Available online at
http://smrj.uitm.edu.my/index.php

e-ISSN: 0128-1089

Social and Management Research Journal 22(2) 2025, 1 – 9.

Social and Management Research Journal

Quality of Work Life (QWL) in the Virtual Office: An Academic Perspective on Remote Work

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 November 2024
Revised 9 September 2025
Accepted 25 November 2025
Online first 11 November 2025
Published 11 November 2025

Keywords:
quality of work life (QWL)_
job satisfaction
general well-being
work stress
academic staff
logistic regression

DOI:
10.24191/smrj.v22i2
September.9500

ABSTRACT

Remote work became increasingly popular during the COVID-19 lockdown, offering flexible hours, reduced commuting, and improved work-life balance. However, it also presented challenges, such as unclear boundaries between work and personal life, communication difficulties, and limited support. For academics, remote working allowed online lectures but sometimes felt restrictive. This study aims to assess the Quality of Work Life (QWL) among UUM College of Arts and Sciences (UUM-CAS) academic staff and related factors. Using the work-related quality of life (WRQoL) scale, a survey was conducted on 187 randomly chosen UUM-CAS staff. Results indicate that higher job satisfaction, greater general well-being, and lower work stress significantly increase the odds of good QWL. Although female staff showed higher odds of good QWL than male staff, this difference was not statistically significant once other factors were controlled. These findings highlight the unique challenges of UUM-CAS, given its geographical isolation and reliance on remote work, and provide important implications for higher education institutions. Recommendations include stress-management interventions, flexible scheduling, and enhanced support systems to improve staff retention and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Remote working or working from home was popular once upon a time when the lockdown was declared to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Remote working offers several advantages, including flexibility in time and location, reduced commuting costs, and improved work–life balance. Additionally, it can lead to confusion about the boundary between work and personal life, communication challenges, limited access to support and help from colleagues, and challenges in performance management (Schieman & Glavin, 2017). In other words, remote working affects a person's quality of work life (QWL).

QWL reflects how positive or negative the workplace is for employees. It involves considering how work affects people and organisational success, and it promotes employee participation in solving problems and making decisions in the organisation (Nadler & Lawler, 1983). It plays an important role in the

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https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

development of every organisation and has a significant impact on the work performance and self-improvement of employees.

Tertiary education institutions are part of this growing occurrence. For an academic, remote working seems to be a good alternative because they can still hold lectures online. However, some academics feel limited when forced to work remotely, especially among those who prefer two-way communication through face-to-face classes. Therefore, remote work apparently affects the QWL of an academic.

It is a must for every organisation to look for actions to improve their employees' QWL through good working conditions, a conducive environment, and sufficient and equal compensation, among other factors. University Utara Malaysia (UUM) is the focal point of this research. This research was conducted with the intention of providing a substantial understanding of the variables that influence the quality of work life among public sector workers, mainly on UUM CAS's staff. This study aims to investigate the QWL among UUM CAS staff and the main factors that affect the QWL of the staff. This research is also being implemented to understand the QWL, in the aspect of working from home among UUM staff during the pandemic, with the motive to improve their job performance and satisfaction.

Problem Statement

As a northern institution located near the Thailand border, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) faces persistent challenges in attracting and retaining academic staff due to geographical isolation. Staff retention is further complicated by the sudden shift to remote working during the COVID-19 lockdown, which increases workloads, technological demands, and blurs the line between professional and personal life (Aye, Tan & Ramasamy 2024). It is clear from this scenario that quality of work life (QWL) is a significant determinant of employee satisfaction and institutional loyalty. These sudden changes will inevitably disrupt QWL to some extent, affecting work performance, effectiveness, and well-being. Basically, low QWL can lead to increased stress and decreased job satisfaction, affecting personal life and overall health. Indeed, neglecting QWL to improve productivity can result in the loss of valuable staff to institutions that offer better support (Marecki, 2024).

UUM comprises the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), the College of Business (COB), and the College of Law, Government and International Studies (COLGIS). Among all, UUM-CAS is the biggest with the highest number of staff and students. Considering that the majority of the UUM staff work in CAS, this study focuses on academic staff in UUM-CAS only. Several questions are addressed in this study, such as what the level of QWL of academics at UUM-CAS is, and what the critical factors are that should be addressed immediately.

Research Objectives

In this study, the aim is to determine QWL among UUM-CAS academic staff while working remotely. Specifically, the objectives are:

(i) To identify the level of QWL among the academic staff of UUM-CAS

(ii) To determine factors that are closely related to QWL significantly

(iii) To model the effect of factors on the QWL of UUM-CAS academic staff

Significance of the study

This study aims to understand and address the challenges faced by UUM academic staff in maintaining their QWL, particularly during sudden changes like the COVID-19 pandemic. By identifying factors that impact job satisfaction, stress, and work-life balance, the study provides insights into UUM to develop strategies that can improve staff well-being, productivity, and retention. Addressing these QWL issues helps

https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

reduce stress and supports mental and physical health, fostering a balanced work-life experience for staff working from home.

This study also provides UUM management with insights to develop work policies that are more flexible and supportive, particularly in times of unexpected change. Enhancing QWL not only improves work experience for academic staff but also helps UUM retain qualified employees, supporting its competitiveness as an attractive workplace in the academic sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advances in information and communication technology have brought major changes in work practices, including higher education. Through technology, the flexibility and productivity of a staff can be increased. Technology has also made working remotely an alternative. Working from home was introduced as early as the 1970s (Van Meel, 2011). Empirical studies highlight various benefits of working remotely, such as better time management skills, flexibility to work at peak productivity hours, access to organisational resources from home, ease of working while managing family responsibilities, and the ability to work when ill (Nakrošienė, Bučiūnienė, & Goštautaitė, 2019). Past studies have revealed that remote working not only improves job performance and job satisfaction but also reduces turnover intentions and stress levels (Vega, Anderson, & Kaplan, 2015; Contreras, Baykal, & Abid, 2020).

In addition to the flexibility it offers, working remotely also poses challenges due to the blurring of work and personal boundaries and the associated social and personal consequences (Kim, Henly, Golden, & Lambert, 2019). Furthermore, it is also an obstacle for some groups who lack knowledge in technology and incur a wide range of personal costs, such as maintaining a suitable workstation setup at home and developing additional skills. (Gorjifard & Crawford, 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns turned remote work from an alternative into the only way for many employees to continue working (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). Remote work allows academic staff to manage their time more effectively, especially in research and writing activities (Baker, Avery, & Crawford, 2007). Several studies have specifically investigated remote work in universities in Malaysia. Studies revealed that a disruptive environment significantly impacts the productivity (Alnakar et al., 2023) and focus (Hasan et al., 2022) of employees working from home. A recent study conducted among corporates in Malaysia, however, showed that remote work can increase employee productivity provided that the organisation is willing to invest in technology (Lim et al., 2025). To date, no such study has been conducted among academic staff at UUM. This gap justifies the current focus on UUM-CAS.

Recent post-pandemic studies have pointed out emerging challenges faced by employees working remotely. Working from home offers flexibility in managing work and family demands; however, studies have shown that it increases stress levels among workers (Irawanto et al., 2021). In addition, inadequate home-based infrastructure and limited institutional support while working from home have reduced overall well-being, highlighting the importance of organisational interventions (Gorjifard and Crawford, 2024).

Gender gaps in academic work-life balance are often reported to be greater among women, yet they also demonstrate better coping mechanisms in some contexts (García-Ael & Martínez, 2020). While gender continues to shape QWL outcomes, the extent and direction of the effects may vary across institutional settings. Some studies demonstrate that gender is not related to QWL at all (Salès-Wuillemin et al., 2023).

QWL encompasses various dimensions, such as work-life balance, job satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, and mental health (Irawanto, Novianti, & Roz, 2021). Several factors influence the impact of remote work on QWL, including organisational support, effective technology use, and individual time management skills. Telecommuting has the potential to enhance QWL among academic staff by offering flexibility and reducing travel stress. However, it also introduces challenges that must be addressed to

https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

ensure staff well-being. Thus, higher education institutions need to develop and implement a supportive remote work policy to maximise their positive effects on QWL.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a cross-sectional online questionnaire survey on UUM-CAS academic staff who experienced remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted a simple random sampling approach. A complete list of 529 UUM-CAS academic staff was obtained from the university's Human Resources Department. Although Cochran's formula is commonly recommended for determining sample size, Slovin's formula was applied in this study as it is more appropriate for finite and relatively small populations such as the 529 academic staff in UUM-CAS. Considering the time and resource constraints during data collection, a margin of error of 0.06 was chosen, especially given the difficulty of conducting an online survey and the limited availability of academic staff. Using Slovin's formula and 0.06 as the maximum margin of error, the minimum sample size required is 182, which is met by 187 valid responses.

$$n = \frac{N}{(1 + Ne^2)} = \frac{529}{(1 + 529(0.06^2))} = 182$$

Thus, the study achieved adequate power to conduct logistic regression analyses, although subgroup analyses (e.g., gender) may be underpowered, which is acknowledged as a limitation. The survey was disseminated to the selected participants using Google Forms through email. Issuance of the questionnaire took place from 20 November 2021 to 31 December 2021.

A detailed explanation of the risks and benefits of the study is provided at the beginning of the online questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed to participants who agreed to participate. As participants continue to the next page, the actual survey questions begin, where participants indicate their consent. In the survey, a Pro Forma questionnaire was included for collecting sociodemographic information, including age, gender, length of service, job satisfaction, well-being, and work stress. All questions regarding job satisfaction, general well-being, and work stress were taken from the 23-item work-related quality of life (WRQoL) scale. Each item in WRQoL was measured using an interval scale of 1 to 5, where 1 and 5 indicate strongly disagree and strongly agree, respectively (Simon & Darren, 2012). The internal consistency of the questionnaire has a Cronbach Alpha value of more than 0.730 for all factors: job satisfaction, general well-being, and work stress management, which indicates that the questionnaire is a reliable instrument.

In the cleaning process, all scores have been adjusted to refer to positive statements only. Higher scores in job satisfaction and general well-being indicate higher satisfaction and higher levels of well-being, while higher points in work stress suggest lower stress. In the analysis, descriptive analysis was used to describe the respondents' profiles, ie, age, gender, and length of service. The overall QWL score for each participant was calculated based on the total for all 23 items of the WRQoL and was then converted to a percentage. A score of at least 85% indicates that the participant is having a very high quality of work life.

RESULTS

Out of 187 participants, 65% are female (n = 121), and the remaining 35% are male (n = 66). On average, the participants' ages are 43.4 years, and they have been working with UUM for 9.3 years. Among the average scores, job satisfaction ranked the highest (mean = 4.6), followed by general well-being (mean = 4.0) and stress at work (mean = 3.6) (see Table 1).

https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

Table 1. Profile of the participants

	Mean	Standard deviation
Age	43.4 years	6.114
Length of Service	9.3 years	4.961
Job Satisfaction Score	4.6	0.25
General Well-Being Score	4.0	0.32
Work Stress Score	3.6	0.49

Source: descriptive analysis of the collected data

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of QWL among the UUM-CAS academic staff. Only 58 out of 187 (31%) staff reported good QWL, and the other 67% reported not having good QWL. Among those who had good QWL, the majority (77%) are those aged 40 and above, 79.3% are female, 51.7% had worked with UUM for less than 10 years, 96.6% had a job satisfaction score above the median value, 87.9% had both general well-being and work stress scores above the median value (less stress). Between age, gender, and length of service, however, only gender ($p = 0.005$) has a significant relationship with level of QWL, suggesting that female academic staff at UUM-CAS experience better QWL than their male counterparts. Among three psychological factors, job satisfaction ($p < 0.001$), general well-being ($p < 0.001$), and work stress ($p < 0.001$) are significantly associated with QWL level, suggesting that higher job satisfaction, higher well-being, and lower work stress levels contribute to a better work-life experience. Table 2. Level of QWL among UUM-CAS academic staff.

Table 2. Level of QWL among UUM-CAS academic staff

		Level of QWL					
		Not Good *n*=129 (%)		Good *n*=58 (%)		Total N (%)	*p*-value of the relationship
Age							0.057
	Below 40	47	(36.4)	13	(22.4)	60 (32.1)	
	40 and above	82	(63.6)	45	(77.6)	127 (67.9)	
Gender							0.005*
	Female	75	(58.1)	46	(79.3)	121 (64.7)	
	Male	54	(41.9)	12	(20.7)	66 (35.3)	
Length of Service							0.473
	Below 10 years	74	(57.4)	30	(51.7)	104 (55.6)	
	10 years and above	55	(42.6)	28	(48.3)	83 (44.4)	
Job Satisfaction Score							<0.001*
	Below median	54	(41.9)	2	(3.4)	56 (29.9)	
	Above median	75	(58.1)	56	(96.6)	131 (70.1)	
General Well-Being Score							<0.001*
	Below median	84	(65.1)	7	(12.1)	91 (48.7)	
	Above median	45	(34.9)	51	(87.9)	96 (51.3)	
Work Stress Score							<0.001*
	Below median	74	(57.4)	7	(12.1)	81 (43.3)	
	Above median	55	(42.6)	51	(87.9)	106 (56.7)	

Source: Crosstabulation analysis on the collected data

Further analysis using logistic regression was then applied to model the relationship between gender, job satisfaction, general well-being, and stress at work with QWL. The logistic regression model in Table 3 provides insights into the factors that significantly impact the QWL among UUM-CAS academic staff. The results showed that job satisfaction, general well-being, and job stress were statistically significant predictors of high QWL, as evidenced by their significance values ($p < 0.001$), all less than 0.05.

The regression coefficient value for job satisfaction was 4.510 with an odds ratio (OR) of 90.957, indicating that individuals with job satisfaction levels above the median were more likely to experience

https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

high QWL. This high odds ratio highlights the importance of job satisfaction in determining QWL, as those with higher job satisfaction were almost 91 times more likely to have higher QWL. General well-being, on the other hand, had a regression coefficient value of 4.055 and an OR of 57.657, indicating a strong positive association with QWL. Staff with general well-being levels above the median were approximately 58 times more likely to have high QWL, indicating that well-being is an important component in improving QWL for academic staff. The coefficient for stress at work is 3.947, with an OR of 51.801, indicating that staff who report lower stress levels (above median) are significantly more likely to experience high QWL. This suggests that managing stress effectively plays a vital role in improving QWL, as those with better stress management are about 52 times more likely to have a higher QWL. Initial cross-tabulation in Table 2 suggested a significant gender difference ($p = 0.005$), with female staff reporting higher QWL. However, when controlling for job satisfaction, well-being, and stress in the logistic regression model, gender was no longer significant ($p = 0.872$). This indicates that the observed gender effect in the bivariate analysis was due to underlying psychological and work-related factors. In other words, once these confounding variables were accounted for, both male and female staff experienced similar QWL outcomes.

The constant value is negative, suggesting that, in the absence of other factors, the baseline likelihood of high QWL is low. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of fostering job satisfaction, general well-being, and stress management to improve QWL among UUM academic staff. The lack of significance for gender suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing QWL can be broadly applied without focusing on gender-specific strategies.

Table 3. Logistic regression model of the relationship

	β	Standard error	Sig.	OR
Gender (Female)	0.097	0.598	0.872	1.102
Job Satisfaction (Above median)	4.510	1.008	0.000*	90.957
General Wellbeing (Above median)	4.055	0.718	0.000*	57.657
Stress at Work (Above median)	3.947	0.734	0.000*	51.801
Constant	-9.818	1.593	0.000*	0.000

Source: Logistic regression analysis for the collected data

DISCUSSION

To answer the first research objective, this study revealed that only 31% of UUM-CAS academic staff reported having a good QWL, while the majority (67%) did not. This relatively low percentage highlights systemic challenges in sustaining well-being within the academic workforce. The result underscores the vulnerability of academics working in geographically isolated institutions such as UUM, where location-based constraints, limited resources, and higher workloads may reduce overall staff satisfaction and well-being. These findings are consistent with Vyas and Butakhieo (2021), who found that academics in Hong Kong also reported declines in work–life balance and productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such evidence suggests that QWL issues among academics are not only institution-specific but also part of a broader global pattern following the pandemic.

For the second objective, the analysis demonstrated that job satisfaction, general well-being, and reduced work stress were significantly associated with better QWL, while demographic characteristics such as age and length of service did not show significant associations. Among the psychological factors examined, job satisfaction stood out as the strongest predictor. Staff who reported higher job satisfaction were almost 91 times more likely to experience good quality of work life (QWL), underscoring how central this factor is. This finding is consistent with Akar and Yıldırım (2018), who identified job satisfaction as a key driver of positive work outcomes. General well-being and stress levels also played important roles, such that staff with better well-being and lower stress reported significantly higher QWL. This supports the

https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

argument made by Sirgy et al. (2001) that well-being and stress management are crucial for maintaining productivity and staff retention. Together, these results suggest that psychological and work-related conditions carry more weight in shaping QWL than demographic characteristics.

The third objective of this study was met when the logistic regression analysis confirmed that job satisfaction, general well-being, and stress at work were statistically significant predictors of QWL, while gender was not significant once other variables were considered ($p = 0.872$). This shows that the gender differences observed in the cross-tabulation were in fact explained by underlying psychological and occupational factors. While García-Ael and Martínez (2020) found evidence of gender-based differences in academic QWL, the UUM case suggests that institutional and psychological support mechanisms are more decisive than demographic factors. Practically, this indicates that policies to improve QWL should focus on universal measures, such as stress management programmes, flexible work arrangements, and stronger digital infrastructure for remote work, rather than on gender-specific interventions. Such strategies can enhance both productivity and retention, particularly in geographically isolated universities like UUM.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Quality of Work Life (QWL) of academic staff at Universiti Utara Malaysia–College of Arts and Sciences (UUM-CAS) is largely shaped by psychological aspects, particularly job satisfaction, overall well-being, and the effectiveness of stress management. Although gender differences appeared to be significant in the descriptive cross-tabulation analysis, these differences where no longer statistically significant once other variables were controlled in the regression model, indicating that psychological dimensions are more critical determinants of QWL than demographic characteristics.

The study is not without limitations, as the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and the relatively small subgroup sizes limit the statistical power to detect differences across demographic categories. Future research could therefore adopt longitudinal or mixed method approaches to provide deeper insights into the evolving dynamics of QWL and to capture more nuanced experiences across different academic groups.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that targeted institutional interventions, such as stress-reduction programmes, flexible scheduling options, and stronger organisational support systems, are essential strategies to improve QWL and sustain the academic workforce, particularly in geographically isolated universities such as UUM.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of UUM-CAS academic staff and the School of Quantitative Sciences, UUM Sintok, for providing the facilities and financial support for this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author agrees that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declares the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The study concept, framework development, research design, data analysis, interpretation, and manuscript writing were fully conducted by Yuhaniz Ahmad. The data collection process was carried out by research assistant under the supervision of the author. All other aspects of the study, including literature review, statistical analysis, and discussion of findings, were prepared by the author.

https://doi.org/10.24191/smrj.v22i2 September.9500

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