

Fostering Scholarly Collaboration: A Longitudinal Ethnographic Study of Departmental Co-Authoring Initiatives

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Abstract: In response to increasing institutional pressure for enhanced research productivity and measurable performance outputs, this study presents a longitudinal ethnographic case study of a strategic initiative implemented to formalise and strengthen scholarly collaboration within an academic department. The initiative involved the intentional formation of research clusters comprising academics with shared research interests who progressed through three structured phases of collaborative writing. Drawing on a relational-cultural conceptualisation of scholarly collaboration, the study examines collaboration as an evolving organisational practice rather than solely as an output metric. A longitudinal ethnographic research design was adopted over a twelve-month period, during which empirical data were generated through participant observation, reflective journals and departmental documents that captured the evolving relational and organisational dynamics of collaborative writing. Although the initiative provided identical structural conditions across three research groups, outcomes diverged significantly, only one group achieved publication during the study period. Doctoral stage and workload intensity emerged as moderating factors influencing collaborative momentum and output realisation. This study also identified gains in research confidence, the redistribution of scholarly agency and mentorship formalisation even within groups that did not publish. The findings contribute theoretically by distinguishing between collaboration as a relational process and publication as a measurable artefact, and methodologically by demonstrating the value of longitudinal ethnography for analysing evolving organisational practices in higher education. The findings suggest that structured co-authoring initiatives can foster collaborative cultures, but their impact remains conditional upon career-stage capacity and relational dynamics within departments.

Keywords: Scholarly Collaboration, Co-Authoring Initiatives, Academic Writing Culture, Longitudinal Ethnography, Research Capacity Development, Organisational Practice, Higher Education Research, Mentorship in Academia

1. Introduction

Universities are increasingly implementing structured initiatives to improve research productivity, strengthen collaboration and build academic capacity (Frantz, Leach, Pharaoh, Basset, Smith and Travill, 2025: 1217). In performance-driven higher education environments, publication outputs and citation metrics are used as indicators of research success (Frantz, Leach, Pharaoh, Basset, Smith and Travill, 2025: 1218). As a result, co-authoring initiatives are evaluated in terms of measurable outputs such as journal impact and publication counts. However, less attention has been given to how such initiatives reshape the practices of collaboration within academic departments. Kahn (2025) states that existing research on academic collaboration relies on bibliometric analysis or cross-sectional survey data and treats co-authorship as a proxy for collaboration. Such approaches offer valuable quantitative insight but provide limited understanding of how collaborative practices emerge, evolve, and stabilize over time within organizational contexts. Collaboration is not only an output; it is a relational and cultural practice that is embedded within institutional expectations, departmental norms, and interpersonal dynamics (Idrisu, 2025: 2). There is a need for longitudinal, process-sensitive inquiry into how structured co-authoring initiatives influence scholarly collaboration as an organizational practice. It is important to understand how such initiatives interact with relational dynamics, intellectual alignment, mentorship structures, and career-stage conditions within departments. This study addresses this gap by investigating the implementation of a departmental co-authoring initiative within an academic department.

This study is guided by the following research question:

How did a departmental co-authoring initiative impact scholarly collaboration within an academic department over time?

To address this question, the study explores:

- What were the pre-existing collaborative practices and relational dynamics within the department?
- Through what organizational, cultural, and relational mechanisms did the initiative influence participation in co-authoring?
- How did patterns of scholarly collaboration evolve throughout the implementation of the initiative?

Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic design, this study conceptualizes scholarly collaboration as a relational-cultural organizational practice shaped by institutional context, relational dynamics, departmental culture, and

intellectual alignment as illustrated in Figure 1. By examining collaboration as an evolving process as opposed to solely as a measurable output, the study contributes both empirically and methodologically to the study of academic collaboration and organisational change.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Collaboration Versus Co-Authorship

Collaboration in academic contexts is usually operationalised through co-authorship. Bibliometric studies usually treat shared authorship as an indicator of collaborative engagement by using publication data to map research networks and patterns of productivity (Kahn, 2025: 130). While co-authoring provides a measurable artefact of collaboration, it represents only one dimension of broader relational processes (Katz and Martin, 1997: 14). Differentiating between collaboration and co-authorship is analytically important. Co-authored publications are observable artefacts; however, they do not capture the negotiated, evolving and socially embedded processes through which collaborative practices develop within departments (Frantz, Leach, *et al*, 2025: 1218). Understanding scholarly collaboration therefore requires attention to relational dynamics, cultural norms as well as institutional expectations that can shape how academics engage in joint intellectual work. In this study, scholarly collaboration is conceptualised as an umbrella construct that encompasses the relational and intellectual practices through which academics jointly produce and disseminate knowledge. This includes co-authoring, mentorship writing, writing groups, research partnerships, ongoing intellectual dialogue and feedback exchanges. Co-authorship thus constitutes a formal output whereas collaboration refers to the underlying practices and dynamics that makes such outputs possible (Iddrisu, 2025: 2).

2.2 Scholarly Collaboration as a Relational-Cultural Organisational Practice

This study adopts a relational-cultural perspective which positions scholarly collaboration as an organisational practice that is embedded within departmental life. Collaboration is therefore shaped by trust, mentorship structures, hierarchy, collegial norms and informal networks (Al-Taneiji and Al Tenaiji, 2025: 2). Senior-emerging lecturer dynamics influence access to authorship opportunities, intellectual leadership and decision-making authority. Departmental culture also shapes expectations regarding individual versus collective research production. Viewing collaboration through a relational-cultural lens shifts the analytical focus from output counts to interactional processes (Bozeman and Corley, 2004: 606). It foregrounds questions about how collaborative norms are negotiated, how scholarly agency is distributed across career stages and how mentorship is enacted within departments. Collaboration therefore is not simply a technical arrangement but rather a socially constructed practice that evolves through repeated interaction (Aitchison and Lee, 2006: 269).

2.3 Institutional Context and Performance Pressures

Academic collaboration does not occur in isolation. Universities operate within performance-driven environments that are characterised by publication targets, funding pressures and promotion criteria (Frantz, Leach, *et al*, 2025: 1217). Institutional expectations incentivise co-authorship and research productivity which shapes departmental priorities (Wagner and Leydesdorff, 2005: 1610). In this research study, institutional performance structures are conceptualised as contextual drivers as opposed to primary explanatory mechanisms. While they create pressure for publication, translating institutional expectations into collaborative practices occurs through departmental culture and relational dynamics. Structured co-authoring initiatives can be a response to institutional performance pressures to formalise collaboration and enhance productivity (Brew, Boud and Namgung, 2011: 534).

2.4 Conceptual Model

Building on these perspectives, scholarly collaboration is conceptualised as a dynamic organisational practice which is shaped by multiple interacting layers:

- Institutional context: performance metrics, policy expectations, and promotion criteria.
- Departmental culture: norms and expectations of collaboration.
- Relational dynamics: trust, mentorship, hierarchy, and collegiality.
- Scholarly collaboration practices: co-writing, joint projects and authorship negotiations
- Collaborative outputs: co-authored publications and sustained partnerships

The primary analytical lens of this study is relational-cultural with institutional context serving as a secondary contextual driver. This framework allows for the analysis of how a structured co-authoring initiative interacts with multiple organisational layers and how collaboration can evolve over time. The conceptual relationships discussed above are illustrated in Figure 1.

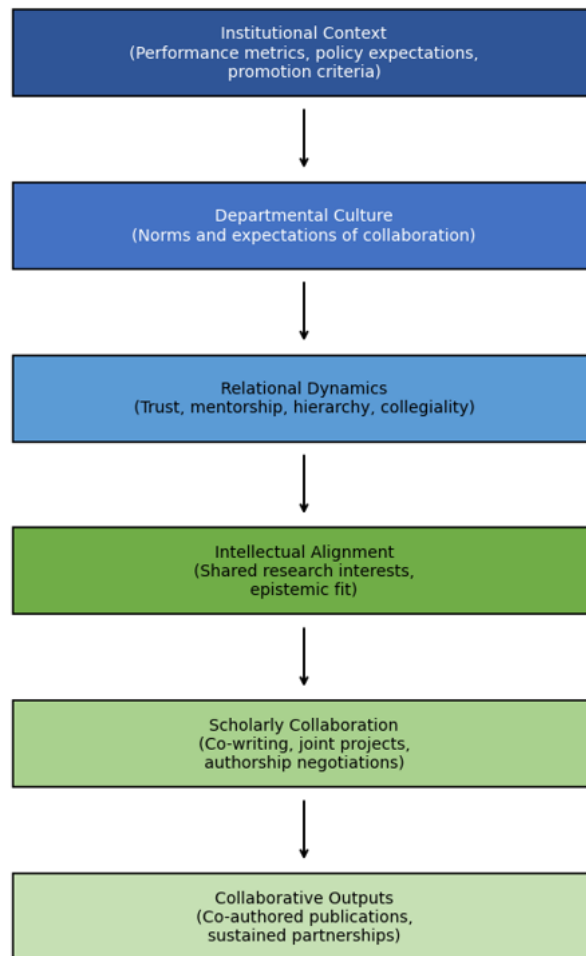


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Scholarly Collaboration as Organisational Practice (Source: Author's Own).

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research study adopted a longitudinal ethnographic case study design that examined how a departmental co-authoring initiative influenced scholarly collaboration within an academic department (Lechler, Canzaniello, Wetzstein and Hartmann, 2020: 425). The initiative formed part of the Department on Information and Knowledge Management's research strategy and was formally approved as a structured co-authoring intervention. A longitudinal ethnographic approach was selected to record the relational, cultural, and organisational dynamics of collaboration as they were implemented over numerous phases of the initiative (Tulokas, Haapasalo and Tampio, 2024 :2). The longitudinal design allowed sustained engagement with the department over time, enabling the tracking of shifts on collaborative practices. The case study is confined to one department within a South African university and specifically focuses on the implementation and evolution of the structured co-authoring initiative.

3.2 Research Context and Structure of the Initiative

The initiative was designed to foster collaborative writing within structured research groups. Three research groups were created, each comprising one senior lecturer and two emerging lecturers. Each group was organized around a shared research interest. The researcher was embedded within one research group while maintaining

observational access to the broader initiative, allowing exposure to multiple collaborative micro-contexts within the same interventions. The initiative comprised three phases. Phase one: Conceptualization and Research Question development: the groups engaged in structured sessions that were focused on identifying research topics, refining the research questions, assessing database searches, and developing sub-questions. This phase placed emphasis on collaborative scoping and thematic alignment. Phase two: Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis: the groups identified databases and created search strings with inclusion and exclusion criteria. PRISMA flow diagrams were constructed, and systematic reviews were finalized. This phase required collaborative decision-making as well as technical coordination. Phase Three: Data Analysis and Research Output Planning: the groups participated in analysis planning, tool selection and role clarification for article production. Authorship orders as well as research outputs were negotiated during this phase as well. This phase created a structured environment in which collaborative dynamics would be analysed. The structural configuration and phased design of the initiative is illustrated in Figure 2.

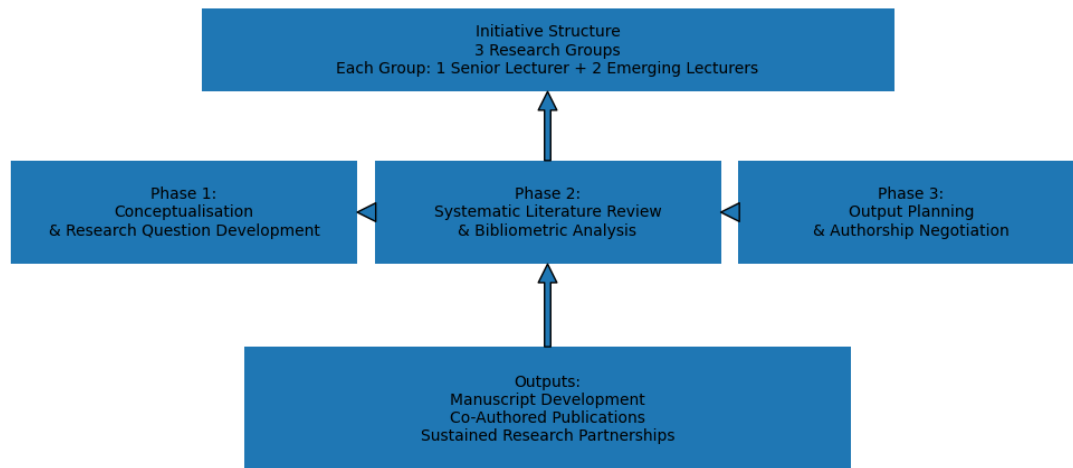


Figure 2: Structure and Phased Design of the Co-Authoring Initiative (Source: Author's Own).

3.3 Data Generation

Data was generated through ethnographic engagement across all three phases of the initiative. Data was collected through numerous sources such as participant observation of structured group sessions across the three phases, field notes that documented interactions, authorship negotiations, mentoring practices and decision-making processes, internal documents such as phase reports, search strategies, PRISMA diagrams and planning documents, a formal memorandum that outlined the initiative's purpose and funding structure and informal reflective discussions among the participants. The observations focused on relational dynamics, intellectual alignment and research scope negotiations, authorship and accountability, participation patterns across the different phases and shifts in confidence and ownership among the emerging lecturers (Tulokas, Haapasalo and Tampio, 2024 :2). Data was collected throughout the full cycle of the initiative's implementation, and this enabled comparison between early-stage collaboration (phase one), process consolidation (phase two), and output-oriented coordination (phase three).

3.4 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

This study was conducted from an embedded ethnographic position within the departmental co-authoring initiative. The researcher participated in the initiative while simultaneously maintaining systematic field documentation and analytical distance. This dual role as participant and observer required ongoing reflexive engagement throughout the research process (De Smet, Eksi and Truijens, 2025: 4). During the implementation of the initiative, the researcher held the position of Deputy Head of Department for Research and Postgraduate Programmes. The co-authoring initiative formed part of the department's formal research development strategy, and participation was mandatory for identified academic staff. This positional authority introduced an inherent power dimension that required explicit methodological consideration, particularly in relation to participation dynamics, collaborative behaviour and authorship negotiations (Bans-Akutey and Tiimu, 2021).

Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the twelve-month period to critically examine the potential influence of leadership authority on group interaction, interpretive framing and participation patterns. Particular

attention was given to distinguishing between compliance driven participation and authentic collaborative engagement. While participation in the initiative was mandatory, intellectual contributions, authorship positioning and manuscript development processes remained negotiated within each group. The research consciously avoided evaluative framing of group performance and separated administrative leadership responsibilities from ethnographic observation. Rather than treating embedded leadership as a limitation, this study conceptualises positional authority as an analytically relevant feature of the organisational context under investigation. The intersection of institutional mandates, departmental culture and relational dynamics formed part of the phenomenon being studied. Maintaining transparency regarding this dual role enhances the credibility, reflexivity and ethical integrity of the research.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, abductive strategy that integrated inductive coding with the research study's conceptual framework of scholarly collaboration as a relational-cultural organisational practice. The analytical process was conducted in three stages. Stage 1: Open Coding: Initial coding identified themes related to trust and hierarchy, intellectual alignment, mentorship dynamics, participation shift, accountability mechanisms, and institutional performance pressures (Mcleod, 2024: 1). Stage 2: Temporal Mapping: The data was categorized in a chronological order across phases one, two and three to identify patterns of change. The way collaborative norms evolved across conceptualization, the execution of the systematic reviews and production planning were the focus (Kringelum and Frederiksen, 20:2510). Stage 3: Mechanism Identification: Mechanisms through which the initiative influenced the collaboration was analysed. This included formalized mentoring roles, structured accountability, shared technical learning, authorship positioning, and collective ownership of outputs (Nikulina, Volker and Bosch-Rekveltdt, 2022: 798). Such an approach allowed understanding how the initiative interacted with relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions of scholarly collaboration.

3.6 Rigour and Trustworthiness

The rigour of this research study was enhanced through the prolonged engagement across the different phases of the initiative, which allowed sustained observation of the evolving collaborative dynamics. Credibility was strengthened through the triangulation of participant observation, cross-group comparative insight, documentary evidence, the systematic maintenance of reflexive memos and an audit trail that documented the analytical decisions and phased processes (Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin, 2020: 143). The structured design of the initiative also provided clear temporal markers that supported systematic analysis of change over time (Coombs, Campbell and Caringi, 2020:5). Given the embedded nature of the research, reflexive awareness of the researcher's dual role as participant and observer was continuously maintained to mitigate bias and enhance transparency (Braun and Clarke, 2020: 343). Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg's Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection (Ethical clearance codes: 2024SCiISO25, 2024SCiISO26,3). Together these measures enhanced the credibility, transparency, and ethical integrity of the study (Cutcliffe, and McKenna, 2004: 130).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 From Informal Collaboration to Structured Scholarly Engagement

Prior to introducing the departmental co-authoring initiative, scholarly collaboration within the department was largely informal and dependent on existing relationships as opposed to structured mechanisms. Collaboration existed but was unevenly distributed, relying primarily on individual initiative and pre-existing intellectual alignment. Mentorship relationships were largely discretionary, and opportunities for emerging lecturers to engage in structured co-authoring were not systematically embedded into departmental practices. The introduction of this initiative marked a crucial shift from discretionary collaboration to formalized scholarly engagement.

The structured grouping of one senior lecturer and two emerging lecturers around a shared research interest created an explicit relational architecture for collaboration. Scheduled meetings phased milestones and defined outputs introduced temporal markers and accountability that reconfigured collaboration as an organized departmental practice as opposed to an informal activity. It is important to note that no overt resistance or authorship tensions emerged during implementation, which suggests that there was alignment between the initiative's objectives and departmental culture. The initiative formalized and legitimized collaborative writing

as a collective departmental responsibility rather than disrupt existing norms. This shift reflects a movement from collaboration as individual choice to collaboration as structured organizational practice.

4.2 Identical Structure, Divergent Outcomes: the Role of Doctoral Stage

The initiative was structurally identical across the three research groups; however, the performance of trajectories diverged significantly. Despite the uniform phased structure shown in Figure 2, the groups experienced different outcome trajectories. Group three progressed through all phases and achieved publication. Group 1 showed strong internal co-ordination but did not publish during the study period, and group two did not complete the manuscript. These differentiated outcomes are significant as they occurred despite the uniform structural conditions. The differentiated trajectories and the moderating role of doctoral stage are illustrated in Figure 3.

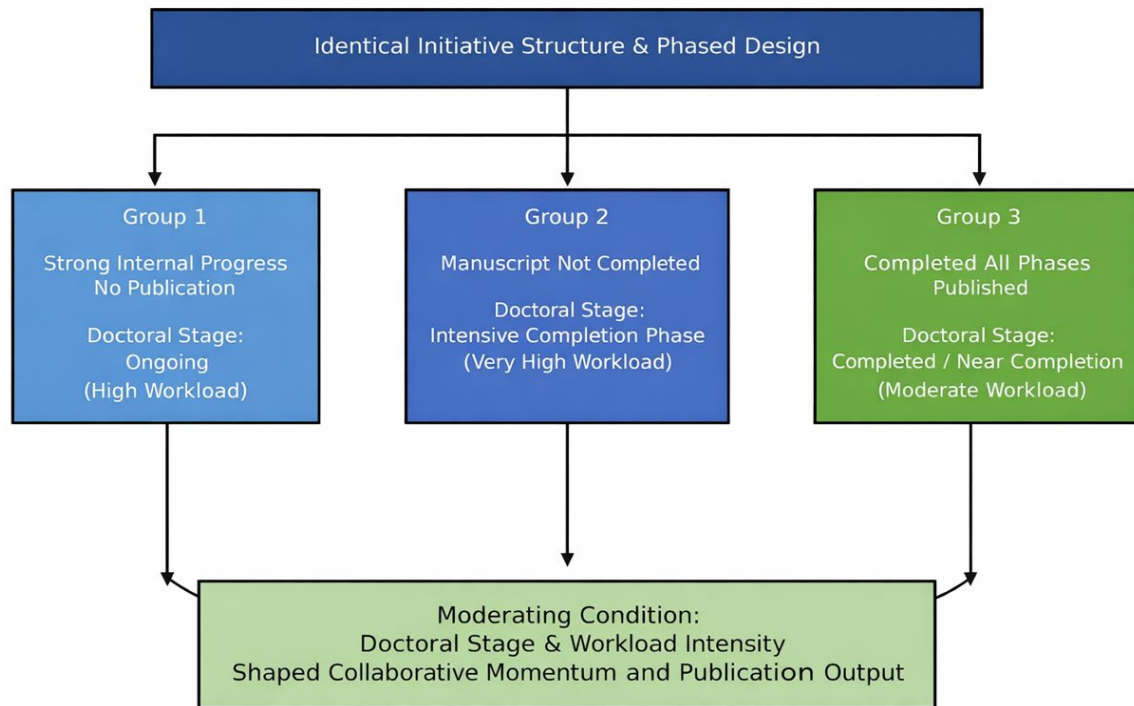


Figure 3: Differentiated Group Trajectories and Moderating Role of Doctoral Stage (Source: Author's Own).

The primary distinguishing factor across the groups was the doctoral stage of emerging lecturers. In groups one and two, emerging lecturers were still completing their PhDs, with one member in Group 2 experiencing intense thesis completion demands. In contrast, group three included one emerging lecturer who had completed their PhD and another who was nearing completion. This variation in doctoral stage appeared to function as a structuring mechanism, that shaped collaborative momentum. Where doctoral completion was nearly finalized, greater sustained engagement in manuscript development was achieved. Emerging lecturers in group three demonstrated stronger continuity across the phases and were able to invest cognitive as well as temporal resources consistently in article development. By contrast, in groups one and two, competing doctoral commitments constrained momentum even though relational dynamics and group cohesion were positive. These findings suggest that structural intervention alone is not sufficient to guarantee equivalent publication outcomes. Instead, scholarly collaboration is mediated by career-stage capacity, workload intensity as well as available intellectual bandwidth. The initiative provided conditions for collaboration; however, the realization of publication outputs was contingent upon the broader academic commitments of participants.

4.3 Collaboration Beyond Publications: Process as Impact

The absence of publication in group one and two does not mean failure. Group one demonstrated strong internal engagement and progressed through conceptualization, systematic review processes, and manuscript drafting. However, the demands of doctoral completion constrained finalization and submission. This distinction highlights the importance of differentiating between collaborative process effectiveness and measurable output. Across all three groups, emerging lecturers showed increased confidence in research design, database

searching, systematic review procedures, and manuscript structuring. Early phases were characterized by mentor-led coordination, especially during the research question refining and methodological scoping. As the integrative progressed, participation became distributed. Emerging lecturers assumed more responsibility for the intellectual contributions and technical processes which reflected a gradual redistribution of scholarly agencies. Even in the groups that did not publish, participants reported that familiarity with systematic review processes and a clearer understanding of authorship expectations increased. The initiative therefore created capacity building effects independent of immediate publication outcomes. Thus, impact occurred at the level of relational and cultural transformation as opposed to output metrics. It is important to note that, following the conclusion of the initiative, more than ten additional publications were produced across departmental staff members outside of the formal structure of the program. This observation is based on departmental publication records collected after the initiative, while causality cannot be claimed, the pattern suggests a sustained shift in research engagement.

4.4 Redistribution of Scholarly Agency and Mentorship Formalization

A significant outcome of the initiative was institutionalized by mentorship within collaborative writing. By formally assigning one senior lecturer to each group, mentorship shifted from of discretionary support towards structured responsibility. This formalization decreased reliance on informal networks and created more equitable access to collaborative opportunities for emerging lecturers. Over time, the relational dynamics within groups transformed. Initial dependence on senior guidance gradually changed into confident participation especially in group three where doctoral completion facilitated stronger intellectual ownership. Even in groups one and two, emerging lecturers increasingly engaged in decision-making and contributed significantly to analytical discussions. This evolution indicates that the initiative did not only increase co-authoring activity; it altered relational foundations of scholarly collaboration within the department. Mentorship became embedded within collaborative practice, and scholarly participation became more pronounced across career stages.

4.5 Integrative Discussion: Structured Intervention and Conditional Impact

Collectively, the findings indicate that the departmental co-authoring initiative successfully reconfigured scholarly collaboration from an informal practice into a structured, relationally supported organizational process. The absence of resistance suggests cultural readiness, and the structured design created enabling conditions for accountability, shared intellectual engagement, and mentorship. However, differentiated group outcomes show that while institutionalized structure assists with collaboration, the realization of publication outputs remains contingent upon career stage conditions and workload distribution. Doctoral stage functioned as a moderating factor influencing collaborative momentum and output completion as depicted in Figure 3. The initiative therefore impacted scholarly collaboration in two significant ways:

- By increasing publication output in at least one group and
- By strengthening collaborative capacity, relational equity, and confidence across the department.

These findings reinforce the importance of distinguishing between collaboration as a measurable output and collaboration as an evolving organizational practice. While publication is visible, the more substantive impact of the initiative is the reshaping of the relational and cultural dynamics through which scholarly work is collectively undertaken.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to analyse how a departmental co-authoring initiative impacted scholarly collaboration within an academic department over time. By adopting a longitudinal ethnographic design, the research was able to move beyond output-based evaluations of collaboration and examine how collaborative practices evolve within their relational, cultural, and institutional context. The findings show that the initiative reshaped scholarly collaboration in two crucial ways. First, it formalized mentorship and structural accountability, which transformed collaboration from an informative practice into a more organized and relationally supported departmental process. Second, it contributed to the redistribution of scholarly agencies, especially among emerging lecturers, by strengthening research confidence, participation in authorship negotiations, and technical competence. While only one group achieved publication during the study period, subsequent increases in departmental publications suggest broader cultural shifts in collaborative engagement.

More importantly, this study demonstrates that structural design alone does not guarantee equivalent publication outcomes. Doctoral stage and workload intensity were moderating conditions influencing collaborative momentum. Scholarly contribution is shaped by institutional mandates, organizational structure as well as career stage capacity and intellectual bandwidth. Theoretically, this study contributes by conceptualizing scholarly contribution as a relational-cultural organizational practice rather than just a co-authorship output. By distinguishing between collaboration as process and publication as artefact, it expands the understanding of how academic writing cultures are constructed within departments. Methodologically, the study shows the value of longitudinal ethnography for analysing evolving organizational practices in higher education, especially where institutional mandates and relational dynamics intersect. Overall, the findings suggest that structured co-authoring initiatives can enable collaborative cultures, but their impact remains contingent upon the interaction between institutional design, career stage conditions and relational dynamics within academic departments.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the research (Ethical clearance codes: 2024SCiS025; 2024SCiS026). The study formed part of an approved departmental research initiative. All data was generated through participant observation, departmental documents and reflective field notes within the institutional context. Care was taken to ensure that no identifiable personal information of participants was disclosed and that the research complied with institutional ethical guidelines.

AI Declaration

Conceptual development, research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation was conducted solely by the author. The author accepts full responsibility for the content and scholarly integrity of the work. AI tools were not used.

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