

Remote Working Among Academic Staff in Higher Education

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Abstract: The higher education sector has undergone substantial transformation since the COVID-19 pandemic, including enduring shifts toward remote working for academic staff. Academics working remotely are often perceived as advantaged, particularly regarding autonomy and work-life balance. This study aimed to identify the demographic characteristics of academics working remotely and to examine whether access to remote working differs across demographic groups. A cross-sectional design was employed, and data were collected across four demographic variables. Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to assess whether the observed distributions differed significantly from those expected under the assumption of independence. No significant differences were observed across gender, age, or tenure; however, academic rank was significantly associated with work arrangement. Senior academics were more likely to work remotely, whereas junior academics were more likely to work on campus. These findings indicate that access to remote work in higher education is not shaped by traditional demographic characteristics, specifically gender, but rather by academic

seniority and accumulated experience within the higher education system. Further research could examine how institutional policies, performance expectations and career-stage dynamics interact to shape both access to remote work and its consequences for academic careers.

Keywords: Remote working, higher education, academic staff, career management.

1. Introduction

Following the onset of COVID-19, higher education institutions rapidly transitioned to offsite work arrangements, with limited access to physical campuses (Al-Naabi & Al-Shukaili, 2024). Academics were compelled to adopt online teaching almost overnight. This abrupt shift was associated with increased levels of stress and burnout among academic staff (Alonso et al., 2025; Mosleh et al., 2022); a pattern also observed in South Africa (Fynn & van der Walt, 2023), where the data for the present study were collected. Elevated stress levels were attributable not only to the sudden change in teaching modalities (OECD, 2021) and the resulting techno stress (Ozgür, 2020) but were further intensified by the strategic expansion of e-teaching to reach and recruit larger student cohorts (Morris et al., 2020). Although hybrid and remote work arrangements have become increasingly prevalent in the post-COVID world of work (Milton, 2024), empirical research examining these evolving modes of academic work remains limited. Direct comparisons between face-to-face and remote teaching are scarce (Andrade & Tonin, 2023) and even fewer studies address the more nuanced distinctions between on-campus, hybrid, and fully remote academic work arrangements in higher education (Gross, 2024; Steinfeld, 2025). Notably, no studies were identified that specifically focus on academics who work fully remotely, as a stand-alone group.

Although remote working is frequently portrayed as conducive to improved work-life balance due to greater flexibility and autonomy (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022), evidence suggests that it may also generate distinct stressors, including social isolation, blurred work-life boundaries, and inadequate institutional or technological support (García-Gonzalez et al., 2020; Ozgür, 2020; Prasad & Prasad, 2023; Rapanta et al., 2020; Schildkamp et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, the present study examines how academics are distributed across different work arrangements, with particular attention to those

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working remotely. Identifying the demographic characteristics of remote academics was considered necessary given persistent concerns that access to preferred work arrangements may be unevenly allocated and potentially perceived as discriminatory in contexts where remote work is idealised as a privileged mode of employment. From a managerial perspective, differential access to remote working may raise allegations of gender-based discrimination or sexism (Chung, 2020), age-based discrimination or ageism (North & Fiske, 2012), and differential treatment based on career stage or seniority, commonly referred to as tenure-based or experience-based discrimination (Ng & Feldman, 2012). This concern aligns with equity theory, which proposes that employees compare access to valued benefits and may perceive unequal allocation as unfair or discriminatory (Adams, 1965). Thus, if remote work is viewed as a privileged arrangement, questions may arise about who receives access to its benefits and why.

This study aims to specify the characteristics of academic staff who work remotely, and one hypothesis was set: H1₀: There is no association between work arrangement (on-site, hybrid, remote) and (a) gender, (b) age, (c) tenure, or (d) academic job level. Alternatively, H1_a: There are significant differences in the extent of remote work across demographic categories of academic personnel. As a result of limited knowledge regarding which academics work remotely, higher education institutions lack a robust evidence base to ensure that unfair discrimination does not occur across groups. This uncertainty also reduces their ability to design and implement appropriate interventions to prevent or mitigate discriminatory practices.

2. Literature Review

The literature review will examine both traditional and contemporary flexible and remote working arrangements. It will conclude by addressing current and complementary themes relevant to both areas.

2.1 Flexible working arrangements

Flexibility in work arrangements was originally driven by the need for mothers to maintain work-life balance and remain engaged in their jobs. As early as 2003, to enable better labour market integration of mothers, the UK government established a statutory right allowing parents of young children to request flexible working. This grants parents of children under six (or disabled children under 18) the legal right to make such requests and obliges employers to give them due consideration. This objective is reinforced in the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers, which repeals the earlier Council Directive and makes these provisions mandatory across the European Union (European Parliament & Council, 2019). The directive states that workers (men and women) “... have the right to request flexible working arrangements for the purpose of adjusting their working patterns, including, where possible, through the use of remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules, or a reduction in working hours, for the purposes of providing care”.

As implied above, flexible work can take on at least three primary forms (Chung, 2020). First, it may involve control over where work is performed, most commonly through teleworking, which enables employees to work outside their normal work premises, such as from home. Second, flexible working may involve control over when work is performed, such as flexitime, which allows employees to vary their start and finish times, adjust daily or weekly working hours, and make use of arrangements such as annualised or compressed working hours. Third, flexible work may involve control over working hours, typically through reductions in working hours, including part-time work, term-time working, job sharing, or temporary reductions in hours.

Although flexible working is often framed as a mechanism to support work-life balance (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2018c), it is also used by organisations to enhance employee performance (Ortega, 2009). Improved performance may result from a better work-life fit, increased motivation, improved

retention, and reduced absenteeism and sickness (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2018). However, flexible working may carry negative connotations, as managers and co-workers may perceive employees who use flexible working arrangements as less productive, creating additional work for others and as less committed to the workplace (Chung, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). Such perceptions can contribute to employees' fears that flexible working will reduce their career opportunities (e.g., promotion or pay prospects) (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Chung, 2020).

Institutional arrangements and prevailing norms shape access to flexible working arrangements (Chung, 2018, 2019), the forms such arrangements take (Lott, 2015; Kurowska, 2020), and the broader workplace cultures within which they are enacted (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Central to these dynamics is the ideal worker culture, which emphasises long working hours and the prioritisation of work above all other obligations, based on the assumption that work demands warrant undivided commitment (Williams, 1999). Such cultures contribute directly to the stigmatisation of flexible working, as the use of flexible arrangements signals a deviation from ideal worker norms and is therefore associated with perceptions of reduced commitment and productivity (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Coltrane et al., 2013). Gender and gender roles are central to most of these arrangements. From a gender perspective, women are less likely to perceive flexible workers as poor workers, as they are more likely to use flexible working arrangements for family-related purposes or to anticipate doing so in the future (Clawson & Gerstel, 2014; Cha & Kim, 2023). In contrast, men – particularly within male-dominated workplaces – are more likely to be embedded in ideal worker cultures and may therefore view flexible working for care purposes as a deviation from normative expectations, which is often evaluated negatively (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Coltrane et al., 2013).

2.2 Remote work

The impact of COVID-19 on working arrangements was monumental (McPhail et al., 2024), with access to campuses becoming minimal (Al-Naabi & Al-Shukaili, 2024) and remote work becoming the norm. The rapid expansion of remote work was accompanied by a marked increase in the use of digital technologies to support teleworking, such as online collaboration tools and virtual communication platforms (DeFilippis et al., 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that remote work can be effective and, in some contexts, associated with maintained or improved productivity (Bloom et al., 2015). As remote work became more widespread, many employees expressed a preference to continue working remotely rather than return to their pre-pandemic arrangements, suggesting that remote work had become embedded in work practices and employee expectations (Barrero et al., 2021). Barrero et al. (2021) report that “20 percent of full workdays will be supplied from home after the pandemic ends, compared with just 5 percent before,” and further estimate that “our ballpark calculations imply that the COVID-induced shift to remote working arrangements will reduce aggregate commuting time by about 435 million hours per month in the post-pandemic United States of America economy” (p. 25).

Commuting time is only one potential benefit of working from home. Remote work may also support improved work-life balance and reduced work-home conflict, alongside higher job satisfaction, largely through greater autonomy and flexibility in how work is organised (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). At the same time, remote work is not equally beneficial – or feasible – for all employees: common challenges include work-home interference, loneliness/social isolation, communication difficulties, procrastination, and technology-related strain (techno stress), which can undermine well-being and perceived effectiveness (Wang et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2022; van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). Moreover, remote work is more viable in certain job types than others (i.e., roles with tasks that can be performed digitally), and it is typically more accessible to more skilled/knowledge-based roles and higher-status job levels. Empirical work shows substantial variation in “work-from-home feasibility” across occupations/industries and systematic differences

by worker characteristics such as education and contract type (Dingel & Neiman, 2020; Adams-Prassl et al., 2022).

Dingel and Neiman (2020) use a scale from 0.00 to 1.00 to indicate the share of jobs within each occupation or industry that can plausibly be performed entirely from home, where 1.00 indicates that nearly all jobs are suitable for remote work and 0.00 indicates that none are. Using this measure, the top three occupations most suited to remote work are Computer and Mathematical (1.00), Education, Training and Library (0.98), and Legal (0.97), while the least suited are Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance (0.00), Food Preparation and Serving Related (0.00), and Construction and Extraction (0.00). Similarly, the top three industries are Educational Services (0.83), Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (0.80), and Management of Companies and Enterprises (0.79), whereas the bottom three are Accommodation and Food Services (0.04), Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting (0.08), and Retail Trade (0.14).

This research focuses on remote work among academics. The emerging literature has begun to describe the post-COVID world of work, in which hybrid and remote work arrangements have become increasingly common (Milton, 2024). However, scholarship on these evolving modalities remains limited. Few studies directly compare face-to-face and remote teaching (Andrade & Tonin, 2023), and even fewer investigate the more complex dynamics across traditional on-campus, hybrid, and fully remote settings within higher education (Gross, 2024; Steinfeld, 2025).

Two theories should be considered when considering remote work arrangements. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) suggests that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for well-being. Working remotely may enhance autonomy but reduce relatedness, whereas on-site fosters relatedness and competence through collaboration and immediate feedback. Similarly, Boundary Theory (Ashforth et al., 2000) proposes that well-being is shaped by how individuals manage the boundaries between work and personal life. Remote work often blurs these boundaries, increasing the risk of work-life conflict, whereas working on-site enforces a clearer separation that can protect well-being (Rizwan & Sivasubramanian, 2022; Song & Gong, 2025).

2.3 Flexible and remote work

When considering the foundations of flexible and remote work arrangements, it is important to recognise that remote working represents a specific expression of broader flexibility practices rather than a distinct phenomenon. Both forms emphasise employee autonomy, discretion over work organisation, and the reconfiguration of temporal, spatial, and quantitative boundaries, with similar benefits and limitations evident across both arrangements. Historically, flexible working was introduced as a targeted mechanism to support work-life balance – particularly for caregivers – while remote work has since evolved into a more generalised mode of work organisation extending beyond family-related needs. In both cases, such arrangements were often framed as discretionary privileges or additional benefits granted to employees rather than as standard modes of work. The rapid normalisation of remote work has since shifted flexibility from an exception afforded to specific groups to a broader organisational practice, raising new questions about access to such arrangements and the potential for differential or inequitable allocation across employee groups.

Within academic settings, these dynamics may be especially pronounced. Academic work is characterised by high autonomy, blurred boundaries between work and non-work, and strong normative expectations regarding productivity and availability. Consequently, remote work may simultaneously enhance autonomy while intensifying boundary management challenges and reshaping perceptions of workloads, performance and commitment. Considering flexible and remote work together allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how evolving work arrangements

interact with personal needs, co-worker and managerial perceptions, organisational norms, access to work options, and perceptions of fairness in the workplace.

Given the literature, it might be expected that younger staff, those with shorter tenure, lower job levels, and women may have reduced access to remote work. However, such expectations should be tempered by the high levels of technological competence among younger workers, the substantial representation of women in higher education employment, and the nature of academic work, all of which may attenuate these patterns.

3. Method

A cross-sectional survey design was employed, with data collected through an online questionnaire. The study adopted a descriptive approach to profile academics engaged in different working arrangements. The study targeted the full population of academic staff at the university, using institutional email addresses as the sampling frame. All individuals holding academic appointments were invited to participate. Work arrangement was measured using five response options: *At the office only*, *Mostly at the office*, *50/50*, *Mostly away from the office*, and *Away from the office*. Due to small counts in the two extreme categories, work arrangements were consolidated into three groups for analysis: *On-site* (at the office only + mostly at the office), *Hybrid* (50/50), and *Remote* (mostly away + away). Demographic variables included gender, age group, tenure group, and academic job level, each captured using predefined categorical response options consistent with the categories reported in the Results tables.

Response rates for online surveys vary from below 10% to approximately 44%, depending on context, population specificity, and survey design (Stedman et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2022). Given that the present study targeted academic staff on a specialised topic without incentives, a response rate exceeding 10% was considered acceptable.

Data were summarised using frequency counts and percentages and presented in tabular form to facilitate comparison and interpretation. Cross-tabulations were used to compute observed and expected cell frequencies for each variable. Some categories were collapsed to ensure that expected cell counts did not fall below five, in line with the conventional rule of thumb for the chi-square test of independence (Field, 2018; Agresti, 2019). Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to assess whether observed distributions differed significantly from those expected under the assumption of independence, with statistical significance evaluated at $p < .05$. To support interpretation beyond statistical significance, effect sizes were reported using Cramér's *V*. Cramér's *V* values of around .10, .30, and .50 are often interpreted as small, medium, and large associations, respectively, following Cohen's conventional effect-size benchmarks (Cohen, 1988).

Clearance was obtained from the Research Permission Sub-Committee (RPSC) of the Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC), Ref #: 2024_RPC_049. All general guidelines regarding ethical research were followed, and no ethical breaches were reported to the overseeing authorities or the authors of this report.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study. It begins with the survey response rate, followed by the demographic profile of the respondents. Work arrangements are described first, followed by the distribution of gender, age, tenure and job level, both overall and across the three work arrangement categories. Chi-square tests of independence and Cramér's *V* effect sizes accompany each cross-tabulation, and instances in which expected cell counts fell below five are noted so that the relevant results may be interpreted with due caution.

4.1 Response rate

Responses were obtained from 265 academics out of an estimated population of 1 823 permanent academic staff members (University of South Africa, 2023a, 2023b), yielding a response rate of 14.5%, which exceeds the predefined minimum threshold of 10% considered acceptable for this study.

4.2 Demographics

The demographics of the respondents are presented below, starting with work arrangements (Table 1). Thereafter, the remaining demographic characteristics are reported (Tables 2 to 5), both overall and by work arrangement.

Table 1: Work arrangements

Work arrangements	Count	Per cent	Work arrangements	Count	Per cent
At the office only	12	4.55	-	-	-
Mostly at the office	106	40.2	On-site	118	44.7
50/50	62	23.5	Hybrid	62	23.5
Mostly away from the office	57	21.6	Remote	84	31.8
Away from the office	27	10.2	-	-	-
Total	264	100.0		264	100.0

At the time of data collection, five categories of work arrangements were specified. However, low response counts in the two extreme categories, at the office only and away from the office, necessitated the consolidation of the upper two and lower two categories. This was necessary because the number of cases in the extreme categories was low and would otherwise have resulted in cells with expected counts below five. Consequently, three groups were formed: On-site (at the office only and mostly at the office), Hybrid (50/50), and Remote (Mostly away from the office). As the sample size did not permit more granular analyses, given the small subgroup sizes. Most respondents (44.7%) reported working predominantly from the office, while 31.8% indicated that they worked mostly away from the office. The remaining respondents (23.5%; n = 62) reported a 50/50 hybrid work arrangement.

For the remaining demographic variables, results are presented for the sample as a whole (first column) and subsequently by work arrangement. For each variable, the observed frequencies (counts) and the expected frequencies per cell are reported, derived from cross-tabulations. As is standard in chi-square tests of independence, a chi-square statistic is reported to assess whether the observed distribution differs significantly ($p < .05$) from the expected distribution under the assumption of independence. These results relate to the hypothesis: There is no difference in the level of involvement in remote work across categories of academic personnel.

Table 2: Gender totals and distribution across work arrangements with chi-square expectations

Gender totals		On-site	Hybrid	Remote	Total
Male = 79 (29.9%)	Count	36	20	23	79
	Expected Count	35.4	18.3	25.2	79.0
Female = 184 (69.7%)	Count	82	41	61	184
	Expected Count	82.6	42.7	58.8	184.0
Total = 263	Count	118	61	84	263
Missing = 1 (.4%)	Expected Count	118.0	61.0	84.0	263.0

Note: The questionnaire included an “other” response option. However, no respondents selected this category.

Females constituted the majority of respondents, accounting for 69.7% of the sample. When gender was compared across work arrangements, the observed frequencies did not differ significantly from the expected frequencies, $\chi^2(2) = 0.514$, $p = .773$. Thus, gender was not significantly associated with work arrangements; that is, the distribution of gender was similar across on-site, hybrid, and remote

working arrangements. Cramér's V was 0.046, indicating a negligible effect size. Thus, gender was not meaningfully associated with work arrangements.

Table 3: Age totals and distribution across work arrangements with chi-square expectations

Age group		On-site	Hybrid	Remote	Total
18-30 = 21 (8%)	Count	14	6	1	21
	Expected Count	9.4	4.9	6.7	21.0
31-40 = 88 (33.3%)	Count	48	16	24	88
	Expected Count	39.3	20.7	28.0	88.0
41-50 = 68 (25.8%)	Count	28	14	26	68
	Expected Count	30.4	16.0	21.6	68.0
51-60 = 61 (23.1%)	Count	21	19	21	61
	Expected Count	27.3	14.3	19.4	61.0
61-70 = 26 (9.8%)	Count	7	7	12	26
	Expected Count	11.6	6.1	8.3	26.0
Total = 246 (100%)	Count	118	62	84	264
	Expected Count	118.0	62.0	84.0	264.0

Most respondents fell within the 31–40 age bracket, followed by the 41–50 age bracket. When age was compared across work arrangements, the observed frequencies did not differ significantly from the expected frequencies ($\chi^2(8) = 18.920$, $p = .015$). The association between age and work arrangement was statistically significant, with a small-to-medium effect size (Cramér's V = 0.196). Inspection of the data reveals that the youngest group was less likely to work from home, whereas the oldest group was more likely to do so.

Table 4: Tenure totals and distribution across work arrangements with chi-square expectations

Tenure		On-site	Hybrid	Remote	Total
0-5 = 75 (28.4%)	Count	42	22	11	75
	Expected Count	33.5	17.6	23.9	75.0
6-10 = 54 (20.5%)	Count	28	11	15	54
	Expected Count	24.1	12.7	17.2	54.0
11-15 = 61 (23.1%)	Count	22	13	26	61
	Expected Count	27.3	14.3	19.4	61.0
16-20 = 30 (11.4%)	Count	11	7	12	30
	Expected Count	13.4	7.0	9.5	30.0
21-25 = 26 (9.8%)	Count	6	7	13	26
	Expected Count	11.6	6.1	8.3	26.0
26+ = 18 (6.8%)	Count	9	2	7	18
	Expected Count	8.0	4.2	5.7	18.0
Total = 264 (100%)	Count	118	62	84	264
	Expected Count	118.0	62.0	84.0	264.0

Note: One cell (Tenure 26+ years × Hybrid work arrangement) had an expected count of less than five, and the results should therefore be interpreted with caution. The expected count is 4.2.

Most respondents were in the 0–5 years tenure group, with progressively fewer respondents in the higher tenure categories, forming a long tail. When tenure was compared across work arrangements, the observed frequencies did not differ significantly from the expected frequencies, $\chi^2(10) = 22.851$, $p = .011$. The practical association was small to approaching medium in magnitude, as indicated by Cramér's V = 0.216. This was the largest effect size observed. Lower tenure was generally associated with on-site work, whereas the pattern observed for the extreme tenure category (26 years or more) appeared inconsistent with the other findings. However, it should be noted that the expected count in one cell for this group fell below the recommended threshold of five observations per cell.

Table 5: Job level and distribution across work arrangements with chi-square expectations

Job level		On-site	Hybrid	Remote	Total
Junior = 114 (43.2%)	Count	65	26	23	114
Junior lecturers = 19 (7.2%) + lecturers = 95 (36.0%)	Expected Count	51.1	26.9	36.0	114.0
Middle = 92 (34.8%).	Count	36	24	32	92
Senior lecturers = 92 (34.8%).	Expected Count	41.3	21.7	29.0	92.0
Senior = 57 (21.6%)	Count	17	12	28	57
Assoc. professors = 30 (11.4%) + professors = 27 (10.2%)	Expected Count	25.6	13.4	18.0	57.0
Total	Count	118	62	83	263
Missing = 1 (.4%)	Expected Count	118.0	62.0	83.0	263.0

Lecturers and senior lecturers were the most represented among respondents, together accounting for approximately 70% of the sample, while associate professors and professors comprised a further 20%. For analytical purposes, three job-level groups were created: junior (junior lecturer and lecturer), middle (senior lecturer), and senior (associate professor and professor). When job level was compared across work arrangements, the observed frequencies differed significantly from the expected frequencies, $\chi^2(4) = 18.258$, $p = .001$. Cramér's V was .186, indicating only a small effect. Senior academics were more likely to work remotely, whereas junior academics were more likely to work on-site.

These demographic chi-square results relate to the hypothesis, which posits that there is no difference in the level of involvement in remote work across categories of academic personnel, whereas the alternative hypothesis posits significant differences in this level across categories. Gender was the only demographic variable not associated with work arrangements. In contrast, for age, tenure, and job level, higher levels were generally associated with remote working, with effects ranging from small to medium in size.

5. Discussion

The literature indicates that flexible work arrangements were initially granted primarily to women in caregiving roles as a means of supporting work-life balance; however, following the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work – conceptualised as a subset of flexible working arrangements – became widespread due to enforced social distancing and affected employees across occupational and demographic groups (Chung, 2020; DeFilippis et al., 2020). As working conditions normalised in the post-pandemic period, organisational responses diverged, with some employers permitting continued remote work while others required a return to on-site work (Barrero et al., 2021). While some employees prefer to avoid remote work for reasons well documented in the literature – such as isolation, blurred boundaries, or reduced support (Wang et al., 2021; van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022) – others aspire to retain remote work arrangements due to perceived gains in autonomy and work-life balance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Shirmohammadi et al., 2022).

At the same time, research suggests that remote workers may be perceived by managers and colleagues as less committed, less productive, or as shifting workload burdens onto others, whereas remote work is viewed by some employees as an opportunity for increased autonomy and improved work-life integration (Chung, 2020; Williams et al., 2013). These divergent perceptions create tensions between managers, employees, and co-workers, particularly where access to remote work arrangements is uneven. In such contexts, remote work may be interpreted as being differentially allocated across groups, raising concerns about fairness and equity (Adams, 1965). Accordingly, the

present study examines whether remote work arrangements are distributed equitably across demographic groups.

No gender differences were observed across work arrangements. This finding marks a clear departure from earlier patterns associated with flexible working, where access was often gendered. Among academics, gender therefore appears to play a limited role in the management of work arrangements.

Small to medium differences in age distribution were observed across work arrangements. This finding is somewhat unexpected, given evidence that younger workers are typically more comfortable with digital and virtual modes of working (Easton & Steyn, 2025), place strong emphasis on autonomy and flexible work conditions (Salem, 2025), and tend to prioritise work-life balance, more than older cohorts (Easton & Steyn, 2024). Younger academics are also more likely to have active caregiving responsibilities (e.g., parenting young children) (Chung & Booker, 2023), which may make remote work particularly attractive. The absence of large age-related differences in this context suggests that remote work among academics may be shaped more by professional norms, job demands, and institutional practices than by age-linked preferences alone.

Small to medium differences were observed across tenure groups. This finding is also unexpected. If remote working is viewed as an organisational benefit, those with longer tenure, who are typically more familiar with institutional systems and better positioned to navigate them, might be expected to adopt it more readily than those with shorter tenure. Conversely, employees with longer tenure may be more accustomed to pre-COVID working conditions and therefore less inclined to adapt to changes such as remote work. Given that tenure and age are closely related, differences in technological skills and technostress may also influence such decisions. Nonetheless, these competing explanations do not readily account for the absence of large tenure-based differences, suggesting that tenure alone may not be a decisive factor in shaping access to remote work among academics.

Small to medium differences were found across job levels. Senior academics (professors and associate professors) were more likely to work remotely than junior academics (junior lecturers and lecturers). This pattern is consistent with the view that seniority in academia reflects not only experience (tenure) but also accumulated credibility, autonomy, and an enhanced ability to navigate institutional processes and expectations. While tenure and seniority may overlap (Pekkola et al., 2022), those who progress to the top typically develop stronger strategic insight into “how the system works” and how to align their work practices with organisational norms and performance expectations. It may therefore be speculated that remote work arrangements are more readily requested and approved for senior academics, who generally require less day-to-day supervision, have established professional networks, and are trusted to deliver outputs with greater independence than academics who remain in lower ranks or younger, emerging scholars.

The hypothesis of no differences in remote work across demographic groups was not rejected for gender, but was rejected for age, tenure, and seniority, suggesting that remote work was not applied consistently across these categories. It appears that a combination of age, tenure, and job level resulted in senior academics being more likely than junior academics to work remotely. This pattern does not seem to align with the preferences typically associated with generational cohorts (Easton & Steyn, 2024, 2025). However, this should be balanced against academic seniority, as the Job Characteristics Model of Hackman and Oldham (1976) proposes that greater knowledge, autonomy, and role flexibility are associated with senior professional positions, resulting in reduced reliance on direct supervision and a lesser need for on-site work arrangements.

6. Conclusion

Dingel and Neiman (2020) identified education-related occupations and industries as particularly well-suited to remote work. Though the majority of academics were still working on-site (n = 118;

44.9%), a relatively large proportion were working in hybrid arrangements ($n = 61$; 23.2%) or fully remotely ($n = 84$; 31.9%). Academics who were senior in terms of age, tenure, and job level may be especially well-positioned to operate effectively in remote work contexts, and these variables were associated with work arrangements. The higher prevalence of remote work among senior academics may therefore be interpreted as reflecting role-related differences rather than indicating unwarranted advantage. Accordingly, no evidence of unfair discrimination was observed.

One possible concern, however, is that no differences favouring women were identified, despite women traditionally being more strongly associated with caregiving responsibilities (Chung & Booker, 2023), which historically served as one of the primary motivations for promoting remote work arrangements. The absence of gender differences may indicate that remote work was allocated primarily on occupational rather than caregiving considerations. Remote work arrangements are complex, and Kossek et al. (2023) characterise them as shaped by multi-level dynamics (individual, group, organisational, and societal) across multiple domains (work and family) and involving multiple stakeholders (e.g., employees, supervisors, co-workers, and family members). These interacting influences contribute to emerging policy and practice concerns, including equitable access, effective implementation, and the management of hybrid forms of work. The present study adopts a one-dimensional focus, examining the demographic distribution of work arrangements, consistent with common approaches to assess potential discrimination. Subsequent studies should extend this angle by incorporating multi-level and multi-stakeholder influences to better explain why remote work is adopted, granted, and experienced differently across contexts.

7. Declarations

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AI Usage: OpenAI's ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2023) was used to assist with language editing, enhancing clarity and grammar.

Data availability: The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and may be used to replicate the results presented in this article.

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