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Sustainability and Conflict Management in the University Environment. Analysis of Students of the Degrees in Labour Relations and Human Resources, and Social Work at the University of Granada (Spain)

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Abstract: In 2015 the United Nations approved the 2030 Agenda which established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The importance of these SGDs to universities, and universities' commitment to them, requires not only involvement but also the development of research projects, instruments and practices that enable the SDGs to be carried out. Conflict is inherent within any social group and the need to perceive, analyse and manage it is crucial in order to move towards sustainable social development. This research paper analyses conflict existing within the university environment. It specifically relates to students studying for two degrees at the University of Granada (Spain): a degree in Social Work and a degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources. The main instrument used to gather information was a survey addressed to students of both degrees. As a quantitative research technique, it has allowed us to gather evidence about and analyse students' perceptions of conflict. The main results reveal the existence of conflict resulting from interactions between the students themselves, interactions between the students and teaching staff and interactions between the students and service and administrative staff (SAS). Central to perceptions of conflict existing within the university environment are the professional and educational interests of students, as well as issues relating to academic assessment and excessive bureaucracy.

Keywords: sustainability; human development; culture of peace; coexistence; university students; conflicts

1. Introduction

When speaking about sustainability, or sustainable human development, we often automatically think of the relationship between individuals and the natural, physical or biological environments. In other words, we focus on the environment and planetary defence. However, sustainability is also connected, from an economic perspective, to rationalised modes of production which are in harmony with the environment and which limit growth in order to allow time for the regeneration of resources and prevent their depletion. It can be said to centre on the balance between nature and human action.

There is another way of thinking about the concept of sustainability. This relates to the structural framework in which social relationships develop between individuals or groups of individuals and other individuals or groups. An early awareness of conflicts and an ability to manage them forms the basis of human development and sustainability. Conflict management is key to achieving fairer and more egalitarian societies under the umbrella of collaboration, solidarity and the cessation of violence in all its forms. This is the focus of this research project.

When presenting the results of the Teaching Innovation Project 'Conflict Management in Universities as a Strategy for Improving Teaching Quality', the Dean of the University of Granada (UGR), Pilar Aranda, pointed out that those of us who are part of the university community are aware that:

"In such a large and heterogeneous group it is natural that, at certain times and in certain circumstances, disparities of criteria may arise, culminating in conflicts which must be addressed, and resolved, by the best procedure which guarantees the reparation of the damage caused, if any. This should guarantee the independence and impartiality of the bodies in charge of addressing and resolving the conflict at hand" [1] (p. 13).

There are many authors [2–5] who understand conflict as something consubstantial with human nature itself, seeing it as part of everyday life and embedded within the different strands which make up the social fabric [6]. The way conflicts are dealt with determines their resolution as well as the future relationships between the different parties. For this reason, positive conflict management is advocated; in other words, we refer to a form of management which adopts a proactive and constructive attitude when dealing with conflict.

According to Zaccagnini [7], conflict can be presented as a solvable problem as long as there is a willingness to accept that it is normal and a natural part of our daily interaction with others. On the other hand, conflict has positive aspects, as it can help us to adopt different perspectives when understanding a given situation and because it can improve relationship skills and self-esteem by strengthening relationships with others. In this way, people strengthen those resources that allow them to be protagonists of their lives, to be *agents*, while taking responsibility for their actions [8].

It is necessary to be 'vigilant' when detecting and identifying conflicts. Failing to deal with them or dealing with them in the wrong way can lead to the entrenchment, and even escalation, of conflict which could lead to social exclusion [9].

This article analyses the main results of a research project, funded and carried out at the UGR within the Framework of the Teaching Innovation and Good Educational Practices Programme (2019–2020). The general objective of the study was to identify and analyse conflicts existing within the educational environment of university students studying for the degree in Social Work and the degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources at the UGR. The primary data collection technique used was a survey addressed to students of both degrees.

The theoretical framework of the study is presented below. It is based on the need to understand, analyse and adequately manage social conflicts with the aim of advancing sustainable social development. The university environment is not exempt from these problems. Therefore, student conflicts have been studied from three perspectives:

1. Conflicts within the student body itself;
2. Conflicts between the student body and the teaching staff;
3. Conflicts between the student body and the service and administrative staff.

The reason this work is in line with the objectives of sustainability and sustainable human development is that it is aimed at achieving a society based on cooperation, dialogue, solidarity and a culture of peace and therefore the advancement towards fairer and more egalitarian societies. Here we are talking about societies focused on sustainable lifestyles which allow for the integration of all human beings in harmony with the planet.

2. Literature Review

When approaching the study of conflict, there is a general guideline, which shows that conflict is part of daily life. Conflict tends to be present whenever there is interaction between two or more individuals or groups of individuals, whether in the public or private sphere (in the workplace, within education, in a community, a family, and so on).

According to Alzate [4], people tend to have a negative attitude towards conflict as a result of socialisation processes. These processes convey pessimistic messages about the pain, sadness, frustration or discomfort caused by having to deal with a conflict situation. These messages, arising from close socialisation environments (family, friends, teachers, etc.), as well as more universal ones (literature, cinema, media, etc.), 'help to construct

attitudes and beliefs about conflict which affect the way we relate to others and how we respond to conflict situations' [4] (p. 108).

Marsal [10] holds that conflicts are neither good nor bad, but rather fruitful companions along the way, giving place to new situations and human relationships. In line with this, Becerril [11] points to the existence of a stream of sociological thought which embraces a positive concept of conflict. The following authors form part of this stream:

- Simmel [12], who sees conflict as a way of introducing a person to the norms, values or culture of a society and therefore as an integrating and necessary element in societies and human relationships;
- Coser [13] and his contribution to keeping groups cohesive in favour of social change, defining conflict as the struggle for scarce resources;
- Dahrendorf [14], who conceives of conflict and change as normal and general components of society.

By assuming, as a starting point, that conflict is inherent in human nature and in any area of our lives, the way in which it is approached will determine the way in which it is resolved and the outcome of the relationship between the different parties involved.

However, if conflicts are dealt with in the context of competition, denial, avoidance or accommodation, the effect is likely to be entrenchment and/or polarisation. On the other hand, we can assume a method of conflict resolution which is positive and constructive and based on agreement and collaboration. As Alzate [4] holds, this method can help us to learn appropriate ways of solving problems, build better and more lasting relationships and learn more about ourselves and others.

2.1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the University of Granada's Master Plan

In 2015 the UN adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as an opportunity for societies worldwide to improve the lives of all people. To this end, a total of 17 goals were established, ranging from the elimination of poverty to fighting climate change, improving education, promoting equality, protecting the environment and redesigning our cities.

These SDGs are intended to build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The idea is that all countries, regardless of their level of development or wealth, should promote prosperity and commit to protecting the environment, with each country taking responsibility for their achievements.

Of the 17 proposed SDGs, Goal 4 focuses on ensuring inclusive, equitable, quality education and the provision of lifelong learning opportunities. Goal 16 focuses on promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies. These two goals are the focus of this paper. This is because quality education is the foundation necessary for achieving sustainable development. It works hand-in-hand with peace in order to achieve the other SDGs.

However, violence, in all its manifestations, continues to be a problem for people all over the world.

One of the aims of Goal 4 is that students should be in a position to acquire both theoretical and practical learning. As pointed out by Vila and Martín [15] (p. 103), 'they are (...) necessary to promote sustainable development, in particular through education for sustainable development and the adoption of sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and the valuing of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development '.

With regard to Goal 16, Díaz [16] (p. 262) highlights how '(...) the achievement of sustainable development, in all its forms and manifestations, requires the adoption by states of measures that promote peace (...)'.

The key lies in legislation so that rules are more effective and people's rights are protected. This is in addition to educating people in a culture of peace and non-violence. As Jares [17] (p. 22) states, it is a matter of promoting a pedagogy of coexistence with human rights as its regulatory framework, together with the essential elements of respect,

dialogue and solidarity. In this sense, living together is a continuous exercise based on dialogue with one another.

The University of Granada sees its role as a vehicle for responding to the social transformations at the heart of its strategic objectives. Society needs to constantly adapt to the economic, social and political changes which shape it. In this sense, universities are key players in these transformative processes, as their role is to generate knowledge and learning.

Universities are active agents which play a leading role in meeting the challenge of seeking a more intelligent, fairer, more balanced, sustainable, socially responsible and egalitarian society.

All of this is set out in the Master Plan (Plan Director 2021. Vice-Rectorate for Institutional Policy and Planning, University of Granada. Available on line: Available online: https://institucional.ugr.es/areas/planificacion-estrategica/plan-director, accessed on 20 September 2021)—a plan which contains 11 main lines of action, 34 strategic lines, 111 objectives and 563 actions. This document includes, for each strategic line, links with the main objectives and lines of action of the Arqus Alliance of European Universities, as well as links with the SDGs adopted by the 2030 Agenda. This Master Plan has been coordinated by the UGR.

As two of its lines of action, we highlight Main Lines I and VII. Specifically, the first main line of action, *a university with a human dimension*, is one of the defining characteristics of the university to which we aspire. This is one in which university management is oriented towards and is for people. In fact, the objectives and management actions proposed in this first main line focus on the establishment of a framework of university life and working conditions which enable the stable and appropriate development of an individual's professional career, a balance between work and family life and a favourable environment for training and learning.

Regarding Main Line VII, *the socially committed university*, higher education is required to provide solid skills in order to achieve success in today's world. This is in addition to contributing to the training of citizens in ethical principles committed to peacebuilding, the defence of human rights and the values of democracy. A university's social responsibility involves contributing and integrating ethical principles, good governance and social commitment into its basic functions.

Likewise, this main line of action involves a firm commitment to sustainable development through training initiatives which allow the university community to continue raising awareness of the 2030 Agenda and thus commit to inclusion, diversity, equality and work-life balance. In short, this represents a commitment to society as a whole.

2.2. Towards a Culture of Peace

Peace can be defined generically as 'the set of conflict situations in which non-violence is chosen' [18] (p. 236).

One of the classic distinctions frequently made in peace studies is the distinction, established by Gatltung [19], between negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is understood as the absence of direct violence. Positive peace refers to the absence of 'structural violence' and the existence of structures, policies and institutions that intervene proactively in human development. In other words, this is not only peace as absence of war but also peace without poverty, inequalities and the violation of human rights. Furthermore, it promotes initiatives that make it possible to tackle present conflict situations and anticipate future ones.

The 2030 Agenda, as a comprehensive, universal and transformative development agenda, is oriented towards positive peace. In this sense, Sanahuja [20] affirms that concepts of peace and development end up being almost indistinguishable. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the peace and security pillar of the 2030 Agenda should not be seen, in the SDGs, as the mere elimination of direct violence and consequently only in terms of negative peace. In fact, around half of the 169 targets that make up the 17 SDGs of the

2030 Agenda allude directly to 'positive peace'. In other words, this is about proactive intervention by institutions in order to promote policies that result in human development.

In this proactive sense, coexistence and the development of the Culture of Peace are challenges for universities at the present time as well as in the future. This is because they are related to the SDGs, which promote, justice, peace and inclusive societies, in addition to other values.

Bernal [21] holds that it is necessary to promote a 'culture of peace'. For this, it is essential to socialise the values, attitudes and behaviours which reject violence and guarantee mutual respect between individuals.

In this context, in which education emerges as essential and necessary, the importance of a positive, dynamic and participatory process, in which dialogue is promoted and conflicts are resolved in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation, is recognised [22]. A culture of peace is the product of long-term actions, under universally recognised moral and ethical principles, which seek to sow their message in the minds of individuals [23].

2.3. Management of Conflict in Spanish Universities

In universities, as in other organisations, different and often conflicting interests coexist. Social interaction in university communities creates fertile ground for the emergence of conflicts. For this reason, universities have established their own bodies to manage conflicts when they arise. These bodies include the University Ombudsman, the Services Inspectorate and the Equality and Reconciliation Unit.

The University Ombudsman was introduced in Spanish universities when the Organic Law of Universities 6/2001 was implemented (Organic Law 6/2001 of 21 December, on universities (LOU). Available online: https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2001/12/21/6/con, accessed on 24 September 2021). This law was enacted with the aim of safeguarding the rights of members of the university community and was established as an instance of conflict management and resolution.

Normally there are three courses of action for conflict management: resolution of queries, dealing with complaints and implementing mediation procedures. 'Queries' involves giving and receiving advice on interpreting regulations (in this case, university regulations) and issuing information on the rights of the parties involved in a conflict. 'Complaints', on the other hand, can be made at the request of a party or ex officio. The aim is to investigate and clarify what is considered to be in violation of the rights of members of the university community. Finally, the Ombudsman's Office is also responsible for mediation and conciliation.

The intervention of the University Ombudsman usually concludes with the issuing of suggestions, recommendations and warnings. However, although the Ombudsman does not have the power to modify the resolutions of the University Administration, he/she can urge other bodies to exercise their powers of inspection and sanction (Regulations for the Organisation and Functioning of the University Ombudsman of the University of Granada, 23 February 2006. Available online: https://secretariageneral.ugr.es/bougr/pages/desarroll o/nuevas/defensoruniversitario230206/%21, accessed on 20 September 2021).

The second body is the Services Inspectorate, whose role is disciplinary. It initiates those disciplinary proceedings that are necessary to ensure the correct functioning of the university services. Its functions include ensuring compliance with current regulations, the fulfilment of the obligations of all members of the university community and the power to initiate disciplinary proceedings when necessary. The Services Inspectorate can intervene in an ordinary way when it acts ex officio or in an extraordinary way when a complaint or claim is presented.

The third body responsible for conflict management is the Equality and Reconciliation Unit. This body oversees the Harassment Prevention and Response Office (HPRO) and is responsible for dealing with cases of harassment. The HPRO focuses on two lines of action. The first is prevention, through awareness-raising, information, training, the detection

of possible cases, responses to harassment, assisting victims and acting on the alleged harasser. The second establishes appropriate disciplinary measures.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the recent approval of Spain's Draft Bill on University Coexistence (Draft Bill on University Coexistence, approved by the Council of Ministers on 25 May 2021. Available online: https://www.universidades.gob.es/stfls/universidades/Servicios/articulos/transparencia_gobierno/participacion_publica/audiencia/ficheros/MAINLeyConvivenciaUniversitaria.pdf, accessed on 20 September 2021), which establishes the foundation for coexistence in the university environment. One of the cornerstones of this draft bill is the important role of mediation and constructive conflict management in promoting coexistence between university members. The use of more peaceful and collaborative methods in the resolution of disputes, which could prevent the normal development of the essential functions of teaching, research and knowledge transfer, presents a great challenge for all universities, as they must set themselves up as models for society when it comes to dealing with conflict.

Universities are required to create a specific commission (referred to as the Coexistence Commission) in order to promote the use of alternative conflict-management procedures, such as mediation, and channel proposals to improve coexistence and the 'implementation' of the provisions of this bill. Title II defines and develops the mediation mechanism and procedures.

The 'mediation mechanism' is specifically defined as a voluntary procedure that is external to a disciplinary procedure. It is one in which active, deliberative and respectful dialogue, assisted and managed by a mediator, enables the conflicting parties to find coexistence in the university environment and reach an agreement for the resolution of their conflict. Conversely, the 'mediation procedure' is understood as an alternative means of conflict resolution within the framework of a disciplinary procedure in accordance with the provisions of articles 20 and 23 of the present bill. This procedure does not apply in cases that may involve sexual harassment, harassment on grounds of sex or gender-based violence, or in cases that may involve academic fraud or damage to the university's assets.

In short, the approval of this bill will represent a decisive step towards the implementation of a culture of peace, which is so necessary in 21st century societies. In general and in particular, it is an essential component of those areas related to training the new generations who are and who will be responsible for building the present and the future.

3. Research Methodology

The research for this paper has been funded and carried out at the University of Granada (Spain) within both the Framework of the Teaching Innovation and Good Teaching Practices Programme and the Teaching Innovation Project 16/92: 'Conflict Management in University Centres as a Strategy for Improving Teaching Quality', developed during the years 2019 and 2020.

The general objective of the research focuses on establishing, and analysing, the levels of conflict perceived by students studying for two degrees at the University of Granada (Spain): Labour Relations and Human Resources and Social Work.

Regarding data production techniques, the survey was used as a primary source in addition to analysis of secondary documentary sources. This enabled us to obtain information on the students' opinions, attitudes and evaluations. The questionnaire, (which was pre-tested) was given to students in person in the classrooms in the Faculties of Social Work and Labour Relations and Human Resources. This was in order to subsequently process the data with the SPSS/PC statistical programme.

The total sample obtained consists of 355 surveys, which indicate a response rate of 16.5%, given that the total population under study (population universe) corresponds to all students enrolled in both degrees—2145 students. Therefore, assuming that the sampling had been random, for a confidence level of 95% (2 sigmas) and with P = Q, the estimated statistical margin of error is ±4.5%.

As can be seen (Table 1), of the total number of responses, the majority were from female students (72.7%), with a much smaller percentage from male students (27.3%). The greater presence of women studying for both degrees, in addition to the high level of feminisation of these degrees, is the reason for their greater representation in the sample. Regarding age, there is a certain balance between the two groups, although the highest representation is held by the group aged 21 and over (55.3%). In terms of the year of study, the first and second years account for the majority of the students surveyed (71.7%), while the third and fourth years account for a smaller proportion (28.3%). With regard to faculty, the highest representation comes from Social Work students (63.8%), compared to students of Labour Relations and Human Resources students (36.2%).

Table 1. Sample characteristics.

	N	%
Gender		
Men	97	27.3
Women	258	72.7
Age group		
From 17 to 20 years old	156	44.7
21 and over	193	55.3
Academic year		
First–Second	252	71.7
Third–Fourth	99	28.3
Faculty		
Labour Relations and Human Resources	129	36.2
Social Work	227	63.8

Source: Own elaboration.

The type of analysis carried out was descriptive, using frequencies and contingency tables. All the crosses of variables used in this research paper were undertaken by taking gender, age group, academic year and faculty as independent variables. The analysis of these crosses of variables was carried out whenever there was a statistically significant level of association between variables, according to the chi-square statistical test, with a confidence level of 95% and a significance level of 0.05.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section we present and analyse the conflicts cited by students of the Faculties of Labour Relations and Human Resources and Social Work at the University of Granada. For this, three dimensions of the students' social interactions were analysed:

1. Conflicts arising from students' daily coexistence in the faculty;
2. Conflicts arising from students' interaction with the teaching staff in the classroom;
3. Conflicts between students and the service and administration staff.

4.1. Regarding Conflicts between Students

Table 2 shows degrees of agreement with different statements which allowed us to ascertain to what extent students feel affected by different types of problems. In general, three out of four students (75.2%) say that they 'often' or 'always' have good relations with their classmates. Even the integration of new students does not, for the majority, normally represent a problem, as they 'often' or 'always' try to integrate them (57.2%). In the case of disagreements, seven out of ten (71.8%) usually solve conflicts through dialogue. Along the same lines, the majority say that there are 'rarely' or 'never' conflicts between peers which affect others (60.6%) or conflicts that are motivated by the use of social media (57.1%). Peer-to-peer criticism is uncommon, with only a minority (12.6%) stating that it happens 'often' or 'always'.

Table 2. Conflicts among students.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	TOTAL	N (356)
I have a good relationship with my classmates	_	4	20.8	48	27.2	100	(356)
Normally, if I have a problem with my classmates, we solve it through dialogue	1.4	5.9	20.9	41	30.8	100	(354)
All classmates get along well	25.2	22	23.2	24.1	5.5	100	(345)
There are small sub-groups within our class	0.9	0.9	8.8	27.6	61.8	100	(351)
When a new student arrives, we try to integrate them	3.4	14.4	25	36.5	20.7	100	(348)
There are conflicts between classmates which affect the rest of us	28	32.6	24.9	10.8	3.7	100	(350)
Conflicts arise through social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)	32	25.1	23.6	14.1	5.2	100	(347)
I feel that my classmates criticise me behind my back	39.6	29.3	18.5	7.8	4.8	100	(351)

Source: Own elaboration.

However, conflict is part of coexistence within social groups and the university setting is not exempt from this. Proof of this is that one in four students (25.2%) believe that they 'never' get along well with their classmates and a significant proportion (45.2%) say that they get along with classmates 'rarely' or 'sometimes'. Creating small subgroups in class is a reality that occurs 'often' or 'always' (57.2%), with all that this entails in terms of social interaction and competition in order to obtain the best academic results.

In general terms, the analysis of conflict existing between the students does not show statistically significant differences according to gender, except in the perception of the degree to which conflicts between peers affect others. Table 3 shows that males (22.7%) consider, to a greater extent than females (11.5%), that conflicts between classmates affect others 'often' or 'always'. However, the general perception is that they do not usually affect others, as the majority of males (77.3%) and females (88.5%) consider that conflicts between peers do not usually ('sometimes', 'never' or 'rarely') affect others.

Table 3. Level of agreement according to gender.

		Gender	
		Men	Women
	Never	22.6	30.1
	Rarely	39.2	30.2
There are conflicts between classmates which affect the rest of us	Sometimes	15.5	28.2
	Often	17.5	8.3
	Always	5.2	3.2
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.008	N (349)	(97)	(252)

Source: Own elaboration.

The gender variable is not a major determinant of conflict between students. However, age group, academic year and faculty are major determinants.

Regarding age groups, as age increases (Table 4), students are more inclined to integrate with new classmates, see fewer conflicts between classmates that affect others, perceive fewer issues arising from the use of social media and less hidden criticism. The opposite is true of the younger age group. In particular, the older students (aged 21 and over) are more likely (57.6%) to 'always' or 'often' integrate a new classmate into the class group, whereas the younger students (aged 17–20) are much more reluctant to do so. This

younger group, in the early academic years, also consider themselves less affected by conflicts between other classmates (72.4%, 'never' or 'rarely'), or by criticism behind their backs (77.4%, 'never' or 'rarely') or by conflicts arising from the use of social media (68.2%, 'never' or 'rarely').

In general, conflict increases as age increases. This is a factor that can be explained by the consolidation of groups within the class and a greater degree of competition between them.

Table 4. Level of agreement with different statements according to age group.

		Age Group	
		From 17 to 20	**21 and Over**
	Never	2	4.8
	Rarely	13.2	12.4
When a new classmate arrives, we try to integrate them	Sometimes	28.3	25.2
	Often	29.5	40.8
	Always	27	16.8
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.012	N (341)	(152)	(189)
	Never	41.7	18.1
	Rarely	30.7	35.8
There are conflicts between classmates which affect the rest of us	Sometimes	20.3	27.1
	Often	5.3	13.1
	Always	2	5.9
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (343)	(153)	(190)
	Never	44.8	24.3
	Rarely	23.4	25.6
Conflicts arise through social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)	Sometimes	17.5	28
	Often	10.4	17.4
	Always	3.9	4.7
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.002	N (340)	(154)	(186)
	Never	42.6	39.9
	Rarely	34.8	24.5
I feel that my classmates criticise me behind my back	Sometimes	15.5	17.5
	Often	4.5	11
	Always	2.6	7.1
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.054	N (344)	(155)	(189)

Source: Own elaboration.

In a study carried out by Martínez et al. [24], based on finding out and analysing the opinions and evaluations of students of the degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources at the University of Granada, it was found that they are most likely to drop out of their courses in the third and fourth years. The main reason is due to a low fulfilment of their expectations regarding the professional opportunities created when they enrolled, as well as the fact that they suddenly take an interest in other degrees. On the other hand,

those in the early years (first and second year) indicate that they are satisfied with their studies. In this sense, the greater perception of conflict by the older students who are in their final years could also be related to an increase in demotivation.

Age tends to be associated with students' academic year, so we found quite a few similarities in the analysis of conflict according to these variables. The analysis of conflict according to the academic year (Table 5) shows that, in the more advanced years (third year onwards), a higher percentage of students believe ('often' or 'always') that conflicts between classmates affect others, that conflicts arise through social media and that classmates criticise each other behind their backs. In addition, the integration of a new classmate into these years creates more difficulty than in the early academic years.

Table 5. Level of agreement with different statements according to the academic year of students.

		Academic Year	
		First and Second	**Third and Fourth**
When a new classmate arrives, we try to integrate them	Never	1.8	4.5
	Rarely	13.3	25.8
	Sometimes	25.3	17.3
	Often	34.4	25.6
	Always	25.2	26.8
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.016	N (344)	(246)	(98)
There are conflicts between classmates which affect the rest of us	Never	33.4	12.3
	Rarely	32.5	37.6
	Sometimes	22.7	17.8
	Often	8.4	27.6
	Always	3	4.7
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.003	N (349)	(249)	(100)
Conflicts arise through social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)	Never	34.3	28.8
	Rarely	24.9	16.7
	Sometimes	22.4	18.5
	Often	14.2	13.8
	Always	4.2	22.2
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.056	N (346)	(249)	(97)
I feel that my classmates criticise me behind my back	Never	42	34.9
	Rarely	31.5	18.8
	Sometimes	16.5	24.4
	Often	5.6	15.5
	Always	4.4	6.4
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (350)	(250)	(100)

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the faculty in which they are studying, it was found (Table 6) that the Social Work students consider (more than the Labour Relations and Human Resources students) that conflicts between classmates 'never' or 'rarely' affect them. They also believe

that conflicts arise through engagement with social media and that they are criticised by classmates behind their backs. The lower level of conflict between Social Work students is also corroborated by the fact that they are more inclusive. This is because a considerable majority (61.9%) state that they 'often' or 'always' integrate new classmates compared to the Labour Relations and Human Resources students who perceive this to be a lower proportion (49.2%).

Table 6. Level of agreement with different statements according to the faculty where they study.

		Faculty	
		Labour Relations and Human Resources	**Social Work**
When a new classmate arrives, we try to integrate them	Never	4.8	2.7
	Rarely	20.6	10.8
	Sometimes	25.4	24.8
	Often	42.1	33.3
	Always	7.1	28.4
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (348)	(126)	(222)
There are conflicts between classmates which affect the rest of us	Never	18.1	33.6
	Rarely	32.3	32.7
	Sometimes	31.5	21.1
	Often	11	10.8
	Always	7.1	1.8
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.002	N (350)	(127)	(223)
Conflicts arise through social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, etc.)	Never	22.8	37.1
	Rarely	25.2	25
	Sometimes	29.3	20.5
	Often	17.9	12.1
	Always	4.8	5.3
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.048	N (347)	(123)	(224)
I feel that my classmates criticise me behind my back	Never	30.2	44.9
	Rarely	27	30.7
	Sometimes	22.2	16.4
	Often	13.5	4.4
	Always	7.1	3.6
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.002	N (351)	(126)	(225)

Source: Own elaboration.

These differences, which relate to faculties, can be explained by the low expectations regarding employment opportunities expressed by students of Labour Relations and Human Resources. In the study carried out by Martínez et al. [24], it was found that the vast majority of students studying for this degree (88.8%) consider it 'unlikely' or 'not at all likely' that they will find a job within 12 months of completing their studies. Furthermore, they show an enormous lack of knowledge when it comes to the job opportunities available

to them (Ibidem). This is largely explained by the significant level of uncertainty regarding professional opportunities, which characterises students of this degree, compared to the excellent institutionalisation of Social Work graduates.

Conflict between students exists, although in general it is uncommon. However, in order to obtain a more concrete view of this issue, students were asked to name the three main areas of conflict perceived in their daily coexistence with their classmates. As can be seen (Figure 1), competitiveness appears as the source of conflict most frequently mentioned by the students (51%). This is a reality which relates to obtaining the best marks as well as the best academic credentials when obtaining collaboration grants and other types of financial aid. It should not be forgotten that the average mark obtained in the degree is fundamental when it comes to a graduate's first professional opportunities. In the case of Spanish university graduates, these tend to be through scholarships and internship contracts, where the average mark is a real filter [25]. The first credential for university graduates is usually an academic transcript. Its importance is crucial since, as the average mark increases, the chances of employability also increase considerably [25].
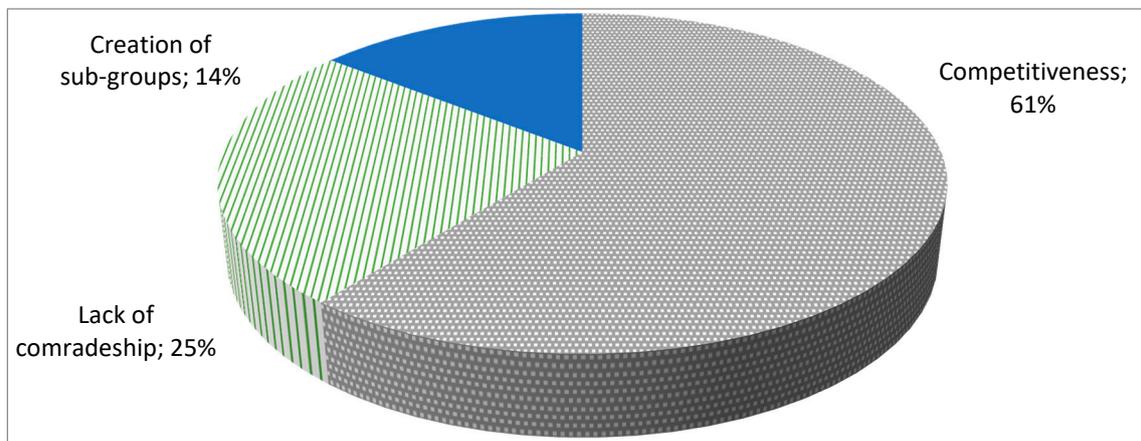
Figure 1. Three main conflicts perceived by students. Source: Own elaboration.

Students are no strangers to this reality, and competitiveness is often accompanied by a lack of comradeship (25%), which appears as the second most frequently mentioned conflict. Refraining from providing key information, refusing to lend class notes and being generally uncollaborative is reflected in group relations. The third most important perceived conflict is the creation of sub-groups (14%), which relates to greater personal affinity and/or shared interests. This is because the formation of groups, to collaborate on the theoretical and research work required for most of their subjects, is part of the competitive strategy. For this reason, and in many instances, these sub-groups are relatively closed, as they share not only informal relationships and friendships but also academic interests.

4.2. Students' Conflicts with Teaching Staff

The second specific objective of this research focuses on conflicts between students and teachers. As can be seen (Table 7), the level of conflict in this area is generally low. The majority of students feel that they 'often' or 'always' have a good relationship with teachers (71.6%) and that teachers respect them as individuals and as students (65.6%). Following this trend, a considerable majority report that teachers 'rarely' or 'never' clash with their students in class (59.6%) or that classmates have conflicts with teachers (69.9%). However, pejorative appraisals of teachers are evident. Seven out of ten students (74%) consider that they are 'often' or 'always' treated in a disrespectful manner by teachers. This can be related to the perceived arrogance attributed to teachers. Furthermore, the majority of students say that they are 'often' or 'sometimes' (56.5%) treated unequally by teachers.

Table 7. Student conflicts with teaching staff.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	TOTAL	N (348)
I have a good relationship with the teaching staff as a whole	_	2.8	25.6	54.1	17.5	100	(355)
I feel that teachers respect us as people and as students	2	4.2	28.2	43.8	21.8	100	(354)
There are teachers who treat students unequally	10.5	22.3	30.8	25.7	10.7	100	(354)
Teachers treat students in a contemptuous manner	0.9	3.4	21.7	48.9	25.1	100	(350)
There are teachers who clash with students in the classroom	22.1	37.5	27.9	10.8	1.7	100	(344)
My classmates have conflicts with our teachers	21.9	48	24.5	5	0.6	100	(342)

Source: Own elaboration.

Students explicitly highlight the problems caused by unequal relations between teachers and students in the classroom. The idea that there is unequal treatment or that students are treated in a disrespectful way is rooted in the different levels of authority and role attributed to teachers in the classroom.

According to the gender variable, there are no statistically significant differences between each of the statements, except when those questioned were asked about good relations with teachers. As can be seen (Table 8), most men and women consider that they 'always' or 'often' enjoy a good relationship with teachers. However, women show a higher degree of agreement, with slightly more than seven out of ten (74.3%) agreeing compared to slightly more than six out of ten (63.9%) men.

Table 8. Level of agreement according to gender.

		Gender	
		Men	Women
	Never	-	-
	Rarely	6.2	1.6
I have a good relationship with the teaching staff as a whole	Sometimes	29.9	24.1
	Often	47.4	56.8
	Always	16.5	17.5
	TOTAL	100	100
$p = 0.059$	N (354)	(97)	(257)

Source: Own elaboration.

With regard to the age group of the students (Table 9), a general trend can be seen in which the older group (21 and over) considers the level of conflict to be higher. The perception that teachers treat them in a disrespectful and unequal manner, the fact that there are confrontations in class and that their classmates have conflicts with teachers, places them a higher level of conflict than younger students. In particular, those in the younger group (17–20 years old) believe, to a great extent, that they are respected, as both people and students, by their teachers. Therefore, although the general pattern for the majority continues to indicate a low level of conflict, as students get older their perception of conflict appears to increase.

Table 9. Level of agreement with different statements according to age group.

		Age Group	
		From 17 to 20	21 and Over
I feel that teachers respect us as people and as students	Never	0.7	4.3
	Rarely	3.9	4.2
	Sometimes	23.2	31
	Often	43.2	44.1
	Always	29	16.4
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.025	N (347)	(155)	(192)
There are teachers who treat students unequally	Never	14.1	5.6
	Rarely	24.4	22.8
	Sometimes	30.7	30.7
	Often	24.4	24.2
	Always	6.4	16.7
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.059	N (347)	(156)	(191)
Teachers treat students in a disrespectful manner	Never	39.1	34.7
	Rarely	41.6	33.4
	Sometimes	13.5	25.7
	Often	5.8	4.9
	Always	-	1.3
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.019	N (346)	(156)	(190)
There are teachers who clash with students in the classroom	Never	29.3	17.3
	Rarely	41.2	33.9
	Sometimes	22.2	34.3
	Often	5.9	12.2
	Always	1.4	2.3
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.014	N (338)	(153)	(185)
My classmates have conflicts with our teachers	Never	31.2	16.9
	Rarely	47.4	47.8
	Sometimes	16.9	28.6
	Often	4.5	5.2
	Always	-	1.5
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.001	N (336)	(154)	(182)

Source: Own elaboration.

In line with age, the academic year that students are in also shows this general trend. As can be seen (Table 10), first and second year students are more likely to rate ('always' or 'often') that their relationship with the teaching staff is, in general, good and that teachers respect them both as people and students. Students in more advanced years (third and fourth) are more likely to state that they are 'often' or 'always' treated unequally and

disrespectfully by teachers, that teachers clash with students in class and that their peers have issues with teachers. Again, in line with age group, students in more advanced years are those who show the highest levels of perception of conflict.

Table 10. Level of agreement with different statements according to the academic year.

		Academic Year	
		First and Second	Third and Fourth
	Never	-	-
	Rarely	2.2	2.8
I have a good relationship with the teaching staff as a whole	Sometimes	22.1	33.2
	Often	55.2	35.2
	Always	20.5	28.8
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.014	N (354)	(252)	(102)
	Never	1.8	12.8
	Rarely	3.1	4.2
I feel that teachers respect us as people and as students	Sometimes	25.9	20.8
	Often	40.5	46.9
	Always	28.7	15.3
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (353)	(251)	(102)
	Never	13.8	13.6
	Rarely	26.1	9
There are teachers who treat students unequally	Sometimes	31.4	31.3
	Often	22.6	22.3
	Always	6.1	23.8
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (353)	(251)	(102)
	Never	39.3	26.4
	Rarely	38.9	27.1
Teachers treat students in a disrespectful manner	Sometimes	16.4	29.1
	Often	4.8	16.5
	Always	0.6	0.9
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.043	N (352)	(251)	(101)
	Never	28	17.4
	Rarely	41.9	17.9
There are teachers who clash with students in the classroom	Sometimes	22.1	29.3
	Often	7.3	32.3
	Always	0.7	3.1
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (343)	(243)	(100)

Table 10. *Cont.*

		Academic Year	
		First and Second	**Third and Fourth**
My classmates have conflicts with our teachers	Never	27.2	18.2
	Rarely	50.3	31
	Sometimes	18.8	23.9
	Often	3	26.9
	Always	0.7	-
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (341)	(242)	(99)

Source: Own elaboration.

Statistically significant differences were also found with regard to faculty (Table 11). Students in the Faculty of Labour Relations and Human Resources indicate higher levels of conflict than those in the Faculty of Social Work. Specifically, future graduates in Labour Relations and Human Resources report, to a greater degree, ('sometimes', 'rarely' or 'never') that lecturers respect them both as people and students, and also to a greater extent ('often' or 'always') that there are teachers who treat them in a disrespectful and unequal manner, that teachers clash with students in class and that their classmates engage in conflicts ('often' or 'always').

Table 11. Level of agreement with different statements according to students' faculty.

		Faculty	
		Labour Relations and Human Resources	**Social Work**
I feel that teachers respect us as people and as students	Never	2.3	1.8
	Rarely	5.4	3.6
	Sometimes	36.4	23.6
	Often	41.1	45.3
	Always	14.8	25.7
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.032	N (354)	(129)	(225)
There are teachers who treat students unequally	Never	3.1	14.7
	Rarely	13.2	27.6
	Sometimes	38	26.7
	Often	29.5	23.6
	Always	16.2	7.4
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (354)	(129)	(225)
Teachers treat students in disrespectful manner	Never	23.4	41.8
	Rarely	38.3	37.3
	Sometimes	30.5	15.1
	Often	7.8	4.9
	Always	-	0.9
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.001	N (353)	(128)	(225)

Table 11. *Cont.*

		Faculty	
		Labour Relations and Human Resources	**Social Work**
There are teachers who clash with students in the classroom	Never	15.9	25.7
	Rarely	34.1	39.5
	Sometimes	35.7	23.4
	Often	12.7	9.6
	Always	1.6	1.8
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.057	N (344)	(126)	(218)
My classmates have conflicts with our teachers	Never	19	23.6
	Rarely	34.9	55.6
	Sometimes	37.3	17.1
	Often	7.2	3.7
	Always	1.6	-
	TOTAL	100	100
p = 0.000	N (342)	(126)	(216)

Source: Own elaboration.

Once again, students studying for the Degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources perceive higher levels of conflict than those studying for the Degree in Social Work.

As can be seen (Figure 2), when students are asked about the three main areas of conflict they have or have had with teachers, the majority (67%) point to academic marks. This is a traditional problem which is directly related to the interests of the students and which, to a large extent, triggers other types of perceptions and conflicts. As the second most significant source of conflict, a considerable percentage of students (22%) point to teacher superiority. Again, this stems from the need to impose discipline in the classroom, as well as to enforce assessment criteria, where teachers are responsible for these tasks. The third most important conflict arises from the use of technology in class (11%). This it is not due to a lack of competence in the use of technology but rather the misuse of it by students. The inappropriate use of mobile phones and laptops in class is seen to lead to clashes between teachers and students.
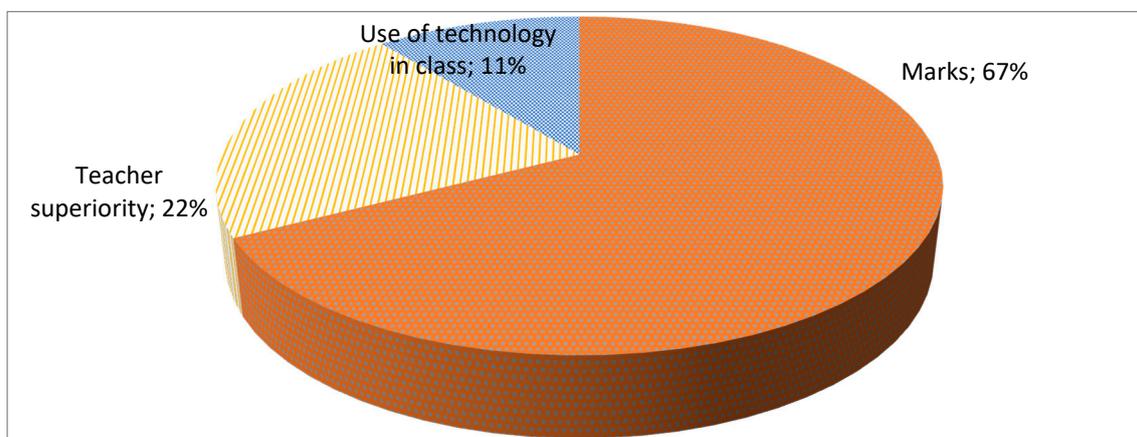

Figure 2. Three main conflicts between students and teaching staff. Source: Own elaboration.

4.3. Conflicts between Students and Service and Administration Staff

The third specific objective of this research focuses on identifying students' conflicts with the service and administrative staff. Table 12 shows the degree of student perception of a number of statements referring to the staff of the secretary's administrative offices and the caretaker's offices. The most marked pattern indicates that a considerable majority indicate a high degree ('always' or 'often') of agreement with the statements. In particular, students maintain that they are treated in a friendly and correct manner in the caretaker's offices. The caretakers are seen to be willing to help them and they receive satisfactory responses and answers. Similar conclusions are to be made with regard to the help given in the faculty secretary's offices. A majority of respondents believe that they are also 'always' or 'often' dealt with correctly, have their administrative matters resolved, are treated in a friendly way and listened to.

Table 12. Conflicts with the service and administrative staff.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	TOTAL	N (356)
Whenever I have gone to the secretary of the faculty, I have always been attended to in a correct manner	1.2	8.4	20.6	36.8	33	100	(345)
Whenever I have gone to the secretary of the faculty, I have always been able to resolve my administrative matters	1.7	7.5	21.4	34.6	34.8	100	(345)
The staff at the secretary of the faculty are friendly and willing to listen to you	2.3	9.3	25.2	36.5	26.7	100	(345)
The caretaker's office staff are friendly and helpful	0.9	3.2	20.6	37.5	37.8	100	(344)
Whenever I have been to the caretaker's office, I have always been treated correctly	0.3	2.9	15.4	39.4	42	100	(343)
Whenever I have gone to the caretaker's office, I have always got a satisfactory response	0.9	4.3	25.2	34.8	34.8	100	(345)

Source: Own elaboration.

This low perception of conflicts with the service and administrative staff does not show significant differences with respect to gender, age, academic year and faculty.

In general, the levels of conflict are low in this area, but the minority who subscribe to a certain degree of conflict indicate, in order of importance: lack of information, unfriendliness and excessive bureaucracy (Figure 3).
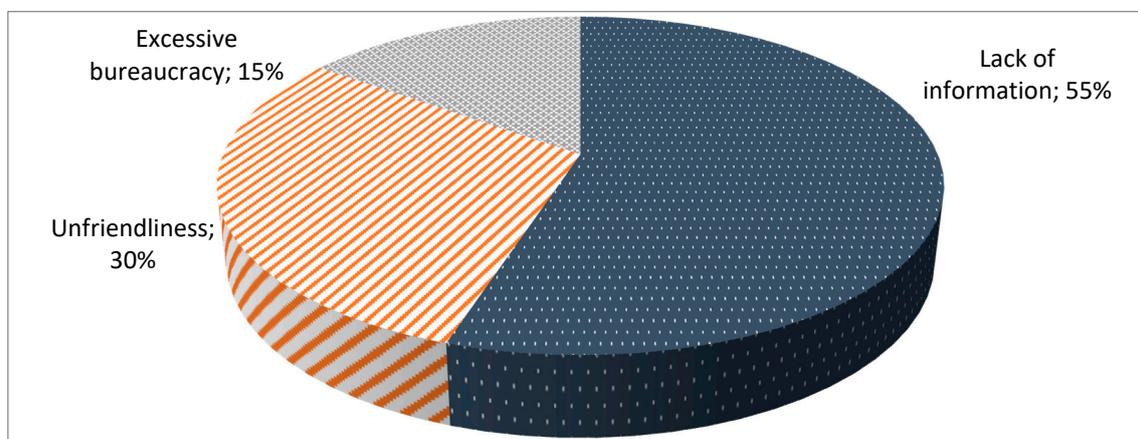
Figure 3. Three main areas of conflict between students and service and administration staff. Source: Own elaboration.

5. Conclusions

Universities have a responsibility to society, which can be translated into knowledge transfer. This is because they occupy a privileged place in the field of education, research and innovation. They are therefore central to global sustainable development. In line with this, Blasco, Brusca and Labrador [26] state that universities have embraced the SDGs in their research and from multiple perspectives. The transfer of knowledge and pedagogical development involves the inclusion of the SDGs in university curricula and in the teaching guides aimed at academic staff.

Sáez, Fernández and Castillo [27], in a similar study, and in their analysis of universities' desire to achieve the SDGs, consider universities to be fundamental in this respect, referring to their innovative and multidisciplinary nature. The responsibility entrusted to universities for training and research, has been translated in practice. This is known as 'transfer' and is an applied dimension of the United Nations 2030 Agenda which acts as an essential guide.

This research paper covers areas of study from the perspective of sustainable development, including the study and analysis of conflict and its subsequent management, in educational, social and professional contexts. On the subject of conflicts in higher education, the investigators Arias and Arias [28] highlight the importance of university as a formative and socializing entity and question where its limits are and what is teachable and what isn't. The role of the education system in society is still up for debate.

In every human group, and in all social relationships, conflict is present more or less explicitly. The way in which it is perceived constitutes a turning point for activating mediation procedures which allow it to be managed in a peaceful and equitable manner. In the face of confrontation and the consequent escalation of conflict, mediation as a solution technique together with the development of a culture based on dialogue, peace and equity, become essential instruments in the advance towards sustainable social development.

Room for dialogue about conflict as well as prevention and management of it should have a prominent place in the university environment. Peaceful conflict resolution, through accommodation and avoidance, form a part of the strategies adopted by young university students. In this sense, conflicts are produced in a context marked by the search for recognition, where academic interest is present [29].

The results of the investigation carried out by Arias and Arias [28] also corroborate peaceful confrontation within the same group. The authors point out the importance of analysing and managing conflict from a positive, transformative and dynamic viewpoint of social processes. In practice, more than constructive conflict management, what is unleashed/triggered are situations of avoidance with certain nuanced breakdowns expressed with/by silence and other types of verbal and symbolic violence.

The analysis of students' perceptions of conflict shows that, for a notable majority, there is a low level of conflict. In general, conflict is not very representative. However, it does exist. Only a minority of students say that they do not have good relations with their classmates. The creation of small, closed groups of friends/colleagues, the refusal to integrate new classmates and criticism among the students lead to conflicts which affect them, and which are not managed through dialogue. Gender is not a determining variable for the perceived degree of conflict. However, other factors are, such as age group, academic year and the faculty where students study. With regard to age, which is usually associated with academic year, a positive correlation is observed with respect to the perception of conflict: more conflict appears to arise in the older age group. With respect to faculty, the highest perception of conflict is seen in students of Labour Relations and Human Resources; among students of Social Work, there is a lower perception of conflict.

The three most negative areas of conflict perceived by students exist in relation to the context of their own dynamic as students. This is because they focus on competitiveness and the creation of sub-groups leading to lack of comradeship within the class. The desire to obtain the best marks leads them to compete. This gives rise to sub-groups which are often closed and thus weaken the bonds of companionship. The new assessment methodologies

applied to grades encourage group work which results in the creation of cliques where formal and informal interests and relationships become part of a social dynamic.

In addition to formal and informal coexistence and relationships between students which generate conflict, another of the dimensions analysed is the perception of conflicts between students and teachers.

Intense and formal relations between teachers and students also give rise to problems. However, again, the level of perception of conflict is generally low. For a majority of students, relations with the teaching staff are good; they feel respected both as individuals and students, confrontations are very rare and their classmates do not usually engage in conflicts. This predominantly positive dynamic is altered by the majority perception that teachers treat them in a disrespectful and unequal manner. This is often linked to existing prejudice and arrogance on the part of teachers, who are seen as authority figures.

The perception of conflict hardly changes according to gender. However, it does change according to age, academic year and the faculty in which students are enrolled. As age increases, the perception of conflict increases. The older age group (21 and over) feels, to a great extent, that they are treated in a disrespectful and unequal manner by teachers, that their classmates clash with teachers and that clashes take place between teachers and students. However, the younger age group (17–20 years) perceives, to a great extent, that they are respected by their teachers, both as individuals and students. This trend is corroborated according to the academic year the students are in, with those in higher years having the greatest perception of conflict. By faculty, students studying for the degree in Social Work are those who perceive the least level of conflict, compared to those studying for the degree in Labour Relations and Human Resources, who are much more affected by conflict. This can be explained by the different professional expectations related to these two degrees, with those students studying for degrees in Social Work having much higher expectations.

In general, the level of conflict between students and teachers is very low, but it is still present for a minority. More specifically, the three main areas of conflict reported are related to assessment. In order of importance, they point to marks, teacher superiority and the misuse of technology in class.

Finally, conflicting relations between students and the service and administrative staff were analysed. Here the general absence of perceived conflict is noteworthy as the vast majority of students indicate that they are treated in a correct and friendly manner by these members of staff. They have their administrative matters resolved, obtain satisfactory answers and indicate that the staff show a willingness to help them. It is important to note that there are no statistically significant differences linked to gender, age group, academic year and faculty.

However, a minority of students perceive a certain level of conflict with service and administrative staff. In order of importance, the most significant issues are lack of information, unfriendliness and excessive bureaucracy. Here, bureaucracy occupies a central place due to its excessive complexity which sometimes triggers conflicts.

Although not for a significant majority, conflicts, of different degrees, do exist between students in the university environment and must be managed. To this end, prevention, diagnosis and management must form part of a university's strategy. Education for peace and in values based on conciliation and mediation are vital for successful conflict management and for consequent sustainable social development.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study did not require ethical approval.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from the director responsible for the research and other investigations involved in the development and implementation of the survey.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions of privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
HPRO	Harassment Prevention and Response Office
SAS	Service and Administration Staff
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
UGR	University of Granada

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