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Making hybrid-work work: task–environment fit, managerial trust and work–life balance in higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – Remote and hybrid work have become enduring features of academic labour, yet evidence on their consequences for work–life balance (WLB) remains mixed.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study examines how remote arrangements, organisational support, professional isolation and boundary preferences intersect to shape academics' WLB. In total, 19 semi-structured interviews with UK-based academics were thematically analysed.

Findings – Three themes emerged. First, flexibility, productivity and work practices: teaching and collaboration were more effective in person, while writing, analysis and marking flourished at home; reclaimed commuting time and environmental control enhanced focus and well-being but risked "always-on" spillover. Second, organisational, managerial and technical support: trust-based, output-focused supervision, clear policies, useable information technology (IT) and appropriate estates enabled balance, whereas ambiguity, hot-desking and poor systems depleted resources. Third, WLB, boundaries and well-being: micro-boundaries and availability norms mitigated erosion, while isolation was unevenly experienced, particularly by newcomers.

Originality/value – The study reframes autonomy as a conditional resource, positions boundary outcomes as shaped by the interaction of preferences and organisational affordances, and advances task–environment fit as a practical design principle. Implications include codifying boundary norms, developing "trust-capable" managers and aligning estates and IT with academic work.

Keywords Remote work, Hybrid work, Work–life balance, Higher education, Managerial support, Task–environment fit, Boundary management

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Remote work is not a pandemic artefact but part of a longer trajectory of location-flexible employment. Early telework research emphasised the spatial reconfiguration of work, while later studies highlighted the enabling role of digital technologies (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). The COVID-19 crisis accelerated this shift, normalising remote and hybrid arrangements at scale, including in higher education (HE), where teaching, research and administration were rapidly reconfigured (ILO, 2020). However, "hybrid work" remains a broad and inconsistently defined concept, encompassing varying combinations of on-site and remote activities mediated by

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technology and organisational rules. This definitional heterogeneity matters, as policy, managerial practice and individual expectations differ in their interpretation. Clarifying how institutions frame hybrid work is therefore essential for understanding its consequences for academic staff.

Work–life balance (WLB) sits at the centre of these debates. Earlier accounts framed balance as a relatively stable state across work and home domains (Clark, 2000), whereas more recent perspectives conceptualise it as a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by shifting resources, constraints and role expectations (Kamboj and Eronimus, 2025). This shift is particularly relevant in hybrid contexts, where spatial and temporal boundaries are more permeable.

WLB is inherently multidimensional and is shaped by interacting and sometimes conflicting factors. Conservation of resources (COR) theory emphasises resource gains from flexibility and autonomy alongside losses from "always-on" pressures (Hobfoll, 1989; Ipsen *et al*., 2021; Wang *et al*., 2021; Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). Social exchange theory highlights reciprocity between employees and organisations (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), while the job demands–resources (JD-R) model focuses on the balance between demands and resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Boundary theory further explains how individuals manage the interface between work and personal life (Ashforth *et al*., 2000). Considering task demands (e.g. deep work versus collaborative teaching), boundary preferences and institutional practices together helps explain why empirical evidence remains mixed.

HE provides a critical context for examining these dynamics. Academic work is characterised by high autonomy alongside competing demands across research, teaching and administration, often extending beyond standard working hours (e.g. Fauzi *et al*., 2024). While organisational support can buffer remote-work demands and sustain engagement, staff also report boundary erosion, equipment constraints, inequities in flexibility and uneven access to appropriate workspaces (Botha *et al*., 2023; Gutman *et al*., 2023). WLB outcomes therefore emerge from the interaction of institutional policies, managerial practices, digital infrastructures and individual boundary strategies.

The study contributes by (1) providing an empirically grounded account of task–environment fit across core academic activities; (2) demonstrating how organisational practices, such as policy clarity, managerial trust and information technology (IT) enablement, condition resource gains from remote work and (3) offering a nuanced account of boundary erosion and repair strategies in academic settings. In doing so, it specifies the conditions under which flexibility translates into sustained balance and provides practical guidance for designing equitable and sustainable hybrid work policies in HE.

2. Literature review

Early conceptualisations of telecommuting emphasised reducing commuting (Nilles, 1988), while later work highlighted the role of technologies in enabling work beyond traditional workplaces (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Grant *et al*., 2019; Gifford, 2022). Remote work is described through multiple terms – telework, e-working, virtual work and flexible work, reflecting its varied forms (Grant *et al*., 2019). Definitions differ in their emphasis on technology (ILO, 2020) or spatial boundaries (Edgell and Granter, 2020). Hybrid work, combining remote and on-site practices, has since emerged as a dominant model, though its defining features and long-term implications remain contested (Vartiainen and Vanharanta, 2023). In this study, remote work is defined as the flexible, IT-enabled performance of paid work outside a conventional workplace, typically from home. This definition enables examination of how such arrangements shape academics' WLB, mediated by organisational support and boundary management.

2.1 Work–life balance in remote work

The concept of WLB has considerably evolved. Early definitions treated balance as a fixed state characterised by effective functioning across roles with minimal conflict (Clark, 2000).

More recent perspectives emphasise WLB as a dynamic process shaped by contextual and environmental factors (Chan *et al*., 2023). These shifts are particularly relevant to remote work, where the integration of home and workspace blurs boundaries and amplifies external influences.

Empirical findings present a mixed picture. Positive outcomes include greater flexibility, enhanced autonomy and improved efficiency (Ipsen *et al*., 2021; Wang *et al*., 2021). Spillover theory, however, illustrates how work demands and emotions can cross into family life, producing negative effects such as overload and reduced satisfaction (Frischmann, 2009; McDaniel *et al*., 2021). Challenges highlighted in the literature include role ambiguity, "zoom fatigue" and blurred boundaries, especially in pandemic conditions of enforced remote work (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003; Wang *et al*., 2021; Aguillon and Cronin-Gilmore, 2024).

Professional isolation is another drawback. Increased remote working has been linked to higher levels of perceived isolation (He *et al*., 2026). However, these effects are not experienced uniformly. For instance, remote working can hinder the onboarding of new staff, limiting opportunities for social integration and organisational socialisation from the outset (Park *et al*., 2025). Additionally, personal circumstances, such as living alone, influence the extent to which individuals experience loneliness in remote working practices (Leal Filho *et al*., 2021). Despite its importance, professional isolation remains a relatively underexplored dimension of remote working (Figueiredo *et al*., 2025).

Individual personalities further shape outcomes. Boundary theory (Ashforth *et al*., 2000) suggests that employees differ in their preferences for segmentation of work and personal life. Conscientious and introverted academics adapt more successfully to remote practices, while extroverts often struggle, experiencing strain and increased turnover (Oseghale *et al*., 2024). These findings underscore the contingent nature of remote work outcomes, which are moderated by personal and contextual factors.

2.2 Organisational support and remote work preferences

The JD-R framework conceptualises support as a resource that foster engagement and buffers against job demands (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Evidence suggests that organisational support enhances WLB and reduces turnover intentions, particularly when aligned with employee preferences (Gutworth *et al*., 2023).

Yet, support is not universally effective. Gutworth *et al*. (2023) show that unmet remote work preferences are perceived as breaches of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995), increasing turnover (Fauzi *et al*., 2024) and undermining reciprocity as outlined in social exchange theory. Moreover, organisational expectations, cultural norms and managerial surveillance can constrain boundary management, even among employees with strong personal coping strategies (Aguillon and Cronin-Gilmore, 2024).

Boundary theory has been criticised for overemphasising individual agency. In practice, boundary management is shaped by both personality traits (Oseghale *et al*., 2024) and contextual constraints (Allen *et al*., 2021). Studies reveal that organisational culture, role expectations and available resources condition the effectiveness of employees' boundary strategies (Gardner *et al*., 2021). Thus, WLB outcomes emerge from the interaction of individual preferences and organisational practices rather than from either dimension alone.

2.3 Remote work in higher education institutions

While corporate contexts dominate much of the literature, academia represents a distinctive case, characterised by competing roles, heavy demands and high autonomy (Fauzi *et al*., 2024). Whilst the evidence highlights both the opportunities and risks of remote working in HE, these are experienced unevenly. Female academics, in particular, report disproportionate declines in research productivity (Li *et al*., 2025) and increased work–life conflict (Akanji *et al*., 2023) from remote working. Rather than being transformational, large-scale remote work in academia has simply reproduced existing inequalities. These patterns are driven by the

unequal gendered division of domestic labour and care responsibilities, particularly among academics with young children (Vardaki *et al*., 2022), and are especially pronounced for women and minority groups. Globally, these disparities take different forms. In India, female academics report pressures associated with extended family care, while in Spain and Chile, women describe significant WLB strain (Lantsoght, 2025). Crucially, these patterns highlight the role of organisational context in either reinforcing or mitigating such inequalities.

Organisational support proved critical: supervisor and peer support mitigated stress, while inclusivity in policies reduced inequities (Capone *et al*., 2024; Gutman *et al*., 2023). Conversely, uneven allocation of institutional resources reinforced inequalities across disciplines (Li *et al*., 2025). Furthermore, WLB improves when employee preferences align with the work environment and organisational support, while misalignment leads to poorer outcomes (Fauzi *et al*., 2024).

These findings emphasise that remote work in academia cannot be reduced to a uniform experience. Instead, outcomes are mediated by institutional policies, managerial practices, resource allocation, employee preferences and individual boundary management strategies (Fauzi *et al*., 2024; Oseghale *et al*., 2024; Rauf *et al*., 2023). Crucially, these factors do not operate evenly, but often reproduce and, in some cases, exacerbate existing inequalities related to gender, caregiving responsibilities, career stage and disciplinary context. As such, remote work risks entrenching structural disparities unless actively supported by organisational practices.

2.4 Research gap

Despite the growth of remote work research, two limitations persist. First, much of the literature is grounded in pandemic conditions, limiting its relevance to voluntary, post-pandemic arrangements (Pensar and Rousi, 2023; Oseghale *et al*., 2024). Second, research is largely concentrated in corporate contexts, with relatively limited attention to HE (Botha *et al*., 2023; Rauf *et al*., 2023). Although recent studies highlight intensified workloads, blurred boundaries and gender disparities among academics (Li *et al*., 2025; Oseghale *et al*., 2024), there is limited understanding of how organisational support, professional isolation and individual preferences interact to shape WLB. This study addresses this gap by examining these dynamics within HE, offering both theoretical and practical insights.

3. Methodology

We adopt a qualitative research design to examine how remote work arrangements, organisational support, professional isolation and individual preferences intersect to shape academics' WLB. This approach is suited to capturing the meanings, contingencies and contextual nuances of lived experience that are not readily accessible through standardised measures (Haj Youssef and Teng, 2021). Consistent with a pragmatic orientation, the design prioritises methodological fit with the research objectives and focuses on in-depth inquiry (Saunders *et al*., 2023; Wasim *et al*., 2024).

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, enabling consistent coverage of key topics while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences and surface unanticipated themes (Saunders *et al*., 2023). This format is well suited to exploring boundary management, professional isolation and perceived support in hybrid contexts while allowing probing for deeper insight (Kallio *et al*., 2016). Interviews were conducted with academic staff from UK-based universities, either online or in person, and lasted 20–40 min. Participants were asked to reflect on (1) remote/hybrid working practices, (2) organisational and technical support, (3) professional isolation and (4) perceived effects on WLB. The interview guide structured these topics while preserving openness for rich responses.

Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases with direct experience of remote or hybrid work (Saunders *et al*., 2023). Participants were recruited via professional

networks (email) and a LinkedIn post. In such designs, case relevance takes precedence over sample size (Hammersley, 2015). The final sample comprised 19 academics, comparable with prior qualitative studies prioritising depth over breadth (e.g. Aguillon and Cronin-Gilmore, 2024; Akanji *et al*., 2023).

The study is intentionally situated within the UK HE context, shaping institutional expectations, workload structures and WLB experiences. Accordingly, findings are analytically transferable but not statistically generalisable. The interview guide was aligned with the study's objectives, combining predetermined questions with tailored probes to ensure both comparability and depth (Kallio *et al*., 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2023). Following ethical approval, participants received an information sheet and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and withdrawal was permitted without consequence. Data were anonymised and securely stored, with identifying details removed or masked.

4. Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using an iterative, theme-oriented approach. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis progressed through familiarisation, systematic coding aligned to the research questions (remote work arrangements, organisational support, professional isolation, WLB and boundary preferences), theme development and iterative review and refinement. Memos documented interpretive decisions and emerging relationships among themes, producing a structured account of how organisational and individual factors interact to shape WLB.

Theme refinement involved repeated cross-case comparison and movement between data and interpretation. Initial codes were grouped into provisional themes and reviewed to ensure internal coherence and clear distinction. Attention was given to contradictory or deviant cases, which informed refinement and surfaced underlying tensions. Credibility was strengthened through several strategies: maintaining a transparent chain of evidence via coding frames and analytic memos, using cross-case comparison to test emerging interpretations and reflexive note-keeping to document assumptions and decisions. Consistent topic coverage, enabled by the semi-structured guide, further enhanced dependability across interviews (Kallio *et al*., 2016; Saunders *et al*., 2023).

5. Findings

The study draws from 19 semi-structured interviews with academic staff. Participants represented a range of experience levels, were evenly split by gender and held differing household circumstances. See Table 1 for details.

The analysis identifies three overarching themes: (1) flexibility, productivity and work practices; (2) organisational, managerial and technical support and (3) WLB, boundaries and well-being, each with four sub-themes (Table 2). Together, these themes illuminate how remote/hybrid arrangements interact with institutional practices and personal preferences to shape WLB.

5.1 Theme 1: flexibility, productivity and work practices

5.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: autonomy over schedule and time. Participants value autonomy over their schedule, location and flexibility in their time, as P16 reflected: *"I have got flexibility in terms of being able to be at home, so it's easier to manage household type jobs because you can kind of have a bit more autonomy over your time"*. However, participants also commented that autonomy over their schedule is part of academic work and not specific to remote work, as P3 added: *"As academics, we've always worked from home"*.

5.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: task-specific productivity. The responses support task-dependent environments, which were split into three categories: "teaching-related", "research-related" and "admin-related". For teaching-related tasks, there was collective agreement that in-person

Table 1. Interview participant demographics

Participant No.	Gender	Years of academic experience	Children/ Dependents	Live with other adult(s)
1	Male	12	Yes	Yes
2	Female	15	Yes	Yes
3	Male	13	Yes	Yes
4	Male	16	Yes	Yes
5	Male	4	Yes	Yes
6	Female	22	No	Yes
7	Male	13	No	No
8	Female	4	Yes	Yes
9	Female	15	Yes	Yes
10	Male	9	Yes	Yes
11	Female	10	Yes	Yes
12	Female	6	Yes	Yes
13	Female	18–19	Yes	Yes
14	Male	8	No	Yes
15	Male	17	Yes	Yes
16	Female	3	No	Yes
17	Female	8	Yes	Yes
18	Female	11	Yes	Yes
19	Male	7	No	Yes

Table 2. Coding table with themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Flexibility, productivity and work practices	Autonomy over schedule and time	Care, Fam, Home, CON, Loc, Time and Sched
	Task-specific productivity	RES, Admin and Teach
	Time saved from reduced commuting and redistributed work time	Extra, TRedis and Tsave
	Distractions and procrastination affecting task completion	Odis, HDis and DisStrat
Organisational, managerial and technical support	Line manager approaches and trust	Flex, Tr and PSup
	Institutional policy, estate decisions and hybrid expectations	EST, POL and HExp
	ICT services and training	ITexp, Train and Equip
	Colleague communication and team practices	Channels, Social and CommStrat
Work–life balance, boundaries and well-being	Childcare and household management	ChC and House
	Boundary erosion	Off, Bound, OffStrat and Owork
	Professional isolation	RB, ISO and IsoStrat
	Well-being benefits	WLB, RC, PBen and PHYS

is more beneficial than remote. P19 stated: *"When it comes to teaching, I believe I'm able to engage students better when I can see them face-to-face"*.

For research-related and admin-related tasks, participants agreed that these were more conducive to working remotely, as P16 explains: *"In terms of productivity at home, writing, I would 100% always want to do that from home. I don't like writing in the office [. . .] I think it's distracting"*. Using remote work for marking was commonly stated. P18 said: *"If I'm marking, I always mark it home now just because it's easier"*.

However, P3 acknowledged that when academic staff were on campus, there was a notable reduction in in-person social interaction: *"Remote work means you go to campus and see empty offices"*. This had a knock-on effect for reducing office space and increasing hot-desking, as experienced by P13: *"I hot desk, it's another reason why I work from home [. . .] I actually don't have my own desk"*.

5.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: time saved from reduced commuting and redistributed work time. Participants consistently reported that reduced commuting frees up significant time, which can be redistributed to other tasks, as mentioned by P8: *"I can use the time gained to do other stuff. Maybe I needed to respond to emails, meet my students online"*. Additionally, P4 described a positive impact on their well-being: *"It did improve my well-being and mental health, because in this case you are not mentally tired from commuting to your workplace"*.

There was, however, a notion that remote working removes the physical separation between work and home, as P11 remarked: *"I do try stopping at 6:00 and making sure that those hours don't run into evening time; I think having that separation of walking home from work or getting home from work makes you stop"*.

5.1.4 Sub-theme 1.4: distractions and procrastination affecting task completion. Distractions and procrastination were reported in both home and office environments. In-office distractions were presented by P11, stating: *"It's very easy for people to see that I'm in, want to come and have a chat, which of course I love, but definitely halters productivity"*. Disruptions were also commonly experienced at home, as P14 noted: *"She might be on the phone to her sister and I might be working, but I can hear her on the phone, and obviously, the disruption"*.

The overwhelming strategy for alleviating distractions and procrastination was to use a private working space, as P11 explained: *"I've got a designated area that's separate from the rest of the house. I think that helps a lot as well. Having, even at home, a segregated designated working area where you can go shut the door and you know that's work time, don't have many distractions."*

In summary, for theme 1, participants highlighted clear benefits of remote working, including autonomy, reduced commuting time, improved productivity and the ability to match tasks to suitable environments. However, these gains were offset by tensions within hybrid practices. Office spaces were often described as quiet, with hot-desking shaping a less personal working environment. At the same time, working from home blurred boundaries and made it harder to switch off. This reflects a broader structural misalignment, where institutional arrangements for hybrid work lag behind the realities of everyday practice. In this way, remote working emerges as both an enabler of WLB and a source of its erosion.

5.1.5 Theme 2: organisational, managerial and technical support. 5.1.5.1 Sub-theme 2.1: line manager approaches and trust. Participants felt that relationships with line managers are important for successful WLB in three key areas: "perceived support, "trust" and "flexibility". Regarding perceived support, P14 commented: *"I feel like the support I've got from my line manager is first class [. . .] If I need anything, I get it virtually straight away"*. Trust was another important aspect of a relationship with a line manager, as P11 commented: *"I don't feel checked upon or that I'm being monitored in any way"*. Flexibility from a line manager was also key, as P8 shared: *"She said to me, don't worry about it, you can keep working from home as long as you are able to submit and meet those deadlines"*.

However, line manager support also depended on individual factors, as P1 explains: *"I would say that age difference between the line manager and the subordinate is very key in determining the remote work arrangement and support received from the line manager"*, and P6 shares: *"When I've had a line manager who cannot work from home, she's distracted and so she assumes that everyone else is like that, and she thinks that the only place that you can work productively is in the office"*.

5.1.5.2 Sub-theme 2.2: institutional policy, estate decisions and hybrid expectations. A lack of a clear institutional policy was a concern as expressed by P17: *"They've been a bit weird and a bit worrying, every now and again they start talking about how they're going to stop people*

being remote and they're going to have people in the offices more often." Acknowledging the challenge, P6 explains: *"I don't think there is a one-size-fit-all policy [. . .] you need a policy which reflects the different types of work that people do"*.

Equipment and on-site factors also have an influence on academics' hybrid working, as P16 said, *"My work bag is so heavy because my laptop weighs an absolute tonne, and we have to haul this round because that's our only computer"*, highlighting practical issues of transporting equipment for hot-desking.

5.1.5.3 Sub-theme 2.3: IT services and training. Participants reported varying experiences of IT support for remote work. Systems and software access were problematic, as P4 highlights: *"I do believe sometimes accessibility towards the university systems or institution systems you might have some barriers if you are working remotely or if you are not using the university device itself"*.

The level of IT training was also discussed. P16 reflected: *"The things that I think we could have more support on are admin-related systems [. . .] they are technically efficient, but they're not very user friendly and there are training sessions, but they're not as regular as probably they should be, and a lot of them are on campus"*.

5.1.5.4 Sub-theme 2.4: colleague communication and team practices. Participants discussed how they maintained effective communication and collaboration whilst working remotely. Microsoft Teams was highlighted as the main platform, and participants highlighted the ease of this for communication. P3 stated: *"We have group chats on Microsoft Teams and we use this almost on a daily basis"*. P1 also shared: *"Calling for a face-to-face meeting is becoming super difficult [. . .] But I'll just text them on Teams, and I will jump into a call immediately"*. On the other hand, participants expressed concerns over the loss of social, face-to-face contact due to remote work. P3 stated: *"Working from home is a barrier to get to know people, to socialise, to understand how things happen"*.

Participants provided various examples of practices and strategies used to maintain effective communication. P3 stated: *"I deliver training sessions myself in order to get to know people, so to make myself more visible"*. P11 also shared: *"We had things like online meet and greets every Thursday. We used to have a cup of coffee online at 4:00"*.

To summarise theme 2, participants emphasised the importance of organisational and managerial support in enabling remote working, particularly the role of line manager support, trust and flexibility. However, experiences were often inconsistent, shaped by individual management styles, meaning support wasn't uniformly experienced. This unevenness appears to stem from the decentralised nature of hybrid working arrangements, where responsibility is devolved to line managers in the absence of clear institutional frameworks. A lack of clear institutional guidance further contributed to uncertainty, particularly given the difficulty of applying a one-size-fits-all policy. As a result, hybrid working is enacted through localised practices rather than coherent organisational strategy, meaning that some staff may be advantaged, while others are constrained and thus may reproduce inequalities.

5.1.6 Theme 3: WLB, boundaries and well-being. 5.1.6.1 Sub-theme 3.1: childcare and household management. Many participants highlighted how remote working eases childcare and household tasks. When discussing remote work and caregiving for a child with additional needs, P12 shared: *"Without the flexibility that my husband and I have combined, one of us wouldn't be able to work"*. With regard to household management, P16 explains: *"I can have the washing on and be doing some food and be doing work and have stuff on the washing line and I like that flow"*.

5.1.6.2 Sub-theme 3.2: boundary erosion. Boundary erosion was highlighted as a difficulty in switching off and being constantly available with remote work. P16 shares: *"If you're not careful, you can really fall into that trap of just working from home and just working a lot from home. You know you easily do like your full work allocation in three days without even thinking about it"*.

Consequently, blurred boundaries impacted WLB as P9 remarked: *"It's difficult to neatly separate work and family and professional life"*. P9 echoed this: *"People, students or*

colleagues, contact you Saturday, Sunday, and often there is the expectation that you are always in front of the computer".

Various strategies were suggested by participants. For example, P9 proposed: *"I think that if they could stop this continuous receiving emails at any time of the day [. . .] to have a policy for which we don't send emails after 6:00pm, and we don't send emails on Saturday and Sunday"*. P16 presented another strategy to avoid disruption, saying: *"Sometimes I'll pretend not to be online because I am here, but I don't want people contacting me"*.

5.1.6.3 Sub-theme 3.3: professional isolation. Remote work was shown to have varying impacts on professional isolation. When asked if they experienced professional isolation, P3 stated: *"Definitely. Especially when I joined the institution and people got used to working from home, you don't see the faces because people knew each other before I joined"*. Adding to this, P10 said: *"There's no denying the fact that you feel that at some point because of the lack of physical engagement [. . .] there is professional isolation [. . .] sometimes you don't get to see or meet for a year"*.

Conversely, others felt that online communications had reduced professional isolation, as P17 commented: *"In fact, if anything, the fact that more people have been willing to jump online, and they've been more willing to have online meetings and do things online [. . .]. For me, it's been an absolute boom. It's been fantastic"*.

5.1.6.4 Sub-theme 3.4: well-being benefits. Well-being benefits were highlighted by many respondents, as P13 shared: *"I think the flexibility means I see family. I see the kids more before school and after school because I'm not sat in traffic"*. Notably, P16 discussed how a more relaxed working home environment improves well-being: *"You don't want to get up, get dressed, put all your makeup on, go to work, you want to stay at home in comfy stuff because it just makes you feel better"*. Furthermore, outdoor or physical activity was a common aspect of remote working, with associated well-being benefits, as P17 commented: *"I'm actually going out in the garden and picking a few flowers and, if I get the chance, I'm going for a half hour walk up the hill"*.

In summary for this final theme, participants highlighted the ways in which remote working can support WLB, through enabling childcare, managing domestic responsibilities and integrating supportive well-being activities into the working day. However, these benefits were offset by tensions around boundary erosion, with participants reporting longer working hours, difficulties switching off and a perceived expectation to remain constantly available. Experiences of professional isolation further reflected this unevenness: while some felt disconnected from colleagues, others found that digital communication helped sustain interaction. This juxtaposition illustrates that remote working simultaneously enhances and undermine WLB, reinforcing its contingent and often contradictory nature.

6. Discussion

Our work suggests that remote and hybrid work are conditional opportunities rather than uniformly beneficial or harmful. Participants reported gains in control over time and place, improved concentration for writing and marking and reclaimed commuting time but also boundary erosion, weaker informal ties and friction from misaligned estates and IT. Interpreted through COR theory, autonomy, environmental control and saved travel time function as valuable resources that can be reinvested in scholarship, caregiving and recovery; when supported by clear norms and supervision, these resource gains enhance WLB (Hobfoll, 1989; Pensar and Rousi, 2023). However, these same resources can reverse into loss spirals when availability becomes the default, with blurred boundaries and "always-on" expectations converting flexibility into latent workload (Ipsen *et al*., 2021; Mann and Holdsworth, 2003; Aguillon and Cronin-Gilmore, 2024). This conditionality helps explain the coexistence of well-being gains and over-extension.

Boundary theory further clarifies these dynamics. Participants varied in their preferences for segmentation and integration, often enacting micro-boundaries (e.g. dedicated spaces,

device rules and deliberate unavailability) to protect focus and non-work roles (Ashforth *et al*., 2000). However, these efforts were frequently constrained by institutional factors such as fixed teaching schedules, hot-desking and implicit responsiveness norms. This supports critiques that boundary management is not purely individual but is shaped by organisational expectations and resources (Allen *et al*., 2021; Gardner *et al*., 2021). While personality may influence boundary strategies (Oseghale *et al*., 2024), their effectiveness depends on institutional affordances, policy clarity and reliable infrastructure.

Social exchange and JD-R perspectives explain why managerial trust and support are pivotal. Where managers emphasised outputs, signalled trust and accommodated caregiving needs, participants reported stronger balance and lower strain. Conversely, where flexibility was inconsistent or linked to surveillance, it generated psychological contract tension and reduced attachment (Rousseau, 1995; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Gutworth *et al*., 2023). Support therefore operates as a resource only when it is credible, timely and aligned with task demands.

A key contribution is the concept of task–environment fit. Teaching, collaboration and student engagement are better suited to in-person settings, whereas deep work (writing, analysis and marking) benefits from remote environments. This helps reconcile mixed findings on productivity: outcomes depend less on remote work itself than on aligning tasks with appropriate settings (Rauf *et al*., 2023; Botha *et al*., 2023). Where estates reduce access to quiet space or technology introduces friction, such misalignment undermines both productivity and balance.

The findings also complicate narratives of professional isolation. Newcomers and those with weaker institutional networks reported slower relationship formation, while others experienced enhanced collaboration through digital tools. Isolation is therefore contingent on onboarding practices, informal interaction opportunities and purposeful co-presence (Rauf *et al*., 2023; Botha *et al*., 2023; Gutman *et al*., 2023). Importantly, these effects are unevenly distributed. Early-career academics and those lacking established networks rely more on informal interactions for visibility and development, making them more vulnerable in remote settings. Similarly, while flexibility benefits those with caregiving responsibilities, it may intensify role overlap, reinforcing rather than reducing inequalities. Hybrid work thus risks reproducing structural asymmetries in access to visibility, support and boundary control.

Conceptually, task–environment fit extends boundary theory and the JD-R model by specifying where resource gains and losses occur. It shifts attention from individual preferences or organisational policies alone to the alignment between task demands and spatial–temporal work arrangements, offering a meso-level mechanism linking flexibility to performance and WLB.

Finally, the findings highlight the role of equity and complexity in HE. While remote work supports childcare and well-being, it also risks extending working hours and blurring boundaries. Consistent with spillover theory, demands can cross domains and erode satisfaction if unmanaged (Frischmann, 2009; McDaniel *et al*., 2021). Hybrid work should therefore be understood not simply as a policy choice but as a design challenge involving workload, estates, IT and managerial practice (Li *et al*., 2025; Botha *et al*., 2023; Capone *et al*., 2024). Overall, the study refines COR by framing autonomy as a conditional resource, extends boundary theory by emphasising organisational constraints on boundary management and integrates JD-R and social exchange to show how trust-based management and reliable infrastructure convert flexibility into sustainable balance – or, when absent, into demand.

7. Practical implications

The findings indicate that autonomy supports WLB only when underpinned by clear boundaries; without them, it can lead to overwork and difficulty switching off. Higher education institutions (HEIs), therefore, need to move beyond broad hybrid policies and establish clearer expectations, such as limiting routine emails outside working hours, setting

response norms and protecting time for focused work. When effectively implemented, these practices can convert flexibility into a sustainable resource and reduce work–home spillover (Hobfoll, 1989; Ashforth *et al*., 2000; Frischmann, 2009; McDaniel *et al*., 2021). However, implementation is challenging, requiring consistent enforcement, alignment across teams and cultural change in contexts where long hours are often normalised.

The data also highlight a clear pattern: teaching and collaboration are more effective in person, while tasks such as writing and marking are better suited to remote settings. Realising this balance depends on managerial trust, equitable access to flexibility and output-based rather than presence-based evaluation. This, in turn, requires training managers to apply policies consistently, adapt expectations across roles and avoid uneven or exclusionary practices. Without this, hybrid work risks reinforcing inequalities or reverting to presenteeism.

When support is reliable and equitable, it strengthens trust and reciprocity, sustaining engagement and retention (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Gutworth *et al*., 2023; Capone *et al*., 2024). For managers, this implies a shift from presence-based oversight to task-based coordination, aligning work patterns with task demands, prioritising co-presence for collaborative work and protecting uninterrupted time for deep work. This requires not only clear policies but also managerial capability to balance flexibility with accountability and ensure equitable access to hybrid arrangements.

8. Conclusion and research contributions

We show that remote and hybrid work in HE are conditional opportunities rather than uniform solutions. Drawing on interviews with 19 academic staff, we identified gains in autonomy, focused time for writing and marking and well-being through reduced commuting. However, these benefits are offset by boundary erosion, weakened informal ties and friction where estates and digital systems are misaligned with academic work. Interpreted through COR, boundary theory and social exchange/JD-R, autonomy emerges as a valuable resource only when supported by clear temporal norms, trust-based management and enabling infrastructure; otherwise, flexibility becomes over-availability and strain.

A key organising principle is task–environment fit. Teaching, student engagement and collaboration are best suited to co-presence, while deep work (writing, analysis and marking) benefits from remote settings. When institutions align work environments with task demands and reinforce this with clear norms and trust-based management, flexibility can translate into sustainable WLB. Conversely, policy ambiguity, hot-desking and inadequate IT convert flexibility into hidden demand.

The study contributes by (1) reframing autonomy as a conditional resource, (2) conceptualising boundary outcomes as the interaction between individual preferences and organisational affordances and (3) integrating JD-R and social exchange to explain how trust, support and infrastructure function as resources rather than demands. While not statistically generalisable, the findings offer analytically transferable insights for comparable HE contexts. Future research should examine these dynamics longitudinally, explore variation across disciplines and career stages and assess whether task–environment fit improves inclusion, performance and retention. For HEIs, the implication is clear: hybrid work must be designed so that autonomy remains a buffer, not a burden.

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