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EXPLORING TRIGGERS THAT GIVE RISE TO STAKEHOLDER CONFLICT AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF WALTER SISULU UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of conflict management in institutions of higher learning is complex, multifaceted, and highly disputable. Conflict is unavoidable and inevitable in the workplace and universities are not immune, as conflict is viewed as a leading source of internecine discord. The nature of stakeholders' expectations creates a stimulating milieu of ferment in any academic environment because conflict is viewed as that trigger of disruption in institutions of higher learning. Conflict not only affects the entire culture of teaching and learning in a comprehensive institution of higher learning, but also affects the academic calendar of the institution and has disparaging reputational ramifications with fraternal institutions which are also competing in the same academic space, not forgetting its major sponsor (government). This empirical paper explored the triggers that

generated conflict amongst the stakeholders of institutions of higher learning, but circumscribed its locus to Walter Sisulu University and its five campuses, which are spread across the Eastern Cape, each with its own set of dynamics, students, personnel, management and leadership styles. This mixed methodological study was conducted with over 180 respondents across the university, and used conceptual and relational content analysis techniques to analyse the data obtained through a structured questionnaire. The findings highlighted five major triggers that give rise to conflicts, escalation of strikes and demonstration at Walter Sisulu University and the findings evoke comparisons with other similar institutions of higher learning. Recommendations in this study include specific conflict management styles appropriate for handling various conflicts at institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: conflict, leadership triggers, management style, stakeholders

1. INTRODUCTION

January 2019 saw the resurgence of conflict at institutions of higher learning which caused the death of a Durban University of Technology (DUT) student, culminating in the Minister of Higher Education, Naledi Pandor lamenting the profuse securitisation at institutions of higher learning (Pandor, 2019). Conflict is often seen as a condition in which people experience a clash of opposing wishes, wants or even needs (Havenger & Visagie, 2011), and as a type of social status where two or more people or a group of people may be involved in a 'disagreement' on key issues. It is an interactive process characterized by disagreement and incompatibility among people (Wagude, 2015). Therefore, one must take cognisance of 'how to manage conflict', which is as important as the ability to run institutions effectively and efficiently. This has resulted in conflict in universities being a contemporaneous phenomenon attracting increasing attention in the academic space. Since a university is a structure in which a variety of individual and group activities play a fundamental role, it cannot be immune from tensions and stakeholder conflicts (Ntsala & Mahlatji, 2016). Conflict

in university can be the result of unlimited triggers. This study sought to identify triggers among the major forces that cause unrest, with special reference to South African universities. These triggers appear due to innumerable motives, provoking dissatisfaction amongst stakeholders. It comments on how managers should assist the organization in realising its purposes, through appropriate management, to ensure stakeholder satisfaction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict is normal. However, sometimes it leads to one party feeling that he/she is being attacked personally and being tempted to lash out in anger or fear. When these strong feelings are evoked, it can make it difficult to hear what someone else is trying to say (University of St. Andrews, 2019).

In addition to their core roles of teaching and research, universities are often said to have a social purpose, responding to the needs of their localities and the critical questions of their times (Millican, 2017). But what role do or should universities play when the environment they are in, is involved in conflict or subject to an oppressive regime? This opens the debate about the ways in which academics, students or administrators might respond.

The overall performance of existing institutions of higher education ranges from world-class to mediocre (NPC, 2012). By 2030, South Africa needs an education system with a further higher education and training system that enables people to fulfil their potential, but without attention, inadequate human capacity will constrain knowledge production and innovation. The Stakeholder Summit on Higher Education Transformation (2010) debated student-specific issues, academic and support staff issues and systemic issues which were central to the revitalisation of the higher education system. A critical area focused on the improvement in leadership and the strengthening of corporate governance structures and processes within institutions with

appropriate levels of accountability (Department of Higher Education and Training or DHET, 2010).

South African universities face many critical challenges that derive as a result of various expectations among the stakeholders involved. The common expectations range from transformation, decolonisation and community engagement of teaching and learning, salary increment, #Feesmustfall Campaign, general work conditions, and the extension of library closing hours. Habib (2018) observed that failure to understand the way higher learning institutions are run was at the top of the triggers that generate tension across the South African higher institutional environment.

During the period 2015-2016, the catalyst to student protest action related to anticipated tuition fee increases which erupted at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Rhodes University (RU) Stellenbosch University (SU), and subsequently escalated nationally to all universities (Mail and Guardian, 2016). The instant trigger to the conflict witnessed was the notice issued by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), of a 10.5% fee increase for 2016, which gave rise to the #Feesmustfall Campaign. Prior to the aforementioned catalytic action, previous studies (Wagude, 2015; Hasani, 2013; DHET, 2011; Fatile, Jacob, Adejuwon, Kehinde, 2011; Visagie & Havenger, 2011; Adeyemi; Ekundayo & Alonge, 2010; and Agbonna, Yusuf & Onifade, 2009) alluded that competition, stakeholders' involvement in decision-making, library conditions, predatory rules, autocracy and unresolved grievances and conflict handling, were the major factors that trigger conflict in educational institutions of higher learning.

On the contrary, Habib (2018) posited that there are three key challenges facing the higher education sector: the competing demands for limited resources in an environment where policy directives are not adequately substantiated and funded; an ongoing political destabilization of universities where these institutions are often used as a political football by politicians and political parties, and increasing remuneration and other demands from internal role players who are resistant to the realities of managing complex higher education institutions in the current global economy.

As in many developing countries, South Africa's higher education institutions witness a series of conflicts, many leading to a state of anarchy on campuses; some disorganise the academic calendar, destruction of life and properties and render the university environment completely insecure for academic day-to-day activities. Conflict in some cases could facilitate cooperation, and foster goal attainment in any institution if properly handled. On the other hand, conflicts among staff, students, institutions and authority and community, if not well managed, could result in severe loss of lives, destruction of properties and disruption of normal academic activities (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2012). Wagude (2015) covered that the survival of any institution largely depends upon the development of better means of resolving conflicts.

In contrast, Agbonna, Yusuf and Onifade (2009) argue that in resolving tertiary institution's conflict, developing a constructive communication process and influential conflict negotiator personality are very important. Institutions cannot avoid experiencing one conflict or the other, but a great deal of such conflict can be managed and guided away from disrupting activities if the conflicting parties are efficient in the way they communicate their objections. Nawi, Ismail, Ibrahim, Raston, Zamzamin and Jaini, (2016) indicate that it was compulsory for higher education to be taught in a healthy and standard atmosphere in order to increase job satisfaction among its stakeholders and productivity.

Prior to the 2016-2017 unrest and in an effort to curtail crises at South African higher institutions, the then Minister of Higher Education appointed assessors to deal with public higher education institutions which were in crisis. The terms of reference were to tackle governance breakdown, maladministration, lack of leadership, absence of efficient administrative systems, dysfunctional senates, corruption and financial crises (DHET, 2012). According to recommendations made to the Minister (19 September 2016) regarding proposed university fees adjustments for the 2017 academic year, the Government committed to the principle of affordable and quality higher, technical and vocational education and training. In line with this

policy, Government recommended that universities consider a fee adjustment of up to 8% for 2017. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) qualifying students, as well as "missing middle" students would experience no fee increase in 2017. The missing middle students are those with a family income of R600 000 and below per annum (DHET, 2016). Furthermore, the policy suggested that universities had to adjust not more than 8% fee for the 2017 academic year for the poor and missing middle students through a gap-funding grant. Conversely, Government was not to provide the gap-funding grant to students who received scholarships and bursaries from the private and public sector and respective funders or sponsors of these students were required to pay the 2017 tuition fees determined by universities (DHET, 2017).

In 2011, the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) constituency lost complete confidence in the university leadership, eventually calling for the dissolution of the WSU Council (DHET, 2011). The Independent Assessor appointed by the then Minister of Higher Education and Training (Dr B E Nzimande) in terms of Section 47(2) of the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997), categorically summed this up: *WSU is an institution in crisis with anarchy ruling within the institution* (DHET, 2011). The institution was riddled with conflict, mistrust and disaffection. There were constant conflicts and battles between employees and management, as well as between students and management, resulting in frequent strikes by workers and class boycotts by students. Labour unrest included staff hostage taking, victimization of students, eviction of staff from offices and lecture rooms, loss of life of stakeholders, vandalism of infrastructure, locking out of staff, seizing of university keys and locking up of university buildings, abandoning of work stations by staff, closing and barricading of access entrances to the institution. This culminated in DHET placing WSU under administration and Dr Nzimande appointing an external Administrator to take over management of the institution.

It is indisputable that the more conflict-free and stable the university educational environment is, the greater the tendency towards learning and teaching, followed by increased efficiency in operations, including the

educational progress of students. Many of the dissatisfactions, such as poor functioning, non-effective activities and continuous conflicts between managers and university students, all stem from deficient understanding of triggers which give rise to conflict.

The contagious #Feesmustfall Campaign left the DHET with no option other than to intervene in convening a "transformation" summit in mid-October 2015, attended by key government officials and academia. This was post-summit protest demands for a zero percent 2016 fee increase, leading to former President Jacob Zuma announcing that there would be no fee increase in 2016 (Irvene, 2016).

The point of departure, debatably amongst the stakeholders, was whether free higher education is feasible, timely or not. However, the African National Congress Freedom Charter adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown on 26 June 1955, proclaims:

> Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children; Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit.

However, not all issues result in conflict. Students' demands at the University of Limpopo resulted in a change in the library hours from 08h00 to 00h00, from 08 March 2016 (Nasal & Mahrati, 2016). This clearly signified the positive side of conflict with a positive outcome. Therefore, it is safe to say that not all triggers of conflict result in the detriment of the institution.

The Human Needs Theory underpins this study. According to Williams (1998:3), Human Needs Theory developed during the 1970s and 1980s as a generic or holistic theory of human behaviour. From this theoretical perspective, humans have basic needs that have to be met in order to maintain peaceful societies. Beliefs, interests and concerns of the parties involved

constitute the elements which 'brew' conflict (Behrman, 2012). It is human nature to struggle to fulfil primordial and universal needs. Maslow's Pyramid of Needs theorises that each human being possesses basic or physiological needs which determine his/her actions in life. Maslow (1943: 86) posited that these needs must be met for a human being to live peacefully and in harmony with others. These, more often than not, are the elements which constantly give rise to conflict in higher education institutions.

From a management perspective, this study asserted support of the Dual Concern Theory. According to De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, and Dijkstrap (2004), the Dual Concern Theory puts conflict management styles into two main categories, high or low concern for self, and high or low concern for others. The level that produces a problem-solving environment has both a high level of concern for self and a higher level of concern for others (De Dreu & Van Dierendonck, 2004 and Rahim, 2002). The theory guides this study in relation to how "concern about self" and "concern about other", motivates individuals to choose a particular conflict-handling style.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLGY

The research methodology and paradigm embraced by the researchers in this study are post-positivist and mixed methods. The term 'paradigm', according to Creswell (2014), is a comprehensive belief system, worldview, or framework that guides research and practice in a field. In general, a paradigm is best described as an entire system of thinking (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). This paradigm was adopted in order to understand the origins and circumstances under which conflict is triggered in higher institutions of learning, and the different philosophies developed on conflict at these sites.

Positivism contends that there is an objective reality out there to be studied, captured and understood, whereas post-positivists argue that reality can never be fully comprehended, only approximated (Bog, 2007). There is no clear-cut list of causes that trigger conflict in higher institution, but the more researchers delve into the causes, the more they are able to come up with new

and more complicated causes. This idea is in line with McGregor and Murnane (2010), who contend that in the post-positivist belief system, there are multiple realities, especially in the social world, which could be explored in varied ways. This study is predicated on this foundation and taps into the magnitude of individual conflict triggers at higher institutions, with special reference to Walter Sisulu University.

In embracing this methodological approach, the post-positivism assumptions are based on approaches that tend to generate hypotheses using inductive reasoning instead of following only the scientific methods (McGregor &

Murano, 2010). Post-positivism approaches are based on mixed methods research design due to their inter-relationship with the positivist and constructivist paradigms (McMillan & Schumacher, 2007).

Data collection methods used for this study included a semi-structured interview schedule. All ethical elements were taken into account with respect to the participants; confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured to participants, who could withdraw from the research study at any time. The researcher constructed knowledge claims, an ethnographic design, and planned observation of behaviour times, based on post-positivist perspectives, with the intent to develop a theory or patterns using open-ended and emerging data to advance predominant themes (Creswell, 2014). The questionnaires were administered to the respondents across the four campuses of the institution in the various cities and towns.

Initially, 240 questionnaires were distributed; however, only 180 were returned. The sample consisted of 180 respondents across the four WSU campuses (NMD Campus, Ibiza, Buffalo City and Queenstown Campuses). The respondents were approached personally to participate in the study which aimed to obtain their insights regarding conflict and the consequential conflict penalties at WSU. The data was collected between July 2017 and October 2017. Questionnaire responses were analysed using both the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software and Moonstats statistical software programs for statistical analysis. The data collection

consisted of interviews and questionnaire. These items were rated on 5-point Likert scale fixed by 1= strongly disagree, to 5= strongly agree.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Undoubtedly, conflict in WSU campuses is complex and multifaceted. This study chose to relate to the few triggers for conflict at the institution. Although there are a myriad documents on conflict, at the time that this study was commissioned, there was sparse and little literature found on conflict in higher education institutions of learning and how to manage it in the South African context. In contrast, it is speculated that there are numerous recorded unnumbered incidents of conflict across the country's universities. This study focused on the triggers that gave rise to conflict at WSU.

Therefore, based on the 'lived-experiences' of the researchers in relation to the state of conflict at the institution, the reviewed literature and the findings in this study, the following conceptual framework and hypotheses were formulated:
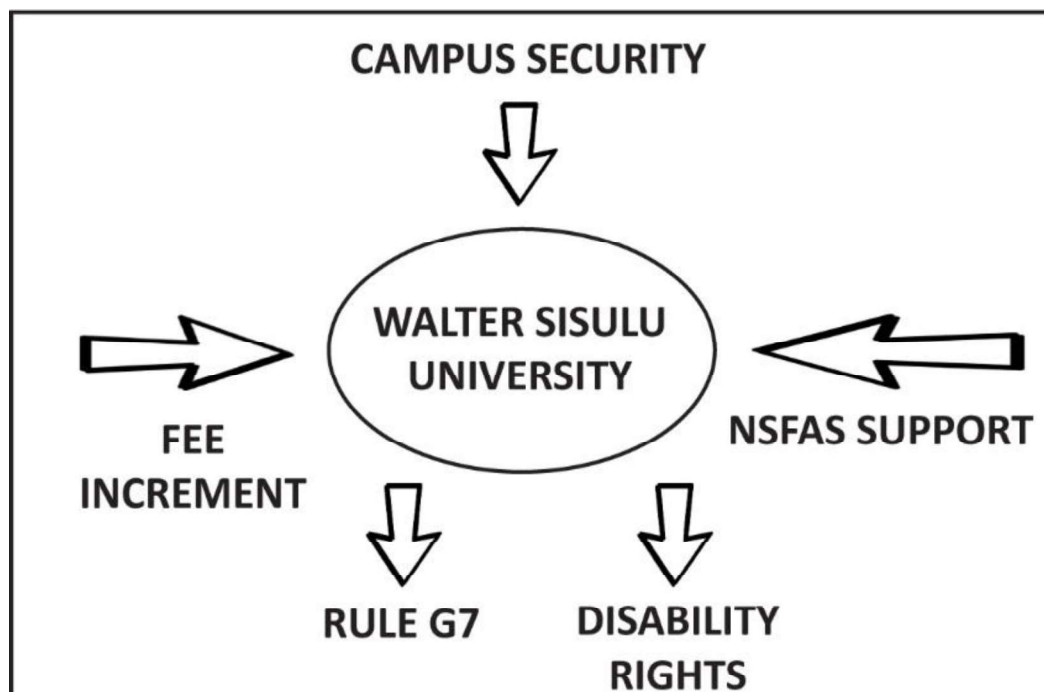
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of conflicts in WSU
Source: Author's own

Figure 1 illustrates the five triggers identified in this study. The two sets of arrows represent the triggers either pointing towards or away from WSU, which represented the hypothesis set for the study and proven by univariate and correlational testing in analysing the data. Therefore, the arrows (hypothesis) pointing to the circle (WSU) were accepted, as contrasted to the arrows pointing away from the circle (WSU), which were rejected and proven against the assumption of the researchers.

H1:   There is a significant relationship between the annual fee increment and demonstrations and violence in campus.

H2:   There is a significant relationship between NSFAS support to students and demonstrations and violence in campuses.

H3:   There is a significant relationship between campus security/safety and conducive   atmosphere for teaching.

H4:   There is a significant relationship between the Rule G7 (exclusion rule) versus demonstrations/violence on campus.

H5:   There is a significant relationship between the right of people with disability and   demonstrations and violence in campuses.

4.1 Annual Fee Increment as a trigger of conflict
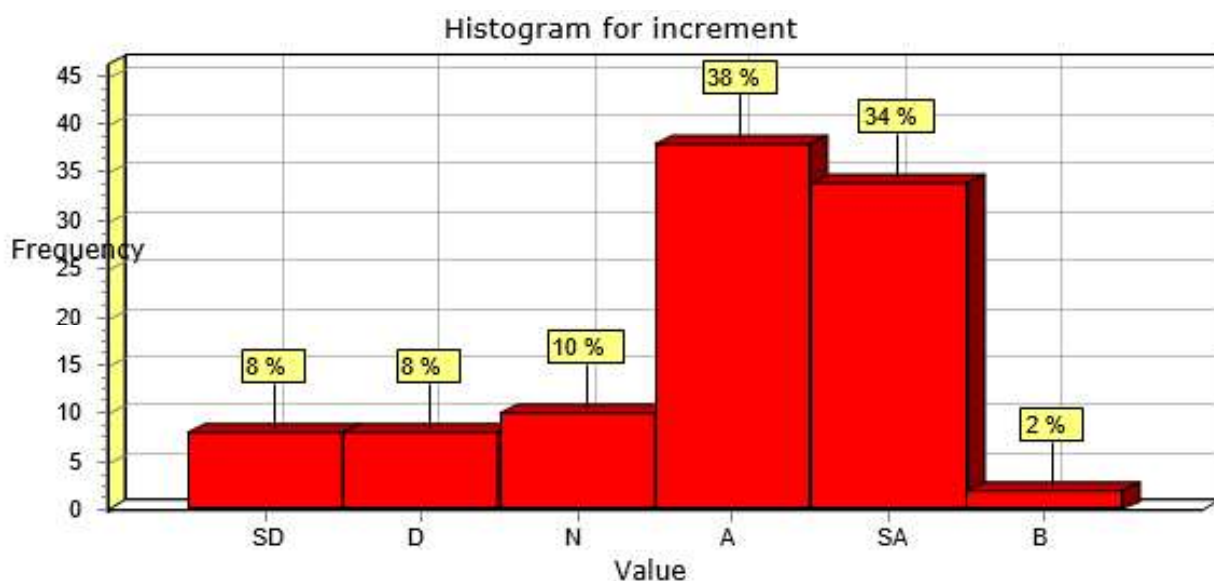
In this case, the value of r is 0.51, which can be considered a strong correlation. The p value is 0.000, which means that the correlation is statistically significant and can reported as follows:

The annual fee increment and demonstrations/violence are statistically significantly correlated at the 1% level (r=0.51; p=0.000). This implies that demonstrations/violence on campus erupt frequently as a result of the annual fee increment. *Based on the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H1 is accepted and proved.* This suggests that students tend to demonstrate/strike whenever fees increase.

The findings in the above correlations depict the scenario that ensued when university students protested across South Africa over plans to increase fees

in 2016 and 2017. The protests turned violent as students clashed with police. According to the Irivene (2016), the then Minister of Higher Education, the country's universities were facing serious funding challenges at the same time that South Africans were having trouble affording tuition. The minister proposed that universities set their own fee increases for 2017 and recommended that the increases be no more than 8%. A day after the Minister's announcement, student protests erupted at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) followed by the University of Cape Town, which suspended classes, and shortly thereafter spread to other University campuses nationwide.

Since these demonstrations by the students were triggered following the Minister's announcement, it could be reported that annual fee increment and demonstrations/violence on campuses are statistically significantly correlated as proven by the findings in this study.

Figure 2: Fee increment is a source of conflict at WSU

In response to the question whether fee increment is a source of conflict at WSU and must not be implemented annually, from the 100 students that responded, 34% strongly agreed, respondents 38% agreed, 10% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 8 % disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

4.2 NSFAS support to students as a trigger of conflict

The Pearson product moment correlation for NSFAS and Demonstrations and violence, r(x,y)= 0.28, p = 0.005, indicates a moderate correlation. The p value is 0.005, which means that the correlation is statistically significant. It could be reported as follows: NSFAS and DEMONSTRATIONS on campus are statistically significantly correlated at the 1% level (r=0.28; p=0.005). *Based on the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H2 is accepted and proved.*

NSFAS is a government scheme set up to help young people pay for tuition at any of the 25 public universities and 50 public TVET colleges in the South Africa. NSFAS provides loans and scholarships that cover tuition, accommodation, living expenses. NSFAS is found to be among the major factors that cause strikes across South African universities. Whether the respondents were satisfied with the way NSFAS operates in accomplishing its mandate, mixed reactions emerged regarding the way it contributes to unrest in many higher institutions. During the period of this data collection, the following sentiments emerged:

The issue of NSFAS has been the primary source of conflict in WSU, that actually led to many strikes and that actually deters and interferes with students' academics.
...so now, for example, the NSFAS issue is not solved correctly. They take time before they make resolution of what the students required.

When the respondents were asked whether their expectations regarding the NSFAS were rational or irrational, one respondent stated:

...Yes, it has, students now are expecting to be funded by NSFAS even if they do not qualify and it has made students to expect everything to be free.

These assertions are in line with the statistical data collected in this study.
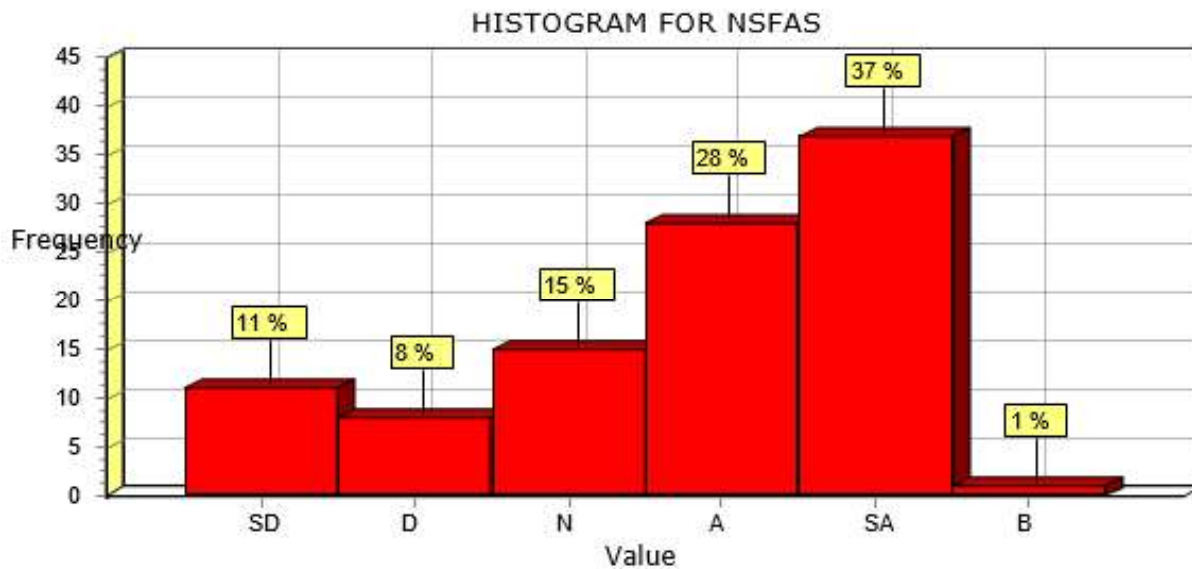
Figure 3: Provision of NSFAS support for students

In response to the question "NSFAS support provided to students is inadequate resulting in conflicts, 37% strongly agreed, 28% of the respondents agreed, 15% neither agreed nor disagreed, 8 % disagreed and 11% strongly disagreed. The issue of NSFAS was found to be a major causal factor of strikes, not only in WSU, but across all South African universities.

Since one of the objectives of this study was to examine the impact of integrating conflict management style at higher education institutions when compared to stakeholders' expectations, analysis of both literal and statistical findings suggest that both DHET and the government should integrate the genuine needs of the stakeholders such as providing free education to indigent students (who cannot afford it), instead of adopting the dominating style of handling conflict and grievances. Ultimately, this will contribute in achieving long lasting harmony between management, the SRC, the entire WSU and generally to other higher institutions of learning.

4.3 Campus security/safety and conducive atmosphere for teaching

The Pearson product moment correlation for campus security/safety and conducive atmosphere for teaching, $r(x,y)= 0.42$, $p = 0.013$, can be considered a moderately strong correlation. The p value is 0.013, which

means that the correlation is statistically significant. It could be reported as follows: the Pearson product moment correlation for campus security/safety and conducive atmosphere for teaching is statistically significantly correlated at the 5% level (r=0.42; p=0.013).

Based on the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H3 is accepted and proved.
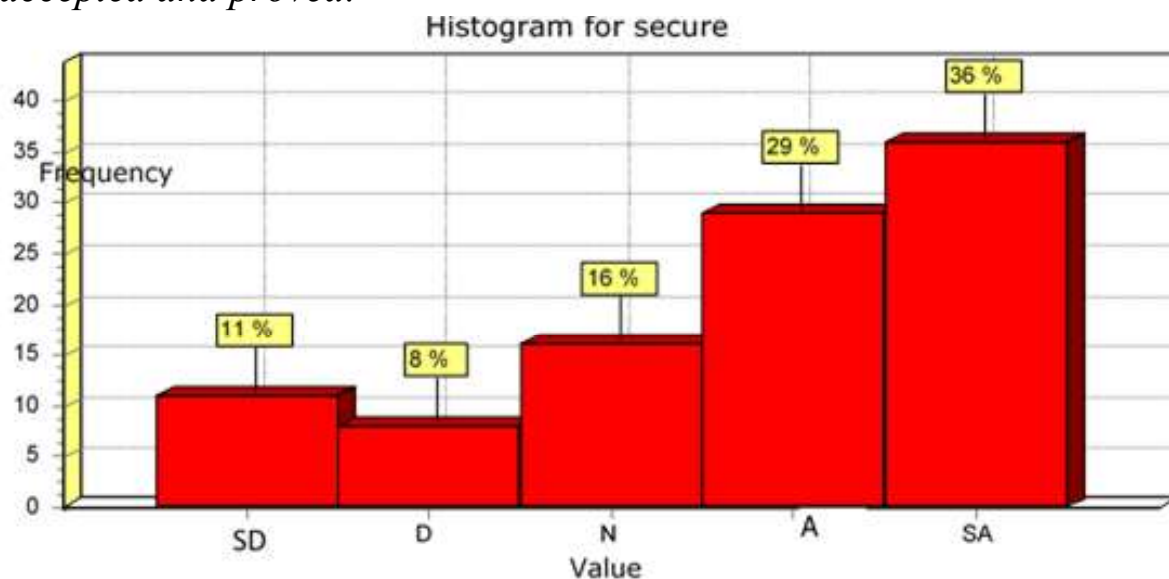
Figure 4: Campus Security and safety at WSU

A total of 36% of the respondents strongly agreed that the campus is not secure and places safety at risk. 11% of them strongly disagreed, 8% agreed and 16% preferred to be neutral to the statement. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents abstained from answering this question. Furthermore, safety and security at WSU was questionable based on the responses that emerged.

Other universities, not only WSU, also faced challenges in terms of providing security to the teaching and learning arena. The high occurrence of organised campus protest in the last several years has invited suggestions on measures to maintain the protection and security of university property and personnel. The ability of internal security forces on campus to respond to disorder and the manner in which they would join in this effort with other external law enforcement groups, has become issue of concern of many

institutions. The transition from the use of gate watchman with or without a stick and a searchlight, has been replaced by the use of electronic devices and live ammunition at all tertiary institutions. Although the rationale behind this development was to ensure and enhance security on campuses, these services must also be reconsidered in terms of the ever-changing scene in higher education arena. The case of a DUT student who was shot dead after an altercation with private security guards contracted to the institution, elicited calls by various eminent individuals and institutions to review the conduct of security personnel during protests. In this regard, the Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Naledi Pandor, deplored the profuse securitisation at institutions of higher learning (Pandor, 2019). The minister further stressed the need to see security in tertiary institutions across the country be improved without causing harm (Pandor, 2019).

4.4 Rule G7 as trigger of conflict via demonstrations/violence on campus

The Pearson product moment correlation for Rule G7 (exclusion rule) and demonstrations/violence on campus, $r(x,y) = -0.04$, $p = 0.715$, can be considered a weak correlation. The p value is 0.715, which means that the correlation is not statistically significant. It could be reported that:

The Rule G7 (exclusion rule) and Demonstrations/violence on campus are not statistically significantly correlated ($r=-0.04$; $p=0.715$).

Since the correlation is not statistically significant, it can be concluded that a significant number of the participants agreed that the implementation of Rule G7 (exclusion rule) is not related to the Demonstrations/violence on campus.
Based on the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H4 is accepted and proved.

Subsequently, the weak correlation that emerged which is not statistically significant, implies that the participants agreed that the implementation of Rule G7 is no longer a factor that triggers demonstrations/violence in WSU campuses (see Figure 5).

Histogram for ruleG7
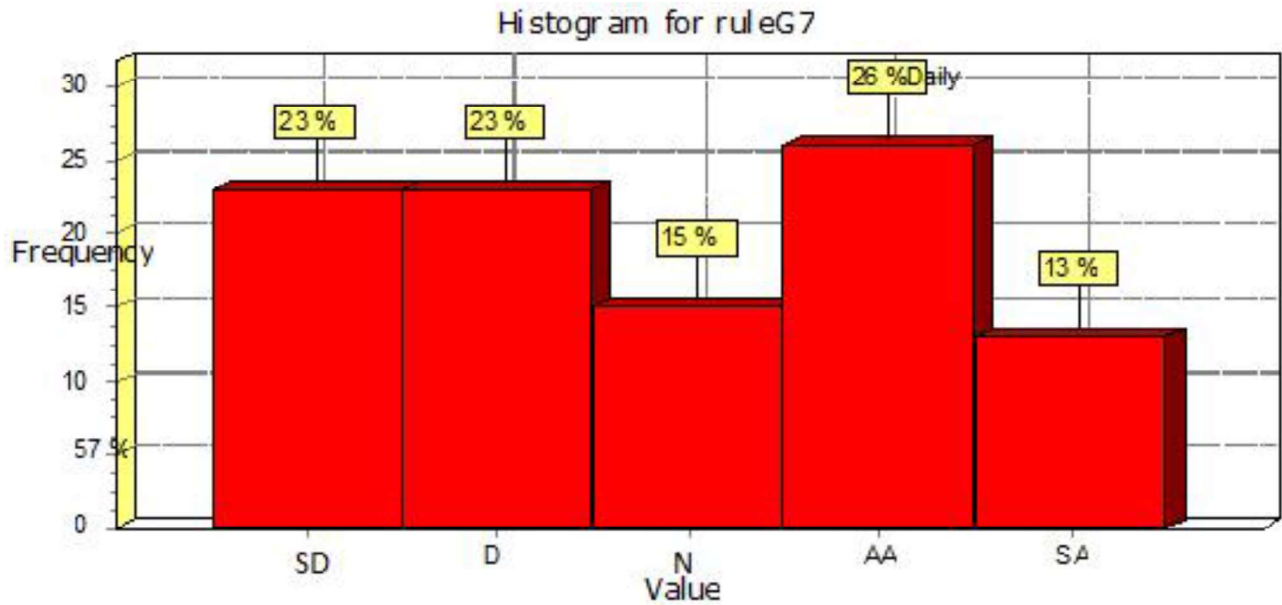

Figure 5: Rule G7 as a source of conflict at WSU

The Rule G7 is applied to and excludes students who underperformed. 23% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Rule G7 must be revoked at WSU, as it has been a source of conflict over the years; 26% agreed and 15% were neutral on the belief that Rule G7 is a source of conflict in WSU. Recent findings at WSU showed that students stopped protesting against the implementation of the Rule G7 (exclusion rule) at WSU. This was factored through interaction and engagement between the university committee dealing with exclusion appeals and the SRC to ensure that the standard of academic performance in the institution was not compromised. The SRC members are mandatory members of the G7 Appeals Committee and participate in the deliberation of the departmental submissions for exclusion. The SRC participates in the final decision and report back to the affected students.

4.5 Rights of people with disabilities as a trigger of demonstrations and violence in campus

The Pearson product moment correlation for disabilities and Demonstrations/violence, r(x,y)= 0.16, p = 0.125, which can be considered a relatively weak correlation. The p value is 0.125, which means that the correlation is not statistically significant. This could be reported as follows:

Disabilities and Demonstrations/violence are not statistically significantly correlated (r=0.16; p=0.125).

Based on the finding obtained in this correlation, the hypothesis H5 is accepted and proved.
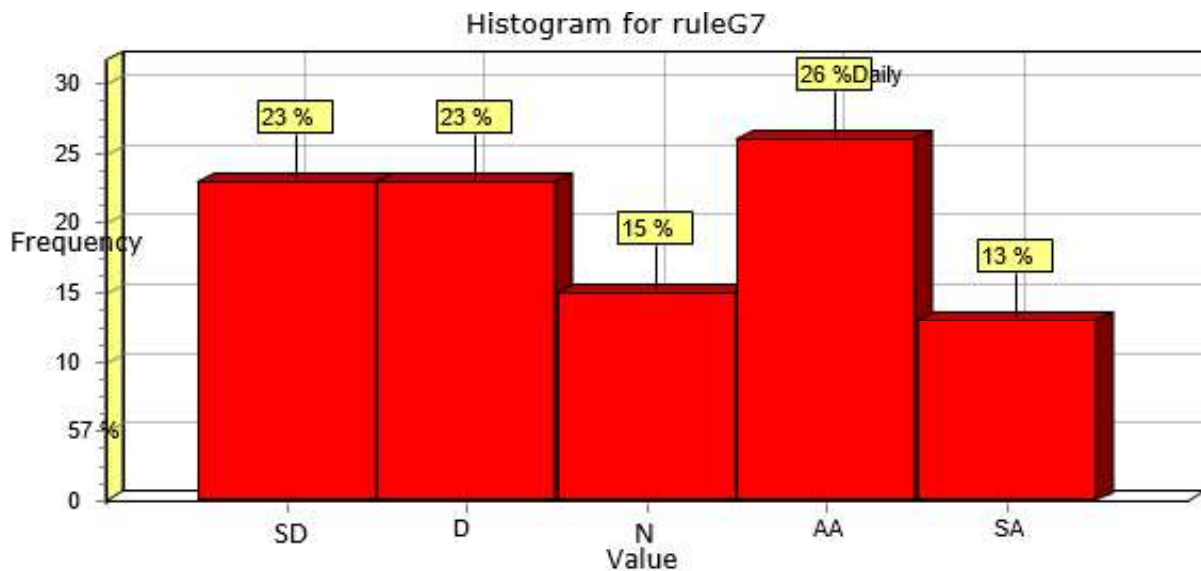
Figure 6: WSU's obligations to students with disabilities

The investigation on whether or not WSU's obligations to students with disabilities is highly inadequate, revealed that 35% of the respondents agreed, 21% disagreed 16% were neutral. 1% of the respondents completely abandoned the question. This question did not attract stimulating responses by the participants either because the number of individuals with disability is insignificant or possibly because the respondents were too self-absorbed to care whether the rights of people with disability are violated.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed at exploring the triggers that gave rise to conflict on the four campuses of WSU. The study was conducted over a specified period of time, and it may therefore not be wholly accurate to judge other institutions based on the findings obtained in this study.

The study's conclusions on each of the five triggers are summarised as follows, as all hypotheses were accepted:

- There is a significant relationship between the annual fee increment and demonstrations and violence in campus.
- There is a significant relationship between NSFAS support to students and demonstrations and violence in campuses.
- There is a significant relationship between campus security/safety and conducive atmosphere for teaching.
- There is a significant relationship between the Rule G7 (exclusion rule) versus demonstrations/violence on campus.
- There is a significant relationship between the right of people with disability and demonstrations and violence in campuses.

In order to validate and expand the findings of this study, it is recommended that future studies be conducted in other areas and institutions. There should be a replication of this study with a more geographically diverse and larger sample size, as this study was limited to participants from WSU.

It is important to identify whether the findings that are reported here are particular to this case study or its applicability to other institutions, as the sample size was limited to a sample of 180 participants.

In summary, researchers could replicate the current research at other larger public and private institutions, colleges and universities, using the purely interpretivist paradigm. Another option for future research may be to delve into studying empirical research in the field of conflict resolution at higher institutions, because this study was limited to conflict management rather than conflict resolution.

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