

## Perception and management of conflict in Spanish and Portuguese university students

### Percepción y gestión de los conflictos en estudiantes universitarios españoles y portugueses

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#### Abstract

*This research is the result of the Erasmus +LIMEdiat research project, in which one of the lines of study has had as its objective: to know the perception that university students from both countries have of conflict management and the ways in which they manage them. From a methodological point of view, a cross-sectional research study was carried out with a quantitative aspect and a simple random sample of 247 university students. The main results obtained from this study include, on the one hand, that conflict is positively valued among university students; and on the other hand, the origin of conflicts is usually to be found in communication problems (16.8%), lack of respect (9.7%) and non-compliance with rules (8%). The results obtained on the students' perceptions allow us to conclude the importance of urging university managers on the need to train their students in positive conflict management and the promotion of education to achieve a culture of peace in universities in relation to the goals set out in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. In this sense, the use of mediation contemplated in Law 3/2022, of 24 February, on university coexistence emerges as an opportunity to improve interpersonal relations and manage conflicts both inside and outside the classroom. Among its limitations is the size and homogeneity of the sample.*

**Keywords:** Research; University; Conflict Resolution; Perception; Problem Solving.

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## Resumen

*La presente investigación es fruto del proyecto de investigación Erasmus +LIMEdiat, en el cual una de las líneas de estudio ha tenido como objetivo: conocer la percepción que tienen el estudiantado universitario de ambos países sobre la gestión del conflicto y las formas en la que gestionan los mismos. Desde un punto de vista metodológico, se ha realizado una investigación de tipo transversal con una vertiente cuantitativa y una muestra aleatoria simple con 247 estudiantes universitarios/as. Entre los principales resultados obtenidos de este estudio destaca, por un lado, que el conflicto es valorado positivamente entre el estudiantado universitario; y de otro lado, el origen de los conflictos suele encontrarse en problemas de comunicación (16.8%) Falta de respeto (9.7%) e Incumplimiento de normas (8%). Los resultados obtenidos sobre las percepciones del alumnado permiten concluir la importancia de instar a los y las gestoras universitarias sobre la necesidad de formar a sus estudiantes en la gestión positiva de conflictos y la promoción de una educación para lograr una cultura de paz en las universidades en relación con las metas establecidas en los Objetivos para el Desarrollo Sostenible de la Organización de Naciones Unidas para 2030. En este sentido, la utilización de la mediación contemplada en la Ley 3/2022, de 24 de febrero, de convivencia universitaria emerge como una oportunidad para mejorar las relaciones interpersonales y gestionar los conflictos tanto dentro como fuera del aula. Entre sus limitaciones se encuentra la dimensión y homogeneidad de la muestra.*

*Palabras clave:* Investigación; Universidad; Solución de Conflicto; Percepción; Solución de problemas

## Introduction

Law 3/2022, of 24 February, on university coexistence (hereinafter LCU), encourages the use of mediation in the essential functions that characterise the university (Belando, 2023), which are: training (teaching), research (dissemination), and the transfer of knowledge at the service of culture, quality of life and economic development. Most universities are currently drawing up protocols for the use of this technique. To this must be added the recent Organic Law 2/2023, of 22 March, on the University System (hereinafter, LOSU), which provides for equality and diversity units in universities, stating that they must have sufficient resources. These provisions are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (4, 5, 10, and 16), which require, among other conditions, the development of socioemotional competences at different levels and the development of competences in conflict management and resolution (del Campo Sorribas, et al., 2006). The average age of university students is between 19 and 28 years old, in different degree, Master's and doctoral courses. In Spain, the proportion of students in this age group is 23.6%, compared to 23.2% in the EU-23, 0.4% higher than in the EU-23 and 1.2% higher than the OECD average (Hernández and Pérez, 2018).

The disruption of the teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the loss of employment opportunities and career development, generating a sense of social isolation and mental health problems, and compromising the physical and emotional well-being of learners. The socialising dimension of education has been severely affected and many young people have experienced isolation, anxiety and depression. At the same time, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been

more exposed to stressful home environments. In response, the European Commission set 2021 as the European Year of Youth in order to promote youth participation in building a better, greener, more inclusive and digital future (European Commission, 2021).

The university is an essential microcosm for the transmission of values in our society. Many of them are related to civic character and the culture of peace, principles that should guide the conduct of any human being, regardless of the profession they end up obtaining. Moreover, the university plays a fundamental role in the socialisation of young people. Studies highlight cases where social networks have become the main source of contact between students in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (Peris et al., 2020; Kern and Smutko, 2021), but they can also be a source of conflict. On the path to establishing a culture of peace in society is mediation, as building a culture of peace in citizenship is related to the achievement of human rights and thus to the establishment of peace.

### **Conflict management at the university**

The Report on Conflict, Human Rights and Peacebuilding (Navarro et al., 2021) notes that in 2020 there was a significant increase in high-intensity armed conflicts, which accounted for almost half of the cases, 47% of the total (Hernández and Pérez, 2018). Conflict and the peaceful management of conflict has been present in society for decades in so-called Western countries. In the 1960s, "different social groups, from university, anti-nuclear, feminist, pacifist, environmental and human rights movements, demanded greater public involvement" (Albornoz, 2007, p. 56).

There are numerous causes of conflict among university students in addition to "academic stress, frequent challenges to their beliefs, fatigue, shared housing, relationships, sexual harassment and racial discrimination, and multicultural conflict" (Gibson, 1995, p. 27). At the same time, complex conflict situations can arise where harassment of students (Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Rosales and García, 2019; Munuera et al., 2023; Aranda, 2023), or faculty (Barba, 2023; Martínez-López et al., 2022). Faced with these situations, the university system must advance in lifelong learning, not only for university graduates, but for the population in general, to ensure the necessary re-qualification of this population in a changing world where the acquisition of new skills is necessary, a process that began to be institutionalised in American colleges and universities in the 1970s and 1980s (Kriesberg and Neu, 2018), transforming their centres into collaborative governance.

The culture of peace is defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (hereinafter UNESCO) as a set of values, attitudes, traditions, behaviours and lifestyles based primarily on respect for life, an end to violence and the promotion and practice of non-violence through education, dialogue and cooperation; full respect for and promotion of all human rights and fundamental freedoms; commitment to the peaceful settlement of conflicts and respect for and promotion of equal rights and opportunities for women and men; and finds in mediation an effective tool for the achievement of this laudable goal. For students living in extreme situations of violence or war, conflict is seen as negative (Pulido et al., 2019). The culture of peace proposed by the UN (2015) is vital, being based on education, sustainable economic and social

development, democratic participation, understanding, tolerance (Gurr et al., 2000; Watson et al., 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2022). This vision has a long history. As early as in June 1980, the Executive Board of UNESCO (1980) approved, through Resolution A/35-35, the proposal to establish a University for Peace in Costa Rica, with an academic programme focused on conflict resolution.

In Spain, the recent LCU allows universities to encourage the use of alternative means of conflict resolution in a positive way, including mediation, with the aim of promoting a peaceful, inclusive and diverse society, where full respect and promotion of all human rights and fundamental freedoms prevail (Belando, 2023). To this law on coexistence must be added the recent LOSU, which incorporates equality and diversity units in universities with the use of sufficient resources. In addition to the two classic missions of the university, teaching and research, a third mission has been added, which can be called "economic and social development, community services or outreach" (Beraza and Rodríguez, 2007, p. 50). In addition to the construction of a culture of peace and the treatment of conflicts, they represent a paradigm shift (Fitzgerald et al., 2016; Martínez-López et al., 2022).

Intra-university mediation is that which takes place in the university environment with the aim of resolving disputes that arise between its components and reaching agreements that are satisfactory for all those involved. This meeting is characterised by the principles of voluntariness, equity, confidentiality, recognition and respect between the parties involved. This process is carried out by a mediator who guarantees a neutral space to favour a meeting that allows the transformation of communication and to reach agreements where everyone wins (Munuera, Valdebenito, et al., 2023), University mediation can help people to restore and develop healthy working relationships (Alcover, 2009; García-Villaluenga, 2009; Barsky, 2002; Avruch and Nan, 2013; Dorado et al., 2015; Rojas and Alemany, 2016; Grau et al., 2016; Rondón-García et al., 2017; Rosales and García, 2019; Belando, 2023). Other authors point out that the internal complexity of the university has led its constituents to spend most of their time trying to reconcile conflicts of interest, negotiating and seeking stability as a means of preserving institutional values (Miklas and Kleiner, 2003; Avruch and Nan, 2013; Rommel and Bailey, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

Conflicts are inherent to human nature and are present in everyday life and in the most diverse social and organisational contexts (Martínez-Martín and Lozano-Martín, 2021). The literature points out their importance for personal, social and organisational development and transformation; therefore, it is essential to learn to deal with conflicts in a positive and preventive way.

Several studies point to the need and development of conflict prevention and positive conflict management programmes, including mediation and education for coexistence in university institutions (García-Villaluenga, 2009; Rommel and Bailey, 2016; Martínez-Martín and Lozano-Martín, 2021). However, its assessment and implementation is still very residual.

University mediation emerges as a new context of intervention where the conflicts that arise have a specific typology. According to Grau et al, (2016), there are different modalities of experiences developed in Spanish universities, among them the following stand out: a) The services for the improvement of university coexistence (University of La Laguna (Rosales and García, 2019) and the University of Vigo); b) The University

Community Attention Service (SACU) of the University of Huelva; c) The UC3M Mediation Group of the University Carlos III of Madrid; d) The University Centre for Conflict Transformation (GEUZ) of the University of the Basque Country (Grau et al., 2016, p. 369); e) Other responses such as the Conference of Universities for the Study of Mediation and Conflict (CUEMYC); f) the Mediation Service of the Complutense University of Madrid (Rosales and García, 2019), the University of Alicante, etc.

The University cannot ignore this peculiar situation and has the opportunity to introduce mediation and education for coexistence as an intra-university formula to incorporate mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts and the culture of peace in future graduates. For all this, it is necessary to know the perception that young university students have of conflicts and how they manage them as a framework for action prior to introducing programmes, projects, in short, initiatives, to improve university coexistence that promote a culture of peace within and outside the university. In other words, the aim is to delve deeper into the conflict dynamics (Redorta, 2021) in the institutional context of the university.

### **Research objectives**

The general objective of this research, framed from a quantitative perspective, is to determine the perception that university students have of conflict management and the ways in which they manage conflict from a comparative perspective between the participating universities (University of Murcia, Complutense University of Madrid and University of Minho). In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives have been established:

- To analyse whether there are differences in conflict management by university students depending on the university and country involved.
- SO2. To find out the students' assessment of the behaviour and effectiveness of the procedures used by young people to resolve conflicts.
- OE3. Know the reasons why conflicts arise among students.

### **Method**

#### **Population and Sample**

A descriptive, exploratory and cross-sectional study was carried out between 9 and 19 March 2022 in three different universities: University of Murcia (Spain), Complutense University of Madrid (Spain) and University of Minho (Portugal). An exploratory and descriptive study was chosen given the scarcity of previous research on how university students perceive and manage their conflicts. Therefore, the aim is not to corroborate any hypothesis but to approach this object of study from a comparative perspective between two EHEA countries, Spain and Portugal.

The sampling used was by convenience among the universities that form part of the International University Conference for the Study of Mediation and Conflict (CUEMYC). The selected universities offer specific training in mediation through a Master's Degree or mediation subjects in a degree in Social Work or Education. In relation to the criteria for

inclusion of the participants, the only requirement was to be studying an official degree at one of these universities where a mediation subject is taught, either in an undergraduate degree (Social Work or Education) or in the Master's Degree in Mediation itself. The sample was a non-probabilistic, simple random sample of 247 university students belonging to different university degrees.

## **Instrument**

The instrument used in the research was a questionnaire entitled "Questionnaire on conflict management" developed by Argentinean students and researchers under the supervision of the researcher Florencia Brandoni (2014). This questionnaire was used in a pilot study at the University of Minho in collaboration with the Universidad Tres de Febrero in Argentina with a sample of 709 students in the 1st year of higher education (Costa et al., 2010). This study made it possible to analyse the questionnaire used, which was revised for wider application.

The survey administered consisted of 20 items grouped into several sections: a) socio-demographic data; b) family and cohabitation situation; c) perception of conflict; d) conflict management. In relation to the reliability of the instrument, a Cronbach's  $\alpha = .917$  was obtained, above 0.70, a result that reflects the robustness of the questionnaire.

In the blocks related to point c and d, a wide range of answers was established to find out their perceptions of the conflict and its management, incorporating the possibility of indicating: others and mechanising their different assessment. In addition, most of the questions allowed the possibility of marking a multiple choice, given that the perception of conflicts and their formulas for resolution do not depend on a single variable, but are embedded and determined within multiple systems: family, school, relational, etc. The dependent variable of this research is the perception that young university students have of conflict and the mechanisms they generally use to resolve their daily problems in the personal, family and social spheres. The independent variables were grouped into four categories: a) socio-demographic; b) their assessment of the different conflict procedures; c) the behaviour of young university students in their relationships with other young people or adults; and d) past experiences in relation to conflicts and conflict management.

## **Data collection and analysis procedure**

The questionnaire was distributed electronically through the *umu.encuestas* application, anonymously, requesting prior authorisation for data access and processing.

SPSS v.28 was used for the statistical analysis. Initially, a descriptive analysis was performed, establishing the most significant socio-demographic differences and in relation to the participating university. Next, a cross-table analysis was performed between the dependent variable and the independent variables, taking into account the chi-square significance level ( $p < 0.005$ ).

## **Results**

The most important results are shown below. Firstly, from a distributive perspective of the participants, of the total number of questionnaires completed (247), 59.5% correspond to the University of Murcia (UMU), 24.7% to the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) and 15.8% to the University of Minho (UMI). In terms of gender, 80.2% are women, a figure that is above the percentage of student representation in the universities, therefore, there is a feminisation of the sample. In terms of age, the mean is 21 years old, while the median is 20 years old. The variance is 13.2. Therefore, we are talking about a sample composed mainly of young women (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Descriptive data of the sample*

University	UCM	UMU	UMI
Gender	24.7%	59.5%	15.8%
	Man 18.6%	Woman 80.2%	Another 1.2%
Age (Universities as a whole)	Media	Medium	Variance
	21.0	20.0	13.2

An important consideration to take into account is how they value conflict, a social phenomenon that can be seen as an opportunity, risk, possibility, etc. 73.3% of the participants consider conflict to be positive. In this sense, it is important to know whether there are differences according to the participating universities. The University of Murcia obtained the highest score in the percentage of positive perception of the conflict, with 81.0% of its participants, followed by the University of Minho, with 66.3%, and the Complutense University of Madrid, with 57.4%. In this case, there is a relationship between the participating university and the evaluation of the conflict, with a chi-square of 0.001 ( $p < 0.005$ ).

Table 2

*Conflict as a positive phenomenon (%)*

	No	Yes* Yes* Yes*	Yes* Yes* Yes*
UCM	42.6		57.4
UMU	19.0		81.0
UMI	33.3		66.3
Total	26.7		73.3

\*Chi-square ( $p < 0.005$ ); \*\* chi-square ( $p < 0.001$ )

In order to understand how university students manage conflicts, it is important to know the nature of these conflicts. In this case, students are asked about the reasons that may give rise to conflict. Table 3 shows the results, grouping the students' answers and highlighting the differences between universities, the latter acting as an independent variable. The highest values are obtained in the following responses as the origin of conflicts: Communication problems (16.8%); Lack of respect (9.7%) and Failure to comply with rules (8.0%).

In this case, no differences are observed between students according to each university. In the case of Communication problems (16.8%), the item with the highest values, it is the most representative of all the universities: 76.2% in the case of the University of Murcia, 75.4% at the Complutense University of Madrid and 61.5% at the University of Minho. If we approach the variable Lack of respect (9.7%), the second highest values are obtained at the University of Minho (56.4%) and the University of Murcia (40.1%) and the third highest at the Complutense University of Madrid (39.3%). Finally, in relation to Non-compliance with rules (8.0%), there is also an approximation to the records, although the Complutense University of Madrid stands out with 42.6%, followed by the University of Murcia with 31.6% and the University of Minho with 20.5%.

Furthermore, a relationship is observed between the identified causes of conflict and the students of the participating universities ( $p < 0.005$ ) in relation to: 1) Lack of knowledge to reach agreements; 2) Discriminatory attitudes; 3) Indifference towards the other; 4) Attacks on personal identity or belonging group; 5) Changes and Transformations.

Table 3

*Rating of reasons for conflicts according to their experiences (5 possible options) (%)*

	%	UCM	UMU	UMI
Rivalry in ties	5.2	27.9	22.4	17.9
Non-compliance with standards	<b>8.0</b>	42.6	31.6	20.5
Absence of authority	2.2	8.2	8.2	17.9
Lack of knowledge to reach agreements	6.8*	26.2	36.7	10.3
Authoritarianism or abuse of power	7.0	27.9	27.9	46.2
Communication problems	<b>16.8</b>	75.4	76.2	61.5
Discriminatory attitudes	4.0*	14.8	14.3	33.3
Indifference to the other	5.2*	18.0	19.7	41.0
Love	1.7	9.8	8.2	2.6
Disinterest in the other	4.5	21.3	17.7	25.6
Lack of comradeship	5.7	23.0	25.2	28.2
Care	1.5	8.2	6.8	2.6
Excessive affection	1.0	9.8	2.7	2.6
Jealousy	3.4	11.5	18.4	7.7



Attacks on personal identity or group affiliation	2.9*	11.5	9.5	28.2
Changes and transformations	2.5*	19.7	6.8	12.8
Desire for the limelight	4.1	14.8	17.7	23.1
Selfishness	7.0	23.0	32.0	38.5
Lack of respect	<b>9.7</b>	39.3	40.1	56.4
Another	0.8	0	4.8	5.1

\*Chi-square (p<0.005); \*\* chi-square (p<0.001)

Young university students are at a vital moment in the construction of their personality and transition to adult life. For this reason, it is important to know what behaviours they use to resolve conflicts. As can be seen in Table 4, the results show that conciliatory attitudes are superior to confrontational ones. A battery of responses showed that the most frequently repeated behaviours (high and medium levels of response) were: a) Dialogue and listening to the other; b) Seeking agreement based on differences; c) Avoiding conflict; d) Dialogue to convince; e) Competing with the other; and f) Reconsidering my position.

Table 4

*Behaviours most frequently used by young people in conflicts (5 possible choices) (%)*

	%	High	Medium	Under
Competing with each other	Total	<b>28.7</b>	<b>22.5</b>	48.8
	UCM	29.8	10.6	59.6
	UMU	29.1	24.4	46.5
	UMI	25.7	31.4	42.9
Seek an agreement, building on differences	Total	<b>47.9</b>	<b>37.8</b>	14.3
	UCM	<b>55.6</b>	<b>37.0</b>	<b>7.4</b>
	UMU	47.7	35.2	17.2
	UMI	37.1	48.6	14.3
Reconsider my position	Total	<b>28.2</b>	<b>51.0</b>	20.8
	UCM	31.3	50.0	18.8
	UMU	29.8	48.8	21.5
	UMI	18.2	60.6	21.2
Avoiding conflict	Total	<b>38.9</b>	<b>42.6</b>	18.5
	UCM	25.5	56.9	17.6
	UMU	40.3	38.8	20.9
	UMI	52.8	36.1	11.1
Dialogue and listening to each other	Total	<b>54.8</b>	<b>30.4</b>	14.9
	UCM	60.4	22.6	17.0
	UMU	53.8	29.5	16.7
	UMI	<b>50.0</b>	<b>44.4</b>	<b>5.6</b>

Dialogue to convince*.	Total	<b>36.9</b>	<b>46.1</b>	17.0
	UCM	30.4	39.2	<b>30.4</b>
	UMU	39.5	46.0	<b>14.5</b>
	UMI	36.1	55.6	<b>8.3</b>

In addition, some significant differences are observed between participating universities. For example, in the option "Dialogue and listen to others", the University of Minho obtained the lowest score (5.6%), with a difference of more than 10 percentage points compared to the other participating universities, which is positive in the case of its students, as it indicates that they have a greater predisposition to do so (94.4% in high and medium values). Another significant fact is found in the option "Seek agreement, starting from the differences" where the Complutense University of Madrid obtains lower percentages (7.4%), as in the previous case, 10 percentage points lower than the rest of the universities, so there is a greater tendency to do so (92.6% in high and medium values). However, the data showing the greatest difference between students according to university is found in the option "Dialogue to convince", which is the only behaviour with  $p < 0.005$ , where the lowest level is again in the case of the University of Minho with 8.3%, far behind the University of Murcia (14.5%) and the Complutense University, with (30.4%). It should be noted that this option is clearly not a behaviour that favours mediation.

Beyond behaviours, we look at the procedures par excellence used by university students, based on those that are already established in society. Table 5 shows the values of the procedures for resolving conflicts that reach higher values in the High/Medium response option.

In the first place, the option "Publicity on Social Networks" stands out, where the medium and high values reach 81.4%. Secondly, the potential that the judicial system continues to have in the resolution of conflicts is observed, given that the option "Trial" obtains the highest level in the High option with 40.9% and 40.1% in the Medium option (81.1% adding both values). Thirdly, the option "Mediation" shows similar values and the sum of High/Medium is 78.9%. Moreover, these three options show a  $p < 0.001$ . In fourth place is "Dialogue and agreement between the parties", where its medium and high values reach 78.1% and show a  $p < 0.005$ .

Table 5

*Assessment of the level of effectiveness of the procedures for resolving conflicts installed in society (%).*

	Universities	High	Medium	Under	NS/NC
Mediation** Mediation	Total	<b>35.2</b>	<b>43.7</b>	15.0	6.1
	UCM	<b>49.2</b>	41.0	8.2	1.6
	UMU	35.4	42.9	18.4	3.4
	UMI	12.8	51.3	12.8	23.1
Trial	Total	<b>40.9</b>	<b>40.1</b>	14.6	4.4

	UCM	41.0	39.3	18.8	1.6
	UMU	47.6	38.1	11.6	2.7
	UMI	15.4	48.7	20.5	15.4
	Total	<b>35.6</b>	<b>42.5</b>	18.2	3.6
Dialogue and agreement between the parties*.	UCM	<b>54.1</b>	41.0	3.3	1.6
	UMU	30.6	44.2	21.8	3.4
	UMI	25.6	38.5	28.2	7.7
	Total	<b>39.7</b>	<b>41.7</b>	15.0	3.6
Advertising on social media**	UCM	44.3	44.3	11.5	0
	UMU	39.5	42.9	16.3	1.4
	UMI	33.3	33.3	15.4	17.9

\*Chi-square ( $p < 0.005$ ); \*\* chi-square ( $p < 0.001$ )

Looking at the differences between these options presented in Table 5, the case of "Dialogue and agreement between the parties" stands out, where the Complutense University of Madrid reaches very high values in High/Medium (95.1%), in comparison with the rest, which do not reach 80%. A similar situation is observed in the "Mediation" option. In this case, the Complutense University of Madrid reaches values of 90.2%, while the University of Minho stands at 64.1% and the University of Murcia at 78.3%.

As mentioned above, young people are at a time in their lives when they are developing social and pre-employment skills and competences in the university environment and the way in which they relate to and interact with their peers and adults is very different, as is the nature of the conflicts. Table 6 shows the most common conflicts that young people have with other young people (values  $\geq 10.0\%$ ).

Table 6

*Most common conflicts of young people with people of other ages (3 possible options) (%).*

	%	UCM	UMU	UMI
For devaluations or discriminations	13.0	44.3	40.1	41.0
For conflicting interests	12.7	39.3	42.2	33.3
Lack of empathy or affinity	16.4	<b>52.5</b>	53.1	46.2
Due to differences in criteria or points of view	21.7	65.6	<b>70.7</b>	66.7
For different ways of acting	12.7	32.8	46.3	28.2
By impositions or authoritarianism	15.6	<b>54.1</b>	48.3	46.2

\*Chi-square ( $p < 0.005$ ); \*\* chi-square ( $p < 0.001$ )

The most representative options are: a) Difference of criteria or points of view (21.7%), b) Lack of empathy or affinity (16.4%), c) Due to impositions or authoritarianism (15.6%), d) Due to devaluations or discrimination (13.0%), and, e) Due to opposing interests and different ways of acting (12.7% in both cases).

The nature of the conflict, i.e. its origin, cannot be understood in the same way whether people see it as positive or negative. In other words, the occurrence of a conflict can vary considerably according to the perception of the conflict. Table 7 shows the reasons for the conflict to occur according to the perception of the conflict (positive or negative).

Table 7

*Reasons why conflict occurs based on their experiences as seen by them: positive vs. negative (%).*

<b>Reasons for conflict</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Rivalry in ties	5.2	30.5	69.5
Non-compliance with standards	<b>8.0</b>	<b>28.7</b>	<b>71.3</b>
Absence of authority	2.2	12.5	87.5
Lack of knowledge to reach agreements	6.8	23.0	77.0
Authoritarianism or abuse of power	7.0	27.6	72.4
Communication problems	<b>16.8</b>	<b>28.0</b>	<b>72.0</b>
Discriminatory attitudes	4.0	39.5	60.5
Indifference to the other	5.2	21.4	78.6
Love	1.7	15.8	84.2
Disinterest in the other	4.5	32.7	67.3
Lack of comradeship	5.7	24.2	75.5
Care	1.5	18.8	81.2
Excessive affection	1.0	<b>45.5</b>	54.5
Jealousy	3.4	27.0	73.0
Attacks on personal identity or group membership	2.9	34.4	65.6
Changes and transformations	2.5	37.0	63.0
Desire for the limelight	4.1	25.0	75.0
Selfishness	7.0	23.7	76.3
Lack of respect	<b>9.7</b>	<b>21.9</b>	<b>78.1</b>
Another	0.8	22.2	77.8

Firstly, it is important to highlight the different perceptions of conflict, given that, as shown in Table 2, conflict is mostly seen as negative. The three options that indicate the reasons for the conflict based on the participants' own experiences are: a) Communication problems with 16.8% of the responses (of these, 28.0% see the conflict as positive and 72.0% see it as negative); b) Lack of respect, which is seen as negative; c) Lack of respect, which is seen as negative, which is seen as positive; and d) Lack of respect, which is seen as negative, which is seen as negative.0% as negative); b) Lack of respect, which reaches 9.7% (21.9% in the case of people who see the conflict as positive and 78.1% among those who see it as negative); c) Non-compliance with 8.0%, (28.7% see the conflict as positive and 71.3% as negative).

## Discussion

Most of the studies carried out on the assessment of conflict in general in university students are included in the analysis of the student-faculty relationship (Davy, Butterworth and Urquhart, 2019), or student-citizenship programmes (Barsky, 2002; Yarn, 2014), or on behaviour in the face of conflict itself (Martínez-López et al., 2022). The study presented here is based on the assessment of conflict in students from three different universities with different degrees where training in positive conflict management is offered, in contrast to other studies that focus on a single degree and university (Dorado et al., 2015a). In all of the participating universities, 73.3% of the students rate conflict as positive. In the case of the University of Murcia, 81.0% of the participants rate the conflict as positive, above the Complutense University of Madrid (57.4%) and the University of Minho (66.3%).

This perspective is of great relevance in the social sciences and in the training of students, given that the positive valuation of conflict favours its resolution, as indicated by numerous studies from Baruch and Folger (1996), through Dorado et al. (2015), to more recent studies by LaBelle (2023). People who acquire competences in positive conflict management and mediation skills generate a democratic relationship among their peers (Bickmore, 2015), based on the principles of respect, inclusion, equity, dialogue and recognition, forgetting the idea of domination and submission that has prevailed for a long time (Redorta, 2021). The identification of problems and the perception of positive conflict management helps to create a context that guarantees their resolution, based on contextualisation, interpretation and empathy (Barton and Levstik, 2004).

Participants who consider conflict as positive identify as possible causes of conflict: a) Excessive affection (45.5%); b) Discriminatory attitudes (39.5%); c) Changes and transformations (37.0%); d) Attacks on personal identity or belonging group (34.4%); e) Disinterest in the other (32.7%) and f) Rivalry in bonds (30.5%). On the other hand, those who value conflict as negative (19.0%), obtain higher values in the following options: a) Absence of authority (87.5%); b) Love (84.2%); c) Caring (81.2%) and d) Lack of respect (78.1%). Numerous studies show that the conflicts that young people have in relation to love, affection and disrespect can occur within their relationships, so it is not surprising that the high percentages of those who consider conflict to be negative for these reasons are not surprising. As pointed out in a recent study - Palomino et al. (2021), developed in Spain, the romantic valuation of relationships is associated with anxious attachment, the acceptance of abusive relationships and, most importantly, with the justification of potential violent behaviour; hence, the origin of conflicts.

The negative perception of conflict would highlight the need to work towards a culture of peace and an inclusive society capable of managing and resolving its confrontations (Duckworth et al., 2019). Students who are aware of their needs in relation to conflict management see the need to modify their conflict narratives (Avruch and Nan, 2013). At this point, as a result of this awareness, an opportunity opens up for mediation as a strategy/practice that allows communities, as in any social system, to develop their norms and protocols to resolve their disputes and, in the process, improve community relations (Munuera and Armadans, 2023).

Learning in conflict resolution leads the person to use it, once the benefits of this procedure have been proven, in all the disciplines studied (Avruch and Nan, 2013; Martínez et al., 2022). According to certain research (Lacuesta-Vizcaino and Traver-Martí, 2018; Rosales and García, 2019), once the subject has experienced the benefits of positive

conflict resolution, he or she knows the effective way to resolve them. Therefore, training in conflict management or Appropriate Means of Dispute Resolution -known as ADR- that can be received at university favours the development of a culture of peace and dialogue in society (García-Villaluenga, 2009; Viana, 2011; Alonso, 2013; Dorado et al., 2015; Zárata-Rueda et al., 2021).

If we specify what type of conflicts students have with people of other ages, the most common are differences in criteria or points of view (21.7%), followed by Lack of empathy or affinity (16.4%) and, in third place, Impositions or authoritarianism (15.6%). According to the records by universities, the Complutense University of Madrid stands out with 95.1% of High/Medium values in relation to the response option Dialogue and Agreement between the parties, when the rest of the universities do not reach 80%. A similar situation occurs in relation to Mediation, where the Complutense University of Madrid obtains a score of 90.2%, compared to 78.3% for the University of Murcia and 64.1% for the University of Minho.

Moreover, within the habits and ways of relating that the population of this age cohort may have, the novel practice of *sexting* increases conflicts with the digitalisation of amorous social relationships (Bianchi et al., 2021). The consideration of social networks as a tool used by university students to solve their problems (Turan et al., 2020), cannot be considered as an effective mechanism for this, or at least there is no consolidated evidence of it. Manca and Ranieri (2017), state that a large part of the problems that arise between people in this age group are related to the exposure or dissemination of disputes on social networks. Students continue to see the judicial channel as a space for conflict resolution, which demonstrates their trust in institutions. However, the acquisition of skills in relation to the culture of peace, positive conflict management and Appropriate Means of Dispute Resolution, including mediation, should be encouraged, as suggested by numerous recent research studies (Gavaldón and Ambrosy, 2023; Barón et al., 2022).

Training in positive conflict management provides students with skills and knowledge about the most appropriate forms of conflict resolution. This training can be implemented in the same way as international universities have done (Barsky, 2002). These universities where competences in peaceful conflict resolution are developed have even transformed their organisation to collaborative governance, where centres have been set up to study, research and train in mediation.

## Conclusions

Despite the scarcity of publications on students' overall perception of conflict, this study provides an opportunity to address this subject of study. The initial approach described in the general objective was to ascertain the perception of conflict and compare the results of the three participating universities. Among the results obtained, it is established that the majority of students see conflict as positive. In comparison, there is a significant difference between the perceptions of students at the University of Murcia and those of the other universities participating in the study, in that they consider conflict to be positive and, therefore, an opportunity to resolve situations of social difficulty.

In relation to the reasons why conflicts occur, the most common choices were: Communication problems, lack of respect, and non-compliance with rules. It should be

noted that, despite being universities with different characteristics (origin, number of students, etc.), there are no significant differences in the perception of the conflicts they face.

In relation to the behaviours and effectiveness of procedures used by students to resolve conflicts, the following stand out: a) Dialogue and listening to the other; b) Seeking agreement based on differences; c) Avoiding conflict; d) Dialogue to convince; e) Competing with the other; and f) Reconsidering their position. The use of networks as a means of resolution contrasts with existing studies by Manca and Ranieri (2017), Turan et al. (2020) and others.

The incipient experiences developed in the different universities studied favour the positive management of conflicts among young university students, which are totally different among their peers and adults, and can help build their personality in the transition to adult life, generating a culture of dialogue and peace (Viana, 2011).

Conflict management skills can always be improved through appropriate training according to studies by Torrego (2004), García-Villaluenga (2009), Alonso (2013), Dorado et al. (2015) and Zárata-Rueda et al. (2021). In most of them, Spanish universities are committed to the acquisition of conflict resolution skills in the development of actions for the construction of a citizenship of dialogue through the promotion of mediation.

The existence of conflicts in the university, training in Appropriate Means of Dispute Resolution and the LCU, constitute basic elements for the consolidation of positive conflict management in the university, with regard to transgressions that may be made on issues related to tolerance, inclusion, attention to diversity, etc. Existing mediation services in universities raise the awareness of the university community to manage their conflicts through dialogue. These services contribute to their beneficiaries becoming agents of change in order to achieve a democratic society of dialogue in which a culture of peace prevails (Rosales and García, 2019). All of this favours the construction of a culture of peace within the university that will extend to society in general, building a dialogic, inclusive and respectful citizenship.

Training in appropriate means of dispute resolution, including mediation, encourages the development of listening and dialogue between people. This training is fundamental in the construction of a culture of peace, and especially in higher education, in order to generate sociability, responsibility, democratic citizenship and favour the establishment of peace in society. This function can be carried out by the University through training in positive conflict management as a strategy for intervention and prevention, in line with the goals set out in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015), such as 4, 5 and 16.

Finally, some limitations of this research are indicated, such as the configuration and breadth of the sample, which in future research should be extended to other universities, more courses and by degrees and/or branches of knowledge. Another limitation is the scarce scientific production at present, from a national and international perspective, in relation to the assessment of conflict, as well as the formulas for resolving them, beyond the disparities that may arise between teaching staff and students, which makes it difficult to analyse the results and strengthen research into this object of study. Despite these limitations, the study carried out has made it possible to gather important information on how students perceive and manage conflicts and on the importance and need for universities to incorporate training and specific services in this area.

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