

## Collegiality and academic life

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Collegiality is a word that is used a lot in higher education. It sounds good. But what does collegiality really mean? It gives off a warm glow a bit like a cosy log fire in winter and conjures up the image of a kinder, gentler and more benign academic world. Even if we agree on what it means when academics working in higher education bemoan the 'loss' of collegiality is this anything other than a golden ageism or even a subliminal fantasy? Are we, in short, deluding ourselves about the past?

Like a lot of words and phrases we like to bandy about – such as collaboration, academic freedom, and so on – we tend to make too many assumptions about what it means and whether it really exists. This University has identified 'collegiality' as one of its four core principles and defined it as meaning 'team working, planning and delivering together, toward our shared vision'.

However, this is just one of at least three ways in which this word might be understood. Here I am going to draw on a threefold definition of collegiality made by James Bess. The historic roots of this term really lie in the self-governing arrangements of colleges of the universities of

Oxford and Cambridge. This is *structural collegiality* and is about academic self-governance, a model that has been in retreat across the higher education sector as the university has been steadily corporatized. Even when academic self-governance was in its pomp in the post war years it needs to be remembered that this was never a very inclusive ideal by today's standards. It was really about rule by a small elite of almost exclusively white male, senior professors. It was never about a democracy.

Collegiality may also be understood as about a sense of shared values both at the individual and departmental level. This is what Bess calls *cultural collegiality*. Yet for this to exist it depends on academics having a lot in common. Sadly this is even less likely to be the case. Academia was never a real 'profession' in the first place and it is now increasingly divided on the basis of teaching and research contracts. The staggering fact is that only around 50% of British academics are still on all-round academic contracts. Then, of course, there are many on temporary short-term contracts as opposed to others on open-ended ones. Finally, the corporate university model means that a worrying divide has opened up between managers and academics. Forget cultural collegiality. We live in a divided academy.

The unbundling of the academic role has its roots in the 1970s and 80s when British universities reinvented themselves as research-based institutions. I say 'reinvented' as back then only a tiny fraction of British academics had a PhD or had much interest in research even in so-called elite institutions. Publications about academic staff referred to them as 'university teachers' not 'academics' up until the early 1980s. However, the up-side of this situation was that they had considerably more time and space to teach, control their own research agenda (if they had one) and support one another without the constant performative pressures of the RAE (and later the REF). We were less divided then.

The third way of defining collegiality brings us back to the definition being used here in one of the University's four principles. This is *behavioural collegiality* and is about supportive relationships between academics and colleagues more widely. Now no one would say such a notion is a bad thing. But this form of collegiality is also in retreat as the language of audit, targets and performance review has become all too familiar. Who is prepared to review papers any more? Who will second mark an assignment? Who will write a book review? How much time do we *really* spend mentoring junior colleagues as opposed to reporting on and claiming credit for our academic citizenship? Fewer and fewer people can afford to spend time doing these

things given the pressures of individual output or income generation targets. The academy has become an ever more competitive place. Collegiality and collaboration is only encouraged where it brings benefits to the bottom line – more publications, more research grants and so on. This is collegiality-as-performativity. Its competition in disguise.

In truth we live in an academic world where the ideal of collegiality has been hollowed out. Collegiality *is* a little bit more than a sub-liminal fantasy but has become largely empty rhetoric in the neoliberal university, one characterised by performative pressures where only selfish individualism is truly rewarded. But of course the word ‘collegiality’ survives as its part of the sacred language of higher education. We have become artful ventriloquists: saying one and doing another at the same time. We pay it lip service. This means that we feel required to pledge our commitment to collegiality in public whilst getting on with the real order of the day in private: keeping our doors firmly closed in order to concentrate on our next paper or grant application. Collegiality was never very collegial and its even less so now.