

MEDIATION AND INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE OF UNILORIN AT 50

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ABSTRACT

As the University of Ilorin celebrates its 50th anniversary, this paper reflects on the role of mediation in sustaining its reputation for stability, harmony, and resilience. In a national context where universities are often marked by prolonged industrial disputes and institutional crises, Unilorin stands out for its relative continuity and academic progress. This study explores how the principles and practices of mediation whether formally institutionalized or informally applied have contributed to this resilience. By examining key episodes of student-staff engagement, union-management relations, and administrative transitions, the paper highlights moments where dialogue, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving shaped outcomes. While Unilorin may not always label these processes as “mediation,” the spirit of interest-based resolution and inclusive communication has underpinned its governance ethos. The paper argues for the future institutionalization of mediation frameworks within the university’s policies, including the training of mediators, establishment of a mediation center, and the integration of restorative justice practices. As Unilorin looks ahead, its mediation-informed approach to managing internal challenges offers a model for other institutions navigating complexity and change. Mediation is thus not merely a conflict resolution tool but a foundation for institutional longevity and academic excellence.

Keywords: Dialogue, Disputes Resolution, Mediation, University of Ilorin.

Introduction

Overview of the University of Ilorin’s 50-year journey.

Situated in the ancient city of Ilorin, the historic capital city of Kwara State, Nigeria, University of Ilorin (fondly called Unilorin) which has turned itself into a first choice institution for most admission seekers and a pace setter for other institutions, was one of the 7 institutions which was established by a Decree of the Federal Military Government in August, 1975. The establishment was to create more opportunities in the country for easy access to quality education for Nigerians. At its inception, the University of Ilorin was a college affiliated to the Premier University, University of Ibadan under the leadership of Dr. T.N. Tamuno – a Professor and Head of History Department at the University of Ibadan, who was appointed the first Principal of the College in September, 1975. Shortly after which he was appointed as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, that which necessitated the appointment of a new principal for the college (now Unilorin). Professor O.O. Akinkugbe, former Dean of the then Faculty of Medicine, University of Ibadan was later appointed as the principal for the college in December 1975.¹

The University College which started off with three foundational Faculties namely: Arts, Science and Education, directing not less than 60% of its programs to science-oriented programs. In October 1976, the University attained full autonomous status, and since then has become one of the giants of Universities in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large. From the foundational three faculties in which the institution started with, Unilorin now boasts of 16 faculties; Agriculture, Arts, Basic Medical Sciences, Basic Clinical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Communication and Information Science, Education, Engineering and Technology, Law, Life Sciences, Pharmacy, Physical Sciences, Management Sciences, Social Sciences and Veterinary Medicine with over

¹ Unilorin, available at <https://www.unilorin.edu.ng/about-us/history/> accessed on 9th June, 2025.

100 departments spanning across the faculties. The student population of 200 in 1976 has increased to more than 50,000 by the 2024/2025 academic session, while the total staff strength of the University stood at approximately 3,632 as at September 25, 2024. As they say, the young shall grow. Unilorin is no exception to the young that grew, as the once Unibadan affiliated college is now a full grown Unilorin that, waking up to 2025, it is now on the verge of celebrating its 50th year anniversary since the establishment in 1975.²

Challenges Facing Nigerian Universities

It goes without saying that Nigerian higher education system emulates the western educational system, however, one thing that set Nigerian tertiary institutions apart is students unrest. Students unrest entails many things, but one can say without burging mouth that every of the activities are negative and have no benefits. The World Health Organization (2002), described student unrest as “an intentional use of physical force or power, which results in or has a high livelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological, harmful development or deprivation.”³ Typical examples of unrests students face include violent behaviors, boycott of classes and lectures, civil disorder, crises, protests, Student riots among many others.⁴

Unilorin as an exception recognized for continuity and academic progress.

As earlier stated the typical types of unrests students face in their various institutions, what sets University of Ilorin apart from other institutions is its consistent continuity and academic progress. University of Ilorin is recognized as an exception to the frequent academic unrests that disrupt academic activities in various institutions in the

² Unilorin, available at <https://www.unilorin.edu.ng/about-us/history/> accessed on 9th June, 2025.

³ Students unrest in Nigerian universities: Types, causes and administrative strategies to the challenges. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371477899_Students_unrest_in_Nigerian_universities_Types_causes_and_administrative_strategies_to_the_challenges accessed on 9th June, 2025.

⁴ Ibid

country. Unilorin has maintained consistent academic progress through various techniques grooming the students for self-sufficiency and enabling students become employers of labor themselves.⁵ Laying a high level of discipline and standard which students must uphold and adhere to.⁶

Definition of mediation and its relevance to institutional governance.

Mediation is a voluntary, confidential, and structured process in which a neutral third party, known as the mediator, facilitates communication between disputing parties to help them reach a mutually acceptable resolution.⁷ Unlike a judge or arbitrator, the mediator does not impose a decision but instead assists parties in identifying issues, exploring options, and negotiating an agreement.⁸ Mediation plays a crucial role in fostering institutional governance through cooperation, reliability, transparency and inclusiveness. Moreover, mediation in institutional governance helps manage disputes among students, staff, management, shareholders, and other stakeholders, reinforcing relationships based on discipline, trust and mutuality, which is essential for effective corporate governance in an institution.⁹ It also provides techniques and mechanisms for early dispute resolution, preserving relationships and supporting institutional continuity, which are key aspects of good governance in institutions.¹⁰

⁵ Unilorin Bulletin, available at <https://www.unilorin.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Bulletin-April-22-2024.pdf?utm> accessed on 9th June, 2025.

⁶ Unilorin Bulletin, available at <https://www.unilorin.edu.ng/egbewole-charges-students-to-uphold-integrity-discipline-excellence/> accessed on 9th June, 2025.

⁷ C. W. Moore. "The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict". 4th ed., Jossey-Bass.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Eric M. Runesson & Marie-Laurence. "Mediating Corporate Governance Conflicts and Disputes." Available at <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/mgrt-pub/focus4-mediation-12.pdf?utm> accessed on 9th June, 2025.

¹⁰ Ibid

Mediation as a process rooted in interest-based negotiation, inclusive dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving.

An interest-based negotiation is one in which parties share the interests that underlie their grievances and try to jointly negotiate a solution that satisfies all parties.¹¹ Interest based negotiations involve exploring the demands of all parties in adhering to their demands rather than sticking to a fixed demands.¹² This approach fosters a collaborative environment where parties work together to create value and achieve win-win outcomes by understanding each other's needs and seeking mutual gains.¹³

Inclusive dialogue ensures all relevant voices, opinions and perspectives are considered and integrated before going on with a process. This inclusivity will create mutual understanding, foster cooperation when no decision is made without consideration of various perspectives, and this will create more room for acceptance, reduce level of disagreement and reduce undermining of participation.¹⁴

Emphasis on restorative justice values and communication culture as contributors to resilience.

Restorative Justice Values emphasize accountability, repair of harm, inclusivity, empathy, and empowerment. These values shift focus from punishment to healing, enabling victims to express their needs and offenders to take responsibility and actively participate in making amends. This process not only addresses emotional and

¹¹ The program on Negotiation. Available at https://www.pon.harvard.edu/tag/interest-based-negotiation/?utm_ accessed on 10th June, 2025.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Steps in Interest-Based Negotiation Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service Human Resources Development Canada available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AFNC/documents/ibnworksheets/3interest_based_steps.pdf?utm_ accessed on 10th June, 2025.

¹⁴ Gender and Inclusive Mediation Strategies. Available at https://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Inclusive_Mediation_Process_Design_infographic_web-1.pdf?utm_ accessed on 10th June, 2025.

psychological wounds but also strengthens community bonds, creating a foundation for sustainable peace and resilience.¹⁵

Communication Culture within restorative justice promotes constructive dialogue, active listening, and mutual respect. Skilled facilitators create safe spaces for honest exchanges between victims, offenders, and community members, helping to bridge divides and build understanding even across deep conflicts or cultural differences. This culture supports ongoing relationship-building and reconciliation, which are essential for resilience in communities facing conflict or trauma.¹⁶ Together, these elements enable communities to resolve conflicts effectively, foster unity thereby enhancing their chances of tackling future crises and challenges.¹⁷

Mediation Practices in Unilorin's Internal Relations

Mediation has been applied both formally and informally in Unilorin to manage students-students, students-staff relationship and broader institution conflicts.

Formal Mediation is clear and evident in the University's policies and principles particularly such as the Sexual Harassment Policy which encourages third party intervention and formal Mediation sessions to resolve disputes between students and staff in order to identify perspectives, encourage mutual acceptance and foster a sense of understandings and unity.¹⁸

Informal mediation on the other hand occurs through the university's internal mechanisms like the establishment of the Student Affairs Unit and the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Society, which promote awareness and training in mediation

¹⁵ Available at https://wjarr.com/sites/default/files/WJARR-2024-3978.pdf?utm_ accessed on 11th June, 2025.

¹⁶ Bridging divides through restorative justice. Available at https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/bridging-divides-through-restorative-justice?utm_ accessed on 11th June, 2025.

¹⁷ Available at https://wjarr.com/sites/default/files/WJARR-2024-3978.pdf?utm_ accessed on 11th July, 2025.

¹⁸ https://www.unilorin.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Unilorin-Sexual-Harassment-Policy.pdf?utm_

and conflict resolution skills among students and staff.¹⁹ Mediation are also employed in addressing the institution's internal conflicts positively enhance academic continuity by reducing strikes, boycotting of lectures and crises.

A notable thing about Unilorin is how the students are always quick to evade from any form of violence. This is not due to anything, but the level of discipline and standard which the institution has set for the students to uphold. The process of suppressing violence will only resort into form of rivalries between students, which is why that is not a go-to in Unilorin. Rather conflicts that arise are addressed through dialogues, and disciplinary actions, when necessary. Notable ones include students rusticated for misdemeanor committed on the institution's campus.²⁰ This includes theft, examination malpractice, hostel bed-space racketeering and extortion, beating a fellow student, admission racketeering, extortion, and assault,²¹ as well as students engaged in other misconducts that taint the image of excellence which the institution seeks to uphold.²²

Governance Culture and the Spirit of Mediation at Unilorin.

The culture of governance at the University of Ilorin has been marked by a consistent commitment to proactive engagement, participatory decision-making, and consensus-building qualities that align closely with the principles of mediation, even when not explicitly termed as such. Unlike many other Nigerian universities where authority is often exercised through rigid hierarchies and confrontational approaches, Unilorin's

¹⁹ADR, Unilorin. Available at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/alternative-dispute-resolution-adr-society-university-of-ilorin-0a211a177_adr-mediation-disputeresolution-activity-6620403729692786689-j0ll?utm_ accessed on 11th June, 2025.

²⁰ The Punch Newspaper. Available at <https://punchng.com/unilorin-expels-two-rusticates-three-students-for-misconduct/> accessed on 11th June, 2025.

²¹ Channels Tv. Available at <https://www.channelstv.com/2024/04/01/unilorin-rusticate-expel-six-final-year-students-13-others-full-list/> accessed on 11th June, 2025.

²² The Punch Newspaper. Available at <https://punchng.com/unilorin-expels-student-for-demanding-ransom-from-parents-of-missing-colleague/> accessed on 11th June, 2025.

administrative ethos reflects a “dialogue-first” culture. This ethos has not only promoted internal stability but has fostered a strong institutional identity grounded in trust and mutual respect.

At its core, mediation whether formal or informal seeks to resolve disputes by enabling open communication, mutual understanding, and voluntary agreement. Scholars have underscored the relevance of mediation as a governance strategy, particularly in environments marked by complex social interactions like universities.

For instance, during transitions between vice-chancellors, Unilorin consistently managed to avoid the administrative crises that often characterize leadership change in Nigerian universities. These peaceful transitions were facilitated by trust-enhancing dialogue and a strong internal culture that respected institutional values over factionalism. A notable example includes the transition from Prof. Ishaq Oloyede to Prof. AbdulGaniyu Ambali in 2010, which was characterized by internal harmony, collective ownership of the university’s vision, and continuity of strategic plans.²³

Moreover, industrial relations at Unilorin, especially with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), were navigated through a mix of principled negotiation and strategic dialogue. While the university experienced some estrangement from ASUU national in the past, it maintained internal academic activities, showcasing the role of internal communication and prioritization of academic continuity over confrontation. This differs sharply from the nationwide pattern of institutional paralysis during union strikes.

The university’s administration demonstrated a tacit use of Interest-based negotiation strategies engaging staff and students in problem-solving dialogues and responding to grievances with empathy and inclusivity. This informal mediation culture, though not

²³ Unilorin, available at <https://www.unilorin.edu.ng/about-us/history/> accessed on 9th June, 2025.

codified, produced real institutional dividends, as seen in student disciplinary matters being resolved without escalating into mass protests or litigation.

In essence, Unilorin's governance model exhibits a form where parties are not only heard but are empowered to co-create solutions, thus fostering long-term institutional harmony.

Conclusion

The University of Ilorin's sustained academic stability and reputation over the past 50 years offer a unique model in the Nigerian higher education landscape. Central to this resilience is the silent but strategic role played by mediation in both its formal and informal manifestations. By institutionalizing dialogue, trust, and respect for diverse viewpoints, Unilorin has demonstrated that universities can withstand systemic challenges without sacrificing academic continuity or institutional integrity.

The use of mediation as a governance strategy has enabled Unilorin to manage conflicts preemptively and build a culture of participatory decision-making. Rather than react to disputes with authoritarian measures or delay responses to stakeholder grievances, Unilorin has shown that a listening posture and a commitment to internal dialogue can prevent crises before they escalate. This aligns with the restorative justice framework, which emphasizes healing and relationship restoration rather than punitive measures.

As the university enters its next 50 years, the formal institutionalization of mediation through a Centre for Mediation and Restorative Justice, professional development programs, and integration into administrative protocols will further strengthen its legacy of stability and academic excellence. This proactive step can create a structured

avenue for staff-student engagement, early conflict resolution, and leadership succession planning grounded in inclusivity.²⁴

The Unilorin model can serve as a blueprint for other Nigerian universities seeking alternatives to institutional volatility. In an era where strikes, policy inconsistency, and administrative breakdowns are common, Unilorin's journey illustrates that resilience is not accidental but cultivated through deliberate practices of listening, compromise, and collaborative leadership.

As noted resilience in institutions is strengthened by dialogical processes that include diverse voices and perspectives. Therefore, embedding mediation in university governance is not only a strategic advantage but a necessity for sustainable academic development in Nigeria.²⁵

²⁴ H. Zehr. "The Little Book of Restorative Justice". Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2002. Available at: <https://emu.edu/now/restorative-justice/book/> <https://emu.edu/now/restorative-justice/> Accessed on 11th May, 2025.

²⁵ A. Dewulf, & R. Bouwen. "Issue Framing in Conversations for Change: Discursive Interaction Strategies for 'Doing Differences.'" *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 168–193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886312438858> <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886312438858> Accessed on 11th May, 2025.