



Rectors' mediation and leadership in managing internal crises: Generative causes and types in Greek higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

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Internal conflicts and crises within Greek higher education institutions (HEIs) necessitate intervention from rectors or top-level administrators. We examine the root causes of crises stemming from legislative instability, resource constraints, and socio-political influences focusing on real-world challenges. This research highlights rectors' over official state perspectives showcasing unique patterns of conflict, the implications for institutional governance and the need for structured mediation frameworks for the unique case of Greek HEIs. Qualitative methods were used including interviews with rectors from 72% of Greek public universities. A typology of conflicts was identified and strategies for effective mediation and crisis leadership were proposed. This study bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering an analytical model for institutional crisis management, integrating theoretical frameworks such as SCCT and adaptive leadership, being one of the most comprehensive, experience-based analyses of internal crises within national higher education systems. The findings underscore the critical role of leadership in conflict resolution that lower-level bodies cannot address, thus emphasizing the need for enhanced mediation frameworks. This research contributes to the field by addressing gaps in crisis management in HEIs, offering practical recommendations for navigating institutional crises and providing a foundation for further studies in higher education.

Contribution/Originality: This research is based on interviews with 72% of Greek public universities' rectors providing valuable insights over official state perspectives showcasing unique patterns of conflict and the implications for institutional governance as well as the need for structured mediation frameworks for the unique case of Greek HEIs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Generative causes and types of internal institutional crises within Greek higher education institutions (HEIs) often stem from human resource challenges that can significantly disrupt the internal operations. These may involve students, faculty, administrative, technical, and other staff. The study focuses on crises exceeding the resolution capacity of institutional bodies and requires mediation and intervention from the top-level administrators, particularly rectors. Addressing all Greek public universities, this research prioritizes rectors' perspectives—the key decision-makers whose practical insights into crisis management remain underexplored. This research connects existing theory with the real-world challenges of managing Greek higher education

institutions by examining the real-world application of frameworks such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and adaptive leadership models. The study highlights the root causes and typologies of crises while demonstrating how rectors' leadership practices can inform and expand these theoretical frameworks.

Prior studies emphasize the Ministry of Education's views on institutional crises while this research draws data directly from rectors' experiences. Rectors were invited to identify root causes, provide examples of the crises they encountered, and assess the relevance and complexity of these incidents. This bottom-up approach captures the operational realities of HEIs, emphasizing the critical role of leadership and addressing crises that lower-level bodies cannot or are unequipped to resolve.

Greece's higher education system offers free access to Greek and EU students reflecting a commitment to accessibility for the public. However, challenges such as limited resources, administrative inefficiencies, and frequent internal conflicts are considered some of the most common issues they face. Issues that demand effective mediation and leadership to sustain quality and equity. This study examines crises which are inherently unpredictable and require leaders to determine and assess the specific context and plan for contingencies, making proactive decisions showing how rectors typically handle institutional instability, resource limitations, and stakeholder conflicts based on Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) contingency and crisis management frameworks (Pharaoh & Visser, 2024) and adopting crisis-responsive leadership strategies. Finally, this study advocates a globalized perspective which is context-sensitive. We address these challenges with the following two primary contributions to the field:

1. A Shift in Perspective: Prioritizing rectors' perspectives largely overlooked over official state views, highlighting practical, experience-based insights.
2. Focus on Real-World Application: This research focuses on investigating real-life situations and coping strategies by emphasizing rectors' critical role in resolving complex institutional crises unlike theoretical studies or hypothetical scenarios.

Coombs's SCCT highlighted the importance of crisis communication strategies aligning with stakeholder perceptions. For institutional resilience, an approach offering innovative practical frameworks that address institutional challenges and crisis management advances in higher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ON CONFLICT, MEDIATION, AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1. Conflict in Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions deal with conflict as a natural aspect of organizational dynamics. Disputes and crises are a considerably common occurrence due to the complex governance structures and the variety of stakeholders. Leaders managing these challenges would benefit from guidance based on solid theoretical foundations that eventually lead to more effective conflict resolution. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) (Thomas & Kilmann, 1976) and the Dual-Concern Model (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993) are frameworks that can be used as valuable tools when analyzing conflict resolution strategies. TKI is used for identifying key approaches, such as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. The Dual-Concern model offers insights into interpersonal dynamics, examining the balance between self-interest and concern for others. These frameworks can be applied when addressing disputes in Greek HEIs. Governance challenges, frequent legislative reforms, and resource allocation issues are the principal root causes for crises in these institutions. When this typology is identified by leaders while also recognizing stakeholders' concerns, leaders can customize strategies addressing conflicts effectively and promoting collaboration.

2.2. Crisis Management Theories

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007) and Contingency Theory of Crisis Management (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017) are particularly relevant in crises management.

Communication strategies should match stakeholder views to maintain trust (SCCT). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Greek university leaders leveraged SCCT principles by tailoring their messaging, reassuring students and staff about the valid concerns about educational continuity. The contingency theory highlights the role of situational factors. It is crucial for understanding how Greek HEIs respond to systemic challenges such as rapid policy changes and economic instability. Leaders can navigate complex crises more effectively by adapting crisis responses to institutional constraints.

2.3. Leadership in Crisis and Conflict Resolution

Leadership plays a vital role in addressing conflicts and crises in HEIs. Different leadership styles offer distinct strategies for navigating these challenges.

- Transformational leadership fosters innovation and a shared vision, teams are inspired to overcome challenges collectively (Bass, 1985). For instance, transformational leadership was observed at the University of Patras where leaders motivated staff to embrace changes during structural reforms (Antonopoulou, Halkiopoulos, Barlou, & Beligiannis, 2021).
- Servant leadership prioritizes the needs of others and builds trust and collaboration (Greenleaf, 1977). Greek university rectors demonstrated servant leadership fostering stakeholder trust during the implementation of governing councils by addressing concerns about governance and institutional autonomy (Kefalaki, 2024).
- Adaptive leadership provides flexible frameworks for identifying challenges, engaging stakeholders, and adjusting strategies in real-time, particularly relevant in dynamic crises (Varis, Kivimäki, & Lönnqvist, 2025). During the pandemic, Greek HEI leaders demonstrated adaptive leadership by swiftly transitioning to online learning and maintaining open communication with stakeholders (Kefalaki, 2024; Tang, 2025).

Frequent legislative changes exacerbate these challenges in Greek HEIs, creating instability and demanding structured approaches. Models such as Kotter's Eight Steps for Leading Change (Kotter, 1996) and Lewin's Change Management Model (Lewin, 1947) offer guidance for leaders navigating reforms. These frameworks emphasize creating urgency while fostering collaboration, and sustaining change which is critical for implementing and stabilizing governance reforms.

2.4. Mediation and Crisis Management in Higher Education

Mediation in higher education is considered both a process and a communicative method of peaceful dispute resolution. According to the Greek Ministry of Justice (2024) mediation involves an independent third party who assists disputing parties in reaching a satisfactory resolution mutually. Mediation, rooted in the field of rhetoric, relies on the principles of persuasion and ethical philosophy, such as Aristotle (2000) restorative justice, which emphasizes virtues such as moderation, neutrality, and respect (Triantari, 2018). Mediation in HEIs unlike most other sectors with unique complexities, handles rapidly escalating conflicts due to strong cultural distrust of institutional mechanisms which highlights the need for deeper exploration of theoretical mechanisms at the core of crisis management (Bundy et al., 2017).

2.5. Crisis Management: Definition and Framework

A crisis is an unexpected event disrupting normal activity and operations, potentially harming individuals, organizations, and even communities. It is characterized by a high level of uncertainty, urgency, and complexity, potentially having devastating impacts such as financial loss and reputational damage (Bundy et al., 2017; Fink, 1986; Nuortimo, Harkonen, & Breznik, 2026). Crisis management covers areas such as identifying, preparing for, and responding to crises to minimize their impact and restore normalcy. It typically involves

1. Identification: Assess risks and potential crises.
2. Assessment: Evaluate impacts and formulate management plans.

3. Response: Implement plans including emergency procedures and stakeholder communication.
4. Recovery: Restore operations and assess responses effectiveness (Coombs, 2013).

2.6. Bridging Theory and Practice in Greek HEIs

Bridging theoretical frameworks with practical challenges faced by Greek HEIs, we focus on the unique role of rectors in crisis management, highlighting the applicability of these theories in navigating legislative instability, resource constraints, and stakeholder conflicts. The findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how leadership and mediation can address institutional crises effectively.

2.7. Types of Crises

Crises in organizations have been extensively categorized in the literature, reflecting the diverse challenges that they pose. Table 1 summarizes the eight most common types, drawing from Lerbinger (1997) and Bundy et al. (2017).

Table 1. Types of crises (Alphabetical order).

Types of crises	
1	Confrontation crisis
2	Crisis of Malevolence
3	Financial crisis
4	Natural crisis
5	Organizational crisis
6	Personnel crisis
7	Technological crisis
8	Workplace violence crisis

Note: "Natural Crisis" was excluded from the study's internal evaluations.

In Greek higher education, crises are shaped by unique cultural and systemic factors. A particularly distinct culture influences how conflicts and crises are managed while facing significant variations based on regional and situational contexts. Many disputing parties tend to bypass these mechanisms escalating their concerns directly to top leadership despite legislation and conflict management bodies. This trend is especially prevalent in Greek universities. This tendency stems from the widespread mistrust of institutional conflict management bodies, which are often viewed as lacking competence and fairness. Terms such as "judicial" are often associated with negative responses resulting in little confidence in formal mediation mechanisms consequently leading to its decreased effectiveness as a tool for conflict resolution.

2.8. Cultural and Systemic Influences on Crisis Management in Greek HEIs

Cultural and systemic influences on crisis management in Greek HEIs because of higher administrative body structures, distrust in formal mediation processes is getting worse. In Greek Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), leadership positions such as rectors and other top roles are chosen through elections. Electoral outcomes can be shaped by internal politics including alliances, conflicts, or favoritism and consequently affect how decisions are being made, resulting in top leaders (especially rectors) often having to handle conflicts that would typically be managed by lower-level bodies such as department heads or relevant committees. This shift in responsibility occurs because of the political nature of leadership in Greek HEIs where people mistrust or directly bypass lower-level processes, expecting top leaders to intervene directly treating their issues. However, not all types of disputes follow this challenging pattern. Routine mediation cases, such as recruitment or budget allocation that include personal disputes among academic staff and administrative decisions are resolved through established mechanisms before escalation to higher administrative courts. The more complex or politically charged crises often require the direct involvement of rectors or higher authorities and are rarely addressed through institutional mechanisms.

2.9. Implications for Crisis Management

These types of dynamics highlight the need to adapt strategies for conflict resolution, adjusting them to the cultural and systemic context of Greek HEIs. By passing formal mediation highlights the importance of handling these challenges with leadership models such as transformational and adaptive leadership. When trust in institutional mediation is increased through transparency and accountability, we are also reducing conflicts that are reaching the upper leadership. The findings contribute to a greater understanding of how systemic and cultural nuances impact crisis resolution and offer perspectives and solutions for other higher education contexts. This study tries to offer practical processes to address the specific challenges that Greek HEIs face by identifying the crisis types and cultural factors that shape management.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted by combining qualitative and quantitative elements aiming to investigate the underlying causes and types of internal crises in Greek Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The research highlights practical insights drawn from university rectors, who, when acting as mediators and decision-makers, provide an experience-driven perspective on institutional crises. For this study, data from 18 universities were included. However, only 13 universities are explicitly mentioned by name, i.e., Democritus University, International Hellenic University, University of Macedonia, University of Western Macedonia, University of Ioannina, University of Thessaly, University of Patras, University of Peloponnese, University of West Attica, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Ionian University, Mediterranean University and the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE). The remaining five universities are not disclosed to ensure compliance with GDPR regulations and uphold ethical research standards. Given the selection criteria regarding the qualifications required for rectors, officially naming these institutions could potentially lead to the identification of specific individuals. To maintain participants' anonymity and data confidentiality, we have chosen to incorporate their data into the analysis without disclosing names.

3.1. Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Western Macedonia, Greece on December 10, 2024 (Ref. No. 113/2025). All participants provided informed consent before participation. The study complies with institutional and ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

3.2. Data Collection Process

Both the questionnaire and interviews were specifically designed for this study. A preliminary analysis based on institutional challenges was used to craft the questionnaire and focus on capturing rectors' lived experiences with real-world crises. The questions were designed to avoid hypothetical scenarios but focusing instead on their firsthand accounts of conflicts during their tenure. The questionnaire included

- Closed-ended questions to identify trends and patterns through statistical analysis.
- Open-ended questions to capture detailed insights and contextual nuances.

3.3. Participant Selection

The questionnaire was distributed to rectors who had served at least one full term, ensuring participants had substantial leadership and crisis management experience.

The study targeted rectors from Greek public universities, representing the highest level of institutional leadership. Selection criteria ensured participants' credibility and relevance:

- Completion of at least one term of office.
- Post-tenure availability to allow for reflective and unbiased responses.

Responses were received from eighteen rectors, representing 72% of Greek public universities. This robust level of representation enhances the reliability and generalizability of the findings.

3.4. Research Aims and Context

The primary aims of this research are to

- Identify the root causes of internal conflicts within HEIs.
- Categorize the types of crises that arise and their implications for institutional governance.
- Develop actionable insights to support new rectors in addressing similar challenges.

The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating remote communication methods for the interviews. While these methods ensured participation, they limited opportunities for deeper, face-to-face engagement. This challenging context is a crucial consideration in understanding the constraints and opportunities encountered during the research process.

3.5. Limited Availability of Mediation and Crisis Management Training

Although the Greek state offers numerous seminars for civil servants as part of their continuous training—many of them free—topics related specifically to mediation and crisis management are notably scarce. This gap does not imply that rectors and other leaders are incapable of handling conflicts effectively. However, lacking structured, specialized training often places an additional burden on top leadership during crises.

Many conflicts within HEIs bypass lower administrative bodies and escalate rapidly to the rectorate level. The severity of certain disputes alongside legislative ambiguities and cultural influences contribute to this phenomenon, where institutional mechanisms, such as ethics committees or student advocates end up proving to be insufficient. As a result, the skills, experience, and personality of the rector are critical for such crisis resolution. This study also underscores the importance of developing training programs targeting to address these unique challenges and enhancing rectors' mediation capabilities.

Data Analysis: Collected data were analyzed by using a mixed-methods approach.

1. Quantitative Analysis:

- Closed-ended responses were analyzed statistically to identify patterns and trends. Descriptive statistics were also used to determine frequency and distribution of crisis common causes and types.

2. Qualitative Analysis:

- Open-ended responses underwent thematic analysis, involving categorizing responses to extract recurring themes and insights.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards.

- Participants were informed of the study's purpose and were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality.
- Written consent was obtained from all participants.

Data were managed transparently ensuring privacy was protected, according to academic ethical guidelines.

3.7. Limitations

1. Remote Data Collection: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, data were collected through teleconferences limiting deeper engagement compared to in-person interactions.
2. Self-Reporting Bias: Relying on rectors' perspectives may not fully capture other stakeholders' opinions including administrative staff or students.
3. Sample Representativeness: The sample represents 72% of Greek public universities; the findings may not generalize to HEIs outside this context.

Despite these limitations, the study's rigorous methodology, high response rate, and systematic analysis ensure that the findings provide valuable insights into crisis management in Greek HEIs.

3.8. Crisis Escalation and Rector Involvement

Greek universities are equipped with administrative services and bodies mandated by legislation to resolve disputes, including

- For students:
 - Support unit for vulnerable groups
 - Student support services
 - Student advocate
- For staff:
 - Research ethics and integrity committee
 - Ethics committee
 - Public relations office

These bodies rely on established conflict resolution methods that are supplemented by professional experience. However, certain conflicts exceed their scope and escalate to the top leadership level due to legislative gaps, cultural influences, or their severity. At this stage, the rector's ability to mediate effectively is critical, as resolution often depends heavily on their negotiation skills, experience, and judgment.

3.9. Root Causes and Crisis Typology

To better understand the origins and nature of crises, eighteen rectors from various Greek universities were surveyed. They were asked to identify up to eight major causes of crises within higher education institutions (HEIs). These causes were not ranked by importance or hierarchy. The responses formed the basis for a crisis typology, providing valuable insights for institutional leaders to address such challenges effectively.

4. RESULTS

Greek HEIs, despite legislative reforms such as the recent summer law 4957/2022 (which mirrors aspects of the earlier law 4009/2011), continue to grapple with persistent issues. Rectors highlighted several critical factors that have influenced the development of Greek universities during periods of both tension and stability. These factors, identified as the primary drivers of crises are summarized in Table 2 with additional context provided where relevant.

Table 2. Root causes of crises in Greek HEIs as identified by the rector.

Root causes	No. of rectors	Short explanation
• Self-government (H. E.I. autonomy)	12/18	Refers to the degrees of freedom granted to HEIs through state financial support and frequently changing legislation. This includes the methods of electing governing bodies, the involvement of students and staff in the electoral process, and subsequent administrative activities.
• University asylum	6/18	Defined largely by the student bodies of individual HEIs and influenced by varying interpretations of its substantive meaning.
• Excessive frequent law changes	15/18	Laws are often replaced or radically modified before their effects are fully realized. This creates continuous instability as stakeholders anticipate short-term changes.
• Syndicalist / party behavior	12/18	Refers to the influence of political or party-affiliated actions by students, professors, administrative staff, and other university personnel.
• Correlation of existing law/political leadership (National or local)	14/18	The applicability and reception of a law depend heavily on whether it was enacted by the current government or a previous one, influencing its effectiveness and acceptance at national or local levels.
• Economics	13/18	Financial constraints and challenges as in any organization, significantly impact HEIs.

4.1. Root Causes of Conflicts in H.H.E.

Figure 1 illustrates the typology of internal conflicts identified in Greek HEIs, identified by the participating rectors. It presents the main categories and subcategories of root causes of crises, often stemming from legislative instability, resource constraints, and socio-political influences.

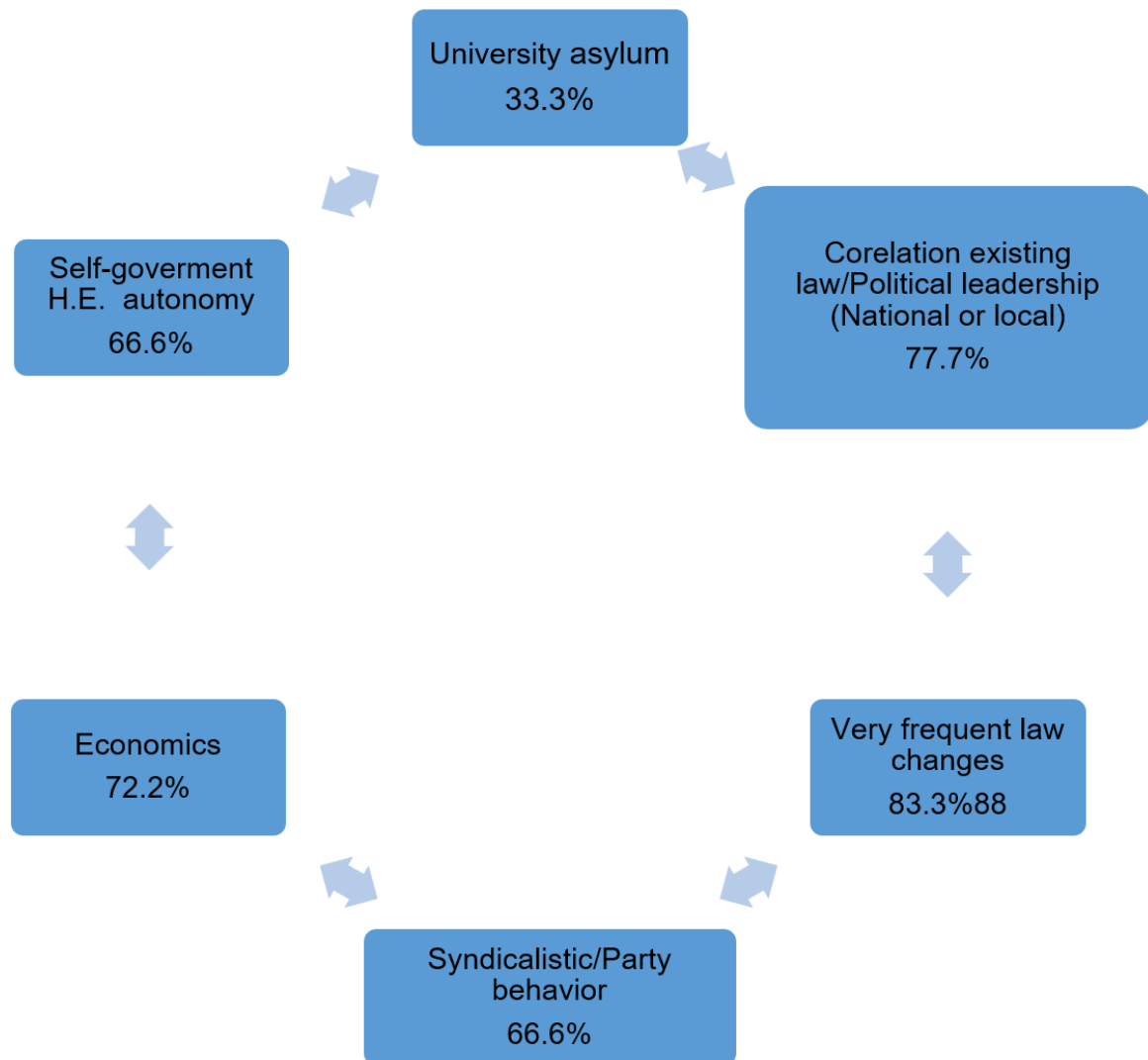


Figure 1. Root causes of internal crises in Greek HEIs and their frequency.

A graphical representation of Table 2 displaying the frequency of each identified root cause.

4.2. Types and Categories of Conflicts Requiring Mediation by the Rector

The underlying causes of conflicts, as identified by respondents lead to distinct categories of disputes or crises. These can generally be classified into two main types, each necessitating specific strategies and tools for resolution:

- a) Internal conflicts/crises
- b) External conflicts/crises

In certain situations, a blend of both types may occur. However, one category usually dominates, and addressing the primary issue often resolves secondary concerns as well. Crises can stem from conflicts driven by either internal or external factors within the institution. This study focuses solely on crises arising from internal conflicts which are further divided into the following categories:

4.3. Internal and External Conflicts in Greek Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

This section outlines the types of conflicts identified within Greek HEIs, categorized as internal and external. Internal conflicts originate within the institution, while external conflicts involve interactions with external entities such as ministries, local authorities, or other organizations. Below is a detailed breakdown of internal conflicts based on the root causes identified by rectors and subsequently validated.

I. Internal Disputes

Internal disputes are classified based on the parties involved and their roles within the institutional hierarchy.

I.1 Disputes between Statutory Bodies

Conflicts arise between statutory bodies as defined by legislation and institutional regulations.

1. I.1.A Disputes between Single-Member Bodies

• I.1.A.1 Between Equivalent Single-Member Bodies:

Conflicts between individuals in similar roles, such as department heads, deans, or vice-rectors, where overlapping responsibilities create friction.

• I.1.A.2 Between Non-Equivalent Single-Member Bodies:

Disputes between individuals in different hierarchical positions, such as department heads and deans or vice-rectors and faculty deans where power imbalances lead to tensions.

2. I.1.B Disputes between Collegiate Bodies

These involve councils and assemblies within departments or faculties, focusing on issues such as:

- Credit distribution
- New staff allocation (academic, administrative, etc.)
- Study regulations and related matters
- I.1.B.1 between Equivalent Collegiate Bodies

Conflicts between parallel councils, such as departmental assemblies or faculty councils.

• I.1.B.2 between Hierarchically Classified Bodies

Disputes arising from ambiguities in legislation that fails to clearly define the authority of superior collegiate bodies. Examples include disagreements over hiring temporary teaching staff or study regulations. These reflect the principle of self-governance, which prioritizes consensus over unilateral decisions.

I.2 Mixed Disputes

- Mixed disputes involve various combinations of students, faculty, administrative staff, ETIP, or EDIP.

Examples include:

- Representation percentages in electoral processes
- Participation in administrative bodies
- Responsibility allocation
- Conflicts combining internal and external factors (not covered in this study).

II. External Conflicts

External conflicts involve interactions with inter-institutional or external entities, such as ministries, local authorities, or other organizations.

Note: These conflicts are not the focus of this study.

4.4. Internal Conflicts

The following page includes a table summarizing the internal conflicts that a university rector in Greece may face. These disputes, as outlined above were presented to rectors for validation. Rectors were asked to confirm whether they agreed with the classifications and whether they had encountered similar situations during their tenure.

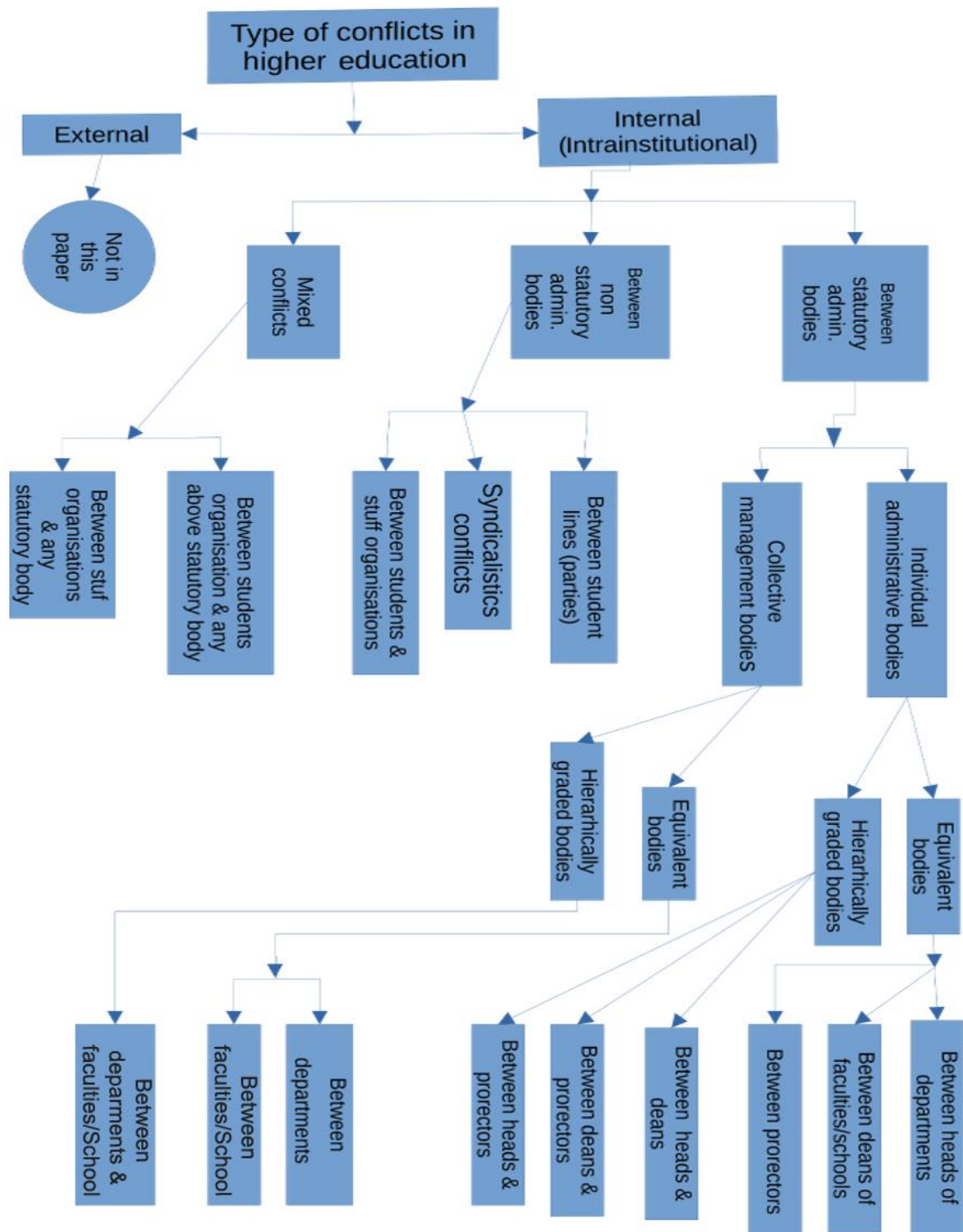


Figure 2. Graph for internal institutional disputes, with which a rector of a Greek university may be or was confronted.

4.5. Legislative Instability and Institutional Challenges in Greek Higher Education

In Greece, during this period (2022), following the recent mergers of the universities with the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs) in May 2019 and the earlier abolition of the universities of Central and Western Greece, the following universities operated - listed in alphabetical order.

Table 3 presents the 25 public Hellenic higher education institutes higher education institutes operating in Greece after the 2019 mergers. Military academies and ecclesiastical schools were excluded because of their distinct administrative structures.

Table 3. Public Hellenic higher education institutes.

1.	Athens School of Fine Arts (ASFA)
2.	Higher School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE)
3.	Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
4.	Agricultural University of Athens (AUA)
5.	Democritus University of Thrace (Democritus University of Thrace)
6.	International Hellenic University (IHU)
7.	National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
8.	National Technical University of Athens (NTUA)
9.	Hellenic Open University (HOU)
10.	Hellenic Mediterranean University (H.M.U.)
11.	Ionian University
12.	Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB)
13.	University of the Aegean
14.	University of West Attica (P.A.D.A.)
15.	University of Western Macedonia
16.	University of Thessaly
17.	University of Ioannina
18.	University of Crete
19.	University of Macedonia
20.	University of Patras
21.	University of Piraeus
22.	University of Peloponnese
23.	Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences
24.	Technical University of Crete
25.	Harokopio University of Home Economics

This list excludes the highest-ranking military academies and higher ecclesiastical schools due to their unique operational and administrative frameworks.

The functioning of universities in Greece varies significantly from large institutions to smaller ones spread across different cities. This diversity necessitates legislation tailored to their specific requirements. Although Greece has ample national laws that align with broader European Union policies—customized to fit the needs of individual member states—it encounters a distinctive challenge. In Greece, higher education laws are revised at an unusually high rate, often justified as efforts to modernize. On average, a higher education law remains in effect for fewer than 18 months. To outsiders, this may appear impractical but it is a uniquely Greek trend, deeply tied to the cultural perspective on addressing higher education challenges.

To highlight this issue, the table below summarizes key legislative changes over the last ten years. It omits minor adjustments, such as presidential decrees or ministerial directives which occur even more frequently. All university rectors have pointed to this persistent legislative instability as a major source of ongoing disputes.

Table 4 presents the major legislative acts (list of laws) with either full or major changes in Greece's higher education legislation during the past decade.

Table 4. List of laws with full or major changes in higher education legislation in Greece during the past decade.

Law 3794/2009 (Government Gazette 156, vol. A'/ 4-9-2009)	Regulation of issues of the university and technological sector of higher education and other provisions.
Law 3848/2010 (Government Gazette 71, vol. A'/ 19-04-2010)	Upgrading the role of the teacher, establishing rules of evaluation and meritocracy in education and other provisions
Law 3879 (Government Gazette A 163 / 21.9.2010)	Development of lifelong learning, transparency, quality, transfers, and other provisions.
Law 4009/2011 (Government Gazette 195, vol. A'/ 6-9-2011)	Structure, operation, quality assurance of studies, and internationalization of higher education institutions.
Law 4076/2012 (Government Gazette 159, vol. A'/ 10-8-2012)	Regulation of issues of higher education institutions and other provisions.
Law 4186/2013 (Government Gazette 193 / A'	Supplementary provisions, topics of universities (TEI),

Law 3794/2009 (Government Gazette 156, vol. A'/ 4-9-2009)	Regulation of issues of the university and technological sector of higher education and other provisions.
17.9.2013)	lifelong learning, etc.
Law 4115/2013 (Government Gazette 24, vol. A'/ 30-1-2013)	Organization and operation of the youth and lifelong learning foundation and the national organization for the certification of qualifications and vocational guidance and other provisions. university issues, recognition of courses in higher education, issues of the quality assurance and accreditation authority in higher education
Law 4316/2014 - Government Gazette 270/A/24-12-2014	Establishment of a dementia observatory, university administrations, research bodies, etc.
Law 4327 (Government Gazette A' 50/ 14.5.2015	Urgent measures for primary, secondary, and tertiary education and other provisions.
Law 4386 (Government Gazette A 83/11.5.2016)	Multi-bill on education. Settings for the survey.
Law 4405 (Government Gazette 129 / 13.07.2016)	Election of university professors, textbooks, university secretaries, HOU, independent departments of HEIs and IKY
Law 4485/2017 (Government Gazette 114, vol. A'/04.08.2017)	Organization and functioning of higher education, research regulations, and other provisions.
Law 4521 (Government Gazette A' 38/02.03.2018)	Establishment of a university of West Attica abolition of two TEIs, creation of 5-year engineering departments of study but not of polytechnic rights and other provisions.
Law 4559/2018 (Government Gazette 142/A/3-8-2018)	Abolition of the TEI of Epirus and the Ionian Islands. Synergies between the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and the former TEI of Central Greece (Chalkida campus).
Law 4589/2019 (Government Gazette A' 13 / 29.01.2019)	University of Athens, the Agricultural University of Athens, the University of Thessaly with the TEI of Thessaly and Central Greece
Law 4610/2019 (Government Gazette 70 / A / 7-5-2019)	Synergies between universities and TEIs, access to higher education, abolition of TEI and creation of new additional universities
Law 4777/2021 (Government Gazette A 25 - 17.02.2021)	Access to higher education, protection of academic freedom, upgrading of the academic environment, and other provisions.
Law 4957/2022 (Government Gazette 141/A/21-7-2022)	New horizons in higher education institutions. Strengthening the quality, functionality, and connection of A.E.I. with society and other provisions.

The following section explains why the study focused on gathering input from university rectors (anonymously) rather than engaging with the political leadership of the Ministry of Education or relying solely on widely cited explanations for systemic issues. The differing viewpoints between rectors and the ministry are clear in the following examples which are also depicted in Figure 2:

4.6. Frequent Legislative Revisions

A majority of rectors (16 out of 18) cited the constant changes in legislation as a major challenge. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education continues to implement sweeping legislative reforms, often within short timeframes under the assumption that these changes enhance the system rather than hinder it. This is evident from the high volume of laws introduced. Frequent legislative changes emerged as a key challenge with rectors identifying instability as a driver of internal crises and a barrier to effective conflict resolution stemming from legislative instability, union activism, and resource limitations. For example, the replacement of Law 4957/2022 by Law 5094/2024 introduced by the new minister and reflects this instability. This high frequency of legal revisions also impacted our ability to conduct a longitudinal evaluation of legislative outcomes. We will proceed under this latest legal framework to continue assessing its implications for institutional governance.

4.7. University Asylum

Only six rectors, most from large urban universities, viewed university asylum as a significant issue. In contrast, the Ministry of Education considers it one of the most pressing problems in Greek higher education, thus frequently addressing it in legislative reforms. Between 2006 and 2008, the ministry faced strong student opposition to a new bill perceived as a threat to their asylum rights. Despite the widespread protests, including year-long university occupations and demonstrations, the ministry refused to revoke the contested provisions. This reflects the ministry's firm stance on the issue, evidently contrasting with the rectors' moderate approach.

5. DISCUSSION AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study based on eighteen rectors' responses, representing 72% of the Greek public universities, provide critical insights into the root causes and the types of internal conflicts in higher education institutions (HEIs). These insights can be extended beyond the Greek academic context and consequently offer relevance to global higher education systems that are faced with similar challenges. This study highlights the importance of crisis communication tailored to stakeholder perceptions that eventually conclude to fewer conflicts using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) frameworks. This discussion explores these implications, the influence of SCCT on communication strategies and suggests practical recommendations for crisis management and conflict resolution.

5.1. Application of SCCT in Greek HEIs

The study confirms that Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is relevant when managing Greek HEI crises. Rectors engaging effectively with various stakeholders and considering their perceptions validates the SCCT's principle of situational alignment. However, cultural distrust towards institutional mechanisms required them to adapt their communication strategies which often led stakeholders to bypass mediation channels. Legislative instability also limited rectors' ability to maintain consistent and proactive management because of the challenges created periodically.

5.2. Leadership Approaches in Crisis Management

The findings showed that rectors employed a combination of leadership approaches.

- Transformational Leadership: Rectors promoted collaboration during periods of crises by bringing together diverse stakeholders through their unique vision and charisma.
- Adaptive Leadership: Rectors balanced the immediate crisis responses with the long-term objectives by leveraging cultural awareness in order to resolve conflicts effectively.
- Servant Leadership: Rectors had to take on mediation roles, often facing challenges while prioritizing institutional well-being and this was especially because of insufficient organizational support.

5.3. Broader Implications

5.3.1. Legislative Instability and Institutional Autonomy

Rectors concluded that the frequent legislative changes create systemic instability and disrupt the effective functioning of HEIs. This is an issue considered common in many educational systems and it reflects the ongoing tension between government control and institutional autonomy so for policymakers it is crucial to assess how such instabilities affect both long-term planning and governance in HEIs.

5.3.2. Cultural Influences on Conflict Resolution

Cultural nuances in crisis resolution revealed distrust in institutional conflict management mechanisms and therefore a tendency to escalate any issues directly to top leadership. This highlights the importance and need of

adapting conflict resolution strategies to both cultural and organizational contexts. This pattern is not unique to Greece. It is relevant to institutions of other countries as well where their structure is of hierarchical decision-making.

5.3.3. Leadership as a Determinant of Crisis Outcomes

Adaptive leadership in academia is underscored due to rectors navigating crises the need for strong. Depending mostly on individual leaders rather than institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution reflects a leadership-centric model while sometimes may prove effective may also hinder scalability and long-term sustainability, so a balanced approach that strengthens both leadership training and institutional capacity-building is required.

5.3.4. Generalizing Beyond Greece

This study focuses on Greek HEIs. However, the identified challenges, such as resource constraints, political influences, and internal disputes are relevant globally. Institutions in other regions can apply these findings by drawing parallels to their own contexts, especially in conflict management related to legislative changes and resource allocations.

5.4. Actionable Recommendations

5.4.1. Legislative Reforms for Stability

Frequent and drastic shifts in the legal framework governing Greek HEIs have shown that they undermine institutional planning and autonomy (Asderaki, 2021; Zhang, Ning, & Barnes, 2016; Zmas, 2015).

- Recommendation: Temporary moratorium (e.g., 5 years) on major legislative changes, allowing current laws to stabilize and their effects to be properly assessed (Papadimitriou, 2015). Establish collaborative forums involving policymakers, rectors, and faculty representatives, ensuring that future legal revisions are evidence-based rather than politically reactive.

5.4.2. Strengthening Mediation Mechanisms

Conflicts in higher education often escalate when existing mediation structures lack authority or stakeholder trust (Katz, 2017). In digitally transforming institutions, well-trained mediators can expedite dispute resolution and build a culture of transparency (Hannan, 2023).

- Recommendation
- Offer targeted conflict resolution training to institutional mediators.
- Increase transparency, publicizing mediation outcomes and clarifying processes.
- Building awareness campaigns among students, faculty, and staff to enhance trust in mechanisms.

5.4.3. Leadership Development Programs

Adaptive and crisis-ready leadership is crucial for managing organizational turbulence in academia (Gigliotti, 2019; Wenzel, Kallmuenzer, & Peters, 2021).

- Recommendation
- Create specialized training programs that combine adaptive leadership, crisis management, and conflict resolution.
- Integrate contextual case studies from Greek HEIs to offer practical, localized insights.
- Encourage ongoing mentorship for rectors and departmental heads to build institutional leadership pipelines.

5.4.4. Cross-Institutional Collaboration

Collaborations among universities can pool resources, share best practices, and develop standardized protocols (Doyle & Brady, 2018; Lozano, Barreiro-Gen, & Huisingh, 2015).

- Recommendation:
- Form inter-university networks exchanging effective crisis management strategies.
- Promote resource-sharing agreements (e.g., staff training programs and mediation experts) reducing redundancies.
- Conduct conferences to build collective capacity for addressing systemic crises.

5.4.5. Integration of Technology

Digital platforms can streamline communication, predict conflict patterns, and facilitate training (Bailey, Losty, Albert, Rodenhausen, & De Santis, 2022; Bonk et al., 2020).

- Recommendation:
- Adopt centralized reporting systems for grievances, improving transparency and record-keeping.
- Leverage data analytics to identify recurring conflict triggers and forecast potential crises.
- Conduct virtual training sessions on mediation and leadership to ensure ongoing professional development.

5.5. Focus on Preventive Measures

Research on crisis management emphasizes proactive strategies over reactive interventions (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2013; Fink, 1986; Nuortimo et al., 2026).

- Conduct Regular Assessments
- Implement institution-wide surveys to identify emerging tensions (Crawford et al., 2024).
- Identify and address minor disputes before escalation by implementing feedback loops, such as anonymous channels and focus groups.
- Allocate Resources Equitably.
- Ensure transparent, data-driven budgeting and resource distribution.
- Clearly communicate rationales for financial or staffing decisions to limit perceptions of inequity.
- Engage Stakeholders in Decision-Making.
- Mixed faculty-student committees (inclusive governance structures) can foster collective ownership (Lozano et al., 2015).
- Consulting administrative staff, professors, and student boards regularly can reduce misunderstandings and lead to goals alignment.

Grounded in both the empirical evidence from Greek higher education and broader international context, these recommendations, provide actionable pathways that could enhance crisis resilience. Greek HEIs are transiting from reactive crisis management to a preventive, and more sustainable model that benefits all stakeholders by stabilizing legislation fortifying mediation channels, fostering leadership and institutional collaboration and integrating technology.

5.6. Future Research Directions

Based on the findings of this study, future research could focus on

Investigating emerging technologies: Examine how tools such as artificial intelligence can enhance mediation and decision-making processes in HEIs. AI-driven solutions may provide innovative approaches that manage internal disputes efficiently and proactively.

Exploring perspectives of other stakeholders: Rectors' points of view can lead to a more holistic understanding of conflicts and improve inclusivity in crisis management strategies by incorporating views from students, administrative staff, and faculty complements.

5.7. Future Directions and Practical Implications

A need for structured training programs in mediation and crisis management tailored to the unique challenges of Greek HEIs is suggested by the findings. Future research should investigate developing training modules for rectors drawing from established frameworks such as adaptive leadership (Wenzel et al., 2021) and situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007). These programs could focus on

Enhancing cultural sensitivity in conflict resolution by training leaders to navigate cultural nuances effectively.

Leveraging digital tools for real-time crisis management by implementing technology to streamline conflict resolution processes.

Integrating theoretical models with practical scenarios to build leadership resilience through case-based learning.

Such initiatives would equip rectors to navigate the complex institutional conflicts while strengthening systemic trust in mediation mechanisms.

6. CONCLUSION

This study reveals how legislative instability, cultural factors, and leadership dynamics drive internal conflicts within Greek HEIs. Institutions will be able to shift away from reactive crisis management to preventive solutions addressing these issues through targeted reforms, better mediation mechanisms, and leadership development. Crises in higher education are no longer isolated (Gigliotti, 2019) with volatile state funding in the U.S. (Delaney, 2023), democratic backsliding threatening academic freedom (Enyedi, 2018), “sticky” yet “slippery” mobility complicating faculty flows (Chou, 2021) and universities themselves evolving as emergent organizations (Doyle & Brady, 2018). Considering the background formal leadership education can foster adaptive, sector-specific competencies (Fennell, Van Dam, Stephens, & Holloway, 2025). Identifying the best global practices in crisis management and mediation can provide valuable insights for adapting strategies to local contexts.

The recommendations provided offer practical strategies not only for stabilizing Greek HEIs but also for guiding other higher education systems facing similar challenges globally. Greek HEIs can become models of sustainable governance and inspire reforms across international contexts through collaboration, adaptability, and systemic change.

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