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Digital Education without Protection? Unpacking Policy Gaps between Remote Working Expansion and Academic Staff Well-Being in Higher Education Institutions in Tanzania

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to examine the mismatch between digital education policies and the well-being of academic staff in the lived realities of remote work as it expands in higher education institutions in Tanzania. Although these policies seek to improve access, flexibility, and continuity, they often overlook hidden workload, psychosocial pressures, and the wider human costs of digital academic work. Guided by the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Theory and supported by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the study uses a PRISMA 2020-informed systematic review of 35 papers from Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online, together with selected national and institutional policy documents, reports, and related publications, including the National ICT Policy (Tanzania), the Tanzania Education and Training Policy, institutional digital learning guidelines, and the TCU Guidelines for Online and Blended Delivery Modes of Courses for University Institutions in Tanzania of 2022. Sources were selected using defined inclusion and exclusion criteria and were analysed thematically. The findings reveal a clear mismatch between policy priorities and academic staff well-being, as policies emphasise technological adoption, access, and efficiency while underestimating invisible labour, workload intensification, technostress, and work–life boundary erosion. The study concludes that digital education policies in Tanzania remain insufficiently aligned with staff well-being and calls for more human-centred frameworks that integrate workload regulation, psychosocial support, and recognition of digital academic labour to improve the sustainability and effectiveness of higher education. The study is significant because it shifts thinking by showing that job demands, resources, and well-being are shaped not only by how work is designed, but also by the policies that guide it. It highlights that without workload-sensitive, human-centred policies, remote work can put more pressure on academic staff rather than supporting their well-being.

Key terms: Academic staff well-being, academic staff workload, digital education, remote work expansion, technostress.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of digital education has significantly reshaped higher education systems worldwide, including in Tanzania, where universities increasingly rely on remote working practices such as online teaching, virtual supervision, electronic administration, and flexible work-location arrangements. At the global level, UNESCO (2023) presents digital transformation as a pathway to inclusive and flexible education systems, while the United Nations links this shift to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. Extending this perspective, the International Labour Organisation (2021) argues that digital transformation must also align with Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work, thereby highlighting that educational expansion should not be separated from the conditions under which academic work is performed.

However, the literature reveals not a unified perspective but a clear tension. Watermeyer et al. (2021) emphasise the flexibility and expanded access enabled by digital education, while Wang et al. (2021) build on this argument by demonstrating how digital platforms sustain continuity of learning and participation. In contrast, Kniffin et al. (2022) challenge this optimistic view by showing that digitally mediated academic work often increases workload and generates technostress. Supporting this critical position, Baskici et al. (2024) show that constant connectivity intensifies job demands, whereas Marozva (2025), drawing from an African context, further links these pressures to emotional strain and declining well-being among academic staff. Rather than forming a consistent narrative, these studies reveal a contradiction in which digital systems designed for efficiency simultaneously generate additional and often hidden labour demands.

To better understand this contradiction, it is necessary to clarify key concepts. In this study, invisible labour refers to the unrecognised and often unmeasured tasks embedded in digital academic work, including continuous online availability, follow-up communication, platform management, student support, larger class size and asynchronous supervision. As Kniffin et al. (2022) demonstrate, such tasks significantly expand workload beyond formal allocations, while Marozva (2025) shows that these additional demands often remain institutionally unacknowledged. Similarly, technostress refers to the psychological strain associated with the use of digital technologies. Baskici et al. (2024) associate this strain with constant connectivity and increasing job demands, whereas Kniffin et al. (2022) highlight the pressure to continuously adapt to evolving digital systems. Together, these concepts show that the impact of digital education extends beyond technology into the lived experience of academic work.

At the national level, the alignment between policy priorities and staff well-being becomes more contested. In Tanzania, the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU, 2022) guidelines on online and blended delivery focus strongly on infrastructure, quality assurance, delivery standards, and student access. While these priorities support system development, they provide limited explicit guidance on workload regulation, psychosocial support, or the recognition of invisible labour associated with remote working. This suggests that, within the Tanzanian policy context, digital education is primarily framed as a technical and institutional challenge rather than a labour and well-being issue. This orientation is further reflected in national frameworks such as the National ICT Policy and the Education and Training Policy, which emphasise access and technological integration but offer limited direct engagement with staff well-being.

A similar pattern is evident across East Africa. Makerere University (2009), for example, prioritises platform governance and instructional continuity, while Uganda Technology and Management University (2012) focuses on access and implementation structures. Although these policies differ in emphasis, they collectively reinforce a regional trend in which technological efficiency and educational delivery are prioritised. What remains less visible across these frameworks is a structured approach to workload regulation or psychosocial protection, suggesting that the policy gap observed in Tanzania reflects a broader regional orientation rather than an isolated case.

However, this imbalance is not inevitable. Egerton University's Staff Workload Policy (2019) provides a contrasting approach by explicitly incorporating workload equity, staff satisfaction, and the principle of

a "reasonable and safe workload." Unlike the previously discussed frameworks, this policy recognises academic labour as something that must be clearly defined, measured, and protected. By doing so, it demonstrates that digital expansion can be aligned with staff well-being when policy frameworks deliberately integrate labour considerations into institutional design. This contrast highlights that existing gaps are not structural constraints but reflect different policy priorities.

Despite growing scholarly attention, an important gap remains insufficiently addressed. While Kniffin et al. (2022) and Marozva (2025) provide detailed accounts of the effects of digital work on academic staff, Watermeyer et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2021) continue to emphasise its benefits. However, both strands of literature largely focus on outcomes and experiences. What remains underexplored is how policy frameworks shape these outcomes by enabling, reproducing, or failing to regulate hidden workload pressures and well-being risks. This lack of synthesis creates a critical blind spot, particularly within the Tanzanian and East African context, where policy-driven expansion of digital education continues to accelerate.

This study addresses this gap by offering a systematic and critical synthesis of the relationship between digital education policies, remote working expansion, and academic staff well-being. Its novelty lies in integrating these dimensions within a single analytical framework, rather than treating them as separate issues. By linking global debates, regional patterns, and the Tanzanian policy context, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of digital education as not only a technological or pedagogical shift, but also a policy and labour issue.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework guiding the study, followed by the methodology based on a PRISMA-informed systematic review. The findings section then outlines the key themes emerging from the analysis, particularly in relation to policy gaps and their implications. The final section discusses these findings and offers recommendations for more balanced and human-centred digital education policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

This study is guided mainly by the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Theory and supported by Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Demerouti et al. (2001) explain that every job involves demands that require effort and resources that help individuals cope, remain motivated, and maintain well-being. Building on this, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) show that strain becomes more likely when job demands increase without sufficient resources to balance them. This assumption fits the present study because remote working in digital education expands demands through online teaching, virtual supervision, continuous digital communication, and platform management, while institutional support, workload regulation, and psychosocial protection often remain limited.

The study adopts the demand–resource logic of JD–R to explain the imbalance at the centre of the research problem. While remote working is often presented as flexible and efficient, the empirical evidence shows that it can also lead to workload intensification, technostress, and strain among academic staff. However, JD–R is not fully sufficient on its own because it was originally developed to explain stress at the job-design level rather than how institutional or national policies create or sustain such imbalances. For this reason, the study uses JD–R selectively, focusing on how expanding demands may outpace available resources. Its key contribution to this study is that it provides a structural explanation of the policy gap, showing why the expansion of remote working without matching support mechanisms can undermine academic staff well-being.

The supporting theory, SDT, was developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), who argue that well-being depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2000) further show that when these needs are not met, individuals are more likely to experience reduced motivation and well-being. This assumption is partly applicable to the study because remote working in digital education is often assumed to enhance autonomy through flexibility. However, the evidence suggests that flexibility may coexist with constant availability, technological pressure, and weakened

collegial interaction, which can undermine these needs. SDT is therefore used as a supporting lens to explain how the structural imbalance identified by JD–R is experienced at the individual level. Its contribution to the study lies in providing a human-centred explanation, showing how unmet psychological needs translate institutional and policy conditions into lived experiences of stress, disconnection, and reduced well-being among academic staff.

Empirical Literature Review

Empirical studies on remote working in digital education show that its effects on academic staff are mixed and strongly shaped by context, institutional support, and workload design. Using a PRISMA-based systematic review of 23 studies, Tarafdar et al. (2019) show that working from home in higher education can improve flexibility and continuity of academic work, but also intensify workload pressure, role ambiguity, and support challenges. A broader systematic review by Watermeyer et al. (2021) reaches a similar conclusion, but places greater emphasis on contradiction, showing that remote work may increase autonomy and flexibility while also contributing to stress, isolation, and blurred work–life boundaries. This tension is further reinforced by Watermeyer et al. (2021), who demonstrate that digitally mediated academic work often extends into boundaryless labour, as well as by Karatuna et al. (2022), who identify work–home interference as a persistent strain in remote working environments. Together, these studies suggest that flexibility is not inherently protective; rather, its effects depend on how institutions structure workload and provide support.

Further empirical evidence shows that digital strain is not only about time and workload, but also about the technological environment itself. Watermeyer (2021), drawing on evidence from South African lecturers, finds that technostress is a tangible and lived experience in digitally mediated teaching. In a complementary perspective, Poalses and Bezuidenhout (2018) argue that stress in higher education institutions must be understood through the interaction between job demands and available resources, rather than individual coping strategies alone. Taken together, these findings suggest that academic staff well-being is shaped not only by remote working arrangements but also by how institutions balance digital expectations with organisational support structures.

Within the African higher education context, qualitative studies provide deeper insight into lived academic experiences but remain limited in scope. Marozva (2025) shows that hybrid working can weaken collegial relationships, reduce social belonging, and strain work interactions among academics in South Africa. Building on this, Marozva and Pelser (2025) shift attention toward institutional responses, highlighting the need for strategies that improve social well-being in hybrid work environments. While these studies are important in challenging the assumption that flexibility automatically improves welfare, their reliance on a single institutional context and small purposive samples limits their broader applicability. More importantly, they do not systematically examine whether existing digital education policies include mechanisms to regulate workload, recognise invisible labour, or protect staff from psychosocial strain.

Policy-oriented evidence sharpens this concern by showing how institutional priorities are framed. In Tanzania, the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU, 2022) guidelines on online and blended delivery emphasise infrastructure, quality assurance, assessment, delivery standards, and institutional readiness, but provide limited explicit attention to workload regulation or staff well-being . In contrast, Egerton University's Staff Workload Policy (2019) explicitly foregrounds workload equity, reasonableness, and staff protection. This comparison is significant because it demonstrates that the pressures associated with digital expansion are not inevitable outcomes of technology adoption, but are shaped by whether policy frameworks explicitly regulate academic labour.

Taken together, the empirical literature reveals three consistent patterns. First, remote working in digital education produces both opportunities and pressures, combining flexibility and autonomy with increased workload, technostress, and work–life interference (Watermeyer et al. 2021). Second, these outcomes vary across contexts, suggesting that institutional support, workload structures, and resource availability play a critical role in shaping staff experiences (Poalses

& Bezuidenhout, 2018; Marozva, 2025). Third, existing empirical evidence remains fragmented: systematic reviews identify general trends, qualitative studies provide contextual depth, and policy documents clarify institutional priorities, but these strands are rarely integrated to explain how policy frameworks shape academic staff well-being in practice (Tarafdar et al., 2019; TCU, 2022). It is this empirical gap between remote working experiences, digital education policy, and staff well-being that justifies the present systematic review.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a systematic review design to examine the policy gap between remote working expansion in digital education and academic staff well-being in higher education. Snyder (2019) supports systematic reviews as appropriate for synthesising existing knowledge in a transparent and structured way, while Page et al. (2021) strengthen this methodological foundation through the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which outline how studies should be identified, screened, and selected rigorously.

The study relied entirely on secondary data drawn from literature retrieved from Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL), together with relevant policy documents and institutional reports. To guide retrieval, a structured search strategy was developed using key terms such as remote work, digital education, online teaching, virtual supervision, technostress, workload, and academic staff well-being.

Study selection was guided by clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria rather than purposive sampling. Sources were included if they addressed digital education, remote academic work, and staff well-being within higher education contexts. By contrast, studies were excluded if they focused on non-higher-education settings, were unrelated to remote working, or did not engage with policy or staff well-being concerns. In line with Page et al. (2021), the review process moved through identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion, which helped remove duplicates and retain only relevant sources.

After this process, a final sample of 35 peer-reviewed papers and policy documents was retained for analysis. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) provide the core procedure for this method by showing how texts can be read critically, coded systematically, grouped into categories, and interpreted through recurring themes. Complementing this, Nowell et al. (2017) show that thematic analysis can be applied in a way that strengthens transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness in qualitative synthesis.

Although the study relied on secondary data, ethical standards were still observed. These included accurate citation of all reviewed sources, careful handling of documentary materials, and faithful interpretation of authors' original arguments so that the evidence was not distorted or misrepresented.

This methodological approach was appropriate for two reasons. First, the systematic review design made it possible to select evidence in a transparent and replicable way, as emphasised by Snyder (2019) and operationalised through PRISMA by Page et al. (2021). Second, thematic analysis made it possible to interpret patterns across both empirical studies and policy documents, with Braun and Clarke (2006) focusing on coding and theme development, while Nowell et al. (2017) reinforced the importance of analytic rigour. In addition, although the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Theory mainly explains stress at the job-design level, this study addressed that limitation by combining policy document analysis with thematic synthesis of empirical evidence. This made it possible to move beyond individual job conditions and examine how institutional and policy frameworks shape the balance between demands and resources in digital education contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The review of 35 papers revealed five interrelated themes. First, about 28 of the 35 studies reported that remote working expansion in digital education has normalised new forms of academic labour, particularly online teaching, virtual supervision, electronic administration, and flexible work-location arrangements. Given the distribution across different forms of academic tasks, this finding can be effectively

illustrated using a bar graph to show the relative dominance of each activity.

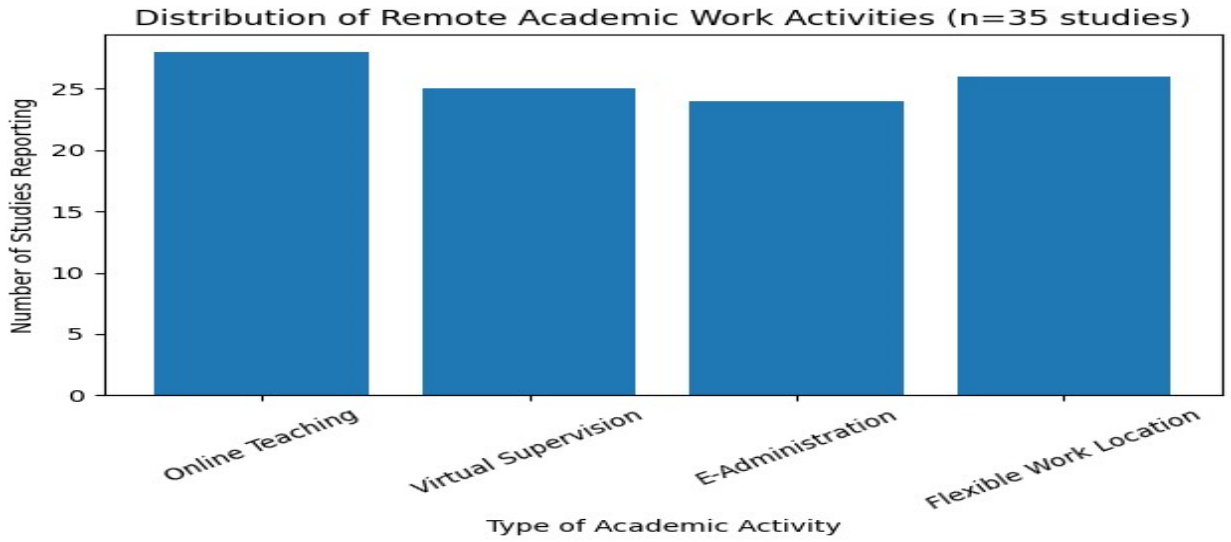

Figure 1: Distribution of Remote Academic Work Activities (n=35 Studies)

Figure 1 above shows that online teaching is the most frequently reported activity, followed by flexible work-location arrangements, virtual supervision, and electronic administration. This supports the finding that remote working has diversified and normalised multiple forms of academic labour.

Second, around 26 of the 35 reviewed studies and policy documents showed that institutional policies primarily prioritise access, flexibility, continuity, and technological efficiency. Because this theme reflects categorical emphasis in policy focus, it can be presented using a descriptive table to compare how frequently each priority appears across the reviewed documents.

Table 1: Policy Focus in Reviewed Studies and Documents

Theme	Evidence from the Review	Frequency
Policy priorities in digital education	Institutional policies primarily prioritised access, flexibility, continuity, and technological efficiency	Around 26 of 35

As shown in Table 1, around 26 of the 35 reviewed studies and policy documents indicated that institutional policies mainly prioritised access, flexibility, continuity, and technological efficiency.

Third, about 27 of the 35 studies highlighted hidden workload intensification associated with remote academic work. These included constant online availability, follow-up communication, platform management, digital reporting, and asynchronous supervision. Due to the multiple components of invisible labour, this finding is well suited for a histogram, which can show the frequency distribution of different workload elements.

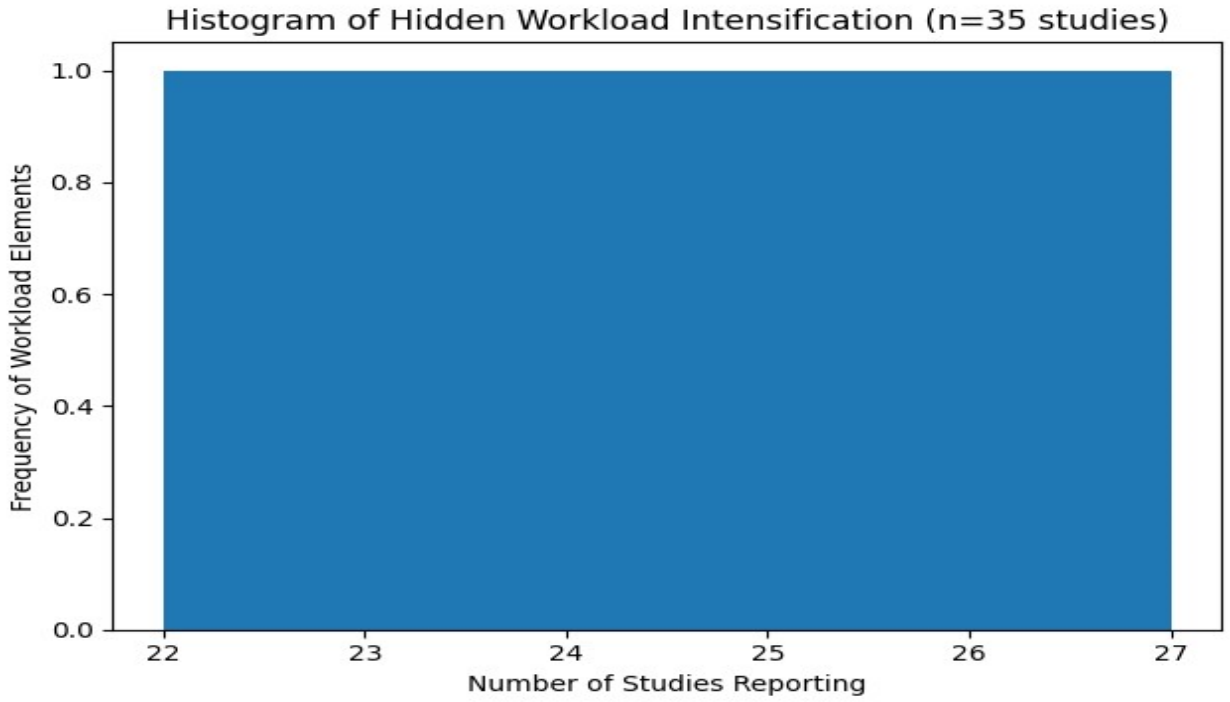

Figure 2: Histogram of Hidden Workload Intensification (n=35 Studies)

Figure 2 presents a histogram of hidden workload intensification, showing that most workload elements cluster within a high frequency range (approximately 22–27 studies), indicating that these forms of invisible labour are widely reported across the reviewed literature.

Fourth, approximately 25 of the 35 studies identified challenges to academic staff well-being, especially technostress, emotional strain, reduced collegial belonging, and blurred work–life boundaries. At the same time, about 8 studies found that flexibility and autonomy could be beneficial under supportive institutional conditions. This contrast between positive and negative outcomes can be effectively visualised using a comparative chart to highlight the imbalance.

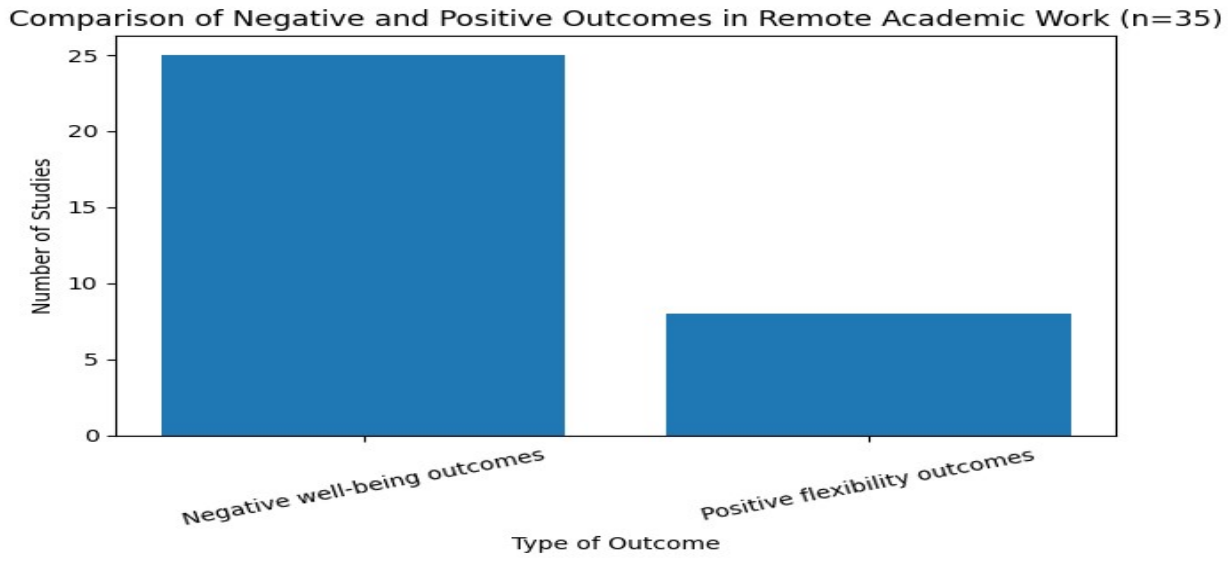

Figure 3: Comparison of Negative and Positive Outcomes in Remote Academic Work (n=35)

Figure 3 shows a clear imbalance between negative and positive outcomes associated with remote academic working. While a minority of studies identified flexibility and autonomy as beneficial under supportive conditions, a much larger proportion reported technostress, emotional strain, reduced collegial belonging, and blurred work–life boundaries.

Fifth, most of the policy-related documents reviewed (over 30 of 35) pointed to a clear policy gap, while fewer than 5 documents explicitly mentioned workload safeguards. This disparity can be clearly demonstrated using a simple bar chart or pie chart, showing the difference between policy expansion and staff protection.

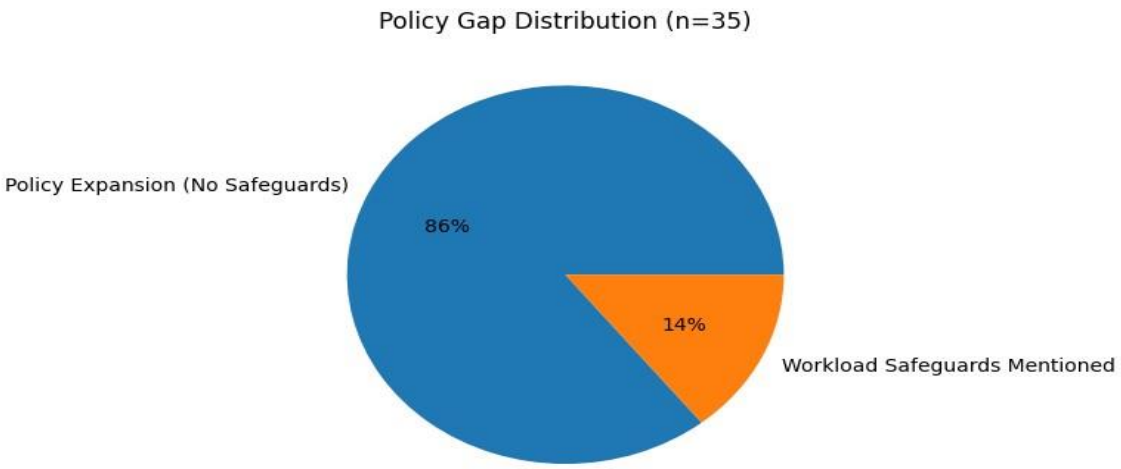

Figure 4: Policy Gap Distribution (n=35)

Figure 4 further illustrates this imbalance, with the majority (86%) of policy documents emphasising expansion without safeguards, while only a small proportion (14%) of workload protection explicitly addresses workload safeguards.

Discussion

The findings of this review point to five related issues. First, remote work has clearly changed the nature of academic labour by making online teaching, virtual supervision, digital administration, and location-flexible work part of everyday university practice. This supports earlier studies, which show that working from home can improve flexibility, continuity, and institutional adaptability, especially where digital systems are already in place. Tarafdar et al. (2019) stress the value of continuity and flexibility, while Watermeyer et al. (2021) add that remote working can help institutions keep teaching and administration going during disruption.

Second, the review shows that policy and management attention are still directed more toward access, continuity, and technological efficiency than toward staff welfare. This is consistent with Tarafdar et al. (2019), who show that institutions often respond to digital change by protecting service delivery first, while staff support receives less attention. What this review makes clearer is that this imbalance has real consequences for the people expected to sustain digital education in practice.

Third, the findings show that remote academic work often brings hidden workload intensification. This includes constant connectivity, platform management, follow-up communication, and administrative spillover. Molino et al. (2020) show how digital work can stretch working time, while Charalampous et al. (2019) help explain why much of this labour remains invisible in formal workload systems. In other words, what looks efficient at the policy level may feel overwhelming at the individual level.

Fourth, the review found strong well-being pressures, especially technostress, emotional strain, isolation, and blurred work–life boundaries. These patterns are also reported by Watermeyer et al. (2021), who highlight stress and boundary difficulties, while

Karatuna et al. (2022) place more attention on emotional strain and adjustment challenges. At the same time, the evidence is not entirely one-sided. A smaller number of studies suggest that remote working can support balance and flexibility when strong institutional support is available. This means the issue is not remote working alone, but the conditions under which it is organised.

Most importantly, this review shows that these outcomes are shaped not only by personal experience but also by policy design. The problem is not simply that remote work exists; it is that, in many contexts, it is expanding faster than the protections needed to support those doing it. Where policies encourage digital working without clear safeguards for workload, recognition, and psychosocial support, negative outcomes are more likely. This helps explain why similar remote-work arrangements can produce very different results across institutions.

These findings are also consistent with the theories guiding the study. Job Demands–Resources Theory explains that stress becomes more likely when demands increase without matching resources, while well-being improves when support and recognition are available (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Self-Determination Theory adds that well-being depends on autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In this review, remote working appears to support autonomy in principle, but that benefit is weakened when academics face overload, weak support, and reduced collegial connection. So, while the study agrees with earlier research that remote work can be beneficial, it also shows that flexibility on its own is not enough. Without policy-backed support, flexibility can easily become another pathway to work intensification rather than empowerment (Wang et al., 2021).

These findings also carry practical lessons. Policymakers, HR managers, and university leaders need to move beyond seeing digital education mainly as a matter of technology and delivery. Institutions need clearer workload frameworks that recognise hidden digital tasks such as constant online availability, student follow-up, and platform management. They also need workload limits, stronger psychosocial support, and policy arrangements that treat staff well-being as part of the success of digital education itself. Put simply, digital education is more likely to be sustainable when institutions protect the people who make it possible.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Sustainable digital education depends on whether higher learning institutions move beyond a purely technocentric approach and adopt policy frameworks that protect the people who sustain digital transformation. The key issue is not the existence of remote working in academic settings, but how it is managed. When remote working expands without balanced and human-centred policies, it can place significant strain on academic staff through increased workload, technostress, and weakened work–life boundaries. This study shows that digital education must be approached with greater balance. While it offers clear benefits in terms of flexibility, access, and continuity, its long-term success depends on whether institutions give equal attention to academic staff well-being. Without this balance, the gains of digital transformation may be difficult to sustain over time.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of this study, several practical steps are necessary to improve policy and practice in higher education. Institutions should develop clear workload frameworks that formally recognise hidden digital tasks such as constant online availability, student follow-up, and platform management, so that academic labour is more accurately measured and fairly distributed. In addition, universities should introduce workload limits and monitoring mechanisms to prevent excessive work demands associated with remote academic work, thereby protecting staff from burnout and long-term stress. There is also a need to strengthen psychosocial support systems, including counselling services, peer support, and staff well-being programmes, to address technostress, emotional strain, and isolation. Furthermore, institutional policies should ensure the recognition of digital academic labour, including teaching, supervision, and administrative work carried out through online platforms. Finally, policymakers and university leaders should adopt a more human-centred approach to digital education, treating staff well-being as a core

component of educational quality rather than a secondary concern.

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