

## **Navigating Collegiality and Competition: Early Career Researchers' Experiences in Centres of Excellence**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores how Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in the Social Sciences and Humanities experience and navigate the tensions between collegiality and competition within Centres of Excellence. Competition has always existed in academia, but excellence schemes have intensified it. Thus, this study approaches collegiality 'on the ground', foregrounding the experiences of ECRs, whose experiences are often overlooked in research on collegiality. The study identifies three dynamics between collegiality and competition: as 'intellectual collegiality as long as there is no competition'; as 'citizenship and commitment for CoE's competitiveness'; and as 'leadership as responding to individual or collective competitions'. Overall, the study offers two interpretations. The first emphasises the emergence of a collective and multidisciplinary sense of collegiality, which is complementary with the institutional competition for excellence and the second interprets this as a temporal illusion as competition is omnipresent and stands in a fundamentally exclusionary relation to collegiality.

### **Full paper**

#### **Introduction: Centres of Excellence and Collegiality**

This explorative qualitative study examines how Early Career Researchers ECRs in the Social Sciences and Humanities experience and navigate the tensions between collegiality and competition within Centres of Excellence (CoEs), 'on the ground', that is, in the collaborative research practice (Kligyte 2021). Their experiences are often overlooked in research on collegiality, which emphasises the governance dimension of collegiality and tenured academics governing the university. Furthermore, although competition has always existed in academia, excellence schemes have intensified it. The study is based on the accounts of 15 participants, who work at three multidisciplinary CoEs in the SSH, called in Germany *Exzellenzcluster*.

One stream of research on collegiality emphasises its positive aspects, remarking that the exacerbation of competition erodes it (Rowland 2008, 358). A second stream avoids this idealisation, identifying its negative sides and recognising that collegiality is not necessarily threatened by competition, but it can align with it (Caesar 2005; Lipton 2019). This study approaches the enactments of collegiality and its interplay with competition through three dimensions. The first dimension refers to collegiality as an intellectual practice, which is driven by 'the powerful tradition of *intellectual collegiality* (Tapper and Palfreyman 2002, 49) and enacted in and through research collaboration (Macfarlane 2017). The second dimension describes collegiality as citizenship (to the CoE) and its academic community (Fleming and Harley 2023). The third dimension refers to collegiality as leadership, which 'represents the interface and connection between "leaders" and those who are led' (Kligyte and Barrie 2014, 158). Methodologically, the study follows the iterative and abductive logics that characterise the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014, 20; Thornberg 2012)

## **Empirical Findings**

The study identifies three dynamics between collegiality and competition. The first one describes the flourishing of 'intellectual collegiality as long as there is no competition'. The participants are aware of the highly competitive nature of academic work and career paths. Notably, the CoE is regarded as place where competition among colleagues is, comparatively, soft and where collegiality as a shared desire and commitment to engage in collaborative research for the advancement of knowledge does indeed blossom (Rowland 2008, 354). However, if the generous material conditions changed and research topics (and with that career paths) tended to converge, collegial collaborations would, most probably, become much more restricted. For the same reason, the relation between intellectual collegiality and competition in the CoE is *exclusionary*.

The second dynamic points to the emerge of 'citizenship and commitment for the CoE's competitiveness'. The citizenship to the CoE compels ECRs to engage in activities that contribute to the greater 'common good' (Alleman, Allen, and Haviland 2017, 83). At the same time, these engagements are aligned with the collective performativity of collaborative research aiming at producing outputs for the CoE. Accordingly, collegial citizenship is *complementary* with the institutional competition for excellence.

A third relation refers to 'leadership as responding to individual or collective competitions'. ECRs describe two strong co-existing modes of leadership exerted by the Principal Investigators: *laissez-faire* and *imposition*. The *laissez-faire* leadership is *complementary* with individualistic career paths and research practices, but also, to some extent, with the values of academic autonomy and freedom that underpin intellectual collegiality (Spiller 2010, 683). However, intellectual collegiality is also underpinned by a collectivist ethos, which stands in an *exclusionary* relation to the *laissez faire* mode. Furthermore, leadership as *imposition* appears to be *complementary* with the institutional competition insofar as

collaborative work occurs and collaborative outputs are generated (for the CoE), however, at the cost of eroding the trust in the quality of the collaborative research. From that point of view, it stands in an *exclusionary* relation to the purpose of producing excellent research.

Overall, the findings allow for two interpretations. The first one emphasises the rise of a collective, multidisciplinary sense of collegiality, rooted in the citizenship to the CoE and the flourishing of intellectual collegiality reflected in the collaborative work enacted by ECRs. It differs from the traditional individualistic research practices and allegiances based on mono-disciplinary university structures. Thus, this multidisciplinary sense of collegiality is aligned and *complementary* with the institutional competition for excellence in which the CoE is embedded. A second reading, however, claims that this portrayal is just a temporal illusion that cannot hide the fact that the accounts of flourishing collegiality are only possible *as long as* there no competition among individual ECRs. From that point of view, collegiality stands in an *exclusionary* relation to the exacerbated competition that characterises modern academia and excellence schemes in particular.