

The Problem of Facing Problems: Why Interpersonal Conflict Deserves Greater Attention in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Problematic relationships and interpersonal conflict are persistent challenges in higher education, affecting students, academic staff, administrators, and the wider institutional environment. Although disagreement is a normal part of university life, unresolved conflict, incivility, bullying, and perceived unfairness may undermine trust, well-being, teaching, learning, and professional collaboration. This scoping review maps the literature on problematic relationships and conflict in higher education, focusing on their forms, contributing factors, consequences, and management approaches. Guided by scoping review principles and informed by PRISMA-ScR reporting guidance, the review organizes the identified literature through descriptive mapping and thematic synthesis. The preliminary findings indicate that conflict occurs across multiple relationships, including student-faculty, student-student, faculty-faculty, and faculty-administration interactions. Recurring concerns include communication breakdowns, perceived injustice, power imbalances, competing expectations, organizational structures, and differences in

professional values. The literature also suggests that problematic relationships can have implications for student well-being and educational experiences, staff commitment, workplace climate, and institutional trust. Proposed responses include mediation, constructive communication, empathy, professional development, transparent grievance procedures, and fair institutional decision-making. However, the available evidence spans diverse contexts and research approaches, limiting direct comparisons and conclusions about intervention effectiveness. The review highlights the need for integrated research that examines interpersonal behaviour alongside organizational conditions and evaluates conflict-management strategies across higher education settings. These insights can inform more respectful, equitable, and supportive university environments.

Keywords: higher education; interpersonal conflict; problematic relationships; academic incivility; workplace bullying; student-faculty relationships; conflict management; organizational justice.

El problema de afrontar los problemas: por qué el conflicto interpersonal merece mayor atención en la educación superior

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Resumen:

Las relaciones problemáticas y los conflictos interpersonales constituyen desafíos persistentes en la educación superior que afectan al estudiantado, al personal académico, a los responsables de la gestión y al entorno institucional en su conjunto. Aunque el desacuerdo forma parte habitual de la vida universitaria, los conflictos no resueltos, las conductas incívicas, el acoso y la percepción de un trato injusto pueden debilitar la confianza, el bienestar, la enseñanza, el aprendizaje y la colaboración profesional. Esta revisión de alcance examina y organiza la literatura sobre las relaciones problemáticas y los conflictos en la educación superior, centrándose en sus manifestaciones, factores asociados, consecuencias y enfoques de gestión. Guiada por los principios de las revisiones de alcance y tomando como referencia las directrices de presentación de informes PRISMA-ScR, la revisión organiza la literatura identificada mediante un mapeo descriptivo y una síntesis temática.

Los resultados preliminares indican que los conflictos se presentan en múltiples relaciones, incluidas las interacciones entre estudiantes y docentes, entre estudiantes, entre docentes y entre el profesorado y los responsables de la gestión universitaria. Entre los problemas recurrentes figuran las dificultades de comunicación, la percepción de injusticia, los desequilibrios de poder, las expectativas contrapuestas, las estructuras organizativas y las diferencias en los

valores profesionales. La literatura también sugiere que las relaciones problemáticas pueden repercutir en el bienestar y las experiencias educativas del estudiantado, el compromiso del personal, el clima laboral y la confianza institucional.

Las respuestas propuestas incluyen la mediación, la comunicación constructiva, la empatía, el desarrollo profesional, los procedimientos transparentes de reclamación y la toma de decisiones institucionales justas. Sin embargo, la evidencia disponible abarca contextos y enfoques de investigación diversos, lo que limita las comparaciones directas y las conclusiones sobre la eficacia de las intervenciones. La revisión destaca la necesidad de investigaciones integradas que examinen el comportamiento interpersonal junto con las condiciones organizativas y evalúen las estrategias de gestión de conflictos en distintos entornos de educación superior. Estos hallazgos pueden contribuir a promover entornos universitarios más respetuosos, equitativos y favorables al bienestar de sus integrantes.

Palabras clave: educación superior; conflicto interpersonal; relaciones problemáticas; incivismo académico.

Introduction

Higher education institutions are not only places where knowledge is produced and shared; they are also complex social and organizational environments in which students, academic staff, and university administrators work together, often under different expectations, responsibilities, and levels of authority. The quality of these relationships can influence the academic experience, staff wellbeing, institutional trust, and the effective functioning of universities. Although disagreement is a normal part of organizational life, conflict becomes more problematic when it is accompanied by poor communication, perceived unfairness, disrespect, exclusion, or ineffective institutional responses. Understanding how such difficulties arise and how they are managed is therefore important for creating higher education environments that are both academically productive and socially supportive.

Research has examined conflict in several higher education relationships, particularly those between students and faculty members. Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, and Gokee (2002) explored the events that contribute to faculty-student conflict and students' perceptions of instructors' responses. Harrison (2007) similarly examined students' experiences of conflict with faculty, drawing attention to perceptions of fairness and the ways students understand available complaint procedures. These studies suggest that conflict is not determined solely by the initial disagreement; the way an institution or individual responds can also shape whether the situation is resolved or becomes a source of continuing dissatisfaction. In this context, communication, fairness, and the opportunity to express concerns are important dimensions of the student-faculty relationship.

The consequences of problematic relationships can extend beyond dissatisfaction with a particular interaction. Ali et al. (2019), in their study of higher education institutions in Pakistan, found that conflict-inducing attitudes among teachers were associated with adverse student psychological and educational outcomes. Their findings also connected negative teacher–student interactions with incivility among faculty members and dissatisfaction with institutional resources. This highlights an important point: difficulties experienced by students may sometimes reflect wider tensions within the academic workplace rather than isolated problems between an individual student and an instructor. In a related area, Snijders et al. (2022) examined students' positive and negative critical incidents with faculty and staff, emphasizing the importance of trust, responsiveness, and genuine interest in students. Together, these studies demonstrate why interpersonal relationships deserve attention as a central part of the higher education experience.

Conflict also occurs among academic colleagues and between faculty members and university administrators. Within departments, disagreements over responsibilities, professional recognition, workloads, resources, and communication can damage collegial relationships. More serious patterns of behaviour, including workplace bullying and persistent incivility, raise concerns about staff wellbeing and the organizational climate. Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) examined incivility in higher education through the experiences of academic leaders, while Lemon and Barnes (2021) reviewed theoretical and empirical literature on workplace bullying among university faculty. These contributions help distinguish ordinary professional disagreement from repeated or harmful behaviour that may require a more formal institutional response. Evidence from Hudgins et al. (2022) also indicates that students and faculty members may differ in how they perceive and experience incivility, although both groups recognize the potential value of clear behavioural expectations, professional role-modelling, and personal accountability. Such differences matter because institutional responses may be ineffective when the people involved do not share the same understanding of what constitutes unacceptable conduct. Hudgins et al., 2022.

At the organizational level, conflict may reflect differences in authority, institutional priorities, and expectations about participation in decision-making. Del Favero (2003) positioned faculty–administrator relationships as an important element of effective university governance, drawing attention to the connections between relationships and institutional functioning. Tensions can arise when academic staff perceive decisions as insufficiently transparent, when their professional autonomy appears restricted, or when administrative priorities conflict with academic values. Yidana (2022), in research on higher education in Ghana, also distinguished between structural and interpersonal workplace conflict, illustrating the need to consider both the relationships between individuals and the institutional conditions in which they work. Consequently, conflict in higher education should not be understood exclusively as a personal or behavioural problem. Its development may also be shaped by organizational structures, decision-making processes, resource constraints, and the perceived fairness of institutional procedures.

Alongside identifying conflict and its consequences, the literature considers how universities can respond constructively. Lau (2022) discussed mediation as an alternative dispute-resolution approach in Hong Kong universities, while Watson et al. (2018) examined mediation training grounded in social justice for faculty, staff, and students. These approaches suggest that conflict management can involve more than formal complaints or disciplinary action; it may also require accessible communication channels, impartial procedures, opportunities for dialogue, and the development of practical skills for resolving disagreements. However, the suitability of a particular response may depend on the nature of the conflict, the power relationships involved, and whether the behaviour represents an isolated disagreement or persistent mistreatment. Effective institutional practice therefore requires an understanding of both the sources of conflict and the conditions under which different resolution approaches may be appropriate.

Despite these contributions, the literature represented in this review covers several related but often separately examined areas: student–faculty disagreements, student–student conflict, faculty incivility and bullying, faculty–administration tensions, organizational justice, and conflict-resolution practices. Research focused on one relationship or form of misconduct may provide valuable insights, but it does not necessarily explain how these problems compare across different groups or how individual interactions connect with wider institutional conditions. The scoping review by Zenelaga et al. (2025), which examined the causes and consequences of university students' conflicts, provides a useful example of the value of bringing dispersed evidence together. A broader synthesis is needed to map the principal forms of problematic relationships across higher education, identify recurring causes and consequences, and examine the approaches proposed or used to manage them. Such a synthesis can also clarify where evidence remains limited, particularly regarding comparisons across relationship types, institutional contexts, and conflict-management strategies.

Against this background, the present review brings together research on problematic relationships and conflict in higher education, with attention to their forms, contributing factors, consequences, and management. Rather than treating every disagreement as equivalent, it considers the differences between interpersonal conflict, incivility, bullying, and organizational tensions, while examining how these issues intersect within university environments.

Our main research question guiding this review is:

How does existing research characterize the forms, causes, and consequences of problematic relationships and conflict in higher education, and what approaches have been identified for managing or resolving these issues?

The review encompassed interpersonal and organizational conflicts involving students, faculty members, academic administrators, and other university personnel. Particular attention was given to student-faculty relationships, faculty-faculty interactions, faculty-administration relations, student–administration interactions, and student–student conflicts. Relevant concepts included interpersonal conflict, academic incivility, workplace bullying, organizational justice, communication breakdowns, governance tensions, and conflict-resolution practices. The review was guided by four research questions:

- a) What forms of interpersonal and organizational conflict have been examined in higher education institutions?
- b) Which individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors are associated with these conflicts?
- c) What consequences do problematic relationships have for individuals, teaching and learning, professional relationships, and institutional functioning?
- d) What strategies have been identified for preventing, managing, or resolving conflicts in higher education?

Literature review

Interpersonal Conflict and the Quality of Faculty–Student Relationships

Relationships between students and faculty members are central to the university experience, shaping students' academic engagement, well-being, and perceptions of institutional fairness. Although these relationships can support learning and personal development, they can also become sources of tension when expectations, communication styles, or perceptions of fairness differ. Tantleff-Dunn et al. (2002) examined student

perceptions of faculty–student conflict, drawing attention to the events that trigger disagreements and the ways instructors respond. Harrison (2007) similarly explored students' experiences of conflict with faculty, highlighting the importance of perceived fairness and awareness of available complaint mechanisms. Together, these studies suggest that conflict is not determined solely by the initial disagreement; the response to that disagreement can also influence whether the situation is resolved or becomes more serious.

Research on relationship quality offers a complementary perspective. Snijders et al. (2021/2022) examined students' positive and negative experiences with faculty and university staff, identifying trust, honesty, responsiveness, and genuine interest in students as important features of constructive relationships. These findings suggest that problematic relationships may develop when students feel ignored, treated inconsistently, or unable to communicate their concerns. In a related study, Snijders et al. (2020) linked student–faculty relationship quality with student engagement and loyalty, indicating that relational experiences matter beyond individual classroom interactions. Ali et al. (2019) further connected conflict-inducing teacher attitudes with students' psychological health and learning outcomes, while Ali et al. (2023) highlighted the relevance of educators' relationships to students' educational outcomes in Pakistani higher education.

Conflict also occurs among students themselves. Pan et al. (2025) identified differences in college students' dormitory conflict-coping styles, showing that students do not respond to interpersonal disagreements uniformly. Rojas-Ruiz et al. (2026) examined the spatial dimensions of student conflicts in Spanish higher education, drawing attention to the role of campus settings and differences across student groups. These studies broaden the discussion beyond formal academic disputes and demonstrate that everyday interactions in classrooms, dormitories, and shared university spaces are also relevant. However, much of the available evidence focuses on particular populations or settings. Further comparative research is needed to explain how institutional culture, power differences, communication, and student support systems shape conflict across different higher education contexts.

Organizational Conflict, Faculty Relationships, and Institutional Justice

Problematic relationships in universities extend beyond interactions between students and teachers. Faculty members work within organizational structures that distribute authority, resources, responsibilities, and opportunities for participation. Tensions may arise when academics and administrators disagree about institutional priorities, decision-making procedures, or the balance between managerial authority and academic autonomy. Del Favero (2003) examined faculty–administrator relationships as an important component of effective governance, while Del Favero and Bray (2010) explored the tensions that can emerge between these groups. Their work places conflict within the broader institutional environment rather than treating it simply as a personal disagreement.

More recent research reinforces the importance of organizational conditions. Counts et al. (2021) considered faculty reactions to organizational change in Christian universities, connecting institutional change with interpersonal conflict and counterproductive work behaviours. Yidana (2022), examining workplace conflicts in Ghanaian higher education, distinguished between structural and interpersonal conflict in relation to perceptions of educational quality. These studies indicate that the sources and consequences of conflict may vary according to whether tensions arise from institutional arrangements or direct interpersonal interactions. In a similar vein, Igbinoba et al. (2022) examined conflict-management strategies and the commitment of academic staff in selected Nigerian public universities, emphasizing the relevance of how disagreements are handled for professional relationships.

A particularly important issue is the relationship between conflict and workplace mistreatment. Lemon and Barnes (2021) reviewed the theoretical and empirical literature on workplace bullying among higher education faculty, while Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) explored incivility as a form of problematic behaviour in academic environments. These contributions suggest that persistent disrespect, exclusion, and hostile interactions deserve attention alongside more explicit disputes. Hudgins et al. (2022) also examined perceptions of incivility in higher education and highlighted the importance of professional conduct and shared expectations. Nevertheless, incivility, bullying, and ordinary disagreement should not be treated as interchangeable concepts: they differ in their characteristics, persistence, and potential consequences. Organizational justice provides another way to understand these tensions. When staff perceive decisions, resource allocation, or interpersonal treatment as unfair, disagreement may become embedded in broader concerns about institutional trust and legitimacy. Research on organizational justice and leadership in higher education links fairness and communication with organizational relationships and knowledge sharing. This literature suggests that preventing conflict requires more than asking individuals to improve their behaviour; institutions must also consider transparency, consistency, participation, and the treatment of staff. At the same time, the evidence is spread across different institutional contexts, and findings from one country or professional discipline cannot automatically be generalized to all universities.

Conflict Management, Institutional Responses, and Research Gaps

The literature identifies several approaches to managing problematic relationships, including mediation, negotiation, empathy, communication, and formal grievance procedures. Lau (2022) examined mediation as an alternative dispute-resolution approach in Hong Kong universities, emphasizing its potential role in addressing interpersonal disagreements and improving awareness of resolution processes. Watson et al. (2018) considered social justice-based conflict-resolution training for faculty, staff, and students, placing conflict management within a broader commitment to equitable and constructive institutional relationships. Smolyaninova et al. (2020) discussed empathy as a means of preventing interpersonal conflict in higher education, while Obi et al. (2015) examined psychological strategies for resolving conflict among administrators in a Nigerian tertiary institution.

Other studies focus on the practical management of conflict in teaching and academic work. Frey Knepp (2012) discussed approaches to student and faculty incivility, including respectful interaction, clear classroom expectations, and instructor preparation. Skelton (2012) examined value conflicts in higher education teaching, suggesting that disagreements can reflect deeper differences in educational priorities and professional beliefs. Such findings are important because not every conflict results from misconduct; some arise from legitimate differences in values, responsibilities, or interpretations of academic practice. Effective responses therefore need to distinguish between disagreements that can be resolved through dialogue and situations involving persistent bullying, discrimination, or misuse of authority that may require formal institutional intervention. Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented across distinct research areas. Studies of student–faculty conflict often emphasize classroom experiences and fairness, whereas research on faculty–administration relations tends to focus on governance, organizational change, and decision-making. Work on faculty bullying and incivility addresses harmful workplace behaviour, while conflict-resolution studies concentrate on particular interventions or institutional procedures. The collected literature therefore provides useful insights but does not yet establish a single, comprehensive explanation of how these different forms of conflict interact within higher education.

Three gaps deserve particular attention. First, more studies are needed that compare conflict across different university relationships within a common analytical framework. Second, research should examine how individual factors, interpersonal behaviour, and organizational conditions interact, rather than considering each in isolation. Third, there is a need for stronger evidence on the implementation and effectiveness of conflict-

management policies across different institutional and cultural settings. Addressing these gaps can support a more integrated understanding of problematic relationships in higher education and help institutions develop responses that combine interpersonal support, fair procedures, and organizational accountability.

Methodology

Research design

Our study employed a scoping review approach to map and synthesize the literature on interpersonal conflict and problematic relationships in higher education institutions. A scoping review was considered appropriate because the research topic encompasses diverse forms of conflict, multiple institutional stakeholders, and a range of theoretical and methodological perspectives. The review was informed by the methodological guidance of the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018; Pollock et al., 2024). These frameworks support the systematic identification, organization, and synthesis of evidence across broad and heterogeneous research topics.

The review focused on identifying the principal forms of conflict examined in higher education, the stakeholders involved, the factors associated with problematic interactions, their reported consequences, and the approaches proposed or implemented to manage and resolve them.

Identification of the literature

An initial corpus of 37 article records was assembled from the literature identified for this review. The records covered a range of topics related to conflict and problematic relationships in higher education, including faculty–student interactions, workplace conflict, academic incivility, faculty–administration relations, organizational justice, bullying, and conflict management. The initial corpus served as the basis for the preliminary analysis and thematic organization of the literature. To ensure transparency, the 37 records should be distinguished from the final number of eligible studies. The corpus was treated as an initial evidence set rather than as a fully validated systematic-search yield. Database coverage, search dates, complete search strings, duplicate removal, and full-text eligibility decisions must be documented separately before the review can be presented as a fully reproducible systematic search.

Eligibility and relevance assessment

The relevance of the collected records was considered in relation to the review objectives. Publications were considered potentially relevant when they addressed interpersonal conflict, problematic relationships, incivility, bullying, organizational justice, or conflict-management practices in a higher education context. Studies involving students, faculty members, academic administrators, and other university personnel were considered within scope when their findings contributed to understanding the emergence, consequences, or management of conflict. Records with an unclear relationship to higher education conflict, insufficient bibliographic information, or substantial duplication were designated for further verification. The final inclusion criteria and the number of studies retained after verification should be reported once formal eligibility screening has been completed. This distinction prevents the initial collection of references from being misrepresented as the final included-study sample.

Data extraction

A structured data-charting approach was used to organize the 37 collected article records. The analytical categories included bibliographic information, publication year, research focus, institutional stakeholders, type of conflict, reported antecedents, consequences, and conflict-management approaches. Where the available information permitted, the research context and methodological characteristics were also considered. The records were organized according to the principal relationship or organizational issue investigated. This enabled comparison across different forms of conflict while retaining the contextual differences between student-related disputes, faculty interpersonal tensions, and conflicts involving institutional management and governance.

Analytical approach

The literature was examined using a combination of descriptive mapping and thematic content analysis. Descriptive mapping was used to organize the records according to their principal research topics, stakeholder groups, and conflict types. Thematic content analysis was used to identify recurring concepts and patterns across the available study descriptions and reported findings. The analysis was guided by an initial set of conceptual categories derived from the review questions, including conflict antecedents, communication and relational processes, power and organizational justice, individual and institutional consequences, and conflict-management strategies. Additional categories could be incorporated where patterns emerged from the literature. The resulting synthesis was intended to identify common concerns, differences across relationship types, and areas requiring further empirical investigation.

Because the preliminary corpus contained studies with diverse aims and research designs, the synthesis emphasized thematic comparison rather than statistical aggregation. Findings were interpreted in relation to the context and scope of the individual studies, without assuming that reported associations necessarily demonstrated causal relationships. The resulting themes should be understood as a synthesis of the evidence available in the collected records, subject to verification against the full texts of the included publications.

Results

This section presents the descriptive findings and thematic patterns identified in the reviewed literature on problematic relationships and conflict in higher education.

Table 1. Distribution of the 37 identified records by primary research focus

The following is a preliminary coding table based on the titles and summaries in your supplied list. Each record is assigned one primary focus so that the percentages add up to approximately 100%.

Primary research focus	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Student–faculty and student–student relationships	14	37.8
Faculty workplace relationships, bullying, and incivility	10	27.0
Faculty–administration relationships, governance, and organizational justice	9	24.3
Conflict resolution, prevention, and general conceptual approaches	4	10.8
Total records	37	100.0*

Note. Percentages were calculated using $\text{Percentage} = (n/37) \times 100$. These are preliminary classifications based on the supplied titles and summaries. The categories should be checked against the full texts, and duplicate records should be removed before the table is presented as a final result.

The preliminary descriptive analysis of 37 identified records suggests that student–faculty and student–student relationships represent the largest thematic group, accounting for 14 records (37.8%). Faculty workplace relationships, including bullying and incivility, account for 10 records (27.0%), while faculty–administration relationships, governance, and organizational justice account for 9 records (24.3%). Four records (10.8%) primarily address conflict resolution, prevention, or broader conceptual approaches. Within the initial 20 records, cross-sectional studies were the most frequently identified research design, representing 13 records (65.0%). However, these findings should be interpreted as preliminary because the classification is based on the available titles and summaries rather than a completed full-text extraction process.

Discussion

This section interprets the main findings in relation to existing research, highlighting their implications, practical relevance, and directions for future research

Problematic Relationships in Higher Education: Beyond Individual Disagreements

The findings of this review suggest that problematic relationships in higher education are diverse and cannot be understood through a single explanation. The literature addresses difficulties between students and faculty, conflicts among students, tensions between academic colleagues, and disagreements between faculty members and university administrators. Although these situations differ in their causes and consequences, they share several underlying concerns, particularly communication, fairness, trust, respect, and the distribution of authority. Taken together, the studies suggest that conflict in higher education is not simply a matter of incompatible personalities. It can also reflect differences in expectations, professional responsibilities, institutional priorities, and perceptions of how people should be treated.

Student-faculty relationships provide a clear example of how everyday interactions can become a source of conflict. Tantleff-Dunn et al. (2002) examined students' perceptions of events that trigger disagreements with faculty and the responses they receive from instructors. Harrison (2007) likewise highlighted students' experiences of conflict with professors and their perceptions of fairness and complaint procedures. These studies direct attention to an important aspect of conflict: the initial disagreement may not be the only source of dissatisfaction. How an instructor responds, explains a decision, or allows a student to express a concern may influence whether the disagreement is resolved or develops into a more serious relational problem. A decision concerning assessment, for example, may be difficult for a student to accept, but a clear explanation and a respectful opportunity to discuss it can help prevent dissatisfaction from becoming a lasting breakdown in the relationship.

This interpretation is consistent with the work of Snijders et al. (2022), which explored students' positive and negative experiences with faculty and staff. Their emphasis on trust, responsiveness, and genuine interest in students illustrates that relationship quality depends on more than formal teaching responsibilities. Students also pay attention to whether their concerns are acknowledged, whether communication is timely, and whether

they feel respected. These relational elements may appear relatively ordinary, but their absence can make students feel ignored or treated unfairly. The findings therefore suggest that universities should not focus exclusively on serious or formally reported incidents. Less visible problems in everyday interactions may also deserve attention because they can influence students' perceptions of the academic environment. The potential consequences of these relationships extend to students' psychological wellbeing and educational experiences. Ali et al. (2019) connected conflict-inducing teacher attitudes with students' psychological health and learning outcomes. Similarly, Ali et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of educators' relationships for students' educational outcomes in higher education institutions in Pakistan. These studies support the view that interpersonal relationships are part of the wider learning environment rather than a separate issue that can be addressed only when formal complaints arise. Nevertheless, the findings should not be interpreted as proving that every negative interaction causes poor academic performance. The relationship between interpersonal experiences and educational outcomes may also be influenced by institutional resources, student circumstances, and the broader academic climate.

Conflict among students adds another dimension to this picture. Pan et al. (2025) examined differences in university students' approaches to managing interpersonal conflict in dormitory settings, while Rojas-Ruiz et al. (2026) considered the spatial contexts of student conflict in Spanish higher education. These studies indicate that student conflict can be shaped by living arrangements, shared spaces, social interactions, and differences in how individuals respond to disagreement. This broadens the discussion beyond formal academic relationships and suggests that the university environment includes multiple settings in which tensions can emerge. However, findings from dormitories or particular campus settings should not automatically be generalized to all student relationships or institutions. Overall, the literature indicates that problematic relationships are best understood as interactions between individual behaviour and the conditions in which that behaviour occurs. Respectful communication and trust may help prevent ordinary disagreements from escalating, while poor responses and perceived unfairness may deepen existing tensions. This does not mean that conflict can always be avoided. Rather, the important issue is whether disagreements can be expressed, understood, and addressed without undermining the dignity or participation of those involved.

Organizational Conditions, Workplace Incivility, and Institutional Justice

A second important finding concerns the relationship between interpersonal difficulties and the organizational structures of universities. Conflicts among faculty members and between faculty and administrators may involve personal disagreements, but they can also arise from institutional decisions about workloads, resources, professional recognition, participation, and academic autonomy. The reviewed literature therefore points to the need to consider organizational conditions alongside individual attitudes and behaviour.

Del Favero (2003) identified faculty–administrator relationships as an important element of effective university governance. This perspective is particularly relevant because academic and administrative staff may approach institutional decisions from different professional positions. Faculty members may prioritize academic independence, disciplinary standards, and participation in collegial decision-making, whereas administrators may be responsible for budgets, regulations, institutional performance, and strategic objectives. These priorities are not necessarily incompatible. However, when decisions are poorly communicated or faculty members believe that their perspectives are disregarded, differences in responsibility can develop into mistrust and resistance. Yidana (2022) also distinguished between structural and interpersonal conflict in the context of higher education in Ghana. This distinction is useful because it prevents the analysis from treating all conflict as a personal problem. Some disagreements may be connected to how work is organized, how decisions are made, or how limited resources are distributed. In such circumstances, asking individuals to improve their communication may be insufficient if the organizational conditions contributing to the conflict remain unchanged.

Effective responses may require both interpersonal support and institutional adjustments, depending on the nature of the problem.

The literature on bullying and incivility further demonstrates why it is important to distinguish between different forms of problematic behaviour. Lemon and Barnes (2021) reviewed research on workplace bullying among higher education faculty, while Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) examined incivility in higher education. Hudgins et al. (2022) explored perceptions of incivility among faculty and students. Considered together, these works show why universities need to take disrespectful and harmful interactions seriously, while avoiding the assumption that every disagreement constitutes bullying. Ordinary conflict may involve competing views that can be discussed and negotiated. Incivility involves disrespectful or discourteous behaviour, whereas bullying generally refers to a more persistent pattern of harmful conduct. Although these categories may overlap in practice, they are not interchangeable.

This distinction has practical implications for institutional policy. A disagreement about teaching methods or workload may be appropriately addressed through discussion, negotiation, or mediation. Repeated intimidation, humiliation, or exclusion may require more formal procedures, particularly where there is a power imbalance or a risk of retaliation. Treating both situations in exactly the same way may be ineffective. Informal dialogue can be valuable for some disputes, but it should not replace protective measures or formal investigation when serious misconduct is alleged.

The reviewed evidence also highlights the importance of fairness and accountability. When members of a university believe that decisions are inconsistent, explanations are unavailable, or complaints are handled differently depending on the people involved, confidence in institutional procedures may weaken. Harrison (2007) drew attention to students' perceptions of fairness and their awareness of complaint mechanisms, while the governance literature emphasizes the significance of relationships between academic staff and institutional leaders. Together, these perspectives suggest that procedural transparency is relevant across different university relationships. People may not always agree with an institutional decision, but they are more likely to understand the process when the criteria are clear and their concerns receive a considered response.

These findings also suggest that responsibility for managing conflict cannot rest exclusively with the individuals involved. University leaders influence the environment through workload arrangements, communication practices, reporting procedures, and the consistency with which standards are applied. At the same time, individual members of the university community remain responsible for their own conduct. A balanced approach must therefore recognize both institutional responsibility and personal accountability. The strongest interpretation of this literature is not that organizational structures explain every conflict, but that institutional conditions can shape how disagreements begin, how they develop, and whether they can be resolved fairly.

Conflict Management, Practical Implications, and Directions for Future Research

The reviewed studies identify several approaches to managing conflict, including mediation, professional development, psychological strategies, empathy, and clearer expectations for behaviour. These approaches share the idea that conflict should be addressed through a process suited to its nature rather than through a single universal solution. Their effectiveness, however, depends on implementation, the circumstances of the dispute, and the willingness of institutions to provide meaningful support. Lau (2022) discussed mediation as an alternative dispute-resolution approach in Hong Kong universities. Mediation may provide a structured opportunity for parties to explain their concerns, clarify misunderstandings, and consider possible solutions with the assistance of a neutral third party. Watson et al. (2018) examined mediation training for faculty, staff, and students through a social justice perspective. This broad participation is important because conflict management is not solely a responsibility for administrators or designated specialists. Members of the university

community may benefit from developing skills in listening, negotiation, respectful disagreement, and the recognition of unequal power relationships.

Other studies point to the potential value of interpersonal skills and preventive practices. Smolyaninova et al. (2020) considered empathy as a means of preventing interpersonal conflict in higher education, while Obi et al. (2015) examined psychological strategies for resolving conflict among administrators in tertiary institutions. Frey Knepp (2012) discussed ways of addressing incivility in teaching environments, including respectful interactions, engaging instruction, and clear classroom expectations. Together, these studies suggest that prevention can begin before a dispute becomes a formal complaint. Clear expectations, accessible communication, and opportunities to discuss concerns may help establish a climate in which disagreements are easier to manage. Nevertheless, conflict-management strategies should not be treated as equally suitable in every situation. Mediation may be appropriate when parties can participate voluntarily and negotiate on reasonably safe terms. It may be inappropriate as the sole response when allegations involve serious misconduct, coercion, or substantial power imbalances. Similarly, communication training cannot resolve every structural problem if the underlying dispute concerns unequal workloads, opaque promotion criteria, or exclusion from decision-making. The findings therefore support a context-sensitive approach that combines early dialogue with transparent procedures and formal routes for addressing serious cases.

For universities, the practical implications are threefold. First, institutions should establish clear and accessible procedures for raising concerns, explaining decisions, and seeking impartial review. Second, students, faculty, and administrators should have opportunities to develop conflict-management skills, including respectful communication and constructive negotiation. Third, institutional leaders should examine whether recurring disputes point to broader organizational problems, rather than treating each complaint as an isolated incident. Collecting information about the types of complaints received, the time required to address them, and the outcomes of different interventions could help institutions identify patterns and assess whether their responses are working. Several research gaps remain. The reviewed literature addresses different relationship types and forms of conflict, but the evidence is not always directly comparable. Studies may use different definitions of conflict, incivility, and bullying, and they may focus on different populations, countries, or institutional settings. Consequently, the available findings do not establish that one form of conflict is universally more common or harmful than another. The preliminary frequency distribution in this review describes the thematic distribution of the identified publications; it should not be interpreted as a measure of the prevalence of conflict within universities.

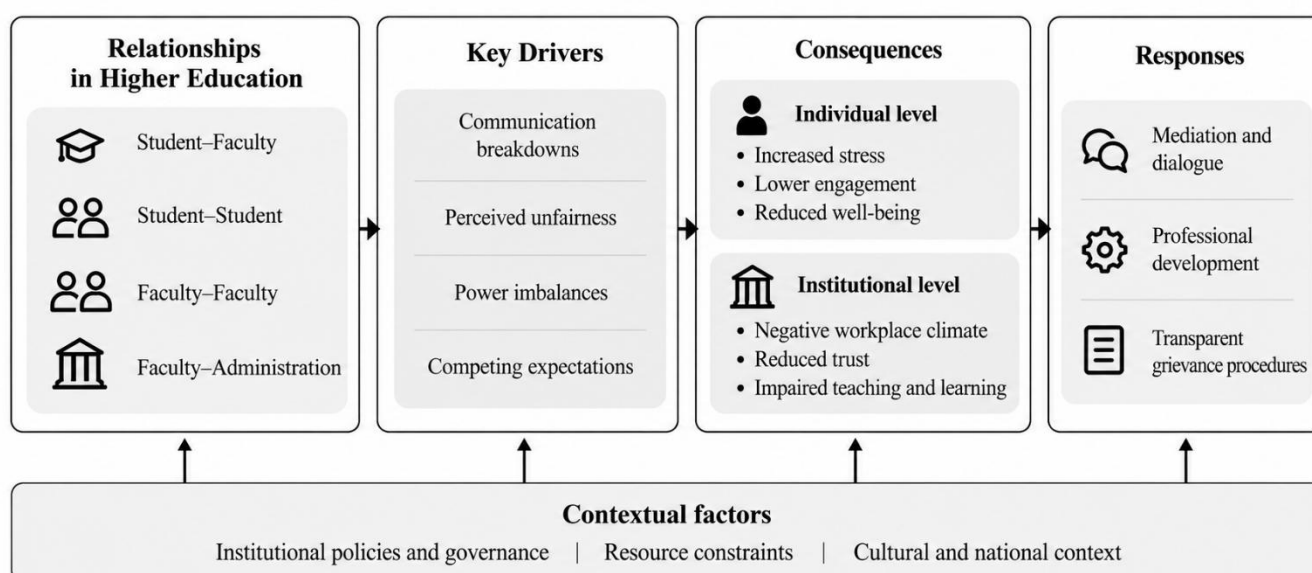
Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, the available literature covers diverse forms of conflict, populations, and institutional contexts, making direct comparisons between studies difficult. Second, differences in research designs and definitions of problematic relationships may limit the generalizability of the findings. Third, some sources were initially identified through bibliographic information and summaries, so conclusions should be interpreted cautiously until all references and full texts have been verified. Finally, further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of conflict-prevention and resolution strategies across different higher education settings.

Future research could address these limitations by using clearer and more consistent definitions, comparing experiences across students, faculty, and administrators, and examining how institutional context influences conflict. Longitudinal studies could help clarify how unresolved disagreements develop over time, while evaluations of mediation, training, and grievance procedures could establish which interventions are effective, for whom, and under what conditions. More comparative research across national and institutional contexts would also help determine whether patterns identified in particular settings apply more broadly. The literature

reviewed here portrays problematic relationships in higher education as a multidimensional issue involving interpersonal behaviour, organizational conditions, and institutional responses. Conflicts may arise from misunderstandings or competing expectations, but they can also reflect concerns about fairness, authority, resources, and professional respect. The central implication is that universities need more than policies that prohibit misconduct: they need fair procedures, constructive opportunities for dialogue, appropriate responses to serious behaviour, and organizational practices that support trust and accountability. A more integrated understanding of these dimensions can help guide future research and inform institutional approaches to healthier academic relationships.

Figure 1. Conceptual Synthesis of Problematic Relationships and Conflict in Higher Education



Note. The figure summarizes the main relationship types, drivers, consequences, and management responses identified in the scoping review. Contextual factors, including institutional governance, resource constraints, and cultural norms, may influence conflict across higher education settings.

Conclusion

Problematic relationships and conflict are important challenges in higher education, affecting students, faculty members, and administrators. The literature reviewed suggests that these issues extend beyond individual disagreements and may be influenced by poor communication, perceived injustice, power imbalances, and institutional culture. When left unaddressed, such conflicts can undermine well-being, teaching, learning, collaboration, and trust within academic communities. Addressing these challenges requires clear institutional

policies, fair grievance procedures, open communication, and appropriate conflict-resolution approaches, including mediation where suitable. However, further research is needed to compare different forms of conflict and evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions across higher education contexts. Ultimately, the goal is not to eliminate disagreement but to ensure that conflicts are managed constructively, respectfully, and fairly, contributing to healthier and more supportive academic environments.

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