

Higher Education competition and academics' perception of collegiality: a sensemaking perspective

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Abstract

Collegiality has been a central element of Higher Education (HE)'s identity and organization. HE has become increasingly competitive and performance-oriented, and this evolution has questioned collegiality's legitimacy and threatened its role as a functioning principle. Despite little enthusiasm, academics have embraced a culture based on revised forms of competition. This apparent contradiction questions how scholars have made sense of the emergence of a competition-oriented paradigm and how it has affected their sensemaking approach to collegiality and their specific role regarding its evolution. This paper which has been newly underway will use a qualitative approach based on an interpretive content analysis of semi-structured interviews of French academics. By exploring the different forms of sensemaking, this work will try to understand how scholars have integrated HE evolutions into their individual and collective perception and implementation of collegiality and how it can inspire HE stakeholders to deal with public contestation of academic expertise.

Full paper

Collegiality has been a central element of Higher Education (HE)'s identity and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)' organization for a long time (Tapper & Palfreyman, 1998). Despite recent debates about its different dimensions (Mignot-Gérard et al., 2023), collegiality can be conceptualized as a set of prosocial behaviors (Victorino et al., 2018) and can be defined as a principle that *“holds that academics as a group of peers make decisions on behalf of the institution. Institutional leaders are elected by and among members of the academic community and negotiate on behalf of the academic peer group with funders and stakeholders”* (Bleiklie, 2012, p. 85). It is one of the distinctive features of the HE sector compared to many other industries. For the last 30 years, HE has become increasingly competitive and performance-oriented and has gone through many profound changes that have directly or indirectly questioned collegiality: a growing marketisation and privatization (Musselin, 2008) illustrating HEIs' evolution from social entities to an industry

(Slaughter & Rhoades, 2011); globalization and internationalization (Wilkins & Huisman, 2021); managerialism (Lavigne, 2019) and corporatization (Lee, 2018); the rise of a “publish or perish” culture (Becker and Lukka, 2022) and the increasing importance of rankings (Hazelkorn, 2016) and accreditations (Lowrie & Willmott, 2009). These evolutions have questioned collegiality’s legitimacy and the balance between coordination and power (Bleiklie, 2012) that collegiality implies.

It is easy to assume that these changes have been inspired and imposed by stakeholders situated or coming from outside academia. However, the measures to implement these evolutions have been taken, or at least accepted, by academics themselves. Despite the little enthusiasm shown to accompany them (Gill, 2010; Childress, 2019), academics have embraced a new culture based on revised forms of competition between, not only organizations but also individual scholars themselves (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2023). The way scholars have faced and dealt with these evolutions questions how they have socially (re)constructed (Weick, 1995) collegiality in this new context and how they have made sense of the spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty that their involvement might imply. Sensemaking is triggered by disrupting events that do not correspond to people’s underlying beliefs or assumptions (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). The sensemaking approach is especially useful in times of change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012) and helps to understand “*the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations*” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p.57). Sensemaking seems therefore particularly relevant to explore the links between HE’s evolutions and collegiality and how scholars have managed to make sense of collegiality’s transformation and the role they have had. Despite many academic works dedicated to collegiality, HE scholars call for more empirical studies on academics’ responses to HE reforms and its impact on collegiality (Antoniadou & Quinlan, 2021). To our knowledge, no study has explored this phenomenon through the theoretical lens of sensemaking while looking at the pressure coming from within. This paper intends to fill this gap and extend the existing literature by examining *how the implementation of a competition-oriented paradigm within HE has affected academics’ sensemaking approach to HE collegiality*.

This paper has been newly underway and is a work in progress. It is a qualitative study that will be based on an interpretive content analysis of semi-structured interviews with French professors/researchers. The analysis will employ an abductive approach (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). First, we will look at repeating patterns and facts’ descriptions. Then we will organize the findings into more distinct themes as relationships will emerge and (sub)themes will be condensed into major themes and aggregate dimensions (Gatrell, 2019; Gioia et al., 1994). This approach will enable us to feed into the data analysis, data gathering, and literature review (Reichert, 2019) and to eventually seek relationships between our different second-order themes to finally construct our model. We intend to use existing sensemaking-related constructs (sensegiving, sensebreaking...) to identify, interpret, and classify how scholars have perceived and adapted to HE's recent evolutions and changes. And how they have extracted

and interpreted cues from their environment and their behaviors to integrate them into their perception and implementation of collegiality, both at the individual and organizational level. Understanding how scholars have provided order to collegiality in a performance-oriented HE inspired by liberal and competitive market logic should help scholars, academic leadership and HE stakeholders to reflect on the importance of collegiality in a period of post-truthism and public contestation of academic expertise.

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