

How to prevent conflicts in doctoral schools – mechanisms, challenges, and good practices

Introduction

In the environment of doctoral schools, the occurrence of conflicts carries significant consequences for the efficiency of the research process, the trajectory of academic career development, and the overall atmosphere within the academic unit. Accordingly, implementing institutional mechanisms that form a part of conflict prevention must be recognized as a key organizational challenge faced by modern research institutions. This study presents an analysis of the specific nature of disputes within the doctoral community, outlines the underlying conditions from which they arise, and offers an overview of preventive strategies and effective solutions, illustrated with examples from national and international practice. The role of Doctoral Schools remains particularly important, as it is precisely within the Doctoral School that the fundamental transformation of a doctoral candidate into an independent researcher takes place—where the relationship between supervisor and doctoral candidate constitutes a key determinant of both the quality of conducted research and the further development of the academic career path. In this context, the organizational culture and the adopted models of governance within a given academic unit play a decisive role in creating a work environment either free from conflict situations or equipped with effective systemic mechanisms for resolving them.

Organizational culture and its influence on the emergence and resolution of conflicts

A well-shaped organizational culture is one of the most effective mechanisms protecting against the emergence of disputes. Creating an environment based on mutual respect, transparency, and readiness for constructive dialogue directly improves cooperation and accelerates the process of resolving existing misunderstandings. Among the recognized practices in this area are: consistent promotion of clear ethical standards, ensuring regular access to training on communication and mediation techniques, implementing reliable and transparent procedures for handling dispute situations, and systematically conducting consultations within the bodies of the Doctoral School.

An analysis of the specific features of conflicts in Doctoral Schools allows for distinguishing three fundamental categories: conflicts in the doctoral candidate–supervisor relationship, conflicts within the peer group of doctoral candidates, and conflicts of an institutional nature. In the case of the relationship with the supervisor, the sources of tension often lie in divergent expectations, insufficient communication, and imprecisely defined roles and responsibilities. The lack of clarity may concern, among other things, authorship rules, research methodology, or the supervisor’s availability to the doctoral candidate. In turn, within the peer group, a significant factor generating tension is competition over limited resources such as grants, research infrastructure, or professional recognition, which in consequence negatively affects the atmosphere of collaboration and leads to escalation. Institutional conflicts, on the other hand, arise primarily from ambiguity in internal regulations, lack of transparency in the system of evaluating doctoral candidates’ achievements and the organization of the research process, as well as limited access to key information.

Which areas of activity of student governments in this regard are guaranteed by law? Among the many competences and rights of student governments, the following should be indicated as related to preventing and resolving disputes.

Conflict prevention — how to effectively avoid them?

A well-designed system of preventive measures allows for avoiding a considerable portion of potential disputes. Theoretical knowledge and effective practices implemented at universities in Poland and abroad indicate the crucial role of several fundamental components of effective prevention. Among them are: developing and signing a cooperation agreement between the doctoral candidate and supervisor, which clearly defines mutual roles, responsibilities, and the agreed rules of communication. Another important element is the implementation of regular meetings aimed at monitoring progress in academic work, which makes it possible to identify ambiguities and growing tensions at an early stage, before they develop into an advanced conflict. Equally important is the work of impartial ombudspersons or plenipotentiaries—individuals with mediation competencies, whose support enables clarification of emerging difficulties without launching formal procedures. Systemic conflict prevention should also include mandatory training on effective communication and conflict-resolution methods, addressed to both doctoral candidates and their supervisors. Complementing these measures are mentoring programs as well as peer mentoring, in which more experienced doctoral candidates support newcomers—fostering the building of an academic community and serving as an important informal mechanism for diffusing emerging tensions.

Internationally validated solutions, which are also applicable in the Polish context, rely to a large extent on developing an appropriate communication model and preparing both supervisors and doctoral candidates to perform their roles responsibly.

In the Netherlands, a common standard in doctoral schools is a compulsory course in supervisory skills, complemented by a system of peer mentoring. The implementation of these instruments has significantly contributed to reducing serious disputes within academic relationships.

In the distinct Scandinavian model, Norway has established the institution of a student ombudsman, whose primary function is to mediate and resolve conflicts arising both among doctoral candidates and in doctoral candidate–faculty relations. In Sweden and Finland, informal support mechanisms—such as support groups and peer-to-peer programmes—are gaining popularity. In these frameworks, experienced doctoral candidates support newly admitted researchers in adapting to the academic environment.

The role of evaluation in preventing conflicts

Key symptoms indicating the emergence of difficulties include: a noticeable decline in engagement, deliberate reduction of contact with the supervisor, lack of measurable progress in the research project, and an increasing number of informal complaints within the doctoral community.

In the context of early detection of such issues, systematic assessment of the relationships within the supervisor–doctoral candidate–doctoral school triad, as well as anonymous satisfaction surveys, serve as valuable diagnostic tools. They make it possible to intervene at a pre-conflict stage, before tensions escalate.

Effective prevention of the emergence and escalation of conflicts in doctoral schools requires the implementation of a comprehensive strategy. A crucial component of this strategy is the development of a transparent support system that includes clear procedures and unrestricted access to external mediation services. An important pillar is the introduction of training modules in interpersonal communication aimed at all members of the doctoral school community—both doctoral candidates and their supervisors. Regular survey-based assessments monitoring the level of satisfaction and the quality of cooperation in supervisor–doctoral candidate relations are an essential diagnostic and preventive element.

Equally important is the active involvement of doctoral candidates in shaping a culture based on community and mutual support, which can be achieved through the implementation of dedicated mentoring and integration programmes. It should be emphasised that the foundation of effective conflict resolution, including disputes rooted in academic matters, lies in the continual development of soft skills, which in practice often prove decisive in achieving amicable solutions.

A fundamental challenge for doctoral schools is the integration of effective formal–legal instruments with initiatives aimed at building an environment based on trust. Innovative forms of support—such as supervision and specialised programmes focused on the development of soft skills—are still relatively new in the Polish academic context. However, current trends suggest that their importance will continue to grow. In an era of increasing professionalisation of research and tightening criteria for evaluating the achievements of early-career scholars, conflict prevention should be recognised as a key strategic element in higher education policy.

Conclusion

Although conflicts constitute an inherent part of academic reality, doctoral schools possess tools that allow them to prevent their escalation. Transparent internal regulations, strategic investment in improving communication, and ongoing work on shaping a culture rooted in dialogue and mutual trust all play central roles. Importantly, contemporary academic education is not limited to preparing independent researchers; it also involves shaping responsible members of the scientific community who consciously respect its norms and principles.

A crucial point to remember is that at the end of every decision or action, there is always another person.

MSc Eng. Damian Kostyła

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