


## Dynamics of hierarchical conflict in higher education: What does the literature tell us about performance and well-being?

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Info Article	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History:</p> <p>Received: August, 2024 Approved: September, 2024 Published: September, 2024</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords:</p> <p><i>hierarchical conflict, higher education, academic performance, staff well-being, conflict management</i></p> <hr/> <p>Corresponding Author:</p> <p>Putu Gede Subhaktiyasa Email: <a href="mailto:pgs@stikeswiramedika.ac.id">pgs@stikeswiramedika.ac.id</a></p>	<p>Hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions can affect the performance and welfare of lecturers and administrative staff, but in-depth studies on the impact and conflict management strategies still need to be explored. This study aims to provide an understanding of the impact of hierarchical conflict on the performance and well-being of lecturers and administrative staff and effective strategies for managing conflict. This study uses a literature review method, which examines findings from relevant literature with a content analysis approach. The results indicate that hierarchical conflict can potentially reduce academic productivity and operational efficiency and increase staff stress and burnout. However, in some cases, conflict can also spark innovation and collaboration. Effective conflict management strategies include managerial, cultural, and structural approaches. The findings contribute to developing conflict management policies and practices in higher education institutions and provide theoretical insights to guide future research.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">© 2024 Putu Gede Subhaktiyasa, I Made Arisusan, Hendro Wahyudi, N. Putri Sumaryani <i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license</i></p> <div style="text-align: right;">  </div>

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions with various approaches to learning theory are central to society as centers for developing science, technology, and innovation (Cai, Ma and Chen, 2020; Lis, 2021; Widyanthi *et al.*, 2024). In addition, they serve as educational institutions that prepare future generations with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively in various economic and social sectors (Petermann, Schreyögg, and Fürstenau, 2019; Schofer, Ramirez, and Meyer, 2020). Thus, an effective organizational structure is essential to ensure that higher education institutions can perform their functions optimally. The structure includes various layers of hierarchy involving administrative personnel, education personnel or lecturers, and other support personnel with specific roles and responsibilities to achieve higher education goals (Kováts, 2018; Cabrera *et al.*, 2022).

Hierarchical structures based on position and authority are becoming increasingly crucial in regulating the internal dynamics of higher education institutions (Shattock, 2021). However, they also bring challenges, especially in the form of conflict, which is a phenomenon that often arises between different layers of organizational hierarchy (Xu and Chang, 2022).

Conflicts within the hierarchical structure of higher education include tensions and disputes between individuals or groups, such as lecturers and administration, stemming from different priorities and perspectives (Yap, Madan, and Puranam, 2021). Lecturers often prioritize academic aspects and intellectual independence, while administration emphasizes operational efficiency and compliance with higher education policies (Lukman, 2021; Bhushan, 2023). In addition, conflicts may occur between departments triggered by competition for resources, differences in vision, and lack of effectiveness (Johnson, 2017; Muthanna and Sang, 2017; Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci, 2022). Even inaccurate placement of individuals according to hierarchical layers in internal university activities can trigger conflicts that degrade the line of command of a hierarchical structure. This misplacement can lead to rankism or hierarchical microaggressions, where staff members are treated differently based on their level of education and role within the institution, leading to feelings of belittlement and misunderstanding of staff roles (Yap, Madan, and Puranam, 2021).

Hierarchical conflict between academic and administrative staff in higher education institutions can significantly impact the organizational structure's implementation. Research has shown that conflict between academics and administrators can arise due to power struggles, priorities, and communication breakdowns (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Traditionally, lecturers had considerable influence over their work, but changes in educational organizations have altered power dynamics, leading to conflict (Muthanna and Sang, 2017). Such conflicts can strain the resilience of higher education institutions, making it essential to align academic and managerial values for a robust system (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen, 2021). Moreover, investigating allegations involving high-level administrators can be challenging, highlighting the complexity of dealing with conflict at the top levels of educational institutions (West, 2006).

Previous studies have discussed hierarchical conflict and conflict management interventions in different organizational contexts. However, most of these studies tend to discuss the conflict in general without a specific focus on the hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions (Rinehart Kathawalla and Mehta, 2022; Bhushan, 2023; Jameson *et al.*, 2023; Wulfekühler and Andrason, 2023). Previous research has paid less attention to hierarchical interactions as a source of conflict, where interactions between different layers of management have different dynamics compared to horizontal conflict (Bhushan, 2023). Differences in power, responsibilities, and expectations at various hierarchy levels trigger complex and prolonged conflicts. This gap shows the need for more specific studies on hierarchical conflict to provide a more comprehensive picture to create a productive and conducive academic environment.

This study aims to collect, analyze, and synthesize previous empirical research on hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions. This study focuses specifically on hierarchical interactions and how these conflicts impact staff performance and well-being in the operational complexity of higher education institutions, which is different from previous studies. We used a literature review approach to identify the impact of hierarchical conflict on the performance and well-being of faculty and teaching staff and practical conflict management strategies proposed in the literature. This study sought to answer the following research questions: "How does hierarchical conflict affect the performance and well-being of

teaching and learning personnel in higher education institutions, and what strategies are effective for managing such conflict?". As such, this study contributes significantly by highlighting hierarchical conflict, which is still under-explored in the higher education management literature. The results of this study can help the management of higher education institutions to design more effective management policies and practices in dealing with hierarchical conflicts. With the right conflict management strategies, institutions can create a more harmonious academic environment to increase productivity. In addition, the study findings can be a critical reference for researchers to conduct future research related to hierarchical conflict in higher education.

## **METHODS**

This library study utilizes information from various literature sources, including books, literature, and documents on hierarchical conflict in higher education. This data collection method explicitly targets the understanding and examining information in scholarly literature related to the research subject. It provides scope to interpret multiple sources and viewpoints more comprehensively and allows for embracing findings from previous studies, such as research conducted by Subhaktiyasa (2024b). Data analysis involves using a content analysis strategy, which employs a series of methodologies to evaluate and derive conclusions from books or other relevant publications. Content analysis extracts relevant information from scientific publications (Slocum and Rolf, 2021). We evaluated the selected literature's relevance, credibility, and contribution to understanding hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions. The literature analysis involved critical reading, identifying key themes, and linking findings to develop a holistic overview of the topic under study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section analyzes how hierarchical conflict affects the performance and well-being of lecturers and education staff in higher education institutions. We systematically outline relevant empirical studies' findings, followed by critical interpretation and discussion to answer the research questions. Explanations include the impact of hierarchical conflict and educational management strategies that have been proven effective in the literature. The analysis method through a thematic approach to the relevant literature can identify key emerging themes related to hierarchy conflict in higher education. We elaborate on each theme based on existing empirical evidence, thus providing a solid basis for further discussion that can provide significant insights for management and researchers in higher education management.

### **The Impact of Hierarchical Conflict on Performance**

Hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions significantly impacts the performance of both lecturers and administrative staff. This conflict can reduce the academic productivity of lecturers. Heffernan & Bosetti (2021) showed that incivility and inappropriate behavior arising from hierarchical conflict disrupted lecturers' concentration and commitment to research, teaching, and publications. Tetteh and Tetteh (2023) also highlighted that organizational conflict demotivates and demoralizes lecturers, reducing their academic output. West (2006) notes that hierarchical conflict can halt operations, significantly affecting operational efficiency and overall performance. It can damage the reputation of the higher

education institution. These conflicts often stem from tensions between academic and managerial values, leading to a lack of cohesion and cooperation within the higher education institution. Muthanna and Sang (2017) explained that internal conflict weakens coordination among staff, hampering the execution of crucial administrative tasks. Conflicts among bureaucratic administrators and academics can result from various factors, including financial disparities and lack of clear job descriptions, leading to inefficiencies in administrative functions. In addition, hierarchical conflict also results in disharmonious relationships between departments, where competition for resources and different visions between departments result in tension and fragmentation, which disrupts the smooth operation of higher education institutions (Barsky, 2002; Edwards, Crosling and Lim, 2014; Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci, 2022). Findings indicate the negative impact of conflict caused by hierarchy, but under certain conditions, such as ambiguous tasks, hierarchy can provide role clarity that improves team performance. Greer *et al.* (2018) showed that a well-managed hierarchy can help overcome task ambiguity and improve team effectiveness. Well-managed conflict can enhance communication and cooperation among administrative staff, encouraging them to find solutions and increasing understanding and collaboration.

The interaction between lecturers and administrative staff within the hierarchical structure of higher education organizations adds another dimension to this conflict. Lecturers focusing more on academic freedom and knowledge development often clash with administrative staff prioritizing operational efficiency and policy compliance. This gap can create tensions that affect the performance of both parties. When lecturers feel that strict administrative policies restrict their academic freedom, they may feel pressured and less motivated, negatively affecting their productivity. Conversely, administrative staff may feel frustrated by lecturers' demands that override efficient operational procedures, hindering productive cooperation. However, positive interactions can be created if these conflicts are properly managed. Through constructive dialogue, lecturers and administrative staff can come to a shared understanding of each other's needs and priorities, leading to innovative and efficient solutions.

### The Impact of Hierarchical Conflict on Well-being

Hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions affects performance and significantly impacts the well-being of lecturers and administrative staff. Lecturers involved in hierarchical conflict often experience increased levels of stress and burnout. Heffernan and Bosetti (2021) found that incivility, characterized by various disrespectful behavior, is rising in higher education. This rise in incivility creates a stressful work environment and decreases the psychological well-being of faculty members. Although the study does not explicitly link incivility to hierarchical conflict, such disrespectful behaviors may manifest underlying tensions within the hierarchical structures of higher education institutions. Capel (1992) supports this by identifying that stress and burnout among teachers are influenced by individual factors (e.g., locus of control, stability of personality), environmental factors (e.g., excessive workload, extracurricular activities, taking work home), and psychological factors (e.g., role conflict, role ambiguity). These factors collectively contribute to stress and burnout, highlighting the importance of addressing individual and environmental stressors to improve well-being. The

inability to manage this stress can lead to burnout, where lecturers feel overwhelmed and lose motivation to work, negatively impacting their well-being (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman 2019).

Furthermore, hierarchical conflict can result in decreased job satisfaction among lecturers. Skelton (2012) highlights that value conflicts between lecturers and administration, such as differing views on academic and operational priorities, can lead to significant dissatisfaction. It affects not only lecturers' professional performance but also their emotional well-being, causing feelings of being unappreciated and unfulfilled. Apart from lecturers, administrative staff are also not immune from the negative impact of hierarchical conflict on well-being. West (2006) explains that protracted disputes can increase tension and create a stressful work environment. It tends to increase insecurity about the future among staff, which impacts their mental and emotional health. This situation is exacerbated by interdepartmental conflict, where competition and lack of effective communication can cause significant tension and lower staff well-being (Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci, 2022). Greer *et al.* (2018) stated that hierarchical conflict exacerbates stress and reduces overall team well-being, especially in teams with temporal instability, skill differentiation, and mutable hierarchies. However, mutual conflict can occasionally strengthen working relationships and increase solidarity among staff. When team members collectively face hierarchical challenges, they can develop a sense of camaraderie and mutual support as they work together to navigate and resolve these conflicts. These shared experiences can foster stronger interpersonal bonds and a unified team identity, potentially increasing solidarity. Better collaboration and communication that builds from conflict situations can create a more supportive work environment and improve overall well-being (Ronay *et al.*, 2012). Interactions between lecturers and administrative staff within the hierarchical structure have essential implications for well-being. When lecturers feel that their contributions are valued and their academic freedom is respected, their well-being improves. Conversely, when administrative staff feel that their roles are valued and they have a say in decision-making, they are more likely to feel satisfied and motivated. Muthanna and Sang (2017) point out that good well-being in both groups is essential for creating a harmonious and productive work environment.

## Effective Conflict Management Strategies

Hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions is managed through various conflict management approaches with varying degrees of success. The three main practical approaches are the managerial approach, the cultural approach, and the structural approach. An effective conflict management strategy should consider combining all three approaches to achieve optimal results. Implementing clear policies, building a solid organizational culture, and reorganizing organizational structures that support communication and collaboration are essential steps in managing and defusing hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions.

The managerial approach focuses on implementing clear policies and procedures to manage conflict. They must understand, comprehend, and transparently execute all higher education management administrative policies with high complexity. Transparent and communicative leadership is critical to easing tensions between lecturers and administrative staff (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014; Smith and Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Institutional leaders should actively listen to staff complaints and concerns and provide appropriate responses. Several leadership styles have proven effective in higher education management.

Subhaktiyasa, Rizki, *et al.* (2023) offer spiritual leadership to develop a harmonious academic environment. It collaborates vision, instills hope, and practices altruistic love that touches basic human needs to be more organized, committed, and productive, creating integrity, humanism, ethics, and respect in the organization (Subhaktiyasa, Agung, *et al.*, 2023; Subhaktiyasa, 2024b). Spiritual leadership increases spiritual well-being, improves motivation and performance, and decreases counterproductive behaviors (Subhaktiyasa, 2023; Subhaktiyasa and Sintari, 2024; Subhaktiyasa, Agung, *et al.*, 2024). In addition, training in conflict management for leaders and managers at every level of the organization can improve their ability to recognize and proactively handle conflicts before escalation occurs (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen, 2024). Tetteh and Tetteh (2023) also emphasize the importance of fair and transparent performance evaluations to reduce dissatisfaction and injustice, often the root of conflict.

The cultural approach emphasizes building an inclusive and supportive organizational culture. Developing shared values that value collaboration, mutual respect, and more open communication is crucial. Edwards, Crosling, and Lim (2013) explain that a culture that supports innovation and appreciates each individual's contribution can reduce friction between different layers of hierarchy. Organizing workshops, seminars, and team-building activities that focus on strengthening interpersonal relationships can help create a harmonious work environment and reduce the potential for conflict (Muthanna and Sang, 2017). In addition, valuing and promoting diversity of perspectives among staff can increase tolerance and better understanding of differences. It indicates the importance of building a culture that encourages harmonious relationships in a productive work environment. Subhaktiyasa *et al.* (2024) proved that integrating local wisdom such as Tri Hita Karana into organizational culture can improve harmonious relationships that impact adaptability, consistency, involvement, and mission.

The structural approach involves organizational design and governance changes to minimize potential conflict. West (2006) emphasizes the importance of establishing trusted governance structures and reconciling academic and managerial values to mitigate conflict and promote a cohesive work environment. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each position in the hierarchy can reduce ambiguity that often triggers tensions. Adjusting the organizational structure to support better communication flow and ensuring that each department has adequate representation in the decision-making process can improve coordination and collaboration (Bulut-Sahin and Kondakci, 2022). Greer *et al.* (2018) showed that restructuring that allows flexibility in roles and tasks can reduce frustration and increase job satisfaction. For example, rotating tasks or cross-departmental projects can enable staff to understand their colleagues' challenges and needs differently, thereby increasing empathy and cooperation.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes significantly to the higher education management literature by highlighting the dynamics of hierarchical conflict that has been less explored in previous studies. The findings enrich the theoretical understanding of how hierarchical conflict affects the performance and well-being of teaching and learning personnel in higher education institutions. In addition to horizontal conflict, this study highlights the importance of considering the vertical dimension in educational organizational structures. The findings expand the

boundaries of conflict management theory by incorporating a hierarchical perspective, which suggests that differences in power and responsibility between organizational layers can be a source of complex and ongoing conflict (Smith and Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Heffernan and Bosetti, 2021). In addition, this research adds new nuances to organizational well-being theory by showing that staff well-being is influenced not only by physical working conditions and organizational policies but also by power dynamics and interpersonal relationships within the hierarchy of higher education institutions (Hautala, Helander, and Korhonen, 2021). These theoretical implications support a more holistic management model that integrates structural, cultural, and managerial aspects to address hierarchical conflict effectively.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study offer valuable guidance for the management of higher education institutions to design and implement effective conflict management strategies. First, implementing clear and transparent conflict management policies is essential to ease tensions and increase trust among staff. For example, conflict management training and fair performance evaluations can help reduce feelings of injustice and improve academic and operational productivity (Edwards, Crosling, and Lim, 2013; Tetteh and Tetteh, 2023). Second, building an inclusive and supportive organizational culture can reduce the potential for conflict by encouraging collaboration and valuing a diversity of perspectives. Higher education institutions should promote values that support open communication and respect for each individual's contribution, which can improve staff's emotional and psychological well-being (Muthanna and Sang, 2017). Third, organizational restructuring to clarify roles and responsibilities and ensure good communication flow are practical steps that can be taken to reduce ambiguity and improve operational efficiency. For example, rotating tasks or projects across departments can strengthen relationships between staff and increase empathy and cooperation (Bulut-Sahin & Kondakci, 2022). Other practical implications include the importance of regular surveys to measure staff well-being and job satisfaction levels and feedback mechanisms that allow staff to voice their complaints and suggestions constructively. Thus, higher education institution managers can proactively address emerging issues before they develop into larger conflicts.

### Social and Ethical Implications

Hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions impacts the performance and welfare of teaching and education personnel and has significant social and ethical implications. Socially, this conflict can create a disharmonious work environment and reduce the quality of interactions between individuals in the workplace. Strained relationships between lecturers and administrative staff can lead to polarization and fragmentation within the academic community, ultimately hindering the collaboration and teamwork necessary to achieve institutional goals. In addition, hierarchical conflict can also affect students' perceptions of educational institutions. Students who witness or experience the impact of conflict between teaching and education personnel may feel uncomfortable and less motivated, affecting the quality of their learning and academic experience. It can also damage the institution's reputation in the eyes of the public and prospective students, reducing its attractiveness as a conducive and quality place to learn.

Ethically, hierarchical conflict management demands serious attention to fairness, transparency, and accountability. Higher education institutions have a moral responsibility to

ensure that all academic community members are treated fairly and equally. Injustice in conflict resolution or the presence of bias in management decisions can engender a sense of mistrust and dissatisfaction among staff, which can exacerbate conflicts and create negative cycles that are difficult to overcome. Furthermore, institutions should consider the ethical implications of their conflict management strategies. Approaches that ignore the voices and rights of teaching and learning personnel may violate professional ethics. Therefore, an inclusive approach involving all relevant parties in conflict resolution is essential, ensuring their views and interests are recognized and respected. Another ethical impact is maintaining confidentiality and integrity in dealing with hierarchical conflicts. Dissemination of inappropriate information or manipulation of conflict data can undermine the institution's integrity and raise serious ethical concerns. Therefore, conflict management must be conducted with a high level of honesty and professionalism to maintain the trust and integrity of the institution.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored the dynamics of hierarchical conflict in higher education institutions, focusing on its impact on the performance and well-being of lecturers and administrative staff and practical conflict management strategies. The findings show that hierarchical conflict has complex and multifaceted effects that affect various aspects of higher education institutions' operations. Hierarchical conflict can decrease faculty and administrative staff performance, affecting academic productivity, operational efficiency, and individual well-being. Adverse effects such as increased stress, decreased motivation, and job dissatisfaction reflect how tensions in organizational structures can undermine the work environment and quality of educational services. The literature indicates that hierarchical conflict tends to have more negative than positive impacts on higher education. Effective conflict management strategies through managerial, cultural, and structural approaches can be essential in mitigating the negative impacts and harnessing the positive potential of conflict. Managerial approaches that involve responsive leadership, cultural approaches that promote values of inclusiveness and cooperation, and structural approaches that create clear communication channels and fair conflict-resolution procedures are critical elements in creating a more harmonious and productive academic environment. This research highlights the importance of a deeper understanding of hierarchical conflict dynamics and how interactions between different layers in the organizational structure affect performance and well-being outcomes. Implementing comprehensive management strategies that are comprehensive and sensitive to the needs and concerns of all parties in higher education institutions can reduce the negative impact of conflict, improve members' well-being, and, ultimately, strengthen overall organizational performance.

While the desk study allowed for a broad overview of the hierarchical conflict in higher education, the results are highly dependent on the quality and availability of data from previous studies, indicating that some critical aspects may not be comprehensively revealed. The implications of the findings may not be fully applicable across different geographical and cultural contexts. Therefore, further studies on the constructive aspects of hierarchical conflict with a more diverse and contextualized approach are needed. Future research should consider a longitudinal approach to monitor changes and developments in hierarchical conflict and its impact on the performance and well-being of lecturers and administrative staff to

provide more dynamic and comprehensive insights.

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