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Ditching the agenda and prioritising the informal: creating communities and collegiality in HEIs

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), formal divisional structures are dominant, generally characterised by top-down approaches that neglects the voices of staff despite purported commitments to kindness and collegiality, commitments often perceived by staff as a tick-box exercise. This paper explores how, within this context, informal networks that exist separate from formal divisional structures may foster enhanced collegiality and a positive sense of social identification. Through an extended ethnographic study involving observations, and gamified relationship mapping interviews, we examine academics' lived experience of their formal and informal HEI-based communities. This research highlights how changes in culture may reshape practices and suggests that informal unstructured interactions are critical for cultivating a positive sense of community that existing formal structure fail to nurture. Through this research we seek to better understand how individuals experience their sense of belonging and collegiality within the institution and consider recommendations for a more humanised approach within HEIs.

Full paper

Introduction

This paper examines how informal collegiality can better foster belonging and community in UK HEIs than formal structures. we explore the experiences of academic and professional services staff at a post-92 university. The study challenges dominant narratives of collegiality and staff voice, revealing how institutional values like kindness and inclusion are often undermined by structural norms. Instead, informal spaces emerge as more authentic and meaningful sites for identity formation, connection, and collaboration across roles in the increasingly complex landscape of higher education.

The Problem with Formal Collegiality

Formal collegiality in HEIs is often seen as performative, shaped by agendas, strategies, and metrics rather than genuine collaboration. While institutions claim to value collegiality, many staff experience formal mechanisms as hierarchical and exclusionary, reinforcing silos rather than building community. As Kurland et al. (2010) suggest, HEIs function as loosely coupled systems where cross-disciplinary communication is limited, and institutional rituals often uphold existing power structures. Organisational culture, filtered through managerialism, frequently undermines the values it purports to promote. According to Johnson's Cultural Web (1992), culture lives in everyday symbols, routines, and relationships, yet these are too often constrained by audit logics and rigid structures, leading to disconnection rather than meaningful engagement.

Rethinking the Staff Voice

Current models of "staff voice" in HEIs are often tied to institutional agendas such as culture surveys or staff-student fora, which position staff as data points rather than co-creators of change. Drawing on Kezar and Eckel's (2002) work on meaningful engagement, we argue that voice must be experienced as relational and situated to be authentic. Informal conversations 'corridor talk', coffee catch-ups, impromptu problem-solving, are far more valued by staff than formal feedback channels, yet these spaces are often overlooked in institutional change strategies.

Our findings also align with O'Brien and Guiney's (2019) inverted pyramid of relational priorities, where staff value relationships with immediate colleagues above those with senior leadership or cross-institutional networks. This has implications not only for inclusion but for organisational learning; institutions that ignore the informal risk alienating their most engaged members of staff.

Methodology: Changing Ethnographic Practices

This study adopts a critical peer ethnographic approach, combining thematic interviews with a novel gamified relationship mapping method. This approach was underpinned by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner (1979) and Mintzberg's (1978) organisational structure framework to explore how faculty-based staff (grades 2-11) construct and experience their professional identity across formal and informal domains.

Data collection included:

- "Traditional" and gamified interviews using the Social Identity Map (SIM)
- Observation journals
- Institutional documentation

By embedding gamification and peer reflexivity into the data collection process, we sought to reduce hierarchy between researcher and participant and encourage rich storytelling about social identity and belonging

Research Findings

Thematic analysis produced three core findings:

1) The internal organisational focus of Early Career Researchers (ECRs)

ECRs described their identity formation as discipline-specific and inward-looking, shaped primarily by research goals, local teams, and line management. They often perceived formal structures as gatekeeping spaces, limiting opportunities for voice unless mediated by senior allies. Many felt isolated from broader faculty or institutional narratives.

2) Professoriate and senior staff prioritise an external focus

In contrast, senior academics and professional services staff described their identity as tied to external networks, national policy roles, REF panels, and consultancy, viewing institutional structures as bureaucratic and sometimes obstructive. Their social capital came from informal alliances, not formal strategy meetings, which were often dismissed as "tick-box" exercises.

3) Informal relationships are universally more valued

Across all roles, the most frequently cited source of professional support and collegiality came from informal relationships, whether peer mentoring, shared frustrations over a coffee, or spontaneous collaboration. These networks were described as more inclusive, more meaningful, and more sustaining than formal communities shaped by structures or job roles.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study adds to critiques of formalised collegiality in HE, highlighting how institutional structures often undermine the very values, like kindness and collaboration, they claim to promote. Informal spaces, though overlooked in strategy, are where staff make sense of their roles, build identity, and experience genuine belonging.

It is our recommendation that rather than formalising collegiality, institutions should create unstructured spaces for cross-role interaction, treat informal discourse as valid feedback, and adopt distributed leadership models that recognise contributions beyond hierarchy. Collegiality cannot be scheduled, it is lived, improvised, and essential to the human fabric of academic life.