

# Developing Conflict Management Skills in Higher Education IT Students: Impacts and Challenges

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are crucial in fostering soft skills, such as conflict management. Internationally, mediation services within higher education are emerging as an innovative approach to identify, manage, and resolve conflicts. These services also play a significant role in enhancing students' personal and interpersonal skills, which are crucial for their holistic development. Given the significance of developing soft skills within Portuguese higher education, this article aims to analyse the impact of the workshop "Estratégias de mediação para a gestão positiva de conflitos" (Mediation Strategies for Positive Conflict Management) on students' perceive conflicts and their positioning towards the integration of mediation services in higher education. The workshop was conducted with 45 Information Technology (IT) students from a university in Portugal. Data collected through a mixed-methods approach were analysed using both simple descriptive and content analysis. The results indicate that the workshop enhanced students' understanding of the significance of positive conflict management, that students tend to adopt collaborative behaviours when confronted with conflict situations, and that students expressed a favourable disposition towards the integration of mediation services in higher education, recognising their potential to assist in resolving, managing, preventing, and transforming conflicts. This work is relevant to reflections on the future of education, as today's globalised society requires that we rethink and readapt educational spaces to meet current social, labour, and global demands.

**Keywords:** Conflict Management, Higher Education, Mediation, Soft Skills, Students

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## 1. Introduction

Soft skills are deemed essential as they enable individuals to adopt collaborative approaches when confronted with complex problems and adversity (OECD, 2024). These skills are transversal across various contexts and aspects of life, significantly improving personal fulfilment, active citizenship, and social inclusion (European Union, 2019).

In the educational context, soft skills play a crucial role in enhancing students' personal and professional development. There is, therefore, a growing interest in incorporating these skills into higher education (OECD, 2024). Among the diverse skills that can and should be developed in these educational contexts, this article specifically emphasises the relevance of developing positive conflict management skills. Conflicts are an inherent part of human interaction, and it is essential to equip students with the tools to manage such adversities effectively, given the diverse array of opinions and personalities in higher education and, later, in the workplace.

Thus, to contribute to the discussion on the significance of soft skills in higher education, this work aims to analyse the impact of the workshop "Estratégias de mediação para a gestão positiva de conflitos" (Mediation Strategies for Positive Conflict Management) on how Information Technology

(IT) students at a university in Portugal perceive and approach conflicts. Additionally, it seeks to understand their position on the integration of mediation services within higher education.

Research of this nature is crucial for reflecting on the future of education because, in the globalised society of the 21st century, educational spaces must be rethought and adapted to meet current social and labour demands. Training students in technical and scientific competencies, and equally importantly, in soft skills, is essential for ensuring a quality education capable of promoting the integral development of generations. The positive impacts of these soft skills are evident both within the academic environment and across various areas of life. Developing these skills enhances the educational experience and equips students to face the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary world with resilience and motivation.

## 2. Soft Skills in Higher Education

The mission of higher education institutions is to develop scientific and technical skills in students to prepare them for specific professions. In Portugal, this mission is outlined in the Legal Framework for Higher Education Institutions, which defines it as (...) "the high-level qualification of Portuguese individuals, the production and dissemination of knowledge, as well as the cultural, artistic, technological, and scientific education of their students, within a framework of international reference." (Article 2.º, Law 62/2007, of September 10).

The development of technical skills is essential and remains a primary focus of higher education. However, viewing this context solely as a space for the transmission and acquisition of knowledge limits its potential to traditional paradigms, which prove insufficient for comprehensive student training (Morgado, 2021; Pacheco, 2020). Educational institutions must also prioritise the development of soft skills that enable students to integrate fully into society and meet its diverse demands (Cornali, 2018; Jardim et al., 2019). Unlike technical skills, which pertain to the performance of specific tasks, soft skills relate to individual attributes and are transferable across various domains and situations beyond the professional context (Cinque & Kippels, 2023; Jardim et al., 2019; Sá & Serpa, 2022; Saepudin et al., 2022).

Skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, conflict management, decision-making, professional ethics, adaptability, stress management, and innovation/creativity are examples of soft skills that researchers highlight as highly valued by companies and employers and those that not only contribute to professional success but also enhance personal and interpersonal well-being (Cinque & Kippels, 2023; Jardim et al., 2019; Mwita et al., 2023).

In the professional sphere, international studies indicate that soft skills are deemed "essential" and "very important" in the hiring process (Wonderlic, 2016) that employers view these soft skills as more significant than technical skills (Murugan & Sujatha, 2020; Wonderlic, 2016); that individuals trained in soft skills tend to be more productive in the workplace (Adhvaryu et al., 2018); and that proficiency in soft skills enhances individuals' ability to relate effectively to others, which, in turn, contributes to both personal success and company progress (Bhati, 2022).

Soft skills also significantly influence personality development (Mohite et al., 2023) and life satisfaction, as they directly affect self-knowledge and confidence, which are essential factors in motivating individuals to acquire new abilities (Feraco et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2022). In this personal domain, longitudinal studies reveal strong correlations between the development of soft skills in preschool and positive outcomes in employment, income, health, and reduced criminal activity in young adulthood (Cinque & Kippels, 2023; Deming, 2017).

All these studies underscore the importance and need for developing soft skills, so integrating them into the curriculum across all educational contexts, particularly in higher education, is essential (Torres et al., 2022). These contexts must adopt pedagogical approaches that address the social demands of a "new generation" (Figueiredo, 2020). This generation needs to be educated to think critically, make assertive decisions, face various adversities and demands, communicate and interact effectively, and collaborate with and relate to others in a respectful, positive, and constructive manner (Morgado, 2021).

Education for conviviality serves as a tangible example of how to foster the development of these soft skills in higher education students. In this context, Spain implemented Law 3/2022 of February 24, aimed at introducing mediation and education for conviviality in universities to encourage and promote active coexistence and shared responsibility among all. In practice, this approach of education for conviviality directly influences how students perceive academic life and manage their relationships and challenging situations, both in the short and long term. Education for conviviality can be implemented through various approaches, including awareness-raising activities to promote values associated with coexistence and a culture of peace, positive and transformative conflict management, counselling and guidance (Álamo et al., 2022), and the integration of these skills as core components of the curriculum (Bhati, 2022; Torres et al., 2022).

In summary, the goal is to promote skills that encompass not only knowing how to do but also knowing how to be — fostering critical thinking and autonomy, which are essential for decision-making and shared responsibility — and knowing how to relate — developing skills for mutual respect and understanding, positive conflict management, and responsible practices for cooperation and conviviality (Morgado, 2021).

### 3. Developing Conflict Management Skills in Higher Education Students

Aware that the development of soft skills plays an important role in fostering social, technical, and moral attributes for the holistic development of individuals, educational systems must implement strategies to promote these skills and help equip future generations with the aptitudes needed to contribute effectively to global economic, social, and humanitarian progress (Cinque & Kippels, 2023; OECD, 2024; United Nations Organisation, 2015; Saepudin et al., 2022).

Higher education institutions are increasingly recognising the significance of their role in developing soft skills. These institutions have been endeavouring to transform the curriculum and their pedagogical practices by adopting innovative, participative and collaborative methodologies in educational contexts and in the teaching-learning and assessment processes (Sá & Serpa, 2022).

In practice, to promote these competencies within higher education institutions, the proposal is to implement both parallel and integrated/experiential learning approaches (Kónyi et al., 2023). Parallel learning approaches include engaging in activities that complement the curriculum but are not part of it, such as workshops, short courses, lectures, and seminars. In contrast, integrated/experiential approaches incorporate the development of these competencies directly into the curriculum through activities like simulations, role-playing, case studies, and teamwork (Kónyi et al., 2023). The combination of these two approaches is advantageous, as it makes the learning process more engaging and stimulating, motivating students to proactively, autonomously, and continuously seek out new and innovative opportunities to enhance their skills.

In both modalities, the emphasis is on student-centred and collaborative learning. The goal is for students to develop skills in time management, organisation, and synthesis, as well as in communication, conflict management, teamwork, problem-solving, critical analysis, and decision-making (Kónyi et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2022).

In particular, and focusing on the core of this work, the development of conflict management skills in higher education is crucial because, given the inherent diversity in this context, conflicts are likely to arise frequently, making it essential to adopt strategies that enable positive management of such situations (Morozova et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2021).

Thomas & Kilmann (1976) identify five conflict management styles: "collaboration"—engaging in constructive dialogue about the needs and interests of all parties; "accommodation"—satisfying the other person's needs and interests; "competition"—dominating to meet one's own needs and interests; "avoidance"—avoiding or denying the conflict, disregarding both your own and the other person's needs and interests; and "compromise"—negotiating to satisfy at least part of each party's needs and interests. Understanding these styles is the first step towards effective conflict management. In the context of higher education, being aware of these styles and creating spaces that encourage positive dialogue, cooperation, and constructive interaction is essential for challenging negative

perceptions of conflict and discovering opportunities for both individual and collective growth (Álamo et al., 2022).

In this regard, beyond the activities offered through parallel and integrated/experiential approaches, it is common internationally to integrate mediation figures and services specifically for developing conflict management skills in higher education. Mediation is viewed as an innovative method for managing conflicts constructively and for fostering essential personal and interpersonal skills in students, which are crucial for their personal, social, academic, and professional well-being (Law 3/2022, of February 24, 2022; Matthews, 2019). Mediation spaces enable direct intervention in conflicts — by identifying, preventing, and managing them constructively — and support personal and interpersonal development - by creating democratic and cooperative environments for dialogue. In these spaces, contradictions, differences, controversies, and oppositions are reshaped and transformed into opportunities for individual and collective learning (Jesus & Souza, 2019; Munuera Gómez et al., 2023; Torremorell, 2008).

Developing these skills is essential for fostering a fair and democratic academic culture, encouraging active participation, maintaining peaceful and enduring interpersonal relationships, and enhancing the quality and strengthening of the mission of higher education institutions (Law 3/2022, of February 24, 2022; Matthews, 2019; United Nations Organisation, 2015).

## 4. Methods

This study aims to analyse the impact of the workshop "Estratégias de mediação para a gestão positiva de conflitos" (Mediation strategies for positive conflict management) on how Information Technology (IT) students perceive and understand conflicts. It also seeks to explore their positionings on integrating mediation services in higher education to assist in preventing, managing, and transforming conflicts positively. The study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess student perceptions. The mixed method allows for a measurable analysis of students' positions while also exploring the meanings they attach to the conflicts. This combined approach enhances the understanding of the impacts and effects of the workshop on the students (Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015).

### 4.1. Participants

The study involved 45 IT students from a public university in Portugal. Of these, 25 were male and 19 were female, with one participant not specifying their gender. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 24 ( $M= 19.96$ ). The sample included students from all years of the bachelor's degree (three years) and master's degree (two years), with the majority in their second year of study ( $M= 2.27$ ).

The students in the sample volunteered for a project where they taught programming to children and young people. Learning to program is a complex process, and in this educational setting, various factors can lead to conflicts, such as differing paces of content comprehension and diverse approaches to technical problems. In this context, the workshop was designed to help student volunteers understand conflicts better and feel more equipped to manage and resolve them effectively when they arise.

### 4.2. Instruments

The data collection instruments used in this study included, qualitatively, students' written responses registered during the workshop and, quantitatively, the workshop evaluation questionnaire.

The written responses were collected at two key moments: when students were asked, "What does the word conflict mean to you?" and "How do you approach conflicts?". The students' responses to the questions were written on unidentified Post-its and collected by the researchers at the end of the workshop.

The evaluation questionnaire, which was administered at the end of the workshop, consists of two sections. The first section gathers socio-demographic information, including the students' age, gender,

course, year of study, nationality, and place of birth. The second section consists of seven statements, on which students were asked to position themselves in order to express their perceptions. This position was assessed using a Likert scale, where 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree". The statements in the questionnaire related to students' perceptions of conflict both before and after the workshop and their views on the importance of creating and replicating similar initiatives in higher education.

It is important to note that during data collection, the students' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured in compliance with the European Data Protection Regulation.

### 4.3. Procedures

Following the invitation to conduct the workshop with IT students, the programme content and outcomes were defined, focusing on three main topics: "1. Can conflict be good?", "2. Mediation and positive conflict management strategies," and "3. Role Play – while loop – and reflection." The content of the workshop was defined by the researchers, taking into account the interests expressed by the students. The two-hour workshop was held on March 16, 2023. During the session, both theoretical and practical activities were developed, two of which are analysed in this article. At the end of the workshop, students were asked to complete the evaluation questionnaire, which was distributed on paper. The statements in the questionnaire, also analysed in this article, were prepared by the researchers prior to the workshop and were structured to elicit quick, clear, and objective feedback from the students on the content covered.

### 4.4. Data analysis

The data collected through the evaluation questionnaire were entered into JASP (Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program) for quantitative analysis. One researcher organised and coded the data, and subsequently, the other validated it. Following this validation, the researchers generated and performed a descriptive analysis of the data. This approach allowed for an immediate and straightforward description of the students' impressions regarding the various statements. The data generated was presented using a bar graph to provide a clearer understanding of the students' positions (Figure 1). No correlations between variables or complex inferences were established, as this is not the primary focus of this article.

The written responses were subjected to manual thematic analysis, allowing for the creation of a visual map of the answers. By examining repetition and similarities, patterns and trends among the students' responses were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

## 5. Results

The collected data provided insights into how the IT students participating in the workshop understand conflict, the behaviours they typically adopt to address conflicts, their perceptions of the workshop and the implementation of mediation services in higher education.

When asked, "What does the word conflict mean to you?", the most frequently mentioned responses were "disagreement" (n = 8), "discussion" (n = 6), and "misunderstanding" (n = 3). Additionally, students also mentioned terms such as "confusion" (n = 2), "discord" (n = 2), and "confrontation" (n = 2). Overall, the responses were similar in meaning. Other examples included "shock" (n = 1), "war" (n = 1), "debate" (n = 1), and "stress" (n = 1), among others.

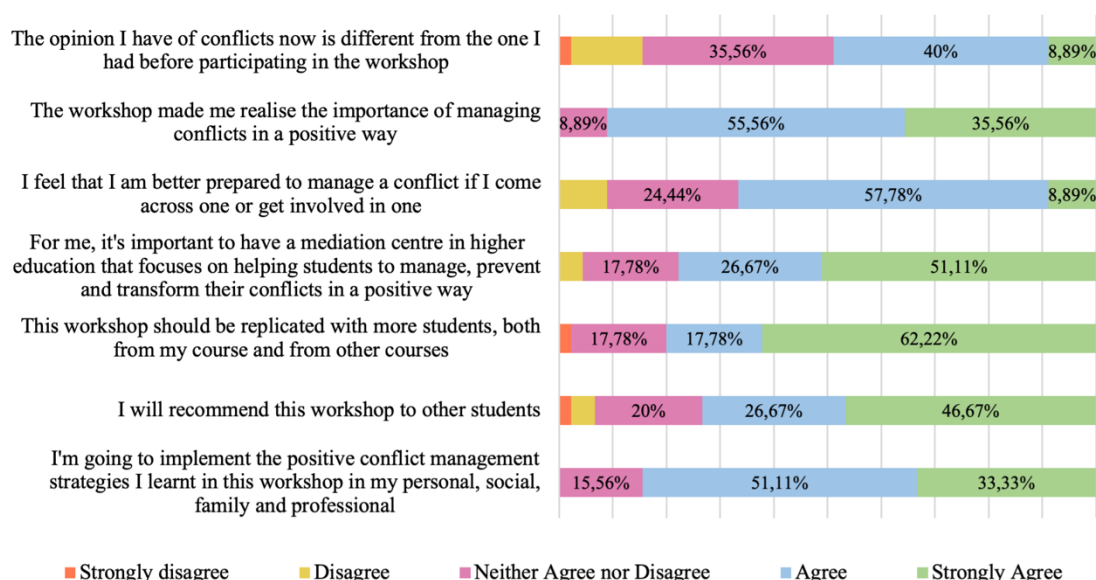
To answer the question "How do you approach conflicts?" nine behaviours were projected onto a screen, each corresponding to a conflict management style from Thomas & Kilmann (1976): competing, avoiding, compromising, accommodating, and collaborating. The data collected indicate that, when faced with conflict, students favour the collaborating style of conflict management. The most frequently adopted behaviours evidence this preference: "trying to understand the other person and their motivations" (n = 13) and "favouring dialogue and listening to the other person" (n = 6). In addition to the collaborating style, students also exhibited accommodating and avoiding styles. The



accommodating style was indicated by behaviours such as "giving priority to dialogue in order to convince the other person" (n = 3) and "trying to reach an agreement even if I do not like it" (n = 3). The avoiding style was represented by behaviours such as "avoiding conflict" (n = 3) and "forgetting about conflict" (n = 2).

Regarding the students' perceptions of the workshop content, Figure 1 summarises the main results.

*Figure 1.* Position of IT students on the statements from the evaluation form for the workshop "Estratégias de mediação para a gestão positiva de conflitos" (Mediation Strategies for Positive Conflict Management)



*Source:* Prepared by the author

Analysis of Figure 1 shows that nearly all students agreed that the workshop helped them understand the importance of managing conflicts positively (n = 41, 91.12%). Some students reported that their view of conflicts changed after the workshop (n = 22, 48.88%) and that they now feel better prepared to manage conflicts if they face or become involved in one (n = 30, 66.67%).

When asked for their opinions on integrating mediation services into higher education, the majority of students expressed a favourable view, with responses predominantly ranging from "strongly agree" to "agree". This indicates a favourable position towards the integration of mediation services in higher education to assist students in preventing, managing, and positively transforming conflicts (n = 35, 77.78%).

The workshop's positive impact is evident from the fact that most students indicated they would recommend it (n = 33, 73.34%) and that it should be offered to more students across various courses (n = 36, 80%). Additionally, students reported their intention to apply the conflict management strategies learned during the workshop to their personal, social, family, and professional lives (n = 38, 84.44%).

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of the results demonstrates that the IT students in the study primarily associate the term 'conflict' with negative aspects, reflecting a generally adverse perception of the concept. This negative perception of conflict is consistent with findings from other studies involving higher education students, particularly in Brazil (Silva et al., 2021), Spain (Martínez-López et al., 2022; Rojas-Ruiz & Alemany-Arrebola, 2016) and the United States (Morgan et al., 2019). The traditional approach to

conflict, which faces it as a dysfunctional situation that must be eradicated, may help explain the students' predominantly negative perception of conflict.

Regarding the behaviours students reported adopting in conflict situations, those most commonly observed in this sample are associated with a collaborating style of conflict management. Other studies conducted in Portugal also indicate that the collaborating style is the most frequently adopted by students to manage conflicts (Silva et al., 2016) and that, generally, higher education students possess strong conflict management skills (Magalhães et al., 2022). The prevalence of the collaborating style among Portuguese students may be attributed to their recognition of the significance of adopting collaborative attitudes and practices, as these soft skills are increasingly valued and sought after in the labour market (Cornali, 2018). Portugal's ranking as the seventh most peaceful country in the world (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024) may also influence this trend. The country's democratic social policies, which promote harmony and social peace, likely foster the adoption of effective coexistence practices. These practices, observed among higher education students, are essential for managing everyday challenges.

However, it is important to note that the responses from IT students, when instructed to select a behaviour during the workshop, may have been influenced by various factors, such as the time constraints for responding. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, as they may have limitations.

It should also be emphasised that, despite students already demonstrating positive and collaborative conflict management skills, the data reveals their strong support for integrating mediation services into higher education. They believe such services would further aid in preventing, managing, and positively transforming conflicts. Internationally, higher education students also express a need to enhance their conflict management skills, viewing mediation as a suitable and innovative service for developing these abilities (Martínez-López et al., 2022). Spaces dedicated to managing, resolving, and transforming conflicts, with both resolution-focused and educational content, are crucial for the development of soft skills. These skills are essential for well-being in academia as well as personal, social, and future professional success (Matthews, 2019).

Another notable finding of this study is the students' positive positioning towards applying the skills they acquired in the workshop to their personal, social, family, and professional lives. A similar study conducted in Ukraine also demonstrated that, following training in conflict resolution and communication, students began to value collaboration rather than confrontation (Morozova et al., 2022). In addition to these extracurricular experiences, a pilot study in Portugal aimed to integrate a course dedicated to the development of soft skills into the curriculum, including content on "interpersonal communication skills, collaborative work, and conflict management" (Torres et al., 2022, p. 146). The results of the study indicate that this type of training positively impacts students' self-awareness, self-confidence, and skill development, motivating them to invest in their personal and professional growth (Torres et al., 2022).

Despite the IT students in this study and those in similar research acknowledging the relevance of these training spaces and expressing a desire for their replication with a broader student audience, integrating soft skills into higher education remains a significant challenge, as their inclusion is still limited and often questioned (Mwita et al., 2023). On the one hand, teaching and learning processes are usually characterised by traditional, expository methods, which impede the focus on developing soft skills (Sá & Serpa, 2022). On the other hand, the implementation of institutional policies that support teaching staff in integrating soft skills is still limited, which exacerbates resistance to their realisation (Sá & Serpa, 2022). Another limitation may be related to students' own attitudes, including passive behaviour and difficulties in managing time across different activities (Sá & Serpa, 2022).

Several studies offer recommendations for developing soft skills among higher education students. For example, at the micro level, these include implementing role-plays to enhance emotional intelligence, promoting debates to develop leadership, conflict management, and communication skills, giving students autonomy to select and execute tasks creatively, and varying or introducing new tasks to help students adapt to change (Otermans et al., 2023). At a macro level, recommendations include broadening curricula to incorporate opportunities for developing these skills, encouraging

participation in specialised training programmes and workshops, and promoting awareness campaigns about the significance of soft skills for personal and professional success (Mohite et al., 2023).

## 7. Conclusions

Educational contexts, especially higher education institutions, are increasingly being urged to create spaces for the development of soft skills. Despite the challenges of implementing these initiatives, the integration of soft skills remains both urgent and essential to prepare students with skills that enable them to succeed in their personal, social, and professional lives.

Conflict management skills are particularly significant among the various soft skills that can be developed. Higher education and professional environments, characterised by their heterogeneity, are inherently prone to conflicts. Understanding and acquiring constructive conflict management strategies is crucial for fostering well-being and effectively achieving individual and collective goals.

Although students may possess strong conflict management skills, the analysis of the workshop "Estratégias de mediação para a gestão positiva de conflitos" (Mediation Strategies for Positive Conflict Management) demonstrates and aligns with other studies, the importance and necessity for higher education to adopt innovative and effective training methods in conflict management, including mediation. Students perceive these training spaces as relevant and beneficial, aiding them in approaching adverse situations with a positive and constructive perspective.

This study's limitations are tied to the sample size of students who participated in the workshop and the context in which the data was collected. The sample is not representative, and the data were collected in a constrained environment, which may have introduced bias into the responses. Additionally, reviewing and adapting the questionnaire for pre- and post-workshop applications would provide a clearer understanding of its impact on student perceptions. Future studies could build on this analysis by expanding it to a larger sample. Additionally, they should explore whether variables such as gender or the specific course of study influence how students manage conflicts and their perceptions of integrating mediation spaces into higher education.

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