

LEADERSHIP CONFLICTS AMONG STUDENTS ON NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR, CALABAR- NIGERIA

***Rachel D. Uche and **Odey, Edward Ogar**

*Department of Guidance and Counselling

**Department of Social Science Education

Faculty of Education

University of Calabar

Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *This study examined the factors that give rise to conflicts among students in their pursuit of leadership on the campus of the University of Calabar (UNICAL). Descriptive survey design was used and through stratified random sampling and simple random sampling techniques, a sample size of 250 was derived. Two research questions were raised and a questionnaire tagged, Student Leadership Conflict Scale (SLCS) formed the data collection instrument. Accruing data was analysed using frequencies and percentages. Results indicated (i) high level of conflict among students arising from their pursuit of leadership (ii) financial rewards and other benefits attached to leadership positions as the main motivators of the conflicts experienced. To this end, it was recommended that allowances and other benefits of student leaders be reduced drastically to make it less lucrative and attractive to the greedy grabbing ones among the students.*

KEYWORDS: Conflict, Leadership, Student Unionism, Student Associations, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is the process through which one member of a group influences other group members towards the attainment of shared group goals ((Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 2004). They are therefore found in a variety of context – the family, business, sports team, the military, politics and even politics among students on campus (Bass, 1990). Gleitman et al further asserted that leaders can exert their influence through the mere appeal of their personality (charismatic leaders), by the way they inspire others through their own personal conduct (Mother Theresa) or through imposition and forcing absolute obedience (Hitler).

The great person theory of leadership maintain the view that great leaders possess certain traits that set them apart from most human beings, no matter when and where they live (Baron, 2006). Most social scientist agree that traits do matter where leadership is concerned, nonetheless, different situations require different approaches to leadership, hence, the same set of competencies will not provide adequate leadership in every situation. Conflict is an inevitable component of group dynamics. Whenever human beings interact, conflict is bound to occur because values, goals and aspirations differ among individuals as well as over time (Whetton & Cameron, 2008). Conflict, though, can be a positive force, however, the reality in most cases is that the impact of conflict is negative (Edward & Walton, 2000). It can create such conditions that make it almost impossible for group members to relate one with another (Robbins, 2005).

The positive or negative effect of the conflict and the outcomes may be the consequence of the conflict and the way the conflicts are managed (Liu, Fu & Liu, 2009).

Researchers have viewed conflict on different dimensions – personal, interpersonal, intra group and inter-group conflicts (Adomi & Anie, 2006), and task relationship conflict (Liu et al, 2009). Barki and Hartuck (2001) defined interpersonal conflict as a phenomenon that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals. The main purpose of students on campus is to learn certain things in order to acquire degrees and certificates. Additionally, a good number of them have leadership ambitions and involvement in student government/association politics. Being a highly heterogeneous group, their divergent opinions, tactics, sentiments, resolve and motives towards the achievement of the leadership ambition often lead to conflicts and sometimes, violence. That is to say, the goal of leadership and for political office means different things to different people. Hitherto, in the earlier years of the inception of Nigerian universities, up to the early 90s', there was a convergent goal and that was service to the student body, working for the coming good of all. Student unions were renowned for challenging government on education and other national issues and most importantly, they were credible and conflicts arising therefrom were positive and constructive. For instance, the student unions resisted the annulment of the June 12, 1993 election and that struggle contributed to the restoration of democracy (Ademuwagun, 2015). Campus unions remained strong and credible institutions for a long time, with minimal intra-student conflicts of elections because such election were objective and credible and those elected were in it for the common good of all. However, at some point, the situation changed for the worse and election to student leadership became a violent do-or-die affair.

Researchers have proffered certain contributing factors to the ugly scenario. As Okojie (2012) lamented, the university being a microcosm of the larger Nigerian society, has not been spared from its decadence and corrupting influence. The system therefore cracked and student unionism became an extension of mainstream politics fraught with violence (Adamuwagun, 2015). Acts of electoral violence as described by Ladan (2006) such as thurgery, intimidation, blackmail, use of force to disrupt political meetings, and the use of dangerous weapons to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral process became rampant.

Election rigging and violence have become common place, in addition to aspirants spending huge sums of money, with hopes of recovering same on assumption of office. As Ojo (2014) put it, the use of money in politics and investment mentality that govern parties and elections in Nigeria is one of the root causes of turbulent elections. Rigging, by itself is a predisposing factor to violence because subverting the electoral process through organized fraud engenders rage and violent upheavals during and after elections (Balogun, 2003; Usman, 2009).

Politicians from outside and high office holders from within the universities act as political god-fathers to student leadership aspirants, providing them with money for elections, with ulterior motives. They end up doing their bidding – political thugs, spies and shutting them up from speaking out against their atrocious acts. God-fatherism involves a servant-master relationship, which many agreed, cannot be free of violence, especially when the servant fails to comply with the terms of agreement (Ikuomola & Okunola, 2011). Nonetheless, politics in Nigeria has reached a point where candidates cannot fund elections themselves without recourse to godfatherism (Akinola, 2009).

Poverty also drives students into politics of do-or-die. According to Danjibo & Oladeji (2007), the high spate of deprivation and hopelessness of the Nigerian youths force them to take the readily available *job opportunity*, by crook or by violence. Unionist make enormous amount of money through levies on fellow students, corporate sponsorship, grants from the university management and others. Politics becomes business and the business of politics becomes merely to divert public funds from much needed aspects of development (Okunola & Ikuomola, 2010). State creation, quota system and the attendant majority/minority syndrome has engendered a sense of entitlement to ascendancy to power on campus. Without any iota of doubt, according to Ojo (2014), ethnicity plays a major role in mobilizing electoral support for candidates, hence free, fair and elections devoid of conflict becomes very difficult.

Also, student leaders wield a lot of influence on their peers, though, mostly through coercion and manipulation. University administration, often, capitalize on this and give them lucrative incentives to help them tame their fellow restive students. They are enabled to live in affluence – luxurious accommodation on campus, driving good cars, interacting with the *high* and *mighty* within and outside the campus, winning and dinning with them. The perks of leadership and the ostentatious lifestyle of political office holders is the greatest stimulus for others to do anything possible to win election (Usman, 2009). Since the winner takes it all, election has to be a do-or-die affair (Ojo, 2009).

Furthermore, mechanisms for controlling spending are often lax, university bursars and auditors turn a blind eye and as such corrupt student leaders get away with embezzlement and other corrupt practices. The weak regulatory framework in the use of money coupled with the perks of office have contributed to impunity and violence associated with politicians (Ugoh, 2004). In addition, electoral laws put in place are hardly enforced and impeachment procedures are seldom utilized, thus, electoral offenders go unpunished. Such non enforcement of laws and non-adherence to same in the electoral process promotes violence during elections due to lack of political will by the political class (Aluigba, 2008). When the rule of law is weak, the judicial system becomes ineffective which make the probability of punishment of offenders low, thus creating a fragile and corrupt system (Aiyede, 2007).

Conflict potentials on university campuses are varied. Some of the conflicts boil over and become visible in the form of strikes that may lead to closure of campuses; others are covert, persistent and fester. The objective of students on campus is mainly to spend certain number of years, learning, acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies – empowered to engage productively in chosen careers. However, some of them lose track of that objective and get immersed in student leadership and power tussle that are sometimes marred by violence. The politics of do-or-die practiced by politicians in the larger society and within the university by lecturers for positions of Vice Chancellors, Deans and members of university governing council is beginning to rub off on the students.

Contest for Executives of student union government, student associations of faculties, departments, tribes/clans, local governments, states of origins and even class representatives, often attract a lot of conflict and controversies. It does seem that some of the positions attract so much incentives that some would graduate but stay back on campus and impose themselves as *king makers* (godfathers) – dictating who should hold which office – thereby perpetuating themselves. Thus, increase the likelihood of conflict, tension and strife on campus.

Hence, what is the level of leadership related conflict among students on the University of Calabar (UNICAL) campus? What are the contributing factors to leadership related conflicts among students on UNICAL campus?

The purpose of the study is to investigate the level as well as the factors that contribute to leadership conflicts among students on UNICAL campus. Thus, the following research questions were raised:

1. What is the level of leadership related conflicts among student on UNICAL campus?
2. What are the contributing factors of leadership related conflicts among students on UNICAL campus?

METHODOLOGY

The design of study was the descriptive survey and the population consisted of all students of the University of Calabar (UNICAL). Using the stratified random sampling technique, 5 out of 10 faculties were selected, then 2 departments from each of the 5 faculties were picked and then using the simple random sampling technique, 25 students were selected from each of the departments, giving a sample size of 250. A two-part self-structured questionnaire tagged, *Student Leadership Conflict Scale (SLCS)* formed the instrument for data collection. Section A, sought respondents bio-data information such as age, sex, department/faculty, year of study and leadership position held (if any). Section B sought information on (i) Prevalence of leadership conflict and (ii) factors attributable to leadership conflicts among students on campus. Items were given to other experts for their comments and suggestions thus refining the instrument and establishing its validity. Through the test-retest procedure, a reliability estimate of 0.64 was established for the instrument. Participants were reached through their departments, the instrument was administered by the researcher and three research assistants and the accruing data was analysed using frequency counts and simple percentages.

RESULTS

Research question 1: What is the level of leadership-related conflict among students on UNICAL campus? Analysis was done using frequencies and percentages and the result is presented on Table 1.

Table 1: Level of leadership-related conflicts among students

S/N		High		Moderate		Low	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
	Election and the election process:						
1.	Confrontation between groups	178	71.2	60	24	12	4.8
2.	Intimidation of opponents	150	60	70	28	30	12
3.	Exclusively for the tough guys (the big boys)	164	65.6	50	20	36	14.4
4.	Fraught with tension on campus	136	54.4	66	26.3	48	19.3
5.	Requires lots of money to be an aspirant	182	72.8	40	16	28	11.2
6.	It is only for those who have god-fathers	120	48	60	24	70	28
7.	Some of us stand no chance	202	80.8	38	15.2	10	4
8.	It's made to favour the indigenes	118	47.2	110	44	22	8.8
9.	Fraught with trouble before and after	215	86	10	4	25	10
10	They are seriously rigged	220	88	08	3.2	22	8.8

The result on table 1 indicates higher frequency and percentages on the high column on all 10 items. *Moderate* and *low*, had lower frequencies and percentages. This is a pointer that there is a high level of leadership-related conflict among students on UNICAL campus.

Research question 2: What are the contributing factors of leadership-related conflicts among students on UNICAL campus. Analysis was carried out using frequencies and percentages and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Contributing factors of leadership-related conflicts among students

S/N		Agree		Disagree	
		N	%	N	%
	Leadership positions				
1.	Machinery for making money (goldmines)	238	95.2	12	4.8
2.	Provide authority over other students	220	88	30	12
3.	Become influential members on campus	198	79.2	52	20.8
4.	Provide luxurious lifestyle (live large)	189	75.6	61	24.4
5.	Provide interaction with the <i>high</i> and <i>mighty</i>	178	71.2	72	28.8
6.	Can do anything and get away with it	201	80.4	49	19.6
7.	Nobody seem to check the accounts	231	92.4	19	7.6
8.	Impeachment is far-fetched (electoral laws hardly enforced)	202	80.8	48	19.2
9.	Provides platform for future political career	176	70.4	74	29.6
10	Easy access to lecturers and administrators	238	95.2	12	4.8

Results on table 2 shows high frequencies and percentages on the *agree* column on all 10 items. The *disagree* column had lower frequencies and percentages. That is to say, all 10 items are strong contributing factors to leadership-related conflicts on UNICAL campus.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that there is a high level of conflict among students in their pursuit of leadership on campus. It further revealed certain factors responsible for the conflicts that arise in the process of that quest for leadership. Leadership as a machinery for making money has been identified as one of the main factors, in addition to the fact that nobody seem to check the accounts, they therefore embezzle and steal the money unrestrained. Youths with little or no money gain access to campus political power which affords them opportunity to enrich themselves. Danjibo and Oladeji (2007) state that Nigerian youths who face deprivation are forced to take the readily available *job opportunity*, by crook or by violence. Politics, therefore, becomes business and business of politics becomes merely to divert public funds (Okunola & Ikuomola, 2010). Moreover, the regulatory framework in the use of money is weak (Ugoh, 2004). Hence, corrupt student leaders get away with embezzlement and other corrupt practices which create further incentives for others to contest for political office at all cost thereby heating up the campus polity.

Easy access to lecturers and administrators, having authority and influence over other students, access to luxurious lifestyle as well as interacting with the high and mighty, have also been identified as factors contributing to conflict on campus with regard to leadership. It is the opinion

of Usman (2009) that ostentatious lifestyle of political leaders is the greatest stimulus to doing anything, legitimate or illegitimate, to win elections. Election has to be a do-or-die affair since the winner takes it all (Ojo, 2009). The perks of leadership, therefore, form the motivating force for pursuit of student leadership and elections that are marred by rigging and clashes between opposition groups.

It was also revealed that elected student leaders can do almost anything and get away with it, in addition to the fact that impeachment hardly occur. These, according to the result, are some contributing factors to leadership conflict on campus. None enforcement of law in the electoral process engenders violence during elections (Aluigba, 2008). Besides, a weak rule of law renders the judicial system ineffective and allows offenders to go unpunished, thereby creating a fragile and corrupt system (Aiyede, 2007).

Provision of platform for future political career was also revealed as a factor of leadership conflict on campus. Being student leaders, give them the opportunity to interact with those in authority, within and outside the university. The belief is that through the instrumentality of such powerful contacts, the foundation is laid for future political or other career ambition. The instance of Labaran Maku, the former Minister of Information, is often cited as an example of a former student unionist for whom campus politics served as a training ground for the future. It therefore serves as an incentive to grab power at all cost, on campus.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that leadership related conflicts exist at a high level among students on the UNICAL campus. The quest for money, power and influence have been identified as the main contributing factors of acquiring political power on campus at all cost. The decadence of the larger Nigerian society has crept into the university campus to the extent that, just like the mainstream politicians, only a handful of greedy die-hards are attracted to this politics of power, influence and money, amidst conflict, violence and strife. Student unions are no longer the strong, responsible and credible institutions of old. The political god-fathers have infiltrated them, subverted the leaders and exposed them to corruption and manipulation of the system. It is politics of the strong and hardened whereby the winner takes it all and the end justifies the means, no matter the turbulence generated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Since money is the major incentive, allowances and other benefits should be reduced drastically, to make leadership less attractive to the greedy, grabbing, trouble making ones.
- University bursars and auditors should rise to their duties by placing tighter control on expenditures of student union leaders.
- Campus electoral laws should be strictly enforced.
- Security should be beefed up during electioneering periods so that students who heat up the polity, through intimidation, confrontation and violence would be stopped in their tracks and adequately punished.
- University administrators should have the will and sincerity to discourage and outrightly stamp out god-fatherism and politics of money, from within and without.

COUNSELLING IMPLICATIONS

Counsellors on university campuses need to rise to this challenge and find ways of diffusing the tension and reducing political conflicts to the barest minimum through:

- Reemphasis on value orientation. Students should be taught to shun materialism and rather to embrace good old values of integrity, selflessness, responsibility and respect for the dignity and rights of others.
- Group guidance should be organized periodically and the issues and factors relating to the student leadership should be explored exhaustively, especially, the consequences of strife and violence.

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