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INTRA-GROUP CONFLICT RESOLUTION: A CASE STUDY ON PEER MEDIATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA AND OTHER EXPERIENCES

(EDS.)

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For the purpose of ensuring the scientific quality of the work, this volume has been evaluated and approved by three Referees internal to the Faculty

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INTRA-GROUP CONFLICT RESOLUTION

A CASE STUDY ON PEER MEDIATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLOGNA AND OTHER EXPERIENCES

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PART I

The “University Dispute Resolution - U.d.r.” project

Introduction

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SUMMARY: 1. University Dispute Resolution: mediation, culture, and institutional innovation. – 2. From judicial protection to conflict management. – 3. The mediation desk as research and “third mission”. – 4. Mapping conflict in the University environment. – 5. Cultural and social impact – 6. Structure of the volume.

KEYWORDS: Conflict Resolution; University; Mediation

1. University Dispute Resolution: mediation, culture, and institutional innovation. Universities are, by their very nature, complex communities. They are places of knowledge production, education, debate, and social transformation. They are also environments in which differences of opinion, competition, cultural diversity, power asymmetries, and organizational or procedural constraints inevitably generate conflict. Yet the systematic study of how conflicts arise, evolve, and may be constructively managed in the university setting has long remained underdeveloped in Italy – and, more broadly, in much of Europe. The research project U.d.r. – University Dispute Resolution was conceived precisely to address this gap. Funded under the Italian PRIN 2022 programme, the project set out to pursue a dual ambition: on the one hand, to promote a culture of mediation and consensual conflict management within the university environment; on the other, to develop a rigorous scientific investigation into the dynamics of conflict inside a community and the institutional mechanisms capable of addressing them effectively. This volume presents the results of that research journey (as documented on the website University Dispute Resolution). It offers both a theoretical framework and an empirical account of a pilot experience implemented at the Universities of Bologna and Verona: the creation of a mediation desk in which specially trained students act as peer mediators and conflict coaches for members of the student community.

2. From judicial protection to conflict management. The project was developed in a broader legal and policy context marked by significant

reforms in the Italian justice system. The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR) emphasizes the need to strengthen the use of mediation and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms. However, legislative incentives alone are insufficient to produce meaningful change. As repeatedly noted in scholarly debate, the effectiveness of mediation depends on a profound cultural transformation in the way individuals perceive conflict and justice.

Civil proceedings are designed to adjudicate rights; mediation, by contrast, addresses conflict as a relational and social phenomenon. This distinction is not merely technical. It implies a shift from adversarial logic to a dialogical paradigm, from the imposition of solutions to the co-construction of outcomes. If such a cultural transformation is to occur, it must begin within formative institutions. Universities, as laboratories of civic life, represent a privileged site for this change.

In the United States, mediation and conflict management programmes have been integrated into higher education for decades. Numerous campuses have developed structured systems combining ombuds services, peer mediation, restorative practices, and conflict coaching. In Europe, by contrast, systematic research and institutional experimentation in this field remain relatively recent. Spain's Law No. 3/2022 on university coexistence constitutes a pioneering legislative effort to embed ADR mechanisms into university disciplinary systems. In Italy, however, apart from isolated initiatives and the broader movement of legal clinics, a coherent framework for university conflict management has largely been absent.

The *U.d.r.* project emerged from the conviction that universities must not only teach law and mediation but embody their values in institutional practice.

3. The mediation desk as research and “third mission”. At the heart of the project lies the establishment of a mediation desk, serving a threefold function.

First, it is a service to the student community. It addresses so-called “horizontal conflicts” – disputes between students – through peer-to-peer mediation and conflict coaching. These tools were selected for their accessibility and educational potential. Peer mediation allows students to act as neutral facilitators for fellow students, enhancing trust and reducing institutional distance. Conflict coaching, by contrast, supports individuals

in understanding and transforming their approach to conflict even when the other party does not participate.

Second, the desk is an educational laboratory. Students from different disciplinary backgrounds receive training not only in the legal foundations of mediation but also in communication techniques, active listening, reframing, open questioning, and emotional awareness. In this sense, the project embraces a learning by doing methodology: students internalize the philosophy of consensual justice by practicing it. They acquire soft skills – empathy, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaborative capacity – that are indispensable in professional and social life.

Third, the desk is a site of empirical research. Every phase of its implementation has been monitored and analyzed. Data have been collected (in full respect of privacy and confidentiality) regarding the types of conflicts addressed, the demographic characteristics of users, satisfaction levels, and procedural outcomes. Interviews with university stakeholders, mapping of conflict categories, and comparative analysis of foreign experiences have complemented this fieldwork. The mediation desk thus functions not only as a service, but as a pilot model through which theoretical hypotheses can be tested and refined.

4. Mapping conflict in the University environment. A central component of the research consisted in the systematic mapping and categorization of conflicts within the university environment. Conflicts were examined in their “horizontal” dimension (among students). Particular attention was devoted to integration conflicts (e.g. cohabitation issues in student housing) and disputes linked to group work or internships.

This mapping exercise revealed the multiplicity of conflict sources embedded in academic life and highlighted the limitations of traditional disciplinary mechanisms in addressing them. Formal procedures sometimes exacerbate tensions, reinforce asymmetries, and fail to restore relationships. Mediation, by contrast, offers a space for dialogue, recognition, and responsibility.

The comparative dimension of the research enriched the analysis, making it possible to identify best practices. The ultimate objective was not to import foreign models uncritically, but to elaborate a doctrine of university conflict management tailored to the Italian legal and institutional context.

5. Cultural and social impact. Beyond its academic outputs—articles, conferences, and this collective volume—the project aspires to a broader cultural impact. It seeks to promote a restorative and relational culture. In doing so, it aligns with a vision of the university as a community of shared responsibility.

The mediation desk has operated as a “space for speech and listening,” where students could articulate concerns, reflect on relational dynamics, and experiment with constructive dialogue. Its preventive, intervention, and educational functions converge toward a common goal: fostering a climate of trust and collaboration within the academic community.

The long-term implications of such an approach extend beyond the university. Students trained in mediation and conflict management become agents of change in workplaces, families, and civic contexts. By integrating technical knowledge with relational competence, universities can contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society.

6. Structure of the volume. This book reflects the interdisciplinary and multi-layered nature of the U.d.r. project. It is divided into two main parts, reflecting both the empirical core of the project and its dialogue with broader national and international experiences.

Part I presents the theoretical foundations of the project, its methodological framework, and pilot implementation at the University of Bologna. Following the introductory chapter, the section opens with an analysis of conflict management within organizations and of intra-group conflicts in complex institutions. It then examines the research methodology adopted in the empirical investigation, including the design and administration of the student survey. The subsequent chapter applies the principles of Dispute System Design (DSD) to the academic context, illustrating the creation and implementation of the peer mediation pilot program, together with its Rules and Code of Ethics. This is followed by a detailed account of the training model developed for student mediators and by a reflection on the evolution of mediation teaching at the University of Bologna. The section concludes with an Appendix containing the regulatory framework governing the peer mediation service.

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Part II broadens the perspective by engaging with other experiences and complementary approaches. It includes contributions on peer mediation training in international contexts, the Spanish legal framework on university coexistence, socio-legal analyses of intra-group conflict, the role of organizational ombuds in higher education, comparative reflections on peer mediation as a form of pre-ADR, communication in mediation, and interdisciplinary approaches to mediation as a tool for integration. Together, these chapters situate the *U.d.r.* experience within a wider scholarly and institutional landscape, highlighting both convergences and distinctive features.

In presenting these results, we do not claim to offer definitive solutions. Rather, we aim to open a field of inquiry. The experience documented here demonstrates that mediation in universities is not merely a service, but a transformative practice capable of reshaping institutional culture.

ABSTRACT: This volume presents the results of the PRIN project University Dispute Resolution (U.d.r.), aimed at promoting a culture of mediation and consensual conflict management within Italian universities. Combining theoretical analysis, empirical research, and institutional experimentation, the project mapped intra-group conflicts within the student community of the University of Bologna and designed a peer mediation pilot program grounded in Dispute System Design principles. The mediation desk serves simultaneously as a service, a pedagogical laboratory, and a research observatory. By integrating legal scholarship, organizational theory, and innovative teaching methods, the volume advances a model for institutional conflict management capable of fostering cultural change within academia and beyond.