Groups, Identity, and Academic Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

Background and Aim. This paper examines the team and community perspectives in academic workplaces to illuminate hybrid work practices and their spatial implications. Recent literature has indicated that hybrid working has impacted teams and communities, influencing social connections and a sense of belonging.

Methods and Data. The study examines two case universities and consists of three stages. First, the different team or community levels were identified based on open-ended survey responses, followed by semi-structured interviews with supervisors in University A. Secondly, the identified levels were tested at University B. The results were formulated incrementally through a qualitative content analysis process.

Results. The findings illustrate four team behaviour patterns and categories, each with different implications for on-site workplace spatial practices. The results indicate that team leaders, research and teaching practices, group cohesion, collaboration, and bonding needs and preferences all influence work manners and locations. Formal and informal collaboration are also key determinants.

Originality. Academic work is typically considered from an individual perspective. This study focuses on the team-level use of space and hybrid work arrangements.

Practical Implications. The results benefit the design and development of work environments by showcasing spatial requirements for on-campus activities that foster social connection, bonding and a sense of belonging.

Type of Paper. Short research

KEYWORDS. academic workplace, community, spatial needs, team, work manners

INTRODUCTION

Working alone and working together have been the focus of researchers on productive knowledge work and workplace management for years. Interest has been aroused as systemic changes in work and life have occurred due to the pandemic era. The hybrid work model encompasses two dimensions: working alone or in teams at different locations and engaging in synchronous or asynchronous activities (Vartiainen & Vanharanta, 2023). However, working synchronously at the same place is now more driven by collaborative work than it used to be. Still, team-based knowledge work remains under-researched, with primary focus on virtual teams (Ninnemann et al., 2024). There are interesting findings about the reasons why people choose office or home (Haapakangas et al., 2025), but there is less research on whether the choice is made collectively as a team. Additionally, the work environments in an academic context are under-researched (Indergård & Hansen, 2022).

This paper examines the perceptions of end-users in universities regarding their sense of belonging to a team or community, and how to identify different team patterns in hybrid work environments. The main research question is: What team or group patterns can be identified in hybrid knowledge work on university campuses? To address this question, qualitative data were collected and analysed from open-ended survey responses and interviews. The data was gathered as part of the workplace change processes in two universities.

LITERATURE STUDY

Hybrid work has advantages over fully on-site work (Aksoy et al., 2022). According to Aksoy et al. (2022), hybrid workers have higher job satisfaction and lower redundancy rates. Then again, according to Hassel's (2022) report, employees who spend more time at the office tend to be more satisfied, and fewer resignations have been observed among them. Employees are more engaged and have a stronger sense of belonging to the community and mutual trust in the work community than those who work remotely alone (Hassel, 2022).

Studies have shown that the shift to remote work has altered group dynamics, identities and well-being within academic institutions (Zike & Illingworth, 2023; Clementine & Qutieshat, 2025). The lack of in-person interaction has led to challenges in maintaining a cohesive group identity among faculty and staff. The evolving landscape of professional identities in academic organisations reflects a complex interplay of collaboration, space, and the redefinition of roles. (Vales et al., 2023.)

In comprehensive work environment literature, scholars such as van der Voordt and Jensen (2021), Brunia et al. (2016), and Danielsson and Bodin (2008) present evidence that the workplace and its physical factors affect perceived productivity in various ways. A healthy working environment that supports well-being and productivity depends on the ways of working and the preferences of the users. Satisfaction with the workplace depends, in particular, on user preferences regarding the balance between privacy and social contact.

Van den Boogert et al. (2024) state that although the most important activity of a knowledge worker is often seen as work done alone at the desk, over 80% of respondents also found scheduled meetings important for their own work. Haapakangas et al. (2025) investigated the push and pull factors of the office, stating that workplace experiences were mainly a push factor. However, Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2022) found that employees who conduct independent tasks prefer home, whereas employees who conduct firstmost meeting-based tasks prefer the office (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022). According to Lin et al. (2023), remote collaboration generates fewer breakthrough ideas compared to close research collaboration, regardless of the field and size of the groups. In decentralised teams, cooperation focuses on the final stage and explicit tasks (Lin et al., 2023). Ninneman et al. (2024) have formulated three distinctive knowledge work activities in teams: 1. Individual Work, 2. Team Work, and 3. Team Exchange. They continue to categorise teamwork according to the place and time. Indergård and Hansen (2022) have stated that university knowledge work is more complex than traditional knowledge work. It encompasses silent work, administration, teaching, and student guidance – the variety of tasks is vast.

METHODS AND DATA

The study investigates end-users' perceptions of teams in two universities. Both universities, A and B, are multi-disciplinary and located in Finland. The findings follow an inductive logic and are qualitative, based on content analysis and model validation.

The research process consisted of three stages and matching data sets. The first and second stages were conducted in University A. The first stage and data set consist of open-ended responses collected through a workplace survey conducted in 2022 for both academic and administrative staff at the university. The study includes open answers from two faculties (number of analysed answers: 251).

The second stage and data set entail semi-structured interviews conducted in fall 2023 with supervisors (n=25) of a faculty. The question set asked the supervisors' views on their workplace needs regarding both individual team members and team behaviour and activities. The third stage focuses on validating the "Team working" model at University B. During the interviews, nine research group leaders positioned their groups within the model, employing three themes: group identity, spatial solutions that supported them, and practices of sharing the workplace. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The themes of the interviews included community, usage rates, sharing, fluent daily life, and other issues.

RESULTS

Group identities

The first part introduces the identified 'group identities'. According to our findings, university employees have diverse needs and preferences. Additionally, their needs and preferences are influenced by the extent to which the workplace, community, and team support them. The data also show significant field-specific differences in the role of work communities and their organisation, e.g., the unit, subject groups, or research groups in an individual's work. The data revealed that while the participants reflected their individual needs and preferences, they also constantly reflected these in relation to others. Based on this observation, we have identified four rough 'group identities' from the responses. Table 1 presents the 'identities' from an individual's viewpoint, i.e. whether they associate themselves with belonging to a group (or not). These group identities may be situational, meaning they fluctuate depending on the task and situation, and an individual can simultaneously belong to multiple identities.

Table 1 Group identities

Group type	Description
No Group or Group Elsewhere	Work independent within host university, person's networks are national or international. The group identity is in networks, the organisational unit provides more administrative support.
Varying Group	Collaborates with different instances within their host university depending on the task. Individual feels they belong to their unit or study field. Diverse groups foster a sense of belonging.
Tight-knit Group	Members work closely together in research, requiring interaction with colleagues on daily basis. A certain group is the core of belonging.
Multi-locational Group	Members work together remotely, located in different places. Some work on campus. Online working practices support group cohesion and a sense of belonging.

The first identity is No Group or Group Elsewhere, where an individual works independently at their university but has national or international networks. I.e., their collaboration is mainly outside the host university with other universities or industries. An allocated room or a dedicated workstation often meets workspace needs. The individual may wish to socialise with their colleagues in the break rooms.

The second identified group identity is a Varying Group. In this situation, the individual can switch between groups flexibly and relate to belonging to different groups depending on the tasks at hand. For example, an individual may initially feel a sense of belonging to their own unit or subject field (in teaching), which defines the group identity, and this identity may fluctuate depending on the topic at hand. As this group identity is ambivalent, the group includes people who may work in very different ways. Thus, the workspace needs vary accordingly.

The third identity relates to a *Tight-knit Group*, whose members work closely together in research and teaching, primarily on campus. People working in the group require face-to-face interaction with their close colleagues for work tasks. For example, experimental research work brings members to campus, i.e., their work demands their presence on campus, and in turn, this emphasises their sense of community. The members in this group type may have their allocated rooms or all work in a shared office.

The fourth group identity concerns *Multi-locational Groups*. The group members work from various locations; some are based on different campuses within the host university, while others work remotely, and a few remain on campus. In this group, the group leader often works remotely and has established remote working practices. However, individuals working in a multi-locational group, but on campus, may be physically isolated from the broader campus community.

Next, we identified two determinants which define the joint team patterns. The first considers how aligned the group members' preferences are (X-axis). The second considers how strong the cohesion of the group is and their need for interaction with each other (Y-axis). As presented in Figure 1, the team patterns have a slight view of the work environment choices, which can be typical for the team.

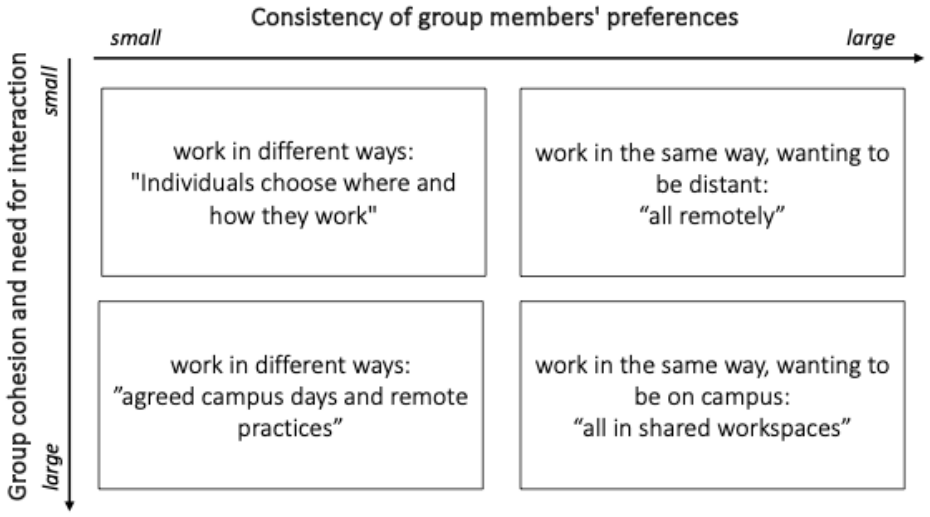

Figure 1 Team working patterns between two determinants. Source: Authors' own work

Validation with the research group leaders provided additional data to propose typical workplace behaviour for the groups. The interviews also provided data about typical sharing practices.

1. Thematic groups are like tight-knit groups which operate both internally and externally, creating a desire to participate in them; the groups have developed practices for strengthening peer support (e.g. seminars), which will be implemented face-to-face or hybrid after the pandemic. They utilise the environment in multiple ways and have already established effective practices for sharing. For them, there is a social driver for sharing: "It is important that we are not coming to campus because of us but because of the research community."

2. Varying Groups are functional groups which operate internally and anchor place-based. They are also faithful to norms and regulations; for example, they state that research is not the primary determinant of teaching, but rather the national degree structure sets the content. Functional groups perceived sharing as somewhat hindering their activities. According to an interviewee, "*There used to be more community feeling with the students when they were allowed to come into faculty places.*"

3. Administrative tasks ultimately do not form a group, or if they do, they are internally functional, or they work independently, loosely related, and it is difficult to join them from the outside; this makes them multilocational. Administrational groups were aligned with the functional groups – the tasks did not require them to share facilities, so they could remain as they had been. As one interviewee said, "We share meeting rooms and break areas – that is enough."

4. Multilocational groups are often network groups, e.g. in projects where actors in other countries individually focus on advancing science. Network groups are highly dependent on digital functional connectivity. The question of sharing within the campus community was not relevant for them. *"Well, maybe not sharing, but what about borrowing – someone can borrow my room when I am away"*.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the diverse group identities in academia based on end-users' perceptions of belonging and how these identities influence workspace choices at the group level. The findings reveal that end-users with no group identity, belonging to network groups, and primarily collaborating with external partners, have needs for more individual workplace settings, similar to those of administrative groups. In contrast, those in a varying group collaborate within their community based on tasks, leading to diverse, community-oriented spatial needs. Tight-knit groups, characterised by strong social connections, also require group-based workplace settings that incorporate both individual and social work environments. Meanwhile, the spatial needs of multi-locational groups have diminished due to remote and hybrid work, making the need for on-campus workplaces scarce.

The study's limitation lies in the generalisation of results; however, it provides a framework for further investigation into academic and team-based workplaces based on these identified categories. Additionally, one needs to consider how team-based workplace patterns can be identified in a relevant way, striking a balance between individual and group preferences.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on identifying the group identities associated with the workspaces offerend on a university campus. The findings illustrate team behaviour patterns and provide a framework for research and practice to develop team-based workplace solutions. While the literature has been interested in individual productivity in knowledge work, one could also investigate team-level productivity, as well as team-based workplace solutions. Future research needs to emphasise the value and support for team productivity.

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