

Factors influencing collegial learning and a collaborative learning culture: the case of the “KoosÕppeJõud” format

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Summary

Collegial learning is widely regarded as a key mechanism for enhancing teaching quality, supporting academic staff professional development, and fostering organisational learning in higher education (Guzmán & Larrain, 2021; Karu & Aava, 2023; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021). Nevertheless, empirical studies indicate that in many universities, collegial learning remains fragmented, episodic, and is weakly embedded in everyday academic practices. Competitive academic cultures, individualised performance expectations, and increasing managerial and administrative demands tend to prioritise individual achievement over collective learning and constrain opportunities for sustained collegial engagement (Macfarlane, 2016; Pinheiro & Pulkkinen, 2023; Stensaker, 2018). As a result, teaching-related development activities often become isolated training events rather than functioning as mechanisms for cultural change.

This article conceptualises collegial learning as a purposeful, dialogical and reflective process in which academic staff jointly make sense of and develop their work, including teaching practices. Collegial learning is not limited to sharing experiences or informal discussion; it requires deliberately designed situations in which experiential knowledge becomes visible, shareable, and open to further development through reflection and dialogue. The article places collegial learning within the liminal conditions of contemporary academic work, where roles, values, and professional identities are continuously negotiated (Barnett, 2016).

The aim of the study is to identify the institutional and cultural factors that support or hinder collegial learning and the development of a collaborative learning culture in a university.

The study addresses two research questions: 1) What institutional and cultural factors support and hinder collegial learning in the university? and 2) How does the collegial learning format “KoosÕppeJõud” support the development of a collaborative learning culture?

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The theoretical framework combines perspectives on collegial learning, learning culture and academic development. Learning culture is understood as a set of socially and institutionally shaped practices that determines which forms of learning are valued, enabled or constrained in an organisation (James & Biesta, 2007; Biesta, 2011). The article also builds on the premise that the university is a liminal space characterised by uncertainty, tensions between teaching and research, and ongoing identity work. In this context, collegial learning is viewed as a way to create shared meanings and to support academic staff in negotiating complex and sometimes contradictory expectations.

The study adopts a qualitative instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995; 2006; Yin, 2018). The case examined is a collegial learning format “KoosÕppe-Jõud” initiated by academic developers at Tallinn University’s Centre for Teaching and Learning. The format is conceptualised as a structured, multi-stage, and recurring collegial learning practice organised around an annually selected focus theme and implemented across academic units. It includes unit-based collegial learning seminars, a university-wide collegial learning event, and facilitated reflective meetings designed to support shared reflection and the development of teaching practices.

Data were collected between November 2024 and November 2025 using multiple qualitative sources to enable triangulation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Flick, 2018). The dataset comprises written correspondence with leaders of seven academic units, reflective memos produced by academic developers during the design and facilitation of the format, and written feedback from 99 academic staff members who participated in collegial learning activities.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis proceeded inductively through open and focused coding, followed by theoretically informed interpretation.

The findings demonstrate that collegial learning is shaped by interrelated institutional and cultural factors. At the institutional level, collegial learning was supported by the leaders’ active roles, systematic communication, and agreed time and space arrangements that allowed learning to be integrated into academic work rather than added as an extra obligation. At the level of the format, a deliberately designed and reflective learning process, clear facilitation, and the practical relevance of the themes helped participants connect discussions to their everyday teaching practices.

Institutional barriers included a lack of time, competing work responsibilities, insufficient continuity and follow-up activities, limited resources of academic developers, communication problems, and the dominance of quantitative performance indicators. The findings point to a tension between the depth, continuity, and relational nature of collegial learning and institutional logics that often measure development activities by participation numbers or

the number of new participants. This tension may marginalise repeated participation, trust-building, and sustained professional learning.

At the cultural level, collegial learning was supported by shared understandings of the value of teaching, collegial interaction, joint sense-making, psychological safety, and experiences of equality. Participants valued opportunities to discuss teaching with colleagues, recognise common challenges, and reflect on their own practices. Such conditions supported readiness to adopt the learner role and to rethink established teaching practices. Cultural barriers included divergent expectations about the purpose of collegial learning, negative attitudes, resistance to change, limited readiness to engage as a learner, protection of existing routines, and language barriers that weakened equal participation.

The analysis of the “KoosÕppeJõud” format indicates that deliberately designed collegial learning formats can support the development of a collaborative learning culture by creating a structured space for dialogue, reflection, and the joint interpretation of teaching practices. However, the impact of such formats does not arise from the format alone. It depends on how strongly the format is connected to the work arrangements, leadership practices, professional identities, and developmental priorities of academic units. When the topic is perceived as distant from unit needs or when participation is difficult to integrate into daily work, the potential of collegial learning to influence learning culture is reduced.

The study highlights the role of academic developers as institutional and cultural mediators. Their work involves not only organising learning events but also creating conditions for dialogue, making teaching development visible, and supporting a shared language for professional learning. In line with Stensaker’s (2018) view of academic development as cultural work, the findings show that academic developers can contribute to the development of a collaborative learning culture when their work is institutionally supported and connected to leadership, work organisation, academic identity, and the valuing of teaching.

As an instrumental case study, the research does not offer universally transferable solutions. Its direct applicability to other institutions is limited by the specific institutional and cultural context of one university. Nevertheless, the identified factors provide an analytical insight for higher education institutions seeking to support collegial learning more systematically. The study suggests that collegial learning should not be treated as an isolated development activity, but as a practice that can shape learning culture when it is visible, valued, supported by leadership, and embedded in the everyday work of academic staff.

Keywords: collegial learning, learning culture, academic developer, instrumental case study