by Rick Delbridge

Sustaining Collegial Relations and Staff Wellbeing: Collegiality and 'Local Leadership' in Contemporary Business Schools

Introduction

Collegiality has long been considered the modus operandi of universities, central to academic freedom, scientific quality, and institutional wellbeing. However, collegiality faces significant challenges due to the increasing managerialism, centralisation, and bureaucratisation of neoliberal universities (Musselin, 2018; Fleming, 2019). This paper explores the concept of collegiality with particular consideration of contemporary business schools. I begin by briefly examining the nature and characteristics of collegiality, then consider the challenges to collegiality that are faced in the contemporary higher education context and how these can be ameliorated, before introducing a case study of a UK business school and discussing collegiality's significance for staff wellbeing. The discussion of collegiality's practical manifestation through this case study of a business school during and immediately post-Covid, considers both the challenges posed by managerialism and centralisation and highlights the importance of local leadership in protecting the staff from some of the negative consequences of these; actions, which thereby sustained collegial relations and contributed to institutional resilience. The paper concludes by reflecting on the future of collegiality in higher education, drawing on a critical and political perspective to advance the key issues in sustaining collegiality in ways that continue to promote staff wellbeing. Throughout this short paper, I draw on work conducted by myself and colleagues in a three-year international project studying collegiality in higher education, led by Kerstin Sahlin and Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist and involving researchers from more than 10 countries across six continents (see Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2024; Cloete et al., 2024).

Collegiality in Contemporary University Contexts

Our research into contemporary collegiality revealed a multifaceted concept encompassing both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Vertical collegiality involves governance structures, decision-making processes, and faculty participation in institutional leadership. This is perhaps the more established and historically conventional understanding of collegiality as a formal system of governance and organisation (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). However, our research identified an increasingly important corollary: horizontal collegiality refers to peer relationships, interpersonal trust, and shared professional norms. These provide the foundation for community-building at the 'grass roots' of institutions and can potentially complement the vertical dimension. The paper by Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2024) that introduces our project (published in twin volumes of *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*) reinforces this duality, arguing that both dimensions are essential and interdependent. They define collegiality as an institution of self-governance, encompassing formal rules, normative identities, and shared practices. Collegiality is thus an institution inhabited by people doing things together, which is sustained through practices, norms, and shared meanings, not just formal structures.

The research showed how collegiality cannot be assumed and passively considered an enduring tradition; it is a 'living institution' that requires active reproduction and, in some instances, can form an aspect of resistance to, rather than maintenance of, the organisational order of a university or stand-alone business school. An element of this, which appears to be increasingly significant in the neoliberal contemporary university, is how staff must engage in political work to defend collegial governance against managerial encroachment (Denis et al., 2019). As I will elaborate below, departmental leaders can protect horizontal collegiality even when vertical structures are compromised. Collegiality requires conscious effort from individuals and institutions to sustain shared values and practices. This framing thus positions collegiality as a dynamic and contested institution, requiring ongoing commitment and vigilance. It follows that collegiality is not a 'one-size-fits-all' concept and how it manifests within specific university and/or business school settings is likely to vary across: a) disciplines – since different academic fields have different norms and expectations, b) institutions – since specific and individual organisational cultures and governance structures shape collegial practices and c) geographies – since national policies and cultural contexts influence how collegiality is understood and enacted. Consequently, collegiality is not monolithic; it is subject to contestation and may produce a variety of outcomes, both potentially positive and negative. While I will highlight the positive here, it should be acknowledged that collegiality can reinforce existing social hierarchies and gatekeeping, thereby marginalising certain groups (e.g., women, early-career academics). Further, international collaborations may shift collegial commitments away from home institutions, affecting horizontal collegiality. Understanding how and why collegial norms differ across disciplines, institutions and geographies, and how, in turn, these variations influence how staff experience and enact collegiality, is essential for designing inclusive and effective collegial practices.

There are many reasons why universities (and business schools, whether they are part of larger institutions or stand-alone) would want to sustain collegiality as central to how they operate. In principle, collegial governance supports academic freedom and scientific quality by protecting autonomy, insulating academic work from external control and instrumental agendas. Collegial environments encourage open-ended exploration and interdisciplinary collaboration, fostering the relationships where creativity can blossom. Lazega (2020) presents collegiality as a relational infrastructure that enables non-routine and innovative work through personalised relationships and collective responsibility. Further, collegiality contributes to conditions that go some way to ensuring research integrity. For example, peer review and shared norms uphold standards of scientific rigour and ethical conduct.

However, there is increasing evidence that managerialism and centralisation threaten these benefits by, amongst other things, privileging short-term metrics over long-term inquiry and imposing 'institutional goals' over professional expertise and autonomy (Parker, 2014). Indeed, Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2024) argue that higher education reforms based on enterprise and bureaucratic ideals have displaced collegiality, often without recognising what is lost. For instance, the increasing precarity and inequality of employment conditions that are experienced by academic staff in the neoliberal university are highly detrimental to the prospects for collegiality; temporary contracts and the marginalisation of early-career academics pose additional threats. Temporary staff are often excluded from governance structures and may struggle to access collegial networks, lacking the time, resources, or institutional support to engage in collegial practices, further eroding the fabric of academic communities. This creates an inequitable system that undermines the inclusivity and sustainability of collegiality. It would be remiss not to acknowledge that alongside wider environmental and market pressures and central university dictates, business schools are increasingly guilty of imposing some of these expectations and conditions on themselves, for example, in seeking rankings 'success'.

These challenges, which have been reported as manifesting in a variety of forms, undermine the conditions wherein collegiality can flourish, in both vertical and particularly horizontal dimensions. At the heart of this challenge is the undeniable reality that trust is foundational to collegiality. Interpersonal trust, built through everyday interactions, sustains horizontal collegiality. Deterioration in institutional trust, when eroded by centralisation and managerialism, undermines vertical collegiality. Repairing trust requires transparent communication, inclusive governance, and recognition of faculty agency. Where there have been negative consequences of the neoliberalism of contemporary universities, restoring trust is essential both in rebuilding collegial environments and supporting staff wellbeing.

Collegiality in Business Schools: A Case Example

It can be argued that business schools face unique challenges to collegiality due to their market-oriented and performance-driven nature. The dominance of metrics (e.g., journal rankings, workload models) undermines professional autonomy and collegial governance. Accreditation bodies, league table rankings, and funding mechanisms incentivise competition over collaboration, destabilising collective identity. The rise of individual performance assessment reduces the value of collective academic work, such as committee service or peer review. These pressures contribute to staff alienation, stress, and a decline in institutional trust, threatening the wellbeing of academics and the prospects for a collegial context.

These are developments with particular significance in business schools, but the trajectory of the wider university has complementary – and negative – further implications. These issues were highlighted by a number of studies in the collegiality project. There have been widespread increases in managerialism and centralised decision-making, which reduces faculty voice. This trend has been accompanied by a growing 'professionalisation' of leadership; the emergence of non-academic managers and institutional arrangements where managerial norms redefine leadership roles, weakening peer accountability and undermining academic professional identities and autonomy.

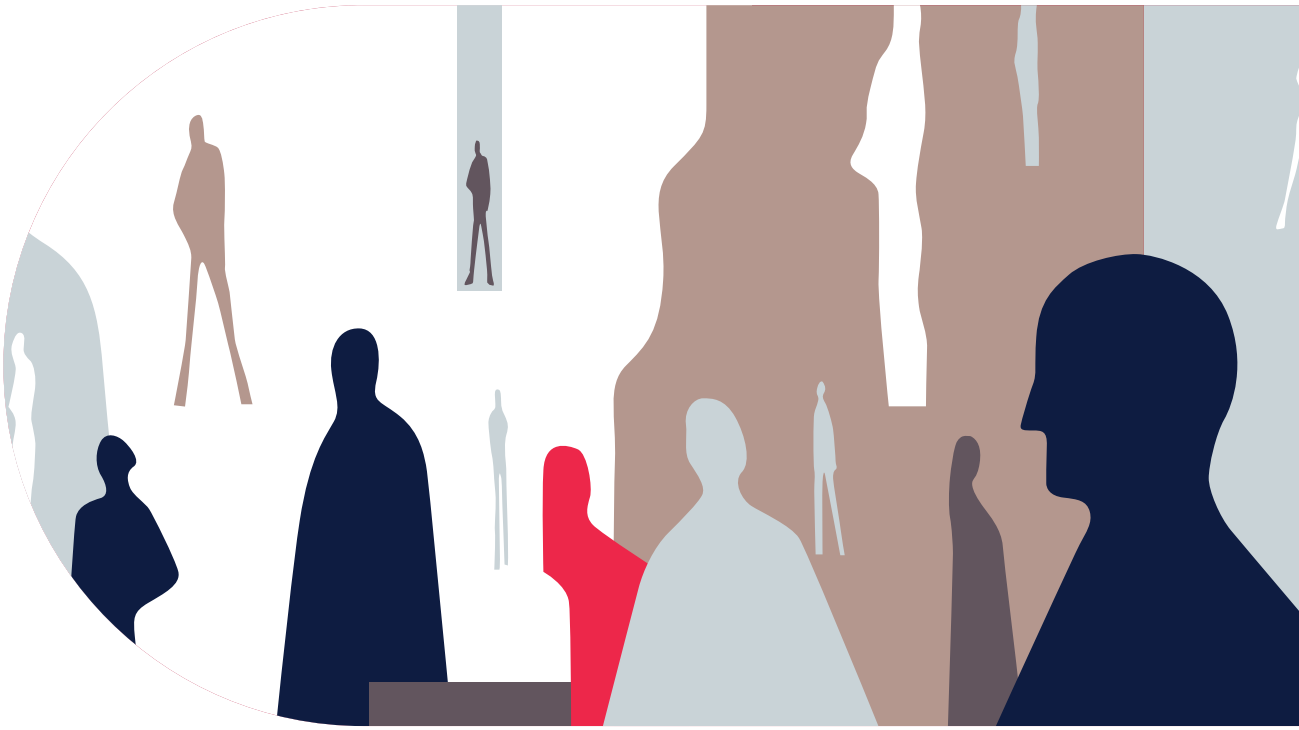
In a study undertaken as part of the larger international project, Jakov Jandríc, Paolo Quattrone and I researched an individual business school in some depth. We labelled the school ABS (Anonymous Business School). The study took place in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic and this provided the backdrop to our exploration of how collegiality was made manifest at the school. In a manner largely consistent with that experienced throughout business schools more generally, the rise of managerialism at university-level was reported to have led to the erosion of faculty authority and the centralisation of decision-making. At ABS, participants reported that decisions were increasingly made at the university level, with little input from departments. This undermined vertical collegiality and created a sense of disempowerment among staff. Moreover, the shift to remote work during the pandemic disrupted informal interactions that are crucial for horizontal collegiality. While digital tools enabled continuity in the face of crisis, they also created barriers to relationship-building and community engagement. New staff, in particular, found it difficult to integrate into the school culture. Participants at ABS described the loss of shared physical space as a major challenge. Offices and corridors, once sites of spontaneous conversation and support, were replaced by scheduled Zoom calls and email threads. This shift made collegiality more difficult to enact and sustain.

In this context, the ABS study revealed that collegiality significantly impacts staff wellbeing in several ways. Collegial relationships amongst staff within the school provided emotional and professional support during the pandemic, helping staff navigate uncertainty and isolation, particularly during periods of lockdown. Staff wellbeing was reported as deeply intertwined with collegial practices. Participants in the study variously

described collegiality as: a) acts of support and mentorship, b) informal conversations and shared experiences, c) a sense of belonging and mutual respect. These reflect in particular the significance of horizontal collegiality in staff experiences at work.

At ABS, collegiality fostered a sense of belonging, and this was reported as being particularly important by early-career academics and new starters, some of whom had moved country as well as employer. Informal interactions and shared values built trust, which was essential for maintaining morale and motivation. Participants described collegiality as actions that prioritise the collective over individual gain, such as mentoring, informal advice, and collaborative problem-solving.

Local leadership that was relational, not merely administrative, emerged as a critical factor in sustaining a collegial environment. As Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2024) emphasise, leadership within collegial systems is a form of academic citizenship. It involves service to the community, stewardship of shared values, and facilitation of inclusive decision-making. Leaders are expected to act as *primus inter pares*—first among equals—rather than hierarchical managers. At ABS, the local leadership, particularly the dean, was praised by colleagues for their empathetic and supportive communication during the pandemic, which contrasted sharply with the formal and impersonal tone from central university management. For example, the dean's weekly emails were praised for their caring tone, and were contrasted sharply with impersonal communications from central management. Departmental leaders exercised agency to 'carve out' spaces for collegiality, adapting central directives to local contexts. Performance reviews were redesigned to prioritise wellbeing and care, offering staff flexibility and emotional support during the pandemic and in its aftermath. These leadership practices helped maintain a sense of community and mitigated the negative effects of centralisation and bureaucratisation.



In some senses, the Covid pandemic served as a stress test for collegiality. Remote work disrupted informal interactions, making it harder to build relationships and integrate new staff, while online platforms lacked the richness of in-person engagement, weakening community ties. In response, staff self-organised to support each other, demonstrating the resilience of horizontal collegiality, and ABS leadership responded by fostering informal communication channels (e.g., WhatsApp groups, virtual coffee mornings) and maintaining regular, empathetic updates.

To summarise, the Anonymous Business School provides a valuable example of how local practices and actions can nurture a collegiality that supports staff wellbeing in the face of institutional pressures (and a pandemic). Three factors stood out from our research:

a. Horizontal collegiality: Informal networks and peer support helped staff navigate the pandemic. This was often orchestrated or facilitated by academics with 'middle managerial' roles, but was also initiated and sustained by the actions of individual academics and professional services staff. It is worth noting that these informal networks spanned junior colleagues through to experienced professors, whether they held formal leadership roles or not.

b. Empathetic leadership: The senior leaders in the school took responsibility for how institutional processes were implemented within the school. The dean and Senior Management Team prioritised care and consideration over centralised control and top-down communication. This was manifest, for example, in the flexibility applied in performance reviews. It was also clear in how central dictates were revised and moderated to be supportive and inclusive before further distribution.

c. Community integration: These first two components complemented proactive and reflexive efforts to sustain a common sense of identity and purpose. This was actively extended to include new staff to foster this sense of belonging. Here, senior staff played a significant support and mentoring role alongside the more formal leadership responsibilities of their position.

These practices show that leadership can be collegial and care-oriented, enhancing staff morale and cohesion. ABS emerged as an 'island of collegiality' (Jandríc et al., 2024) within a centralised university, demonstrating the importance of proactive and protective local leadership in shielding horizontal collegiality from bureaucratic pressures and thereby sustaining the centrality of collegiality to staff wellbeing.

Conclusion

The study of collegiality in business schools offers insights for broader organisational theory. Universities exhibit hybrid forms of governance, blending collegial and managerial elements. Decision-making is often messy and emergent, requiring flexible and participatory structures. Universities are unique organisations where professional norms coexist with bureaucratic systems. These dynamics challenge traditional models and call for nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to leadership and governance. Collegiality and local leadership are essential to the wellbeing of staff in contemporary business schools. They provide emotional, professional, and institutional support in the face of growing pressures. Our research on how the worst impacts of Covid were ameliorated amply demonstrates the centrality of collegiality. Currently, the higher education institutions of many countries are facing extremely challenging financial conditions. Reaffirming collegiality—as both a governance model and a cultural practice—is crucial for the future of higher education, and how these financial challenges are navigated will have considerable long-term consequences for individual institutions. A loss of the underpinning foundation of trust may prove fatal to collegial cultures. And meanwhile, the nature and practices of collegiality must evolve to remain relevant in digital and hybrid environments. Digital platforms pose new challenges, especially in politicised environments. Universities must manage these dynamics to preserve collegial relations. Local leadership plays a pivotal role in mediating between centralised university structures and the lived experiences of staff. Leadership is not inherently managerial; it can and should be collegial, participatory, and nurturing.

There are a number of implications for practice and policy in order to enhance staff wellbeing that may be at least provisionally derived from the ABS case example, while noting the specificities of each individual business school. Our findings suggest that business schools should look to ensure that they have empowered local leadership in order that decisions are taken with a commitment to care and an attention and understanding of the circumstances of each individual member of staff. Where necessary, this may require a certain rebalancing of formal vertical governance structures both within the school and the wider university. In extremis, such 'rebalancing' may be necessary to protect academic freedom and preserve the professional autonomy of academics. Such steps are needed to foster trust and community *within* the school. As I have noted above, trust is foundational to collegiality. Its erosion undermines both good governance and employee wellbeing. This sense of identity and community will be further enhanced by the active and visible recognition of collegial contributions made by individuals. In this regard, both peer-to-peer support and the mentoring of colleagues by senior staff are crucial. I have noted above the danger that collegiality can reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities; senior staff bear responsibility to be reflective of this and to act in open and supportive ways, including as role models, whether or not they have formal leadership roles.

Overall, the findings from the collegiality project emphasise that collegiality is not just a governance model but a cultural and relational practice. It requires time, effort, and intentionality. Staff – both academic and professional services – must invest in building relationships, participating in governance, and affirming shared values. In short, collegiality is not an automatic feature of academic life; it is an outcome of choice and effort. Indeed, in our 'outroduction' to the collection of papers produced by the collegiality project (Cloete et al., 2024), we frame collegiality as political work, requiring faculty to engage actively in shaping institutional norms and practices. We highlight the importance of collegial resistance, activation, and maintenance, suggesting that collegiality must

be continuously negotiated and renewed. Conversely, where they are present, faculty can use collegial structures to advocate for inclusive governance, challenge managerialist policies and actively and collectively reaffirm academic values.

Universities must choose to support collegial values through policies, structures, and leadership practices. These need to be underpinned by institutional systems that signal expectations through formal processes such as probation, promotions and rewards. As Peter Fleming's 'Dark Academia' (2019) warns, the erosion of collegiality threatens the soul of the university. Revitalising collegial practices is essential for sustaining a vibrant, inclusive, and humane academic environment. We each have our own responsibility as individuals within this. Academic and professional services staff members will need to invest in relationships, community-building and seek to play a role in shared governance. In parallel, local leaders and senior academics must play a pivotal role in shaping the tone, culture, and practices that sustain collegiality. In the face of managerialism and crisis, collegiality remains a vital resource for staff wellbeing, institutional resilience, and ultimately the very integrity of academic work.

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