recurrence of institutional conflict?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Institutional Conflict and University Governance

Institutional conflict in higher education arises from competing interests, expectations, responsibilities and sources of authority within complex organisational structures. Universities are particularly susceptible because academic autonomy, managerial authority, professional interests, employee representation and public accountability coexist within the same institutional environment. Conflict may concern policies and conditions of service, decision-making, resource allocation, interpersonal relations or competing claims to institutional authority. It is therefore not inherently dysfunctional; its consequences depend on how institutional arrangements shape the recognition, negotiation and management of incompatible interests. Conflict Management Theory consequently treats conflict as an enduring organisational condition whose effects depend on how competing interests are managed (Rahim, 2002).

This perspective shifts attention from conflict as an isolated disagreement to the conditions shaping its trajectory. Inclusive decision-making, transparent communication and credible grievance mechanisms can keep disagreements within manageable institutional boundaries, whereas concentrated authority, restricted participation, weak accountability and unresolved grievances can intensify distrust and confrontation. Governance is therefore not merely the context of conflict; it can influence whether conflict is contained, escalated or constructively managed.

Evidence from Nigerian universities supports this relationship. Ajewole and Olaifa (2021), examining public universities in South-West Nigeria, identified staff welfare as a significant source of industrial conflict and participatory decision-making and mediation among management responses. Their study establishes an important relationship between institutional practices and conflict management, but focuses principally on conflict sources and responses rather than how governance conditions shape conflict trajectories. The present study therefore extends this inquiry from why conflict occurs to how institutional arrangements influence its development and management.

2.2 Union–Administration Relations and Industrial Conflict in Nigerian Universities

Union–administration relations are central to public university governance because managerial authority interacts continuously with collective employee interests. Collective bargaining provides an institutional mechanism through which these interests can be negotiated rather than pursued through unilateral decisions or industrial action. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2022) identifies collective bargaining as a structured mechanism for negotiating employment relations, while effective worker representation and freedom of association provide foundations for legitimate bargaining. More recently, the ILO (2024) has emphasised social dialogue as a means of promoting inclusive decision-making and negotiated solutions where representative actors can meaningfully influence outcomes.

Nevertheless, formal unions and bargaining structures do not automatically produce cooperative relations. University administrations exercise authority over policies, resources and institutional decisions, while unions pursue collective interests through representation, negotiation and, where bargaining fails, collective action (Akoma, 2024). This creates an inherent institutional tension rather than necessarily an antagonistic relationship. Conflict becomes more difficult to manage when either party perceives that its interests, authority or legitimacy is being disregarded.

Disputes over conditions of service, welfare, workload, resource allocation and institutional policies can consequently become linked to wider perceptions of exclusion and unfairness. Delayed communication or inconsistent implementation may further transform substantive disagreements into disputes over institutional credibility. Union–administration relations should therefore be understood as an ongoing governance relationship in which disagreement is inevitable, but escalation can potentially be managed through representative engagement, negotiation and credible institutional processes. The ILO (2024) accordingly stresses representative participation, freedom of association, effective collective bargaining and institutional capacity to translate participation into meaningful influence. The quality of these relations consequently depends not simply on formal structures but on their capacity to facilitate recognition, participation, communication, negotiation and credible commitments.

2.3 Social Dialogue, Negotiation and Conflict Management

Dialogue provides an important institutional mechanism for managing disagreement because it creates opportunities for communication, consultation, negotiation, clarification of interests and joint problem-solving (Akoma, 2024). Within labour relations, social dialogue encompasses negotiation, consultation and information exchange among representative actors concerning matters of common interest (ILO, 2024). Its significance lies in providing channels through which competing interests can be articulated and negotiated rather than translated directly into confrontation. The ILO (2022) similarly identifies collective bargaining as an important mechanism through which workers and employers participate in shaping employment relations.

However, dialogue should not automatically be equated with effective conflict management. Meetings, consultation structures and bargaining forums may exist without providing meaningful influence. Dialogue can become symbolic where participation occurs without substantive consideration of participants' interests, or procedural where meetings take place but underlying grievances remain unresolved. Its effectiveness may also be weakened where trust is low or previous commitments have not been implemented.

The key analytical distinction is therefore between the existence and effectiveness of dialogue. Dialogue provides a process for managing disagreement, but its capacity to do so depends on whether actors can articulate interests, access relevant information, negotiate differences and reasonably expect that outcomes will influence subsequent institutional action. From a Conflict Management Theory perspective, its value lies in enabling actors to manage incompatible interests through constructive interaction rather than necessarily eliminating disagreement (Rahim, 2002). Dialogue becomes consequential when it moves actors from positional confrontation towards negotiation, accommodation and problem-solving.

2.4 Trust, Participation and Procedural Fairness in Dialogue

The effectiveness of dialogue is shaped by the conditions under which interaction occurs. Participation, recognition, procedural fairness, communication and trust are therefore interconnected rather than independent factors determining whether dialogue is experienced as legitimate and productive.

Meaningful participation enables affected actors to articulate interests and influence decisions. Recognition is equally important because cooperation is difficult where one party perceives that its institutional status or interests are disregarded. Procedural fairness influences whether actors accept negotiated outcomes, particularly when agreements require compromise rather than complete satisfaction of initial demands. Trust connects these conditions across time: honoured commitments can strengthen confidence in subsequent negotiations, whereas repeated non-implementation, inconsistent communication or perceived exclusion can weaken it. The ILO (2024) similarly emphasises representative institutions capable of meaningful participation and sustained engagement.

Trust should therefore be understood not simply as an individual attitude but as an institutional resource accumulated through repeated interactions and credible conduct. Dialogue is more likely to facilitate constructive conflict management when recognition, participation, fairness, communication and trust reinforce one another. Where these conditions are weak, dialogue may reduce immediate confrontation without resolving the institutional and relational conditions sustaining conflict. This provides an important basis for explaining why similar dialogue mechanisms can produce different outcomes across institutional settings.

2.5 Negotiated Agreements, Implementation and Conflict Recurrence

A significant limitation in discussions of dialogue and conflict management is the tendency to treat negotiated agreement as the endpoint. Yet negotiation, settlement, implementation and sustainable conflict management are analytically distinct. An agreement may be reached without being implemented, while implementation itself does not necessarily eliminate the conditions that generated the original dispute.

Implementation is important because it converts negotiated commitments into credible institutional action. Where agreements are implemented, monitored and followed by continued engagement, they can strengthen confidence in institutional processes and reduce the likelihood of recurring grievances. Conversely, delayed, partial or weak implementation can reproduce the original grievance while generating an additional

grievance concerning institutional credibility. The post-agreement period is therefore a constitutive phase of conflict management rather than an administrative stage external to it.

Existing scholarship provides conceptual support for this distinction. Metz et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of trust and stakeholder relationships in implementation, while Prorok and Cil (2022) demonstrate the significance of credible commitments for implementing negotiated agreements. Joshi (2023) similarly highlights implementation as important to the durability of negotiated settlements. Although these studies examine different conflict and institutional contexts, they provide a broader conceptual basis for understanding why negotiated commitments require continuing institutional support to become durable outcomes.

For university conflict management, the implication is clear: agreement without implementation can reproduce the grievance it was intended to resolve. Sustainable conflict management therefore requires movement from negotiation to implementation, monitoring and continued engagement. This conceptual distinction provides the foundation for examining whether dialogue in Nigerian public universities produces durable accommodation or merely temporary containment.

2.6 Empirical and Theoretical Gap

The literature establishes that institutional conflict is inherent in complex organisations, while union–administration relations provide an arena for negotiating competing interests through dialogue and collective bargaining. It further indicates that participation, recognition, procedural fairness, trust and implementation shape the quality and durability of institutional interaction. However, an important gap remains. Scholarship on Nigerian university labour relations has examined industrial disputes, strikes, staff welfare, collective bargaining, management responses and conflict consequences. Ajewole and Olaifa (2021), for instance, demonstrate the prevalence of industrial conflict and the relevance of participatory decision-making and mediation in public universities in South-West Nigeria. Less attention, however, has been given to how institutional conditions shape conflict trajectories through dialogue and negotiation, and why some negotiated outcomes endure while others generate renewed grievances and confrontation.

More specifically, existing scholarship has insufficiently connected governance conditions, dialogue, negotiated settlement and implementation. This limits the understanding of how governance failures or resource pressures generate grievances, how communication and trust shape dialogue, how dialogue produces negotiated agreements, and how implementation determines whether settlements endure. This study addresses the gap by examining conflict as a process embedded in institutional governance and managed through continuing interaction, rather than as an episodic industrial event. Conflict Management Theory provides the primary theoretical foundation, complemented by Social Dialogue and Collaborative Governance perspectives on participation, negotiation, trust and joint problem-solving. The study therefore examines when dialogue becomes effective, how agreements are implemented, and how weak implementation can reproduce conflict.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Conflict Management Theory, which was principally developed by Afzalur Rahim, building on earlier work with Thomas V. Bonoma (1979) on the diagnosis and intervention of organisational conflict. Rahim (2002) conceptualises organisational conflict as an interactive process involving incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance among individuals and groups, arguing that conflict should not necessarily be eliminated but diagnosed and managed according to its nature, intensity and consequences. Effective conflict management therefore requires appropriate interventions that reduce destructive affective conflict while allowing constructive disagreement to contribute to organisational learning and effectiveness.

Rahim identifies five principal approaches to handling conflict-integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising- with their appropriateness depending on the nature of the conflict and the interests of the parties involved (Rahim, 2002). Particularly relevant to this study is the integrating approach, which emphasises open communication, information exchange and joint problem-solving. From this perspective, dialogue can provide an institutional process through which conflicting parties clarify grievances, negotiate interests, develop mutually acceptable solutions and prevent escalation. However, dialogue is unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes where power asymmetries, distrust, exclusion or non-implementation of agreements undermine the process.

Applied to this study, Conflict Management Theory provides a framework for examining how dialogue functions in managing union–administration conflict, the strategies employed by university actors, and the institutional conditions that determine whether dialogue produces accommodation or merely postpones renewed confrontation. It therefore directly connects the theory to the study's central concern: understanding when dialogue becomes an effective mechanism for managing institutional conflict in South-West Nigerian public universities.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how dialogue facilitates the management of institutional conflict in union–administration relations in public universities in South-West Nigeria. A qualitative case-study approach is appropriate for investigating complex institutional processes within their real-world contexts and for understanding how actors interpret, negotiate and respond to conflict (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Guided by Conflict Management Theory (Rahim, 2002), the study examined dialogue through participation, negotiation, trust, procedural fairness, power relations and implementation.

Four public universities, including the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Lagos State University and Olabisi Onabanjo University, were purposively selected to provide comparative institutional variation within a common regional setting. Sixty-four participants with direct experience of union–administration relations were purposively 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. Documentary evidence, including institutional policies, collective agreements, communiqués and relevant correspondence, complemented the interviews and strengthened data triangulation.

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach. Analysis focused on conflict emergence, dialogue initiation, participation, negotiation, trust, power relations, agreement implementation and conflict recurrence, followed by cross-case comparison to identify similarities and differences. Triangulation across participant categories, cases and documentary sources enhanced credibility and

dependability. Ethical procedures included informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and participants' right to withdraw. The methodology was designed to establish how and under what institutional conditions dialogue facilitates effective management of union–administration conflict rather than merely postponing its recurrence.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Institutional Pressures, Grievance, Communication Failure, Distrust and Escalation

Participants consistently identified limited participation in decision-making as an important source of dissatisfaction, particularly regarding staff welfare, conditions of service and institutional policies. Union representatives associated legitimate governance with meaningful participation, whereas administrators emphasised timely decision-making and institutional efficiency. A union leader explained: “There are occasions when decisions affecting staff are already concluded before the union is invited to a meeting. By then, consultation becomes more about informing us than actually seeking our views.” (KII/UL/UI/2026) The concern was therefore not consultation itself but the absence of substantive influence. An administrator offered a contrasting perspective: “Management cannot subject every administrative decision to prolonged consultation because the university has to continue functioning. Some decisions require timely action, even though the unions may not initially agree.” (IDI/UA/OAU/2026) These accounts reveal tension between participatory legitimacy and administrative discretion. Consistent with Rahim's (2002) Conflict Management Theory, the significance lies not in disagreement itself but in how incompatible interests are managed. Jameson et al. (2022) similarly highlight the importance of trust and organisational relationships in higher education. The present evidence extends these insights by showing that inadequate participation constituted an early-stage grievance, creating conditions in which disagreement became increasingly difficult to manage.

Resource constraints constituted another significant pressure, encompassing funding, staff welfare, remuneration, workload, conditions of service and resource allocation. However, scarcity alone did not generate conflict; its significance depended on perceptions of fairness, entitlement and institutional responsibility. A union executive stated: “The issue is not always that resources are completely unavailable; the concern is whether the resources available to the university are being distributed fairly and whether staff priorities receive

adequate attention.” (KII/UL/UI/2026) This shifted the grievance from absolute scarcity towards distributive fairness. Management offered a contrasting explanation: “Sometimes management is blamed for issues that are actually determined by government funding and broader financial limitations. We have commitments to staff, but our ability to meet them depends on resources available.” (IDI/UA/OOU/2026) The accounts reveal competing constructions of responsibility, with unions emphasising fairness and management highlighting external constraints. Ajewole and Olaifa (2021) similarly identify staff welfare and institutional conditions as relevant to conflict management in Nigerian universities, while Gibbs and Kharouf (2022) and Jameson et al. (2022) emphasise cooperation and trust in higher education relationships. Through Rahim’s (2002) Conflict Management Theory, the significance of resource scarcity lies in how competing interests are managed. The present findings suggest that transparent communication and participation could keep resource disputes negotiable, whereas perceived inequity and inadequate engagement intensified grievances.

Furthermore, communication failure emerged as a critical mechanism connecting existing grievances to distrust and subsequent mobilisation. Participants reported delayed information, contradictory messages and inadequate communication regarding issues affecting staff. A union participant explained: “When management does not communicate clearly or delays information on issues affecting staff, rumours begin to replace official information, and this creates suspicion before the union can even engage management.” (IDI/UL/LASU/2026) A management participant similarly observed: “Some disagreements become bigger because information does not reach the unions at the appropriate time, and by the time clarification comes, the issue has already generated considerable mistrust.” (IDI/UA/OOU/2026) The accounts converge on the importance of communication timing and clarity. Okotoni and Kugbayi (2024) identify communication gaps as a dimension of conflict in Nigerian universities, while Gibbs and Kharouf (2022) emphasise cooperative organisational relationships and Jameson et al. (2022) highlight trust in higher education. From Rahim’s (2002) Conflict Management Theory, communication shaped how incompatible interests were interpreted and managed. The findings indicate that distrust developed cumulatively from perceived exclusion, inadequate responses and uncertainty, eventually making mobilisation more likely when conventional mechanisms appeared ineffective. Snyman et al. (2023) similarly connect

organisational justice and trust in higher education relationships. The present evidence therefore positions mobilisation not as isolated union militancy but as a later outcome of accumulated governance and relational failures.

The findings indicate that unresolved grievances and communication failures progressively weakened trust in union–management relations. Distrust emerged not as an independent cause of conflict but as an accumulated consequence of perceived exclusion, inadequate responses, delayed information and uncertainty regarding decisions and agreements. Once established, however, it altered how subsequent actions were interpreted, with management decisions attracting greater suspicion and union mobilisation potentially being viewed as confrontation. Jameson et al. (2022) identify trust as important to higher education relationships, while Snyman et al. (2023) link organisational justice and trust with employee relationships. These studies provide conceptual context rather than empirical confirmation of the escalation sequence identified here. The present evidence shows that mobilisation occurred when conventional institutional mechanisms were increasingly perceived as inadequate. From Rahim's (2002) Conflict Management Theory, mobilisation therefore represented a later manifestation of poorly managed incompatible interests rather than the starting point of conflict. The findings suggest that institutional pressures generated grievances, inadequate communication fostered distrust, and accumulated distrust increased the likelihood of mobilisation and confrontation. However, this sequence was not deterministic; escalation became more likely where grievances persisted without credible institutional responses. The study consequently positions collective mobilisation as a cumulative outcome of governance and relational failures rather than isolated union militancy.

The findings further demonstrate that confrontation was not necessarily the endpoint of institutional conflict. Dialogue created opportunities for parties to clarify positions, renegotiate interests and pursue settlement, but its effectiveness depended on whether underlying grievances were substantively addressed. The conflict trajectory therefore extended from institutional pressures and grievances through communication failure, distrust, mobilisation and confrontation to dialogue, followed by either settlement or renewed conflict. This processual pattern aligns with Rahim's (2002) Conflict Management Theory, which emphasises managing incompatible interests rather than merely suppressing

their visible manifestations. It also resonates with scholarship emphasising trust, cooperation and organisational relationships in higher education (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022; Jameson et al., 2022). The present evidence, however, shows that formal mechanisms alone were insufficient: their effectiveness depended on timing, credibility, inclusiveness and implementation. Where dialogue addressed underlying grievances and produced credible commitments, settlement could become durable; where agreements were poorly implemented, or institutional pressures persisted, conflict could recur. Thus, the central empirical finding is that institutional conflict was processual rather than episodic. From the study's perspective, effective conflict management must therefore intervene before confrontation by strengthening inclusive governance, transparent communication, credible grievance mechanisms and continuous dialogue. The objective is not merely to settle conflict after escalation but to interrupt the process through which grievance becomes distrust, and distrust becomes confrontation.

4.2 Dialogue as a Conditional Mechanism of Conflict Management

The findings indicate that dialogue was more effective when unions were recognised as legitimate institutional stakeholders and engaged before grievances escalated. A union participant stated: "When management is willing to sit down with the union early enough, many issues can be explained and clarified before they become major disputes. The problem comes when engagement starts after confrontation." (KII/UL/OAU/2026) This positions early recognition as a form of preventive conflict management rather than merely a response to established conflict. Similarly, an administrator observed: "Dialogue allows both sides to explain their position directly rather than relying on assumptions. Sometimes simply understanding why a decision was taken can reduce the tension considerably." (KII/UA/UI/2026) The accounts suggest that recognition created institutional space for meaningful participation and clarification before positions hardened. Jameson et al. (2022) emphasise trust in higher education relationships, while Gibbs and Kharouf (2022) highlight cooperation and organisational relationships. These studies provide conceptual context rather than direct confirmation of the present cases. From Rahim's (2002) Conflict Management Theory, the findings suggest that dialogue becomes constructive when parties have legitimate opportunities to articulate and manage incompatible interests. Thus,

dialogue begins before the meeting itself: recognition and timely participation shape whether engagement develops cooperatively or becomes reactive and adversarial.

Also, the findings show that productive dialogue depended on transparent communication, reciprocal explanation and sufficient relational trust to support negotiation. The administrator explained:

“Dialogue allows both sides to explain their position directly rather than relying on assumptions. Sometimes simply understanding why a decision was taken can reduce the tension considerably.” **(KII/UA/UI/2026)** This indicates that dialogue enabled reciprocal rather than merely unilateral communication, allowing competing interpretations to be clarified. A union representative similarly stated: “We do not always expect management to accept everything we demand. What matters is that they listen, explain their position and negotiate with us until something acceptable to both sides are reached.” **(KII/UL/OOU/2026)** An administrator reinforced this process: “Successful negotiations require both parties to make adjustments. Management may not be able to grant everything requested, but there are usually areas where we can compromise and prevent the matter from escalating.” **(IDI/UA/LASU/2026)**

These accounts indicate that negotiation was the substantive mechanism through which dialogue transformed competing positions into manageable interests. Jameson et al. (2022) link trust with higher education relationships, while Snyman et al. (2023) connect organisational justice and trust. Consistent with Rahim’s (2002) Conflict Management Theory, the present evidence suggests that effective dialogue did not require complete consensus but depended on information exchange, willingness to adjust positions and accommodation. Dialogue was therefore both a communication process and a test of institutional reliability, with each interaction capable of strengthening or weakening trust.

Despite its positive functions, the findings reveal that dialogue could produce only temporary de-escalation where participation was delayed, symbolic, or negotiated commitments were inadequately implemented. A union participant explained: “The difficulty is sometimes not reaching an agreement but seeing the agreement implemented. When commitments made during meetings are not followed through, the same grievance returns and the union loses confidence.” **(IDI/UL/OAU/2026)**

An administrator, however, acknowledged: “There are agreements that management genuinely intends to implement, but implementation may depend on funding, government approval or other processes beyond the immediate control of university management.” (IDI/UA/UI/2026)

These accounts reveal contrasting interpretations: unions could regard delayed implementation as non-compliance, whereas management might perceive it as an institutional constraint. Consequently, negotiated agreements could become new sites of contestation when implementation was delayed without credible explanation. Snyman et al. (2023) highlight organisational justice and trust, while Jameson et al. (2022) emphasise trust in higher education relationships. From a Conflict Management Theory perspective, the findings indicate that agreement does not necessarily constitute resolution; implementation determines whether negotiated outcomes acquire institutional credibility. The empirically observed sequence—agreement, weak implementation, renewed grievance and declining confidence—demonstrates that dialogue has a temporal dimension. Its effectiveness must therefore be assessed beyond the meeting itself. Where commitments were implemented, dialogue could support durable settlement; where implementation remained weak or inadequately explained, it risked postponing rather than resolving conflict.

Still more, the findings demonstrate that dialogue functioned as a conditional rather than universally effective mechanism of conflict management. Its effectiveness depended on recognition, meaningful participation, transparent and reciprocal communication, willingness to negotiate and accommodate competing interests, and credible implementation. Participants’ accounts indicate that dialogue was consequential not simply because management and unions met, but because it created opportunities for recognition, communication, negotiation and joint problem-solving. This resonates with Jameson et al. (2022), who emphasise trust in higher education staff relationships, and Gibbs and Kharouf (2022), who highlight cooperation and organisational relationship quality. From a Conflict Governance Theory perspective, dialogue becomes effective when institutional processes enable actors to participate meaningfully, negotiate competing interests and translate agreements into credible action. The findings further demonstrate that dialogue should not be equated with conflict resolution: it could de-escalate confrontation while leaving

underlying grievances unresolved. Implementation therefore emerged as the critical bridge between dialogue and durable conflict management. Where commitments were implemented, negotiated outcomes could strengthen trust by demonstrating that participation had tangible institutional consequences. Conversely, delayed or symbolic dialogue could produce temporary containment, weak implementation, renewed grievances and recurrent conflict. The study therefore shifts analytical attention from whether dialogue occurs to its quality, timing, inclusiveness and consequences. Dialogue became transformative when it moved beyond procedural engagement to generate credible institutional action addressing underlying grievances. This finding reinforces the study's position that effective conflict management requires not merely mechanisms for engagement but institutional conditions capable of converting dialogue into sustainable outcomes.

4.3 Inclusive Participation, Recognition and the Legitimacy of Settlement

The findings indicate that sustainable negotiated outcomes depended partly on recognising unions as legitimate stakeholders and providing meaningful opportunities for participation. A union representative explained: "The union does not expect to control the university, but we expect management to recognise that we represent staff and that our views should be considered when decisions directly affect our members." (KII/UL/OOU/2026) Similarly, a management participant observed: "Where unions are brought into discussions early, and their concerns are properly considered, it becomes easier to explain management decisions and prevent unnecessary misunderstanding." (IDI/UA/UI/2026) The accounts converge on early engagement, although unions emphasised substantive recognition while management stressed communication and reduced misunderstanding. Jameson et al. (2022) highlight trust in higher education relationships, while Gibbs and Kharouf (2022) emphasise cooperation and organisational relationship quality. From a Conflict Governance Theory perspective, participation enhances the legitimacy of conflict-management processes by giving affected actors meaningful voice. The findings further suggest that sustainability depended not simply on the outcome but on whether parties regarded the process as procedurally fair. Snyman et al. (2023) similarly connect organisational justice with trust in higher education. Thus, recognition and procedural fairness increased willingness to accept

compromise and remain engaged, whereas symbolic participation weakened legitimacy and could undermine the durability of agreements.

Trust emerged as a critical link between negotiated agreements and sustainable conflict management. Participants indicated that willingness to engage constructively in subsequent negotiations was shaped by previous experiences, particularly whether earlier commitments had been honoured. A union participant explained: “When previous agreements have not been honoured, the union enters subsequent meetings with suspicion because members believe that another agreement may also remain on paper without implementation.” (IDI/UL/OAU/2026). A management participant offered a complementary perspective: “Trust has to be built on both sides. Management must keep its commitments, but unions must also engage constructively and recognise the limitations within which the university operates.” (KII/UA/LASU/2026). These accounts position trust as reciprocal and experience-based: implementation can strengthen confidence in subsequent agreements, while non-implementation undermines their credibility. Metz et al. (2022) similarly show that trusting relationships among implementation stakeholders can facilitate implementation, while Prorok and Cil (2022) demonstrate the relevance of credible commitments to implementation in peace-agreement contexts. Although these studies concern different settings, they provide useful analytical context for the present finding. From Conflict Governance Theory, agreement becomes sustainable when parties perceive institutional commitments as credible and reciprocal. Thus, trust functioned simultaneously as an antecedent and outcome of successful implementation, shaping expectations about future negotiations while being reinforced through credible institutional action.

The strongest evidence concerned the transition from agreement to implementation. Participants indicated that reaching an agreement did not necessarily resolve conflict; rather, implementation tested the credibility of negotiated settlement. A union participant stated: “Dialogue should not end when the meeting closes. There should be a mechanism for following up what was agreed, because without monitoring and continued communication, misunderstandings can quickly return.” (KII/UL/UI/2026). Similarly, an administrator explained: “Some matters require several levels of approval before implementation, so continuous engagement is necessary to keep both parties informed

about what has been done and what remains outstanding.” (IDI/UA/LASU/2026). These accounts show that delayed implementation was not always deliberate, but that inadequate communication could cause administrative constraints to be interpreted as abandonment or bad faith. Metz et al. (2022) emphasise relationships and trust in sustaining implementation, while Prorok and Cil (2022) highlight credible commitment and Karreth et al. (2023) identify institutional obstacles affecting negotiated agreements over time. From a Conflict Governance Theory perspective, monitoring and continued engagement are integral to conflict management because they connect negotiated commitments to institutional action. The findings therefore position implementation as the critical test of settlement, while monitoring functions as a mechanism of accountability and institutional memory. Where progress, delays and outstanding commitments are transparently communicated, implementation gaps can remain manageable; where they are neglected, unresolved commitments can become renewed grievances and undermine the sustainability of negotiated outcomes.

The findings show that weak implementation could reproduce the conditions that generated conflict by allowing delayed, partial or unresolved commitments to return to the bargaining agenda. A union participant explained: “When previous agreements have not been honoured, the union enters subsequent meetings with suspicion because members believe that another agreement may also remain on paper without implementation.” (IDI/UL/OAU/2026). Non-implementation therefore affected both the original grievance and the credibility of subsequent negotiations, producing a cumulative process in which weak implementation reduced confidence, renewed grievances and made future negotiation more difficult. This finding accords with scholarship demonstrating the importance of implementation for settlement durability. Joshi’s work links implementation to peace durability, while Joshi and Quinn show that implementation extent has implications for the duration of peace. Prorok and Cil (2022) similarly demonstrate the importance of credible commitments for implementation. Although these studies concern peace agreements rather than university labour relations, they provide comparative support for the present finding. From a Conflict Governance Theory perspective, negotiated agreement represents only an intermediate stage: sustainability depends on whether commitments are translated into credible institutional action. The present study extends this insight by demonstrating that weak implementation generates both an unresolved substantive grievance and a new

grievance concerning institutional reliability, thereby undermining trust and increasing the likelihood of renewed conflict.

In all, the findings from the four universities reveal a common but differentiated trajectory in which governance deficits, resource pressures, communication failures, perceived unfairness and declining trust generated grievances, while dialogue created opportunities for negotiation and accommodation. The durability of these outcomes, however, depended on implementation, monitoring and continued engagement. Where commitments were implemented and followed up, negotiated outcomes strengthened confidence and reduced the likelihood of renewed grievances. Where implementation was weak, settlement provided only temporary relief, allowing unresolved issues to resurface and reinforcing doubts about future agreements. The findings therefore distinguish settlement from sustainable conflict management: settlement occurs when parties reach an acceptable agreement, whereas sustainability requires that agreement to become institutionally credible through implementation and continued engagement. This interpretation is consistent with Metz et al. (2022), who emphasise trusting relationships in implementation, Prorok and Cil (2022), who demonstrate the importance of credible commitments, and Joshi's work on implementation and peace durability. Karreth et al. (2023) further highlight institutional obstacles affecting implementation over time. From Conflict Governance Theory, the evidence indicates that effective conflict management extends beyond agreement to the institutional processes that sustain it. Thus, the sustainable pathway moves from dialogue through negotiation, agreement, implementation and monitoring to continued engagement, whereas weak implementation can produce renewed grievance, declining trust and conflict recurrence.

5. Cross-Case Synthesis - From Agreement to Sustainable Conflict Management

Nevertheless, conflict management in the four identified universities emerged as a continuing institutional process rather than a discrete negotiation event. Governance pressures, resource constraints, communication difficulties and competing interpretations of responsibility generated grievances which, when unresolved, weakened trust. Dialogue provided opportunities to interrupt escalation through recognition, communication and negotiation, but its effectiveness depended on subsequent implementation. Where commitments were implemented and monitored, dialogue facilitated more durable

accommodation; where implementation was weak, it functioned primarily as temporary containment, allowing unresolved grievances to re-emerge. This interpretation is supported by Metz et al. (2022), who emphasise trusting relationships in implementation, Prorok and Cil (2022), who demonstrate the importance of credible commitments, Joshi's work on implementation and peace durability, and Karreth et al. (2023), who highlight institutional challenges affecting implementation. These studies provide analytical support but do not substitute for the present empirical evidence. From a Conflict Governance Theory perspective, the central finding is that agreement should not be treated as the endpoint of conflict management but as the beginning of an implementation phase in which settlement credibility is tested. Implementation demonstrates that commitments are honoured, monitoring establishes accountability, and continued engagement prevents emerging grievances from accumulating. The study therefore positions sustainable conflict management as requiring a post-agreement architecture of implementation, monitoring, accountability and continued dialogue, shifting university conflict management from reactive dispute settlement towards sustained trust-building and relationship maintenance.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrate that institutional conflict is embedded not simply in incompatible union-administration interests but in the quality of governance through which those interests are recognised, negotiated and managed. Exclusionary decision-making, weak accountability, inadequate communication and concentrated authority transformed potentially manageable disagreements into persistent grievances and distrust. This extends Conflict Governance Theory (Kriesberg & Dayton, 2017) by showing that governance arrangements are not merely the context of conflict but can constitute mechanisms of its production and escalation. The findings therefore suggest that effective conflict management must address both manifest disagreements and the institutional conditions that generate and sustain them.

The findings further show that dialogue was conditional rather than inherently transformative. Consistent with Rahim's (2002) Conflict Management Theory, dialogue provides a process through which incompatible interests can be articulated, clarified and negotiated rather than necessarily eliminated. However, its effectiveness depended on meaningful participation, procedural fairness, recognition, trust and credible institutional

responsiveness. Where unions were recognised as legitimate stakeholders and management engaged transparently, dialogue facilitated de-escalation and accommodation; where engagement was delayed, symbolic or inadequately implemented, underlying grievances persisted. This complements the ILO's (2024) emphasis on meaningful worker participation, representative voice and institutional capacity as foundations of effective social dialogue. Thus, dialogue should be understood as a conditional mechanism whose effectiveness depends on the quality, credibility and consequences of engagement.

Most importantly, the findings shift analytical attention from settlement as an endpoint to implementation as a constitutive phase of conflict management. Agreements reduced immediate confrontation, but their durability depended on implementation, monitoring and continued engagement. Unimplemented commitments could reproduce the original grievance while simultaneously generating distrust in institutional reliability; credible implementation, conversely, strengthened confidence in subsequent negotiations. The study therefore advances the sequence governance conditions → grievance → dialogue → negotiation → agreement → implementation → monitoring → continued engagement → sustainable conflict management, while weak implementation could generate renewed grievance, declining trust and confrontation. The central contribution is consequently that sustainable union–administration relations depend not merely on dialogue or agreement, but on institutional capacity to translate negotiated commitments into credible, monitored and sustained practice.

7. Conclusion

This study examined why institutional conflicts persist in union–administration relations in selected public universities in South-West Nigeria despite formal conflict-management mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that conflict is sustained through the interaction of governance weaknesses, perceived injustice, communication failures, distrust and weak implementation. Dialogue can interrupt this process, but only conditionally, through meaningful participation, procedural fairness, recognition, trust, negotiation and credible implementation.

Theoretically, the study extends conflict-management perspectives by demonstrating that dialogue effectiveness is conditioned by the institutional environment within which it

operates. Empirically, it establishes that conflict is processual and potentially cyclical: weak implementation can transform settlement into renewed grievance, declining trust and confrontation. Agreement should therefore not be treated as the endpoint; implementation, monitoring and continued engagement are integral to sustainable conflict management. Practically, universities should institutionalise continuous dialogue, inclusive decision-making, transparent communication, joint problem-solving and mechanisms for monitoring negotiated commitments, while unions should engage constructively within institutional processes. The study is limited by its qualitative focus on selected public universities in South-West Nigeria. Future comparative and longitudinal research could examine how institutional conditions influence the durability of conflict-management outcomes across Nigerian universities.

8. Policy and Practical Implications

The findings indicate that sustainable union–administration relations require an integrated institutional framework combining early grievance management, meaningful participation, transparent communication, credible implementation and strengthened conflict-management capacity. Accordingly, five interrelated policy priorities emerge.

- ❖ **Institutionalise Preventive Social Dialogue.** University Governing Councils and management should establish regular union–administration consultative forums rather than relying predominantly on dialogue after disputes escalate. These forums should enable recognised unions to raise emerging grievances, review contentious policies and negotiate potential disagreements before they develop into industrial confrontation. This would shift conflict management from reactive settlement towards early institutional prevention.
- ❖ **Embed Participatory Governance in Decision-Making.** Vice-Chancellors, senior administrators and Governing Councils should ensure meaningful union participation in decisions affecting workload, staff welfare, conditions of service, restructuring and other employment-related matters. Consultation should occur before, rather than after, decisions are effectively concluded, thereby strengthening procedural legitimacy and reducing perceptions of unilateral governance.

- ❖ Strengthen Communication and Institutional Trust. Universities should establish transparent mechanisms for providing unions with timely information and formal responses to institutional concerns. Major decisions should be clearly communicated, while unresolved issues should be tracked until appropriately addressed. Unions should likewise communicate negotiated positions and agreements accurately to members. Such reciprocal communication can reduce uncertainty and prevent manageable disagreements from developing into distrust and confrontation.
- ❖ Make Implementation and Monitoring Integral to Conflict Management. Management, Governing Councils and recognised unions should jointly monitor negotiated agreements, specifying responsibilities, timelines, implementation requirements and procedures for reviewing outstanding commitments. This is particularly important because the findings demonstrate that agreement does not guarantee sustainable settlement. Weak implementation can revive original grievances and undermine confidence in subsequent negotiations. Implementation should therefore constitute a core phase of conflict management rather than a post-settlement administrative task.
- ❖ Strengthen Institutional Conflict-Management Capacity. University authorities, regulatory bodies and unions should develop competencies in interest-based negotiation, mediation, grievance management, communication, joint problem-solving and agreement monitoring. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and relevant regulatory bodies should encourage minimum institutional standards for social dialogue and agreement implementation.
- ❖ Overall, universities should move from a reactive settlement model to an integrated prevention-and-implementation approach, in which participation generates legitimacy, communication supports trust, dialogue facilitates negotiation, agreements establish obligations and monitoring sustains implementation. This connected institutional architecture offers greater prospects for durable conflict management than episodic responses to recurrent disputes.

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