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Optimizing Work-from-Home Systems for Academics in African Open and Distance Learning Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of open and distance learning (ODL) has transformed higher education across Africa. It offers unique access to tertiary education for diverse populations. With advancements of technology and lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, work-from-home (WFH) models for academic staff have become progressively practical. This paper examines optimal ways that African ODL higher education institutions (HEIs) can benefit from WFH systems for academics. It explores the advantages, such as enhanced productivity, cost savings, flexibility, and work-life balance, as well as the challenges, including technological limitations, reduced collaboration, and quality assurance concerns. Using examples from leading African ODL HEIs: including the University of South Africa (UNISA), National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), and Open University of Tanzania (OUT), this paper identifies main institutional and systemic factors that influence the effectiveness of remote academic work. The theoretical grounding draws on OET and DTT frameworks. It highlights how digital infrastructure and supportive management can sustain performance. Findings intimate that a well-structured WFH policy improves academic engagement, institutional efficiency, and educational quality. However, optimal realization requires flawless performance management systems, formidable digital infrastructure, psychosocial support, and inclusive policy design. The paper concludes by proposing strategic and policy recommendations for African ODL HEIs to institutionalize sustainable WFH models that balance accountability, flexibility, and productivity in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: Academic productivity, African higher education, digital transformation, open and distance learning, organizational efficiency, work-from-home

INTRODUCTION

The higher education (HE) scenery in Africa has endured profound evolution in recent decades, constrained largely by the development of ODL systems. ODL HEIs have become essential in addressing challenges of access, equity, and lifelong learning, particularly in regions where physical HEI infrastructure is limited and demand for HE continues to surge (Tsindoli, 2025). ODL flexibility has empowered masses of learners [specifically those in rural or underserved areas] to access HE without the constraints of physical attendance. However, as ODL delivery models continue to advance, the role and working conditions of academics within these HEIs are also being redefined. A major significant development in this regard is the adoption of WFH or remote work systems for academic staff. The WFH model, which the global COVID-19 pandemic coerced, has shifted perceptions about how, when, and where academic work can be performed. During the pandemic, ODL HEIs across Africa, such as

NOUN, OUT, UNISA, and ZOU, were comparatively better positioned to change to remote operations than conventional universities, given their established online pedagogies and digital infrastructure (Faturoti, 2022). However, even within ODL sites, the pandemic showed considerable differences in institutional readiness, technological access, and policy frameworks governing remote academic work. While some academics excelled under flexible WFH arrangements, others struggled with technological barriers, isolation, and unclear performance expectations (Rathnayake et al., 2022).

In the African milieu, ODL academics characteristically engage in teaching, course design, learner support, assessment, and research (Mudau & Van Wyk, 2021; Nketekete & Mojalefa, 2024). These functions are progressively mediated by technology. El Koshiry and Tony (2025) explain that the incorporation of digital tools such as learning management systems (LMS), virtual classrooms, and electronic feedback platforms has made WFH possible and, in many circumstances, more efficient. For example, UNISA's myUnisa platform enables instructors to design and deliver entire courses asynchronously, while NOUN's eLearn portal enables assessment and student support across Nigeria's separate regions (Ajudua et al., 2025; Maré & Mutezo, 2025; Ononogbu, 2025). These examples display that WFH arrangements can augment academic flexibility, improve productivity, and reduce institutional costs associated with physical office spaces. Moreover, from a staff welfare perspective, WFH can mitigate commuting stress, reduce transport expenses, and promote better balance of work and life (Russo et al., 2025). According to Olaniyi and Agbaje (2024), these factors are specifically significant in congested urban areas such as Lagos, Nairobi, and Johannesburg. Nonetheless, notwithstanding these advantages, implementing WFH systems in African ODL HEIs has challenges. Abdullahi et al. (2025) mention that some HEIs experience infrastructural limitations such as defective internet connectivity, irregular electricity supply, and limited access to high-quality digital tools. Moreover, ODL academics often report feelings of isolation, reduced collegial interaction, and clouded boundaries between professional and personal life (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2024; Smith & Ulus, 2020; Uras Eren & Atay, 2025). Institutional policies on workload measurement, quality assurance, and performance appraisal also remain underdeveloped for remote settings, leading to variations in expectations and accountability. These complexities underscore the need for strategic and evidence-based approaches to integrating WFH systems within African ODL HEIs.

Given this context, the present study seeks to identify optimal ways African ODL HEIs can benefit from academics' WFH systems. It aims to move beyond the temporary and reactive adoption of WFH—as seen during the pandemic—towards a sustainable and structured model that enhances institutional efficiency and academic well-being. The paper posits that WFH can be a strategic asset for African ODL HEIs if supported by robust digital infrastructure, sound managerial practices, and equitable policy frameworks. By examining both benefits and challenges, and drawing lessons from leading HEIs such as UNISA, NOUN, OUT and ZOU, this paper provides a framework for harnessing WFH arrangements as part of a long-term digital transformation agenda in African HE.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the study, drawing on OET and DTT. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the benefits of WFH systems in African ODL HEIs, including institutional and individual advantages. The subsequent section discusses challenges and weaknesses, such as infrastructural, psychological, and managerial constraints. Thereafter, the paper presents strategies for optimizing WFH practices, focusing on capacity building, technological investment, and human resource policies. Finally, policy recommendations and conclusions are offered to guide African ODL HEIs toward sustainable remote academic work systems that balance flexibility, accountability, and productivity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The effectiveness of a WFH system for academics in ODL HEIs can best be understood from two interrelated notional lenses: organizational efficiency theory [OET] and digital transformation theory [DTT] (Enakrire et al., 2025; Enstroem et al., 2025; Osman & Yatam, 2024). Ajani (2024) suggests that these are frameworks offering theoretical basis for exploring the way remote academic work influences institutional performance, staff productivity, and systemic sustainability within African ODL contexts.

Organizational Efficiency Theory

According to Subair et al. (2025), OET accentuates the optimal use of resources such as human, financial, and infrastructure, to attain institutional objectives. In the ODL setting, efficiency is both a measure of cost reduction and a reflection of the way an institution can deliver quality education to scattered students using available resources. Embracing WFH systems aligns with the principle of efficiency by minimizing operational costs, optimizing human capital deployment, and increasing the flexibility of academic workflows (Tongsubanan & Kasemsarn, 2025). In traditional contact HEIs, academic productivity is often restrained by spatial and temporal

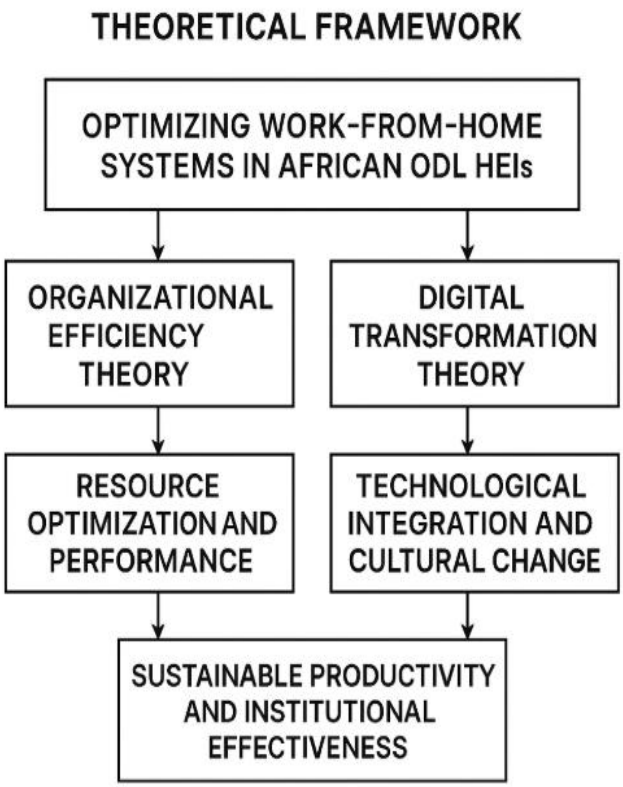
restrictions such as fixed office hours, commuting time, and limited access to digital tools. Conversely, in ODL HEIs, WFH arrangements can rationalize communication, reduce physical infrastructure expenses, and enable academics to work in personalized environments conducive to focus and creativity (Nguyen et al., 2023). According to OET principles, such arrangements can enhance institutional agility (Al Ali, 2025), which is the capacity to react fast to changes in student demand, policy, and technology. This will happen whilst retaining or even expanding quality standards. Nevertheless, efficiency rewards depend on adequate coordination mechanisms, clear performance metrics, and institutional cultures that value accountability and trust (Salomo & Rahmayanti, 2023). From this perspective, WFH in ODL HEIs is both a logistical adaptation and a strategic resource realignment process. African HEIs such as the NOUN and UNISA typify this efficiency approach. Both have leveraged WFH to reduce administrative overhead, digitalize student support services, and expand their reach to new learner markets (Ghoulam, 2025). However, as OET implies, such structural changes require careful management to prevent overextension of human resources and to sustain communication flow across remote teams.

Digital Transformation Theory

OET explains the institutional logic behind WFH adoption, and DTT addresses the technological and cultural dimensions that enable or constrain its success. According to Dung and Tri (2021), DTT is the addition of digital technologies into all aspects of an organization, essentially changing how it operates and delivers value. In the context of African ODL HEIs, DTT involves adopting technologies that support online teaching, collaboration, and administrative processes such as LMS, cloud-based research tools, and digital assessment platforms. DTT views technology adoption as a technical upgrade and a immersed organizational change process that requires new mindsets, competencies, and leadership approaches (Vial, 2019). For WFH systems, this means moving beyond using digital tools for convenience to embed them in institutional culture and academic practice. For example, OUT and ZOU have introduced digital ecosystems that enable academics to design, deliver, and evaluate courses entirely online (Salama & Hinton, 2023). These systems display how digital transformation promotes new work patterns aligning with WFH principles: remote teaching, asynchronous student engagement, and virtual academic meetings. This can expand institutional resilience and inclusivity. However, DTT also highlights the importance of digital readiness (Tripo & Kovács, 2025), the extent to which HEIs and individuals possess the necessary infrastructure, skills, and support systems to sustain digital operations. In many African ODL HEIs, uneven digital readiness creates disparities in WFH effectiveness. Jabeen et al. (2025) caution that without adequate bandwidth, device access, or digital literacy training, the transformative potential of WFH remains limited. Thus, sustainable WFH operation requires both technological investment and organizational change management. This will ensure that human and digital systems evolve together.

Integrating the Frameworks

Adding OET and DTT offers a complete lens for analyzing WFH in African ODL HEIs. OET explains the *why* (Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025): the strategic rationale for adopting WFH to enhance productivity and reduce costs. DTT explains the *how* (El Awady et al., 2025): the technological and cultural changes necessary for effective implementation. Collectively, these frameworks suggest that WFH is most beneficial when HEIs achieve a dynamic balance between resource optimization, technological innovation, and human-centered management. For African ODL HEIs, this dual framework underscores the need for policies and practices that link digital investment to staff development, performance monitoring, and institutional sustainability.



Benefits of WFH in ODL HEIs

The WFH system has emerged as a transformative work arrangement for ODL HEIs, specifically in the African situation where digital education models are mounting promptly. The potential benefits of WFH for ODL academics cover cost savings and extend to increased productivity, enhanced staff welfare, institutional flexibility, and environmental sustainability (Itam & Warrier, 2024). This section explores these advantages, using examples from established African ODL HEIs such as the NOUN, OUT, UNISA and ZOU.

Increased academic productivity and enhanced efficiency

One significant advantage of WFH arrangements for ODL academics is the potential for improved productivity (Itam & Warrier, 2024). Academic work such as teaching, research, course design, and student support usually requires continual intensity. Mićić & Zbiljić (2025) enlighten that the WFH nature enables academics to structure their work schedules around personal productivity cycles and to reduce time lost to commuting and office-related distractions. Other studies have shown that academics working from home can gain between one and two additional hours per day previously spent in transit (DeWeese et al., 2022; Erdoğdu & Watson, 2023; Halefom et al., 2025). This time can be redirected toward research output, online tutorial preparation, and individualized learner support. At HEIs such as UNISA, which serves over 350,000 students across and beyond South Africa, WFH systems have facilitated the digitalization of academic processes (Letseka et al., 2025; Msekelwa, 2022). These systems enable tutors and lecturers to engage more flexibly with students using asynchronous platforms such as myUNISA and Microsoft Teams. Similarly, NOUN's adoption of eLearn and virtual facilitation systems allows its academics to handle larger student cohorts without compromising the quality of engagement (Joseph, 2025). The improved efficiency results from the seamless integration of work tasks within home-based digital ecosystems. This reduces logistical constraints and supporting timely completion of academic responsibilities.

Enhanced Staff Welfare and Work–Life Balance

WFH systems also contribute pointedly to employee welfare and job satisfaction (Fang et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2025). For many academics in urban centers of Africa, travelling to physical campuses can consume substantial time and financial resources due to inadequate public transport and traffic congestion. WFH eliminates these inefficiencies. It allows staff to allocate resources towards other aspects of personal and professional well-being. The reduced commuting burden leads to lower transport expenses, reduced exposure to stress and pollution, and

more opportunities for family engagement and personal reconstruction (Wang et al., 2025). Work-life balance critically affects academic motivation and performance. In ODL HEIs, where workloads are often high due to large student numbers, WFH arrangements can mitigate burnout and promote sustainable productivity (Mateen et al., 2025). For instance, according to Agbeyangi and Lukose (2025), UNISA and OUT have reported improved staff morale and retention when flexible work arrangements are followed. Moreover, the sense of autonomy and trust associated with WFH encourages intrinsic motivation (Whitfield et al., 2021). Through this, academics feel empowered to manage their tasks creatively and efficiently. According to Mahade et al. (2025), OET offers autonomy that can increase both job satisfaction and overall institutional performance.

Cost savings for HEIs and employees

WFH arrangements generate tangible cost savings for both academics and their HEIs (Russo et al., 2025). For employees, direct financial benefits include reduced expenses on transport, meals, and office attire. For ODL HEIs, cost savings are realized through reduced demand for office space, utilities, and maintenance. Given the financial limits that many African HEIs experience, these savings can be reallocated to other strategic priorities (Wang et al., 2025), such as digital infrastructure development and academic capacity building. Marima (2025) informs that ZOU's hybrid operations after the COVID-19 pandemic have allowed it to optimize space utilization across regional centers, resulting in significant reductions in operating costs. Similarly, NOUN has strategically restructured its budget to invest in e-learning servers and cloud-based systems rather than physical expansion (Faturoti, 2022). This aligns with the principles of OET, where resources are redirected from non-core physical assets toward high-impact technological investments that enhance institutional agility (Zhen, 2025).

Flexibility and institutional agility

Flexibility is a fundamental strength of ODL, and WFH arrangements amplify this institutional characteristic. Academics can work asynchronously across time zones, allowing ODL HEIs to offer continuous learning support to geographically dispersed students. This flexibility enhances institutional agility, which Al Ali (2025) defines as the ability to act rapidly to emerging academic and administrative demands. For instance, during the pandemic, OUT could maintain academic continuity by enabling its staff to teach, assess, and communicate remotely through Moodle and Zoom platforms, thereby minimizing educational disruption. Institutional agility also extends to research and collaboration (Al Ali, 2025). WFH settings promote the use of digital collaboration tools such as Google Workspace, Microsoft Teams, and ResearchGate, which facilitate cross-border academic partnerships without the need for travel. This digital academic mobility enhances Africa's integration into global knowledge networks (Shen & Wang, 2022). This enables ODL HEIs to expand their scholarly reach while controlling operational costs.

Environmental Sustainability

Although frequently disregarded, environmental sustainability is a significant benefit of WFH systems in ODL HEIs (Pambudi et al., 2025). HEIs contribute to lower carbon emissions, decreased energy consumption, and reduced demand for physical infrastructure by reducing daily commuting. In the context of global sustainability goals, ODL HEIs, which is already developed to minimize physical resource dependence, can strengthen their green credentials by implanting WFH as part of their institutional sustainability strategies (Dixit et al., 2023). This aligns with the African Union's Agenda 2063, which promotes environmentally responsible education and innovation systems.

Strengthened Digital Competence and Innovation Culture

Wang et al. (2024) suggest that WFH systems naturally accelerate digital literacy and technological innovation among academics. As staff adapt to remote teaching and research, Li (2024) declare that they develop new skills in online pedagogy, digital assessment, and educational technology integration. This process encourages a culture of continuous learning and innovation within ODL HEIs. For instance, NOUN has incorporated ongoing digital skills training into its professional development framework, while UNISA consistently updates its staff development programs to include modules on virtual engagement and online course design. Aliy et al. (2025) believe that over time, such initiatives enhance institutional digital maturity. They will enable more efficient and responsive academic operations. This is to say that WFH systems in African ODL HEIs offer multifaceted benefits that align with both institutional efficiency and DTT goals. They enhance productivity, promote staff well-being, generate financial and environmental savings, and cultivate digital innovation. However, the realization of these

benefits is contingent upon supportive infrastructure, strong management frameworks, and equitable access to digital tools. These preconditions form the bridge to the next section, which examines the challenges and weaknesses that may constrain the optimal implementation of WFH systems in African ODL HE.

Challenges and Weaknesses of WFH Systems in African ODL HEIs

The arrangement of WFH offers substantial advantages to ODL HEIs in Africa (Maré & Mutezo, 2025; Ononogbu, 2025). Agba and Agba (2025) explain that implementing WFH is loaded with structural, technological, and psychosocial challenges (Agalliu & Ibrahimi, 2025). These challenges can undermine productivity, institutional cohesion, and quality assurance if not strategically managed. Understanding these weaknesses is essential for formulating effective optimization and policy strategies. The key limitations include inadequate digital infrastructure, limited digital literacy, psychosocial isolation, blurred work–life boundaries, weak institutional policy frameworks, and difficulties in monitoring performance and quality.

Inadequate Digital Infrastructure

A major impediment to effective WFH systems in African ODL HEIs is the inadequacy of digital infrastructure (Woldegiorgis, 2025). Loglo (2024) concurs by suggesting that unreliable internet connectivity, unstable electricity, and inadequate access to quality information and communication technologies (ICTs) are noteworthy obstructions. Many academics, particularly those in rural or peri-urban areas, experience challenges in retaining reliable access to online platforms and virtual communication tools. In countries such as Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, frequent power outages and high data costs limit the ability of academic staff to perform their duties effectively from home (Bangani, 2024).

According to Karanja and Areba (2025), HEIs such as the NOUN and ZOU have made advances in digitalization. However, infrastructural inequalities persist among staff. This breeds discrepancies in performance and engagement. Without universal access to reliable internet and power, WFH systems risk reinforcing pre-existing inequalities between academics based on geographical and socioeconomic factors (Mordi et al., 2023). Thus, infrastructure deficiencies represent both a technological challenge and a social equity issue within African ODL systems.

Limited digital competence and technological adaptation

The successful operation of WFH models depends on academics' ability to effectively use digital tools for teaching, research, and communication. However, digital competence levels vary widely across African ODL HEIs (Ndibalema, 2025). Younger academics often adapt quickly to digital teaching platforms such as Moodle, Blackboard, or Zoom. However, many senior staff experience challenges in grasping these tools. The limited availability of systematic training programs intensifies the problem/ It leaves some academics ill-prepared for the technological demands of WFH. For instance, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, some HEIs experienced difficulties in ensuring that all staff could transition smoothly to remote teaching (Singun, 2025). In some cases, technical support was centralized and lacked to meet prevalent needs. Without continuous professional development in digital pedagogy and ICT literacy, WFH systems may unconsciously weaken the quality of instruction and assessment.

Psychosocial isolation and reduced collegiality

A regularly reported disadvantage of WFH is social isolation (Grenčíková et al., 2024). Academic work, though rationally independent, is also intrinsically collaborative: collegial interaction inspires research, peer review, mentoring, and emotional support. Saraiva and Nogueiro (2025) warn that WFH can weaken these social ties, leading to feelings of disconnection, loneliness, and reduced morale among staff. In African ODL HEIs, where teamwork and cross-departmental consultation are essential for course development and student support, the absence of face-to-face interaction can diminish innovation and knowledge sharing. HEIs such as UNISA have sought to mitigate this by organizing regular virtual departmental meetings and online wellness programs, but participation rates vary, and digital fatigue can reduce engagement over time. According to Spagano (2025), within OET, social cohesion and communication are vital for maintaining institutional performance. The erosion of these social dynamics is therefore a critical weakness in long-term WFH arrangements.

Clouded work–life boundaries and burnout risks

WFH arrangements enhance flexibility, but they can also shadow the boundary between work and personal life. In many African households, where family responsibilities and domestic activities are intertwined with living spaces, academics often struggle to establish clear separation between work hours and home life (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2025). The constant availability required by students, colleagues, and administrators through online communication tools can cause overwork and psychological fatigue. Burnout becomes a tangible risk, particularly in ODL systems where academic workloads are high due to large student-to-staff ratios (Mynarek & Jahr, 2025). Even in cases where it is not the case, some staff members may report working longer hours at home than in the office because online systems create a perception of perpetual accessibility. This undermines one primary intended WFH benefit, work-life balance. Lansmann et al. (2025) caution that if this is left unaddressed, it can negatively impact job satisfaction and long-term productivity.

Weak institutional policies and performance management systems

Woldegiorgis (2025) informs that an additional limitation of WFH systems in African ODL HEIs is the lack of robust institutional policies governing WFH. In many HEIs, WFH arrangements were adopted reactively during the pandemic and not as part of deliberate organizational planning (Gray et al., 2025). Accordingly, in African HEIs, policies about workload distribution, communication protocols, data security, and performance evaluation are not well developed. Without clear guidelines, academic staff often experience ambiguity about expectations, accountability, and professional boundaries. Performance monitoring is specifically challenging in remote settings. Conventional metrics such as office attendance, classroom contact hours, and administrative visibility are less applicable. He et al. (2025) clarify that these HEIs have not designed fair and transparent evaluation systems to measure output rather than presence. The lack of standardized digital performance indicators may cause perceptions of unfairness or laxity. Silaji et al. (2025) warns that this undermines motivation and institutional trust. Moreover, data security and privacy concerns have arisen as academics increasingly handle sensitive student information from home networks that may lack institutional-level protection.

Institutional culture and resistance to change

Institutional culture plays a vital role in determining the success or failure of WFH systems. Some ODL HEIs continue to adhere to outdated bureaucratic management structures that prioritize physical presence over results-based performance (Saher & Ali, 2025). Resistance to flexible work arrangements among senior administrators or colleagues can hinder effective implementation. Cultural attitudes toward supervision, trust, and productivity can therefore impede the transition to a result-oriented, digitally mediated work culture. Therefore, WFH offers significant potential benefits for African ODL HEIs, it is constrained by systemic weaknesses related to infrastructure, skills, social interaction, and institutional governance. Addressing these challenges requires both technological investment and cultural transformation and strong managerial leadership.

Strategies for Optimizing WFH Systems in African ODL HEIs

Calfa (2025) advises that to realize the full potential of WFH systems, African ODL HEIs need to adopt deliberate, structured, and evidence-based tactics designed to address both the technical and human factors of WFH in academia. Rahman (2025) adds that effective optimization necessitates institutional planning, investment in digital infrastructure, robust policy frameworks, capacity building, psychosocial support, and performance management systems that balance flexibility with accountability. Drawing from best practices in HEIs such as the NOUN, OUT, UNISA, and ZOU, the following seven strategies can guide the transformation toward sustainable WFH models.

Strengthening digital infrastructure and connectivity

Robust digital infrastructure is the basis of any successful WFH system (Afrianty et al., 2022; Putra et al., 2025). Hadi and AlShaikh-Hasan (2025) guide that African ODL HEIs should prioritize investment in dependable internet connectivity, cloud-based learning platforms, and stable power supply options. HEIs such as UNISA have shown that centralized digital ecosystems, such as blackboard and myUnisa, can resourcefully host LMS, virtual libraries, and staff collaboration tools (Dlamini et al., 2025). However, infrastructure improvement should benefit institutional systems and support individual staff members. George (2024) notes that providing subsidized data packages, home office allowances, or low-cost equipment (e.g., headsets, laptops, routers) can encourage bridging the digital divide among staff. Collaborative partnerships with telecommunication companies and government

agencies can also expand broadband coverage to remote areas. enabling equitable participation. For example, UNISA's collaboration with mobile network operators [Cell C, MTN, Vodacom] during COVID-19 and beyond, mainly for giving students data at exam and other times, proved the countless value of such collaboration (Shibambu & Ngoepe, 2025). Also, NOUN partnering with the Nigerian Communications Commission to improve access to learning broadband networks reveals a mountable approach to digital presence in remote academic work (Uwaezuoke, 2025).

Building digital literacy and continuous professional development

WFH optimization relies on staff expertise in using digital tools for pedagogy, assessment, and collaboration (Sahni et al., 2025). Therefore, African ODL HEIs should commit broad digital skills training programs for every academic. Training should exceed basic computer literacy to incorporate modules on digital pedagogy, virtual student engagement, data security, and online research collaboration (Amiri, 2025). Kamya (2022) informs that HEIs such as OUT have instigated digital pedagogy workshops to improve staff expertise in Moodle and synchronous learning environments. Likewise, UNISA repeatedly repeats its professional development programs to incorporate training on remote teaching methodologies and digital assessment design. Constant upskilling increases academic performance and nurtures a culture of innovation and adaptability (Aithal & Maiya, 2023). According to Signorini et al. (2025), these are primary attributes for maintaining digital renovation.

Establishing clear institutional policies and guidelines

Effective WFH application involves thorough policy outlines that define prospects, duties, and performance metrics (Itam & Warrier, 2024). However, Woldegiorgis (2025) decries that many African ODL HEIs currently lack formal WFH policies, and this causes confusion and inconsistency. Institutional policies should outline communication standards, conditions of eligibility, mechanisms for monitoring output, and work hours. They should also address issues of cybersecurity, intellectual property, and data protection to safeguard institutional integrity. As an example, Eshun et al. (2025) present UNISA's post-pandemic "Flexible Work Policy (FWP)," for instance, provides a useful model. FWP combines accountability mechanisms with flexibility using digital work logs and performance reports (Owojori & Erasmus, 2025). It enables staff to adapt their schedules based on teaching and research needs. Equally, Ogunode and Ayoko (2023) explain that NOUN's digital governance charter includes e-supervision systems for monitoring staff activity while upholding trust and autonomy. These show that clear rules can help ensure that WFH is structured, equitable, and aligned with institutional objectives.

Developing communication, collaboration, and collegiality

To offset the WFH's resultant psychosocial isolation, ODL HEIs can advance a radiant virtual academic community. Regular online meetings, peer mentoring programs, and virtual research groups can sustain collegial interaction and emotional well-being (Dost, 2025). HEIs can leverage collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace, Zoom and Slack to maintain communication flow across departments. An example by Caffrey et al. (2025) explain ZOU's implementation of a virtual mentorship and research partnership platform that bonds junior and senior academics across faculties. According to Elechi et al. (2025), such ingenuities preserve institutional culture, improve knowledge sharing, and certify that remote academics are incorporated into the larger organizational network. Additionally, WFH can be augmented using sporadic in-person retreats or hybrid workshops. Elemure et al. (2025) concur that these can reinforce virtual interaction. This will fortify teamwork and social cohesion.

Implementing results-based Performance Management Systems

Migration to WFH requires rethinking traditional metrics of academic productivity (Garnita et al., 2025). Giraldi and Rossi (2025) counsel that for WFH to become effective, ODL HEIs need to swing from physical presence-based to results-oriented performance evaluation systems that measure tangible outcomes such as course completion rates, student satisfaction, research publications, and timely feedback. Where digital performance dashboards are included into LMS and human resource systems, they can monitor primary indicators transparently and fairly. UNISA and OUT have begun applying data-driven performance models that link individual contributions to institutional goals (Chigbu & Makapela, 2025). Regular feedback sessions, virtual appraisals, and self-reporting implements can further reinforce accountability while promoting a sense of ownership among academics.

Supporting work–life balance and psychosocial support

Given the vague boundaries between professional and personal life in WFH contexts, ODL HEIs need to develop wellness programs that nurture work-life balance (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2024). Flexible scheduling, mental health counseling, and virtual socialization sessions can help mitigate burnout (Adomako et al., 2024). For example, Eshun et al. (2025) point at "Well@Work", the UNISA's plan that offers online wellness resources and psychological support services customized to remote staff. Inspiring academics to create dedicated workspaces at home, setting realistic work hours, and disconnecting from digital platforms after work can endure long-term stimulus. Mangampo (2025) adds that incorporating wellness indicators into institutional performance metrics indicates commitment to staff welfare. This is viewed as a fundamental aspect of sustainable productivity.

Nurturing a culture of digital leadership and innovation

Commitment of leadership is essential for successful WFH optimization (Rachman et al., 2025; Wagan & Sidra, 2025). Top management (TM) needs to champion digital transformation by modeling WFH practices. Barrero et al. (2023) urge TM to invest in staff development and in promotion of culture oriented with innovation. Digital leadership entails offering resources and advancing trust, autonomy, and collaboration among remote teams (Barrero et al., 2023). Mordi et al. (2023) and Sebunya (2025) cite HEIs such as NOUN and OUT as exemplifying this leadership model through comprehensive digital governance constitutes and participating decision-making. Therefore, African ODL HEIs stand to ensure that WFH systems progress from temporary reactions to integral components of modern academic work by entrenching digital leadership into institutional strategy.
Recap: Optimizing WFH systems in African ODL HEIs necessitates a holistic approach that incorporates culture, human capital, infrastructure, and policy. Clear policies, constant capacity building, results-oriented accountability, reinforced digital infrastructure, and supportive management can transform WFH into a facilitator of institutional excellence.

Recommendations towards Policy

To commit sustainable and equitable WFH systems, African ODL HEIs need coherent policy frameworks that balance accountability, flexibility, and inclusivity (Ref). The following policy recommendations offer guidance to administrators, policymakers, and quality assurance bodies pursuing to employ WFH for institutional transformation and academic excellence.

Develop comprehensive institutional WFH policies

African ODL HEIs should design formal WFH policies clearly defining communication protocols, eligibility criteria, performance standards, and working hours. Such policies should align with academic standards, institutional mandates, and national labor laws. Notably, policies should be developed using participatory consultation with academic staff for legitimacy and ownership. These policies should also provide for cybersecurity, data protection, and intellectual property rights in remote academic contexts.

Invest in digital infrastructure and equity

Governments, regulatory agencies, and ODL HEIs should invest in reliable internet connectivity, affordable data packages, and sustainable energy solutions. Public-private partnerships with telecom operators can enhance digital access for academics in underserved areas. Institutional policies should nurture equity by providing technological support (devices, subsidies, or stipends) to staff experiencing infrastructural drawbacks to prevent digital omission.

Institutionalize continuous digital capacity development

Ethical policies should mandate continuing digital skills training towards academic professional development. National quality assurance bodies [e.g., National Universities Commission in Nigeria and the Council on Higher Education in South Africa] should set minimum standards for digital expertise among academics in ODL HEIs. Entrenching digital literacy within promotion and appraisal frameworks will encourage lifelong learning and technological adaptability.

Strengthen performance management and accountability systems

WFH policies should include performance-based evaluation systems that measure outcomes such as research productivity, student engagement, and teaching quality and not emphasize physical presence. Visible, data-driven monitoring and evaluation systems improve trust and institutional integrity. Policies should also require regular reporting and loops of feedback for continuous improvement and alignment with strategic goals.

Integrate staff welfare and mental health support

Policies for WFH should commit to psychosocial support services to address burnout, isolation, and stress. Counseling services, flexible scheduling, and wellness initiatives should be formalized as integral components of ODL workforce management. ODL HEIs can encourage sustainable productivity and enhance institutional resilience by embedding well-being within policy.

Recap: Policy agendas integrating digital literacy, infrastructure investment, performance answerability, and welfare support can renovate WFH from an emergency response into a strategic support of African ODL HE revolution.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are plentiful benefits when academic in ODL work from home, notably with respect to economics of time, stress, finances, energy, and contributes to the overall well-being of employees involved. This study demonstrates that adopting WFH systems in African ODL HEIs presents a transformative opportunity to improve academic productivity, digital innovation, institutional efficiency, and staff welfare. This paper has demonstrated that WFH arrangements enable academics to engage with students flexibly, optimize time, and reduce commuting stress while empowering HEIs to achieve cost savings and expand their reach. NOUN, OUT, UNISA, and ZOU are examples showing the practical benefits and viability of academics WFH when linked with robust digital infrastructure and supportive management. However, the effectiveness of WFH systems depend on addressing significant challenges of blurred work-life boundaries, inadequate technological infrastructure, limited digital literacy, psychosocial isolation, and underdeveloped institutional policies, among others. If there are no targeted interventions, these weaknesses can weaken both academic performance and organizational structure. This paper proposes some strategies and policy recommendations to optimize WFH systems, emphasizing continuous professional development, infrastructure investment, leadership-driven cultural change, psychosocial support, and results-based performance management. As a collective, these measures position WFH as a likely arrangement and a strategic tool for institutional modernization and resilience in African ODL HEIs.

Suggestions for future research include longitudinal studies to estimate the long-term impacts of WFH on academic productivity, institutional sustainability, and student learning outcomes. In addition, this study proposes investigating hybrid work models that combine WFH and on-campus engagement and how they can produce optimal balance between accountability, collaboration, and flexibility. African ODL HEIs should also examine emerging technologies [such as adaptive learning platforms, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality] to further enhance remote teaching, assessment, and scholarly collaboration.

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