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Teaching in a Pandemic: An Exploratory Study into University Instructors' Perceptions of Work-from-Home Opportunities and Challenges during the COVID-19 Lockdown in South Africa

Kazeem Ajasa Badaru*^{ID}, Kemi Olajumoke Adu^{ID},
Emmanuel Olusola Adu^{ID} and Ntombozuko Duku^{ID}
University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

Abstract. Recent studies have investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, organisations, and education in South Africa. However, research on the work-from-home opportunities and challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown is still scarce in the context of South Africa. This study, therefore, explored university instructors' perceptions of work-from-home opportunities and challenges in South Africa. The study, guided by the SWOT analysis as the theoretical framework, was located within the qualitative research paradigm. It leveraged a sample of ten academics drawn from the Faculty of Education at a rural-based university using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview and analysis was thematically performed. The findings revealed that WFH arrangements offered opportunities for working from home without incurring the cost of travelling, saved commuting time, provided new ways of teaching and learning with evolving digital platforms, and allowed for prioritising of time for self-development and relaxation. WFH challenges included social isolation, disconnection from colleagues, fatigue from performing monotonous routines daily, inadequate data, and poor internet connectivity. Thus, the study recommends the provision of internet facility support and technological training of academic staff of universities on innovative and pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning for blended and/or online teaching in preparation for any similar disruption of education in the future.

Keywords: work-from-home; university instructors; COVID-19 lockdown; use of technology; pandemic

* Corresponding author: *Kazeem Ajasa Badaru, badruajasa97@gmail.com*

1. Introduction

Recent studies have investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, organisations, and education in South Africa. However, studies on the work-from-home (WFH) opportunities and challenges experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown are still scarce in the context of South Africa. This study therefore set out to fill the gap in the extant literature by exploring university instructors' perceptions of the work-from-home opportunities and challenges in South Africa. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe was followed by the implementation of varying degrees of lockdown measures, such as total restrictions on human movements locally and internationally, by governments (Smith et al., 2021). This unprecedented restriction of human movements during the lockdown, described by a team of researchers as the "great pause or anthropause", affected over 4.5 billion people worldwide (Smith et al., 2021, p. 1). Drastic measures taken by most countries to curtail the spread of the coronavirus included placing bans on public gatherings and other social functions, the imposition of sit-at-home orders on the workforce in both private and public sectors, and closures of schools, colleges, and universities (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

The closures of educational institutions forcefully compelled university instructors in South Africa and worldwide to work from home and shift their teaching engagements with students from a face-to-face delivery mode to an online or virtual mode of teaching because of the restrictions imposed on human and vehicular movements due to the pandemic (Joseph & Trinick, 2021). The COVID-19 lockdown and its resultant effects, such as the work-from-home (WFH) option for academics, created certain opportunities and challenges (Lantsoght et al., 2021). The concept of working from home has gained popularity since March 2020 when the global lockdown was first introduced as a measure for stopping the spread of the virus. It is a phenomenon that has been studied using various but overlapping terms, such as work-from-home, "telecommuting, telework, virtual office, remote work, location independent working, and home office" (Aczel et al., 2021). Working from home was more of an alternative strategy adopted by organisations and/or employers for mitigating the widespread economic impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on productivity (Jenkins & Smith, 2021). It was the only safe option available to workers who were forced to stay out of their normal workplaces and they were able to carry out their daily routines from the safety and comfort of their homes.

Before the pandemic and the resultant lockdown of the world, several university instructors were reportedly not proficient in the use of the internet and other technologies for teaching and learning purposes (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2020; Ugwuanyi et al., 2021). As Crawford et al. (as cited in Joseph & Trinick, 2021) succinctly put it: "While some universities were somewhat prepared for the unexpected shift due to COVID-19 as they had offered blended or fully online programmes before the pandemic, others had a lot more ground to cover" (p. 3). WFH had two characteristics: people were left with the option of working from home, and they completely relied on the use of information and communication

technologies (ICTs) for connections between home and the office (Rupietta & Beckmann, 2016).

Vyas and Butakhieo (2021) have noted two important factors closely correlated with WFH: namely organisational factors, as well as individual and family factors. Organisational factors involved in WFH include support for the demands from workers; the cost of WFH facilities; training on the utilisation of technology; organisational communication; and trust (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). As stated, WFH is also influenced by individual and family factors (Solís, 2016; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). According to Baruch (as cited in Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021), WFH requires individuals to be self-disciplined, self-motivated, able to work independently without supervision, be tenacious, self-organised, self-confident, have time-management skills, and be computer literate. Furthermore, related WFH family factors include the characteristics of the household such as the size of the family apartments, the number of family members sharing the accommodation space, as well as the number and age of the children in the family (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021).

In South Africa, academics in the tertiary institutions had to stay away from campuses and resort to online platforms for the continuation of teaching and learning activities amid strict COVID-19 lockdowns. This study explored the university instructors' perceptions of WFH opportunities and challenges in the context of South Africa. This study is significant as its findings will contribute empirical evidence to the body of literature concerning the WFH challenges and opportunities, from the perspectives of academics in a rural based-university in South Africa, and in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown. In light of the foregoing, the study set out to solve the main research question: What opportunities and challenges did university instructors experience when working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa? It also attempted to address the following specific questions:

1. How did participants perceive as the concept of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa?
2. What opportunities did the participants gain from WFH arrangements during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa?
3. What challenges did the participants experience with WFH arrangements during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa?

2. The Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

According to Vyas and Butakhieo (2021), the concept of WFH was first used by Nilles as far back as 1973. The WFH practice is conceptualised as a typical term that encapsulates the idea of working from any place apart from the designated workplace provided by any organisation for its workforce (Aczel et al., 2021). The lockdown that followed the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated employees (including academics) working from other locations outside their primary offices (Biron et al., 2020). In the extant literature, WFH is used interchangeably with telework, remote work, telecommuting, virtual work, e-work, or working in a home office (Aczel et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2015; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). Each of these terms is essentially about an employee's ability to

execute work duties using technology in a flexible workplace such as from home (Grant et al., 2019; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). WFH was an emergency response that brought to the fore the economic potential of the home as a site for productive work during the COVID-19 lockdown period (Jenkins & Smith, 2021). For this study, the concept of WFH was regarded as an idea and a practice. It was an idea that suggested that work could be done elsewhere other than the usual designated workplace or office. It was also regarded as a practice whereby people performed their official duties, which would ordinarily be performed in offices or at workplaces, from their homes since human movements were restricted to curtail the spread of the SARS-CoV-2. The benefits and challenges of WFH practices were analysed in a study conducted by Vyas and Butakhieo (2021) in Hong Kong. In this study, the authors applied the SWOT analysis to understand the concept of the WFH arrangement in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This is presented in Figure 1 below:

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <p>Flexible arrangements, no office distractions, autonomy/freedom/cozy/familiar environment, time-saving, no commuting, reduced stress, spend less on office space, work-life balance, and reduced absenteeism.</p>	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <p>Distractions from family and household duties, living and working in a small home space, loneliness/missing social interactions, lack of hardware support, blurred lifestyle, not favoured by all employees, and injustice.</p>
<p>WFH</p>	
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <p>Hybrid models, and new talents from around the world.</p>	<p>THREATS</p> <p>Cybersecurity: data theft, loss of corporate/employee/customer data, no WFH policies and regulations, extra expenses associated with WFH practice. High competition: job may be outsourced to cheap overseas labour.</p>

Figure 1: A SWOT Analysis of the WFH Model

Source: Adapted from Vyas & Butakhieo (2021)

The SWOT analysis of the WFH arrangement was relevant in the context of this study as its objective was to explore the perception of academics in South Africa regarding the opportunities and challenges of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown. This theoretical framework guided the researchers of this study in drafting the correct type of questions for the data collection stage. The SWOT analysis of WFH, as shown in Figure 1 above, shows that WFH strengths include flexible work arrangements; the absence of office distractions by colleagues; workers enjoy some degree of autonomy or freedom from supervision by their superiors; stress reduction as people work in a familiar environment; there is no commuting from home to the workplace; and money is saved as less is spent on office workspace. In addition, WFH offers opportunities for hybrid models of work and access to new talents from other parts of the world through digital platforms (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). For this study, both the weaknesses and threats of WFH based on the SWOT analysis were referred to as the challenges. Again, Figure 1 above shows that WFH challenges (weaknesses and threats) are distractions caused by family or house chores; working from home can be inconvenient and uncomfortable due to space constraints; the absence of

communication and interaction with colleagues; a lack of office infrastructure to support working at home; and there is a lack of justice as it does not favour workers equally. Other challenges of WFH are the lack of policies and regulations for WFH practices; cybersecurity; and extra expenses that can be incurred by workers as they carry out their official duties from home (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021).

3. The Literature Review

There are very few studies on the opportunities inherent in WFH arrangements for academics and their professional practices within the higher education sector during the COVID-19 lockdown (Aczel et al., 2021; Lantsoght et al., 2021). From a positive angle, researchers found that WFH arrangements are beneficial to workers as they eliminate or reduce the need to commute from home to the workplace daily (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021), and they allow workers increased autonomy over the use of their time, with less interruption from colleagues. WFH also makes it easier to manage family responsibilities and demands, and workers can carry out their official duties with greater flexibility from the comfort of their abode. This increases their job motivation and satisfaction, and grants opportunities for more time and engagement with leisure activities (Aczel et al., 2021; Lantsoght et al., 2021; Okeke et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). In a recent study that investigated the challenges and opportunities experienced by academics during COVID-19, academics reportedly enjoyed the opportunity to reach an increased level of technological proficiency through learning about new digital tools and platforms for teaching and engaging their students. They were also able to continue with their research work and conduct official meetings with their colleagues (Lantsoght et al., 2021). Other benefits of WFH include the avoidance of office politics, the use of less office space and facilities, improved gender diversity, much healthier workers with less absenteeism and greater talent retention, and greater productivity (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). In Japan, a study found that WFH led to increased life satisfaction for workers (Kazekami, 2020). Commenting about the flexibility of working from home, Makhaga (2020) opined that it was advantageous for workers to do their work from anywhere and at any time of the day. Given the deadly nature of the pandemic, working from home was better and safer than working in the office where people could be exposed to the threats of dying from the COVID-19 infections (Makhaga, 2020).

The WFH arrangement, despite its inherent opportunities, is not without challenges, especially for academics during the lockdown period. Recent studies report that WFH arrangements cause employees to be disconnected from their colleagues, thereby leading to isolation as a result of being physically and socially distanced from their fellow workers. They also have difficulties with switching off and the need to cope with distractions from children and other family members locked out of schools and workplaces due to the closure of schools and workplaces (Aczel et al., 2021; Kazekami, 2020; Lantsoght et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). WFH requires quiet and dedicated spaces for the performance of work duties and this requirement can be very challenging for workers who live in very small homes and apartments (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). A study revealed that online distance education academics complained of WFH challenges including a lack of

opportunities for skills development and a lack of physical interactions with their colleagues (Aczel et al., 2021). Another challenge was the perceived greater workload resulting from preparation for online teaching engagements by academics (Okeke et al., 2021). University academics also had to contend with the challenge of the non-availability of pedagogical practices for online teaching, and many underprivileged students lacked devices for online learning platforms (Okeke et al., 2021). It was also reported in another study that workers who engaged in WFH practice found it difficult to manage time between working and non-working hours; a practice that usually resulted in overwork (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021).

Be that as it may, a review of empirical studies revealed that there was little attention given to the challenges and opportunities of WFH arrangements in the context of the lived experiences of the academics in higher education institutions during the lockdown period in South Africa. This study addressed this gap in the extant literature by investigating university instructors' perceptions of WFH opportunities and challenges during the lockdown period in South Africa. The researchers selected a rural-based university in the Eastern Cape Province as the location of the study. This location was appropriate because it was one of the provinces where the prevalence of COVID-19 infections was high during the lockdown period.

4. The Methodology

This study aimed at exploring university instructors' perceptions of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown. In this section, the research paradigm, design, approach, procedure, data collection, and analysis are given rigorous attention.

4.1 Research Paradigm

A researcher's action is guided by a set of beliefs, otherwise known as a philosophical framework (Badaru & Adu, 2018). The paradigm for this study was interpretivism. Interpretivism is a research paradigm that allows researchers to study phenomena by using a qualitative approach. The interpretivist paradigm is a philosophical belief that reality is complex and multi-layered. Therefore, any single phenomenon can have multiple interpretations. This paradigm becomes useful in helping researchers understand how people interpret and interact with their social milieu.

4.2 Research Design

The design of a phenomenological case study was adopted to explore the university instructors' perceptions of WFH challenges and opportunities during the lockdown period in a rural-based university in South Africa. According to Creswell (2013), the underlying goal of a phenomenology design is to make interpretations of a given phenomenon under study. This design, otherwise known as the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was most appropriate for this study because it guided the researchers to gather an in-depth understanding of WFH, being the phenomenon studied, from the participants' perspectives as they experienced it during the lockdown period (Smith & Osborn as cited in Sumalinog, 2022).

4.3 Research Approach

A qualitative interpretivist case study research approach was most useful for this study. Nieuwenhuis (2020) argued that a qualitative research approach focuses on exploring the experiences, meanings, beliefs, experiences as well as perspectives of participants regarding the investigation of a social phenomenon. Creswell (2009) notes that a qualitative paradigm is an interpretative approach that is strongly embedded in an empathetic understanding of the everyday experience of people in specific natural settings. It is an approach with a belief that reality is best interpreted through the meaning attached to the phenomenon under study (Badaru, 2019).

4.4 Research Participants

The study targeted all the lecturers in the Faculty of Education in a rural-based university in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The sample size comprised ten university teachers selected from the Faculty of Education using a purposive sampling technique. This sampling technique is otherwise known as judgemental, selective, or subjective sampling which allows the researcher to rely on their judgement for choosing participants who share similar and ideal peculiarities relevant to the study (Nhongo & Siziba, 2022). The inclusion criteria for choosing the participants was purposive and based on their ranks, their experiences in conducting teaching and related activities from home, as well as their specialisations in education cutting across science education, educational foundations, humanities, and management sciences. It was believed that involving instructors of various cadres and in different fields of study in education would help the researchers obtain balanced and robust views. Although a total of 15 instructors were invited to participate, only 10 of them eventually agreed to take part in the study. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to the selected participants via email because the lecturers were still working remotely during the period of data collection for this study. The researchers decided to only invite the Faculty of Education's instructors whose email addresses were readily available as human movements were still restricted by the government. Following the positive responses to the email invitations, the dates for data collection were set by considering the convenience and availability of each of the participants. In conformity with the ethical principles of research, the identities of the participants and the institution where the study was conducted remained anonymous and undisclosed. The participants were thus identified as Lecturers 1, 2, 3...10, as presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Variables

Participant	Gender	Specialisation	Number of Years in Service	Rank
Lecturer 1	Male	Mathematics Education	13	Professor
Lecturer 2	Male	Early Childhood Education	6	Senior Lecturer
Lecturer 3	Female	History Education	8	Senior Lecturer
Lecturer 4	Male	Curriculum Studies	5	Lecturer

Lecturer 5	Female	Accounting Education	3	Lecturer
Lecturer 6	Female	Early Childhood Education	11	Professor
Lecturer 7	Female	Mathematics Education	9	Professor
Lecturer 8	Female	Language Education and Curriculum Studies	7	Professor
Lecturer 9	Female	Early Childhood Education	12	Professor
Lecturer 10	Male	Mathematics Education	5	Senior Lecturer

Table 1 shows that 50% of the participants were professors while others were senior lecturers and lecturers who had work experience of three years or more. It also reveals that 60% of the participants who participated in this study were females and 40% were males.

4.5 Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was designed in the English language for data collection. The instrument was validated by other colleagues to ensure that its items were valid and appropriate for measuring the objectives of the study (see Appendix 1 for the research instrument). The interviews were conducted in a manner where the researchers freely probed further on issues of interest. In order to ensure an effective IPA, the interviewers established a rapport with their interviewees (Smith & Osborn as cited in Sumalinog, 2022). Before the data collection stage, the researchers sought and obtained ethical clearance from the research ethics committee in their institution. Subsequently, arrangements were made for the interview schedules via WhatsApp and Telegram Messaging and video sessions. The convenience and availability of the participants were given the utmost primacy before fixing the time and date for the interview sessions for each of the participants. It took 16 days, amidst unstable internet connectivity and other challenges, to complete the interview sessions with all the participants. During the interviews, participants were asked to complete and sign the informed consent forms. We also sought the consent of the participants for their responses to be recorded with the aid of an android phone's video recorder. Two of the researchers transcribed each of the recordings verbatim. Participants were urged to read and confirm the textual data to verify whether or not they were the narratives expressed during the data collection stage. Following the confirmation of the transcribed data, the researchers coded and categorised the textual data into the different themes that provided the answers to the research questions, and an audit trail was performed to ensure the dependability of the research findings.

4.6 Data Trustworthiness (Reliability)

Data trustworthiness is required in any qualitative research. It has to do with concerns for the findings of a qualitative study to be found worthy of being given attention (Badaru & Adu, 2021). In tandem with the data trustworthiness criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Loh, 2013), the data for this study

were collected and analysed while ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability during the process. The researchers performed the data analysis independently, then discussed and compared the various themes and reached an 'intercoder agreement' to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Moosa & Bekker, 2021, p. 67).

4.7 Data Analysis

The data were analysed with the aid of the Atlas 6.2 software application for thematic content analysis. This is a process of transcribing the data, perusing the transcribed data over and over again, identifying the themes, and finally writing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Aloka, 2021). This method of qualitative data analysis was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researchers to scrutinise and interpret the interview data holistically.

5. Results

This study explored the university instructors' perception of work-from-home opportunities and challenges in the context of South Africa. The sub-research questions were addressed using the different themes that emerged from the narratives given by the participants.

5.1 WFH Conceptualisations

The researchers asked the first sub-research question: How did participants perceive the concept of WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown? This was done to gain insights into the participants' understanding of the concept of WFH in the context of the COVID-19 lockdown. The majority of the responses from the participants indicated that they had a good understanding of the WFH arrangements. The general understanding emanating from their responses was that WFH meant that they had to perform their official duties such as teaching, supervising research students, and attending departmental meetings from their homes or any other location outside of their workplaces. For instance, the following response was obtained from one of the participants:

"Working from home means not going to office during work hours. Rather you do your daily office work in the comfort of your home (Lecturer 7, Female)."

The above excerpt from the interview responses indicated that participants agreed on the meaning of WFH as a work practice within the home space and environment. Thus, it was correct to define WFH as a work arrangement whereby workers were given greater autonomy to carry out their official tasks from their various homes owing to certain factors which made it practically impossible for them to report to the office or workplace.

5.2 Opportunities associated with WFH

The researchers posed the sub-research question: What opportunities did the participants gain from WFH arrangements during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa? They wanted to probe the opportunities that the participants had by working from home in the course of being locked down in their various homes due to the imposition of the COVID-19 movement restrictions. The responses of the participants indicated that the WFH arrangements were beneficial to them.

According to most of them, the WFH arrangements offered opportunities to save time hitherto spent commuting from home to the office in the pre-COVID-19 lockdown period. In addition, they disclosed that working from home offered opportunities to prioritise time for work and self-development, to learn about new technological and innovative ways of teaching, assessing, and conducting research without leaving their homes.

5.2.1 Time-saving

The findings of this study indicated that working from home saved time so that participants could do more work at home, as they did not have to spend time commuting from home to their office or workplace. The university teachers did not have to drive from home to the campus during the lockdown. An excerpt of the narratives from the participants expatiates on this as follows:

“Working from home meant that there was more time to do my academic work. I no longer had to drive to and from work. I used the morning hours for teaching through blackboard collaboration with undergraduate students. I also responded to students’ emails during morning hours. In the afternoon, I sometimes had lectures for postgraduate students or supervision meetings. In the evening, I would then focus on research (Lecturer 2, Male).”

From the above narratives, it was safe to conclude that working from home saved time that would otherwise be spent commuting from home to the university campus. The participants regarded this as one of the opportunities offered by WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown.

5.2.2 Exposure to new technological skills

Another opportunity provided by WFH during the COVID-19 lockdown was the exposure of the participants to new technological skills and the use of innovative digital platforms for teaching and learning. The participants reported that they gained new technological skills by using digital platforms when presenting their classes to students. This opportunity, according to the participants, was an enhancement of their teaching career as university instructors. A participant had the following to say:

“I learned new technological skills and learned to work smart to cope during the hard moments. I am sure I worked double the normal working hours, but I also gained so much more. On a personal level, I also learned new skills and got to know my strengths and weaknesses of being without colleagues constantly around me. I also learned new ways of presenting my classes and will most definitely use this next year to make the most of the content and quality presented to students (Lecturer 5, Female).”

From the above findings, it was safe to conclude that working from home offered the opportunity for the acquisition of new technological skills and the use of innovative and digital platforms for teaching and learning. It therefore enhanced technology-based teaching and learning activities.

5.2.3 Flexibility

Flexibility was another WFH opportunity that emerged from the narratives of the participants. The findings revealed that working from home made things flexible for participants. The participants acknowledged how the WFH phenomenon allowed them to work at home and simultaneously attend to family issues. This was evident in the response from one of the participants stated below:

“... It is very flexible to work at home, but one must prioritise and have a management plan to accommodate the work as well as the family matters. I always thought that working from home is meant for people working on technical jobs, with no need for face-to-face meetings (Lecturer 7, Female).”

From the above finding, it was safe to conclude that flexibility was one of the opportunities experienced by university instructors when working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown.

5.2.4 Exposure to alternative assessment techniques

The participants disclosed that working from home provided them with the opportunity to be exposed to alternative assessment techniques through the use of digital platforms for their lesson delivery. A participant responded as follows:

“Working from home changed my thinking completely about blended learning and the possibilities thereof. I have learned so many different technological skills and alternative ways of assessment that will enable me to adapt my ways of working in the future (Lecturer 8, Female).”

From the above narrative, it was safe to conclude that working from home provided the opportunity to learn alternative assessment techniques with the aid of digital platforms for teaching engagements with the learners.

5.2.5 Personal safety

Personal safety was another opportunity that working from home offered to university instructors during the COVID-19 lockdown. The majority of the participants, six out of ten, mentioned the fact that working from home guaranteed their safety as they did not need to leave the comfort of their homes at night in order to do their jobs. This was explicitly stated by one of the participants as follows:

“For example, before the advent of COVID-19, I used to teach postgraduate students in the evening and sometimes until around 21:00. This created challenges for both me and my students. One of the challenges was safety. However, due to COVID-19's impact and restriction on human movement, I have used remote lecturing. Post-COVID-19, I envision a situation where I and my colleagues will use blended learning so that we do not have lectures scheduled at night (Lecturer 9, Female).”

Thus, it could be concluded that working from home offered the opportunity for personal safety because university instructors did not have to commute to campus at night or return home late from the campus after work.

5.3 WFH Challenges

The researchers wanted to unmask the challenges associated with the WFH arrangements by asking the sub-research question: What challenges did they experience with WFH arrangements during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa? The participants highlighted the challenges they experienced in this regard.

5.3.1 Stress involved in balancing home and work-life

The participants mentioned that it was challenging and stressful to balance work and home responsibilities while working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. This was pointed out by one of the participants in the response below:

“Getting a balance between home and work responsibilities was a challenge at first. It did put a bit of stress on me at the beginning; I felt uncertain and was scared to miss something (Lecturer 3, Female).”

Thus, it could be concluded that WFH posed a challenge as it created stress when the participants struggled to balance their work and family responsibilities during the COVID-19 lockdown.

5.3.2 Poor internet connection and power cuts

WFH was faced with the challenge of poor internet connections and power cuts. The participants narrated how this challenge adversely affected the virtual conducting of classes with their students. The response of one of the participants summed it up as follows:

“The problem is the issue of poor network coverage and the electricity cuts. Classes sometimes would not go as scheduled because of the cuts and poor coverage (Lecturer 8, Female).”

Thus, it could be concluded that poor internet connectivity and power outages presented a challenge to working from home effectively during the COVID-19 lockdown.

5.3.3 Disruption and distraction from family

Working from home was challenged by disruptions and distractions caused by family and other home affairs. A male lecturer narrated how his water heater had exploded and distracted him from his academic work. The following response also highlighted a distraction:

“WFH is difficult, especially when you have children as young as six years old. In the early stages of the lockdown, it was difficult because they do not readily understand that you are working, but after pre-school commenced it [was] a bit better (Lecturer 1, Male).”

Given the above narratives, it was safe to conclude that participants’ official duties were impacted and therefore challenged by distractions and disruptions when working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. These were caused by family members and household responsibilities.

5.3.4 Working more time than necessary

Working from home created the challenge of working more hours than were necessary. Of note was a particular experience shared by one of the participants who stated that she was unable to switch off from work at home. The following response expatiates on this challenge:

“It completely changed; this is because of the way my work is designed. I needed to make sure that I accommodate all my students and colleagues too. As time went on, I noticed that most students have access to data at night or have some difficulties that impacted how I worked and how I work or plan my work [sic]. This meant I am working more than the allocated times [hours] and not in a normal or as I initial [sic] thought (Lecturer 4, Male).”

From these narratives given above, it was safe to conclude that working from home created a challenge in terms of doing more work while working at home because workers do not feel the urge to close for work as they do while in the office.

5.3.5 Monotony of work and boredom

Boredom and monotony were other challenges associated with working from home experienced by the participants in this study. One of the participants rightly put it as follows:

“Before COVID, it was something that I thought was highly privileged because you would do things according to your time without being in a rush of trying to avoid peak hours (traffic), working in the comfort of your home, where you can sip coffee or drink at any given time without driving. However, little did I realise [sic] that if it is a lengthy stay and working from home for so many months it becomes monotonous [sic] and you hit the plateau, simply because of the same environment and the productivity stalls (Lecturer 6, Female).”

From the finding above, it was safe to conclude that working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown created the challenges of work monotony and boredom for the participants in this study.

5.3.6 Financial constraints and limited productivity

Working from home also resulted in the participants in this study experiencing the challenges of financial constraints and limited productivity. The narrative below captures these challenges:

“I did not get sufficient time to complete my academic activities due to the tight schedule attending a lot of meetings via zoom, sometimes working from home without data due to financial problems (Lecturer 9, Female).”

Thus, it was safe to conclude that being compelled to WFH was accompanied by the challenge of financial problems, which resulted in the inability to procure internet data, which in turn limited work productivity.

5.3.7 Social isolation

The participants reported that they had to contend with social isolation. By implication, working from home deprived them of opportunities to collaborate with office colleagues because they were restricted from leaving their homes during the COVID-19 lockdown. One of the participants narrated his experience as follows:

“I had to work alone, with no collaboration with colleagues. I could not interact with individual students and guide them in answering certain tasks (Lecturer 10, Male).”

Given the above narrative, it was safe to conclude that the participants experienced the challenges of social isolation and the absence of collaboration and interaction with colleagues while working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown.

6. Discussion of Results

Regarding the first research question, the narrative from the participants shows that they perceived working from home as a necessary arrangement where they had to carry out their official duties, which included teaching, research, and attending to administrative matters, from their home space and environment as the COVID-19 lockdown made it practically impossible to do the same at their workplaces located within the university campus. Although some of the participants expressed divergent views on their initial expectations of working from home while the lockdown lasted, in the end it turned out that their expectations were far different from their experiences, especially in terms of the challenges arising from online tutoring and the use of some digital platforms for teaching. It is instructive to note that the participants' perceptions of the concept of working from home aligned with the idea of this phenomenon espoused by Aczel et al. (2021), who believed that it meant working from designated areas provided for workers by any organisation. This view is also corroborated by Biron et al. (2020), who defined working from home as the practice of working from other locations outside the primary offices. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the participants perceived working from home as a practice whereby work is performed from any location outside of the usual designated office.

The second research question in this study sought to articulate the WFH opportunities experienced by the university instructors during the period of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. The results, as analysed above, show that working from home provided opportunities for these university instructors during the lockdown. It saved them time when working from home (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021); it was an eye-opener to the availability of the myriad of technologies and digital platforms which could be adopted for teaching and learning (Lantsoght et al., 2021); its flexibility offered opportunities to juggle family matters with official work duties (Kazekami, 2020; Lantsoght et al., 2021; Okeke et al., 2021); it availed the university instructors with insight into the alternate assessment methods using the digital technologies for lesson delivery when connecting the home and the office; and another opportunity associated with working from home was the opportunity for increased personal safety

(Makhaga, 2020). These findings were not in contradiction to the findings of Aczel et al. (2021), who posited that working from home offered opportunities to save on the costs of travelling or commuting from home to the office and vice versa, and increased autonomy over the use of time with no distraction from colleagues. These findings are also corroborated by Lantsoght et al. (2021); and Okeke et al. (2021) in their studies which reported that working from home offered greater flexibility for workers to do their work in their comfort zones. Of course, WFH allowed university instructors greater control over their time and places for performance of work. This is corroborated by Makhaga (2020) who considered flexibility of WFH from the 'advantage' point of view. Lantsoght et al. (2021) also found that academics gained more proficiency in the use of technology for teaching and learning. Those university instructors, who for one reason or the other had not been teaching online before the pandemic, were forced to learn and master how to use the innovative digital technology platforms for teaching during the lockdown. Linked to this advantage, this study also found that personal safety was another opportunity enjoyed by the university instructors while working from home; a finding which was also stated by Makhaga (2020).

In the final analysis, the last research question attempted to unravel the challenges experienced by the university instructors when working from home during the pandemic lockdown in South Africa. The challenges, among others, included: balancing home and work life being stressful; poor internet connectivity and power cuts; disruption and distraction by family members (Aczel et al., 2021; Kazekami, 2020; Lantsoght et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021); an increased workload and working outside of normal working hours (Okeke et al., 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021); boredom and monotonous work; financial constraints limiting work productivity; and social isolation from office colleagues (Aczel et al., 2021). The WFH challenges identified in this present study are not inconsistent with the findings of Aczel et al. (2021); Lantsoght et al. (2021); and Okeke et al. (2021). In the study done by Aczel et al. (2021), working from home reportedly created challenges such as the disconnection from co-workers and social isolation, and problems dealing with pressures imposed by the constant presence of family members. These findings were corroborated by Okeke et al. (2021), who posited that working from home brought with it a greater workload for academics when compared to the usual workload they had to contend with in their face-to-face teaching engagements with their students. Aczel et al. (2021) further reported a lack of opportunities for skills development and a lack of physical interactions with fellow academics that would have happened had they been on campus. Okeke et al. (2021) also reported by that WFH arrangements were associated with the challenge of a lack of digital devices for online learning in South Africa.

7. Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, it is apposite to recommend that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and university authorities adequately prepare academic staff ahead of any similar crisis that may cause another disruption to education in the future. There is a popular saying that good preparation prevents poor performance. If there are adequate preparations ahead

of future disruptions, in terms of upskilling knowledge and effective use of technology, WFH arrangements can be more successful than they have been during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Of course, it is better late than never. Academic staff members need to be trained consistently on a blended or hybrid approach to teaching and learning. University authorities also need to provide more facility support, in terms of internet data and digital tools, to enhance academic staff's work productivity while at home. The challenge of poor internet connectivity and power cuts can be addressed by providing staff with much more reliable internet data and uninterrupted power supply (UPS) battery backup which can help power their personal computers during times of load shedding or power cuts while working at home. The challenge of stress in balancing home and work life as well as social isolation can be mitigated by joining forums for academics and connecting with professional experts via social media and other online platforms where they can share jokes and recipes for healthy practices and engage in motivational sessions related to balancing work-life matters with like-minded colleagues. Connecting with professional colleagues to laugh together, share teaching challenges, and learn about new online pedagogical approaches can also help them 'kill' the boredom that was experienced during the pandemic lockdown. In addition, university authorities need to provide online staff support services and/or physical centres that will help with matters of health and wellbeing. When all of these recommendations are implemented and followed religiously, the WFH opportunities will be maximised for the university instructors in the post-pandemic era. The researchers' decision to conduct this study at one of the Eastern Cape universities was not contemplated to be a limitation, rather it was an attempt to unravel an understanding of the perceptions of university instructors regarding the opportunities and challenges associated with working from home during the lockdown in South Africa. Nevertheless, the researchers note that the findings of this study may not apply to other universities in the country. It is therefore essential to also recommend that more studies be conducted to understand WFH opportunities and challenges in the contexts of other universities in South Africa.

8. Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of ten academics regarding WFH opportunities and challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown in a rural-based university in South Africa. It was found that the academics gained from WFH arrangements as an alternative to working on the university campus. The WFH opportunities included, among others, saving of commuting time, the use of new teaching approaches, proficient use of digital platforms for teaching and learning, and no distractions from colleagues. Conversely, the participants in this study pointed out some challenges they experienced with the WFH practice. They argued that working from home isolated or disconnected them from their office colleagues, and they had to deal with both work and family demands simultaneously as they worked from home. This led to the burden of having to carry a greater workload as they had to work longer hours than they had before the COVID-19 related lockdown. The findings of this study have implications for rethinking teaching and learning in the post-2020 era as regards the modality of

lesson delivery, pedagogical approaches, and accessibility to various technologies.

Going forward, the modes of lesson delivery and interactions between university instructors and their students have to be hybrid, such that the modes of delivery and interaction can be both face-to-face (F2F) and virtual when it is practically impossible for the F2F sessions to take place. The pandemic and the avalanche of digital platforms available for teaching and learning have shown that no instructor should miss classes on account of their absence from campus. The WFH alternative has opened our eyes to the possibility of holding lectures virtually, using a variety of technologies. If for one reason or the other an instructor cannot physically be present in the classroom for their lecture, then the alternate option of online teaching has to be explored so that the lecture can still be held. Another implication is the need for university instructors to build on their WFH experiences during the pandemic lockdown by continually pursuing opportunities in the field of information technology to advance their pedagogical approaches and repertoire as the higher education institutions move towards embracing blended and online pedagogies in the post-pandemic era.

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Appendix 1: Research Instrument

1. What is your understanding of working from home, as a university instructor, during the pandemic lockdown?
2. How does the pandemic influence your understanding of the work-from-home (WFH) phenomenon during the lockdown period in South Africa?
3. How has your perception of working from home changed from the one you had prior to the COVID-19 crisis?
4. In what ways has WFH served as an opportunity to you as a university instructor while teaching during the pandemic?
5. What were the challenges of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa?