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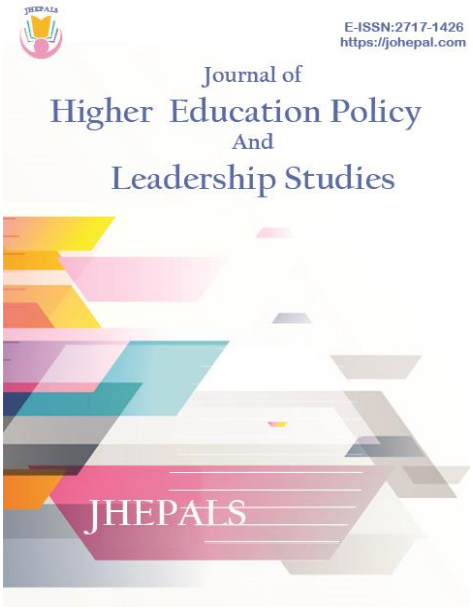

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Remote Work in Higher Education: Operationalizing Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

We reflect on the complex dynamics of remote working as a form of work flexibility within the higher education (HE) sector. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the reflection builds on research into the experiences of administrative and support staff in two HE institutions during and after periods of enforced remote work. The reflection moves beyond summary to offer deeper insight into the evolving world of work in academia. The impetus was the sudden shift to remote work following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. For workers in support functions, this transition sparked debate within HE, with limited prior research to inform leadership responses. Independent studies at universities in South Africa and Austria explored staff experiences, and the consistent emergence of autonomy as a key theme led to collaboration and the application of SDT as a robust explanatory framework for optimal remote working conditions. Findings revealed that the three core psychological needs identified in SDT—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—were evident in remote work experiences. These were operationalized as self-regulation, connectivity, and flexibility as a way of working.

Keywords: Higher Education; Leadership; Remote Working; Self-Determination Theory; Flexible Work Models

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Introduction

Remote working empowers employees to collaborate with colleagues and stakeholders by leveraging digital tools and technology-driven solutions. This mode of work – along with hybrid, virtual, and nomadic arrangements – constitutes the broader phenomenon known as "digital work" (Orlikowski & Scott, 2016) or flexible work (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021). For this study our focus was specifically on work location as either remotely from home or in a hybrid manner when employees work sometimes at home and sometimes in office. Hybrid work stands out by uniquely integrating multiple locations – both physical and digital – and by shaping the collective work experience through their interplay in time and space. This interconnectedness necessitates advanced negotiation skills to manage its dynamic challenges on the experience of work and work relations (Feiten Haubrich & Hafermalz, 2022).

Within the context of higher education (HE), there has been a significant shift toward remote and hybrid working for administrative staff and their leaders. Although the number of remote workers across different industries had been gradually increasing (Golden & Gajenddran, 2019), the adoption of remote working practices was dramatically accelerated by the pandemic. Since then, global debates have intensified over the sustainability and effectiveness of these arrangements and the implications for leading in higher education sectors. Despite the higher education sector's significance, research on hybrid or remote work in academic leadership remains sparse. Authors have focussed on the idea of virtual leadership, but this work tends to be predominantly centred on technology in pedagogy (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Remesal & Villarroel, 2023) and how it is managed by HE teaching and learning, rather than on effective leadership and management in remote and hybrid working instance (Chew et al., 2022). In our work in HE institutions, we observed that autonomy often surfaced in the narrative surrounding remote work. This perspective aligns with work positing SDT as a useful lens to explore future of work (Wang et al., 2021; Gagné et al., 2022) but extends the insights to higher education sector.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has long informed our understanding of worker motivation and serves as a foundational framework for exploring the evolving nature of work (Gagné et al., 2022). Notably, Wang et al. (2021) identified autonomy as a key factor in fostering an effective remote working experience. Studies have explored remote working in HE sector, following the pandemic to some extent, but SDT has not yet been specifically applied in this context. This paper provides insights and recommendations for managing and leading remote and hybrid working within higher education.

Remote Working in Higher education

The higher education (HE) sector is characterized by specific field structures that emerge through tension between scientific knowledge production and administrative governance. This duality is a defining feature of HE institutions and results in complex interactions between the logics of science and administration (Lueg & Graf, 2022; Bess & Dee, 2014; 2012; Clark, 1983). The organizational culture within the management and administrative domains of universities is shaped by a bureaucratic principle, manifested in pronounced hierarchical structures, rule-based order, and formalized processes. Leadership in this context primarily entails responsibility for clearly defined areas of activity, based on

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functional differentiation. Boundary-setting occurs through control and disciplinary measures, establishing an administrative framework that governs scientific work. These differing task logics are also reflected in distinct spatial and temporal regimes. Cyclical time structures, linked to the academic year and career transitions of students and researchers, as well as spatial independence due to discontinuous work rhythms, indicate a relatively low level of institutional attachment within the scientific domain, in contrast to the administrative sector (Lueg & Graf, 2022; Hüther & Krücken, 2013; Musselin, 2006). Historically, the higher education sector has been shaped by male-dominated structures, both in terms of staff and student populations. Science, traditionally regarded as a vocation rather than a profession, has contributed to the formation of a specific academic identity centered on autonomy, excellence, and the cultivation of elite status (Mouzughi; 2022; Lueg, Graf & Powell, 2020). Currently, the academic field is undergoing a profound structural transformation, largely driven by global competition. This transformation is also evident in the management and administrative structures of universities, which increasingly face both external and internal challenges. Key drivers include managerialism, the internationalization of higher education systems, the implementation of certification processes, the digitization of administrative functions, and a shifting system of values. These developments are leading to a reconfiguration of the traditional tension between science and administration, between flexibility and autonomy on the one hand, and control and constraint on the other (Kagan & Hanney, 2000; Henke, 2019, Frank & Meyer, 2006; Clark, 1998). This dynamic and complex environment, with a unique system of logics for faculty as opposed to administrative and support staff, presents a unique context to explore the phenomenon of remote working.

Remote working is not a new concept but has been on the rise since the enforced lockdown experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. Remote working has been incorporated in a broader field of flexible working practices (FWP), facilitated by the advancement in technology (Soga et al., 2022). FWP are defined as working without strict boundaries concerning workspaces, schedules, and contracts, and encompass concepts such as telecommuting, remote working, co-working spaces, and on-call work. The paper aligns with Soga et al. (2022) in categorizing FWP as remote work, spatiotemporal work, on-demand work, and self-directed work.

While historically remote working in HE was primarily the domain of faculty, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant shift, making it a more widespread feature across higher education institutions. Since then, researchers have explored remote working in HE through various theoretical perspectives including neoliberalism (Nash & Churchill, 2020), feminist lenses (Okeke-Uzodike & Gamede, 2021), social exchange theory (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023), and the Job-demand-Resource theory (Demerouti et al., 2001). Research highlights several challenges and requirements associated with remote working in HE. These include issues of equity and equality (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), the impact on caregiving responsibilities- particularly for women (Alam et al., 2023; Nash & Churchill, 2020), digital inequality (Chinembiri, 2020), technostress (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023), and employee disengagement (Adisa et al., 2023). It is also noted that remote working policies are often shaped by governmental and institutional regulations, which can impact the autonomy of workers (Pinochet et al., 2023). Furthermore, we note that research on virtual leadership in HE from a management perspective has been somewhat neglected, with

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priority being in pedagogy and teaching and learning (Chew & Zainal, 2022). Self-determination theory has not specifically been applied in this scope of research, and that is where we turned our attention.

Self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that individuals are more motivated when their fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness are fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy refers to a sense of self-governance and volition. Competence involves feeling skilled in performing tasks, while social embeddedness relates to quality social interactions and a sense of belonging. We explore how these needs are affected in remote work settings and how factors such as work pressures, and leadership support can either enhance or diminish these feelings. The discourse around remote working in universities has long been associated with flexible time management, particularly within academic roles. However, this autonomy can be challenged by inadequate time management and a lack of restorative breaks (Zimmermann & Degenhardt, 2014) exacerbated by limited support systems (Begum et al., 2024). HE leaders play a crucial role in nurturing autonomy, competence, and connectedness among remote employees to boost motivation.

Ultimately, this reflection aims to expand insights into the management implications of remote working within the HE sectors, specifically concerning administrative and support staff and their leaders, by employing the framework of Self-determination theory.

Reflection

From our research, we reflect specifically on

- The experience of administrative and support workers and their leaders while working remotely.
- How aspects of motivation, as articulated in the self-determination theory, shapes this experience?
- How Self-determination theory help us understand the remote working experience in Higher education?

Autonomy as Self-Regulation

Autonomy in the context of remote working may be experienced as self-regulation, which captures a desire for personal contracting on work output and the navigation of blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Personal contracting highlights the positive experience of having personal responsibility and individual scope for action when working remotely. Many respondents in our respective studies expressed a preference for continued flexibility regarding remote working, valuing the ability to adapt their time management to their individual life situations, thereby improving work-life balance and often reporting increased productivity due to better focus and fewer interruptions. The sentiment was that employees should have more autonomy to manage their own life dynamics and should be held accountable for their performance. Both institutions experience high levels of productivity and performance amongst administrative and support staff during the pandemic enforced lockdown over the periods of 2020-2021.

However, this desire for autonomy may be tempered by a simultaneous call for the official anchoring of flexibility through policies and guidelines, in other words guidance is

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called for to ensure fairness for all. Guidelines helps leaders to make decisions and set the parameters for employees to remain accountable and facilitate effective teamwork. While informal flexibility is supported through trust, formal policies and guidelines would provide greater security under labour law and clarity regarding what is acceptable in terms of working hours and responsibilities. This apparent paradox, where employees desire autonomy but also seek formal frameworks to guide it, points to the complexities of implementing remote work policies in HE.

We interpret this as a dichotomy where autonomy is often balanced with introjected regulation, a form of extrinsic motivation where individuals behave in a certain manner to avoid feelings of guilt or to gain approval. HE leaders still feel responsible for policing labour laws and ensuring compliance with working hours, potentially impacting the trust that underpins autonomous work arrangements. This suggests that the motivation for self-regulation in a remote working context may not always be purely intrinsic but can be influenced by internalized pressures and expectations.

While the autonomy of remote working is desirable, there is an unintended consequence for this self-regulation. A blurring of boundaries between work and personal life as an unintended consequence of remote work, requires greater individual regulation of work behaviour. The absence of physical workplace cues and the elimination of rituals like commuting to and from work, may make it more challenging for individuals to 'switch off' from work. This necessitates a high degree of intrinsic motivation to navigate between work and home modes effectively. The individual needs to consciously create their own "artefacts" or routines to establish boundaries, as the natural transitions provided by a physical workplace are no longer present.

Relatedness as Connectivity

The second dimension of SDT, relatedness, is operationalized as connectivity, emphasizing the need for connection across both time and space in remote and hybrid working arrangements. In terms of temporality, we see a shift from time as the dominant concept of work to output being the primary measure of performance in remote settings. While employees may appreciate the flexibility in time management, problematic or highly inter-dependent tasks may take longer to resolve remotely due to the lack of informal, spontaneous interactions, especially if relationships are not established and productive before-hand. This temporal distance could pose challenges, particularly in highly interdependent teamwork. Here we observe the experience of introjected regulation in relation to time management, with some workers feeling the need to constantly demonstrate their availability and productivity, even at off-peak hours, to avoid being perceived as not working. For example, sending that email late on Friday, to show productivity.

Regarding space, the importance of connecting spaces to foster a sense of being noticed and to build social capital, which is no longer solely reliant on physical co-location. Digital communication tools play a crucial role in enabling quick and transparent information flows. However, HE leaders needed to be mindful of group dynamics and ensure that all team members have the capacity to use these tools effectively. The importance of informal communication and social contact for group dynamics, trust, and cohesion is important, suggesting that deliberate efforts are needed to replicate these aspects in remote or hybrid

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settings. In a physical office, opportune moments to connect are built into the structure of the office, in remote working there is often a tendency to have an online meeting about everything, all the time. This, while for example the MS Teams platform has been purposefully designed to facilitate online, real-time connection in work and communication.

Interdependence in work process furthermore increases the need for connectivity, extending beyond interactions with colleagues to include the link between people, processes, and technology. The spatial aspect of connectivity also impacts trust, requiring leaders to be more intuitively "in touch" with individual team members and their needs, as visual cues are often lacking in remote settings. Leaders need to actively seek feedback and develop their digitally enabled social intelligence, to understand individual circumstances and distribute workload fairly.

The intersection of autonomy and relatedness is evident in how the flexibility of time and space interacts with set working hours and the need for coordinated availability, potentially leading to introjected regulation if not managed effectively. Providing teams with the capacity and tools for greater interdependence could foster better social exchange and a stronger sense of connectivity.

Competence presenting as 'Flex as a Way of Working'

The third dimension of SDT, competence, is about enabling capacity for employees working remotely as well as the ability to lead a mix of remote working and hybrid working team members. An expanding challenge for HE leaders is that this flexibility is not limited to work location but may also include flexible contracts and schedules. To lead in this work modalities, HE leaders require a comprehensive understanding of individual roles, workload, and team dynamics. We believe the two types of leaders in HE institutions may also experience this differently. Administrative or operationally focused leaders are usually more familiar with the process within their function and therefore, have a benefit in leading work output and facilitating role clarity. Academic or scientific leaders on the other hand are not as familiar with operational processes and therefore may find it challenging to facilitate clarity amongst team members and managing work output. These leaders are often experienced as leading activity as opposed to output, which is a challenge in remote working contexts.

The unintended consequences of this requirement for flexibility are the need for clarity and a decentralized organizing frame to support leaders in this regard. Clarity is deemed essential regarding expected work performance and availability, requiring leaders and team members to have a clear understanding of work activities that could be effectively performed remotely versus those requiring on-site presence. A clear division of work within teams is also important. A potential challenge to trust may surface when the increased digitization and automation of processes impact individual capacity and work allocation. Furthermore, increasing technological demands from faculty on support staff in remote settings could lead to increased workload and burnout if not addressed.

For employees, capacity building is essential when working flexibly. Managing their own work-life balance, building essential relations and networks to know how to get things done in an online working environment, as well as managing team dynamics in flexible work arrangements, are important.

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Remote Work in HE

While HE institutions have attempted to guide this flex as a way of working through policies, there is a further need to negotiate within teams toward a form of decentralized organizing frame, where the team coordinate the extent and format and rules to allow more efficient flexible working experience. This however is easier said than done in a bureaucratized work context such as higher education. On one side, the decision making and power is still predominantly centered in top level roles. For employees, this also becomes an issue of fairness as not all work is democratized. Some employees are not able to negotiate such flexibility due to the nature and or location of their work, there may not be an option to work remotely, and these workers may experience this as unfair. This decentralized approach, while fostering a sense of ownership, also presented an unintended consequence, the potential for individual contributions to become invisible within team-based work. This could impact trust and potentially lead to individuals feeling the need to overcompensate by demonstrating their work through visible actions, such as sending emails at off-peak times.

It is therefore not merely a function of organizational policy and guidelines, but a revised and negotiated psychological contract and actions to build and sustain trust for all. Such team level negation of the work dynamic and psychological contract speaks to a form of identified regulation, a more internalized form of extrinsic motivation where individuals consciously accept the situation as their own goal. While individuals are given autonomy to construct their work arrangements, this remains within the boundaries of what is acceptable for the team, client, and the organizational requirements for overall delivery.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The operationalization of the dimensions as self-regulation, connectivity, and flexibility as a way of working provides a valuable lens for leaders in HE to manage worker flexibility in the evolving world of work. Exploring autonomy through self-regulation highlighted the preference for flexible work but also the simultaneous need for formal frameworks, leading to the concept of introjected regulation as a motivator alongside autonomy. People desire independence but also desire fairness and therefore it is also about how leaders apply policy or framework guidelines.

The operationalization of the second dimension of SDT, relatedness as connectivity emphasized the shift from time-based work to output-focused performance and the critical need for both temporal and spatial connections in remote teams. As posited by Leonardi et al. (2024), where teams have greater interdependence, distance could potentially have negative consequences. Leaders therefore must be mindful of facilitating virtual connections and developing their social intelligence to understand and address the needs of remote workers. Digital tools for work are also essential (Zapata et al., 2024). Interdependence and the integration of people, processes, and technology further complicate connectivity in remote settings and prior research posited technostress among some workers as an unintended consequence (Harunavamwe & Kanengoni, 2023).

The theme of flexibility as a way of working, linked to competence, highlighted the challenges and complexities for leaders in managing various forms of flexibility. However, flexible work arrangements is not uncommon in higher education management (Alam et al., 2023; Al-Dmour et al., 2023). The need for clarity in roles and processes, particularly for

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academic leaders overseeing administrative staff, was identified. The proposed decentralized organizing frame, while empowering teams, also triggered identified regulation and the potential for individual contributions to become less visible. Ryan and Deci (2020) posited identified regulation as slightly more autonomous as introjected regulation.

The reflection underscores the shared responsibility of both workers and leaders in making remote work successful. Workers need to develop self-regulation skills to manage boundaries, while leaders need to focus on facilitating connections and providing clarity in a flexible working environment. Encouraging flexibility as a way of working, supported by clear policies and decentralized application, is presented as an optimal approach for HE institutions, contingent on strong team leadership.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest to be cited here.

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Human Participants

Participants signed informed consent forms, and our research conformed to the Institutional Review Board guidelines at WU and Stellenbosch university respectively.

Originality Note

The paper is the authors' original work, and proper citations are used if others' works are included.

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The authors claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this paper.

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