# Mental Wellbeing of University Staff Working Remotely in Kenya: A Systematic Review of Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Institutional Support

[1]Boniface Kimwere , [2]Dr. Mary Mwanzia

[1]KCA University Program: MSc Knowledge Management and Innovation

[2]Lecturer in Strategic Management /Marketing Post Graduate Programmes Coordinator, School of Business | KCA University

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a systematic review of the challenges, coping strategies, and institutional support mechanisms that are connected to the mental well-being of university staff working remotely in Kenya. Undeniably, the transition to remote education, which was accelerated by the Coronavirus Pandemic, has presented unique problems to faculty members. The review analyses five peer-reviewed research articles published between 2019 and 2024, employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to comprehend the impact of remote working on faculty mental health. The findings reveal that staff members in Kenyan universities have experienced increased stress, anxiety, work-life imbalance, technological difficulties, feelings of isolation, and job insecurity. Accordingly, to cope, staff employ self-leadership, holistic health practices, mindfulness techniques, and maintain social connections. The review underscores the critical need for institutional support, including mental well-being awareness programs, robust mental health support systems, employee assistance programs, clear and regular communication, investments in infrastructure, and digital skills training.

**Keywords**: Remote work, mental health challenges, coping strategies, institutional support, job insecurity, and work-life balance

## INTRODUCTION

Technology has ushered unprecedented, transformative changes in learning institutions internationally. The traditional, classroom-based learning and teaching mode has been gradually replaced by remote education. A lecturer in Kisumu can now engage with learners in Nairobi, Marsabit, and Mombasa without compromising the quality of education. Essentially, the effectiveness of remote education depends on a myriad of factors, including the digital competence of students and instructors and the technological infrastructure within universities (Ober & Kochmańska, 2022, p. 35). Fundamentally, the Coronavirus pandemic and the resulting containment measures resulted in the shutdown of face-to-face classes in Kenya and beyond. During this period, analysts affirm that higher learning establishments learned about emerging vulnerabilities in their educational systems and the need to exploit technology to improve learning (Khodabandelou et al., 2021, p.272). Regrettably, recent studies have disclosed that there is a growing need to evaluate the mental well-being of university academics, especially due to the challenges staff have reported during this transition period (Dinu et al., 2021). Scholars have continually evaluated how remote learning impacts students' wellbeing, suggesting that there are stress-associated issues due to study skills challenges and struggles concerning time management, and memory techniques, and remain motivated during remote learning (Lister et al., 2023, p. 2). Unfortunately, low efforts have been dispensed to explore the mental well-being of academic staff in learning institutions, especially in the Kenyan context.

This paper seeks to conduct a systematic review of the challenges, coping strategies, and institutional support aimed at enhancing the mental well-being of university staff members in Kenya. Unfortunately, instructors are often overlooked in the literature relating to their mental well-being and few studies have been conducted to help

these crucial stakeholders. The current review seeks to focus on their experiences, seeking to answer these three crucial research questions:

1. What are the mental health challenges faced by university staff working remotely in Kenya?

2. What coping strategies do university staff in Kenya employ to manage mental health challenges connected with remote working?

3. How effective are institutional support systems in addressing the mental well-being of remote university staff in Kenya?

Currently, there are controversial issues regarding the present definitions of mental health. However, in this study, the researcher follows the World Health Organisation's definition of mental health as the state of personal well-being in which individuals realize their abilities, can cope with typical life stresses, can work productively, and fruitfully, and can make meaningful contributions to their institutions and communities (Palumbo & Galderisi, 2020, p. 7).

# BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

## The Context of Kenyan Higher Education

Kenya is increasingly witnessing a marketized higher education environment, characterized by a growing number of educational establishments and dozens of courses. The 2019 census report by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) (2019) revealed that the total university enrolment was about 485,734, with undergraduate students constituting 89.5% of this number (p. 89). Indeed, this was an astronomical growth compared to 47,302 total enrolments for universities in 1999 (KNBS, 1999, p.58). The described phenomenon reveals a spectacular massification of Kenyan higher learning education. Chiefly, the Mwai Kibaki administration played a role in the thriving higher learning educational segment, as the late President acted fast on granting charters to at least ten universities (Amutabi & Hamasi, 2023, p. 57). President Mwai Kibaki recognized the crucial role that Kenyan universities played in promoting better governance and as crucial players in Kenya's thriving economy.

As of 2016, Kenya had 16,001 academic staff working in both private and public universities (Commission for University Education, 2016, p. 66). Out of these 11,828 were working in public universities and the remainder, 4,173, served in private institutions. The business and administration cluster had the largest number of academic staff at 3,082, translating to 20% of the entire academic staff population. The highlighted statistic is expected given that the same report revealed that most students were enrolled in the business and administration area. During this period, Kenya had over 539,749 students in private and public universities, with 86% of students enrolled in public universities (Commission for University Education, 2016, p. 28). Based on the projected number of students and academicians, the ratio would translate to 1:34. The number of students enrolled in universities had doubled between 2012 and 2015, making the impact of the 2003 free primary education be felt across the country.

The increase in higher educational organisations in Kenya has resulted in unintended consequences. The sector has many players, contributing to a climate of hyper-competition between different universities. A study has affirmed that the highlighted neoliberal context, just as witnessed in other nations like the United Kingdom, has repositioned students as consumers within this segment (Jayman et al., 2022, p. 2). Institutional leaders, therefore, view students as clients who are paying for services, and hence, they must have excellent experiences when studying (Jayman et al., 2022, p. 2). Universities have increased engagement with students, relying on multiple surveys and meetings to evaluate the quality of teaching methods, academic progression, retention, and so forth. As witnessed in the Kenyan context, the university is going to a great length to ensure learners have the best learning experiences, ascertaining that these institutions remain competitive in their higher education market.

## Mental Wellbeing of University Staff

Unfortunately, Kenya's marketized higher education sector has dire consequences for staff members at different

levels. According to Jayman et al. (2022), academics are busier than ever due to the growing number of students and resulting classes (p. 2). Apart from this, staff must work faster; concentrating on what they do instead of reflecting on who they are. In the Kenyan context, there is evidence of a lack of job security and practices that undermine academic freedom and professionalism (Sifuna, 2012; Odhiambo, 2011). Some of these challenges, according to Sifuna (2012) stem from lack of adequate funding, globalization trends, infrastructure challenges, and lack of adequate support from Kenyan higher education organisations. In this context, it becomes increasingly challenging for academics to position themselves outside the prevailing performance culture, while maintaining their value as team members. Jayman et al. (2022) argue that modern universities have become 'risk organisations' that are keen on avoiding failure, which makes such an establishment concentrate on specific types of activities, including technological, pedagogical, relational, and administrative in efforts to minimize danger (p. 2). In the end, the intense competition has produced a new kind of staff member in the typical university, where individuals must spend more time trying to please their superiors than believing in themselves and utilizing the language of the performative.

In light of these issues, the Coronavirus pandemic resulted in radical changes in the higher education sector. Generally, countries decided to impose travel restrictions and curfews that compelled institutions to gradually transition to remote working. Fortunately, most universities have a flexible work arrangement, and the remote working model makes academicians free to decide when they work, and where they work, and have greater self-control mechanisms to improve their productivity (Yüceol et al., 2021, p. 267). Unfortunately, there are limited studies concerning remote work, particularly as it pertains to academicians in both technical and administrative tasks (Capone et al., 2024, p. 2). Academicians had to adapt to these unique technologies and faced unexpected challenges that still affect how they work daily (Capone et al., 2024, p. 2). Technology allowed staff members to work from home and this increased their workload, including the increase in online lessons. Apart from this, the situation resulted in the blurred work-life balance for these workers to become even worse.

Despite existing issues, the traditional working setup was beneficial to employees in different ways. Undeniably, it was easier for university staff to establish social relationships as they reported and worked in various universities. A previous study revealed that remote working had a negative effect on workers' subjective well-being and that this form of work arrangement was closely connected to burnout syndrome (Barros, 2017, p. 1015). In the highlighted context, a significant shortcoming of remote working is the lack of social relations. Indeed, the social relationships that workers establish as they work in various universities are crucial for prosperity, and their mental well-being, and continue to positively affect their job performance. Unfortunately, working remotes creates a feeling of lack of social support outside of work activities and also within the context of work. Social resources, including a supportive supervisor, supportive work-family policies, and supportive co-workers are unavailable and this affects employee well-being (Bobbio et al., 2022, p. 2936). Besides, time-based demands, for example, working overtime and for extended periods, could increase home-related interferences and lower employee satisfaction (Bobbio et al., 2022, p. 2936). Researchers who have evaluated remote working arrangements have disclosed that the approach could be effective in present times since it allows workers to assume more responsibilities for self-management and self-motivation, which might not occur in traditional working methods (Yüceol et al., 2021, p. 270). Despite this, accountability and higher performance tend to increase job pressure and the overall likelihood that this pressure is likely to affect employees and their families.

# METHODOLOGY

The researcher opted to conduct a review of the mental well-being of university staff working remotely within Kenya. A systematic review is a preferred approach since it ensures a rigorous and transparent synthesis of the existing literature to answer the primary research questions. The researcher decided to adopt and follow the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines that offer a structured framework for identifying, selecting, and analysing relevant studies.

**The Study Design**

This paper utilizes a systematic review methodology in collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing existing evidence on the mental well-being of remote university staff members in Kenya. The systematic review approach is

preferable to a literature review, given its structured approach that ascertains comprehensiveness and minimizes bias. The study sought to identify the common mental health challenges, coping mechanisms, and institutional support systems that are available to university workers doing their work duties remotely. Aggregating the findings from multiple studies allows this systematic review to offer a holistic understanding of this crucial issue and inform future research and policy recommendations.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The researcher established specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to maintain focus and ensure that only relevant studies were included in this systematic review.

**Inclusion Criteria**

The studies that the researcher included had to meet the following criteria:

- **Population** – The study must focus on university staff working remotely in Kenya. The staff could include support staff, administrative personnel, or faculty members.
- **Topic Relevance** – The selected research studies had to address at least one of these key topics: mental health challenges, coping strategies that staff use to deal with mental health issues, and institutional support that has been designed to improve mental well-being.
- **Publication Type** – The studies that were considered for review had to be published in peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and credible grey literature.
- **Time Frame** – The review only included studies published in the last 10 years to ascertain that the findings reflected the digital transformation and remote working arrangements within the Kenyan higher education sector.
- **Language** – The researcher only included studies published in English to ensure consistency in analysis and accessibility.
- **Methodology** – The researcher considered both quantitative and qualitative studies since they capture diverse perspectives on mental health challenges and applicable interventions.

**Exclusion Criteria**

Studies were excluded from this systematic review if they met the following criteria:

- Research studies that concentrated on students' mental well-being instead of university staff.
- Studies that explored general workplace mental health without distinguishing the experiences of staff members in various universities who work remotely.
- Editorials, opinion pieces, and commentaries that lacked empirical data or rigorous analysis.
- Research studies that were published in other languages other than English.
- Duplicate studies that failed to offer new or additional insights.

**Data Sources and Search Strategy**

The researcher conducted a comprehensive database search to identify studies that met the inclusion criteria. Accordingly, the researcher used multiple academic and institutional databases. For example, Google Scholar was crucial in capturing a wide range of institutional reports and interdisciplinary research studies. PubMed offered studies that focus on mental health and trends in psychology. The other relevant databases included ResearchGate, African Journals Online, and University websites and government reports.

**Search Terms and Boolean Operators**

Maximizing relevant results required the researcher to utilize a combination of specific keywords and Booleanoperators (OR, AND). Examples of the search inquiries include "mental well-being" OR "mental health" OR "psychological distress" OR "university staff" OR "faculty" OR "higher education employees", "remote university staff" OR "faculty working remotely" AND "Kenya."

# RESULTS

The section highlights the results of the systematic review. First, it summarizes the process and studies that were utilized in the analysis. Second, there is a summary of the selected research articles and their primary findings regarding the research questions.
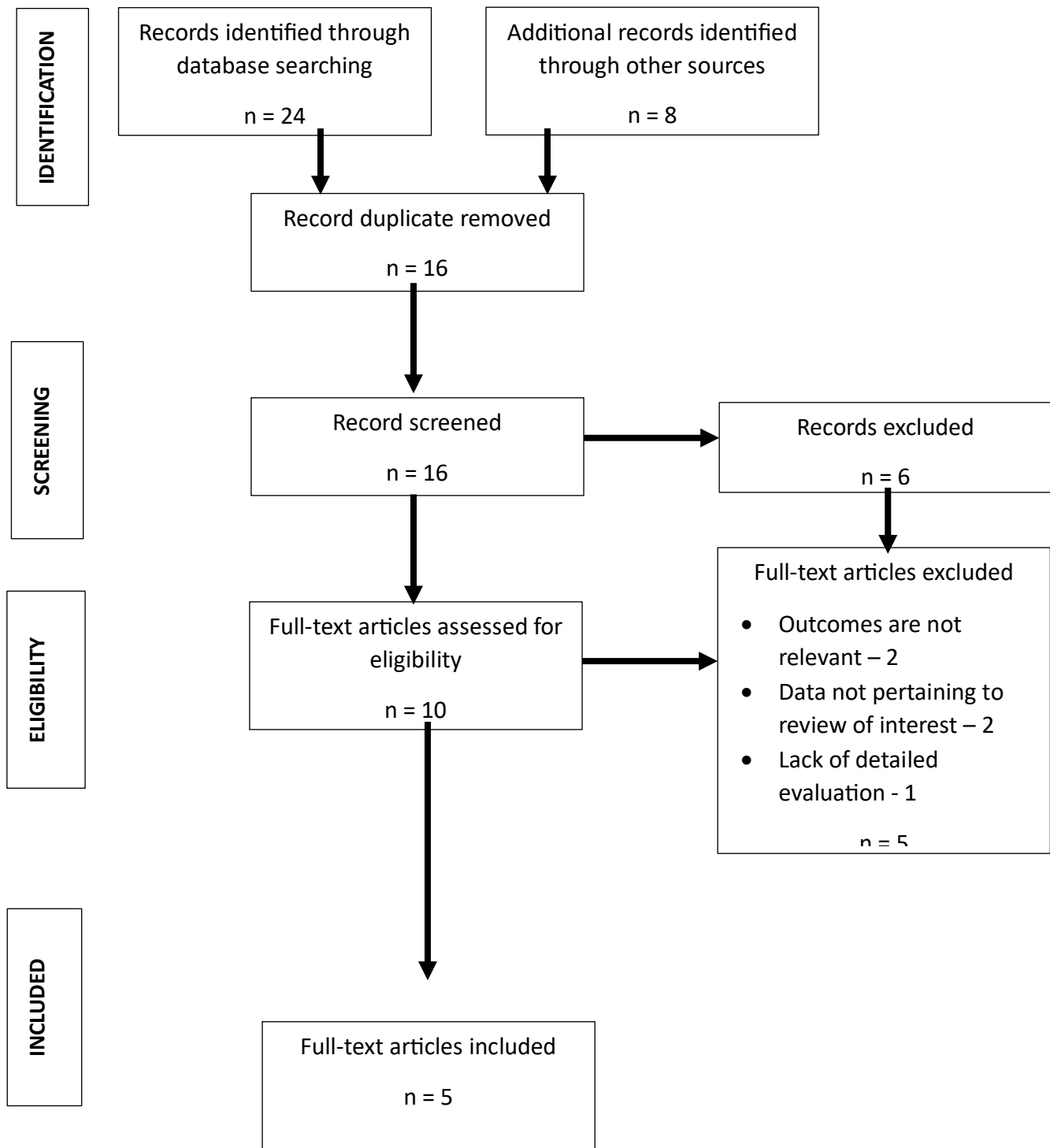


**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram that highlights the studies included in this systematic review.

The initial search of research studies in various databases allowed the researcher to identify 32 articles. After screening titles and abstracts, removing duplicates, and conducting a full review of these studies, only five research articles met the inclusion criteria and were analysed in detail. The peer-reviewed research articles were published between 2019 and 2024 and cover various Kenyan universities. The reviewed literature included qualitative interviews, quantitative surveys, and mixed-methods designs, which ensured a broad understanding of the mental health challenges affecting staff members working remotely.

The table below provides a detailed summary of these articles, categorizing the studies by author, year, methodology, key findings, and conclusions.

| Author(s) | Year | Methodology | Key Findings | Conclusions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Faith K. Mwenda, Abraham Kiflemariam, and Sarah W. Kimani** | 2019 | Cross-sectional survey design; data collected from 384 full-time and part-time faculty members via questionnaires; analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including simple linear regression. | - Inverse relationship between job stressors and faculty performance. - R-squared value of 0.499, indicating job stressors explain 49.9% of faculty performance variation. - Beta coefficient for job stressors was -0.667, showing a significant negative correlation. - Frequent changes in higher education caused anxiety about job security. - Moderate stress levels reported. - Workload and job insecurity were significant stress contributors. - 40% of faculty recommended career development support to reduce occupational stress. | - Increased job stressors lead to a decline in faculty performance. - Universities should implement strategies to maintain low-stress levels for better faculty performance. |
| **Lydiah Wambui Mwaura, Maria Ntarangwe, and Joyzy Egunjobi** | 2024 | Phenomenological research design with a qualitative approach; data collected through interviews with 15 participants (year-four students and full-time staff) using snowball sampling; analysed using thematic analysis. | - Lockdown had both positive and negative impacts on mental well-being. - Positive effects: increased reliance on technology, social connections, personal growth, and health focus. - Negative effects: psychological distress and deterioration of mental well-being. - These effects continue to influence post-pandemic mental well-being. | - Ongoing support systems and holistic approaches are necessary for resilience and recovery. - Universities should implement support systems to address mental health needs. |
| **Saikou Yaya Kollet Diallo, Marshal Mutinda Mweu, Simeon Ochanda Mbuya, and Mutuku Alexander Mwanthi** | 2019 | Analytical cross-sectional design; data collected from 136 teaching staff via semi-structured questionnaires; analysed using a mixed-effects logistic regression model. | - 12-month prevalence of LBP was 64%. - Significant risk factors: physical inactivity (aOR: 6.0), lack of lumbar support in office chairs (aOR: 3.3), and high workplace stress (aOR: 4.4). - Participants who rarely exercised had higher odds of LBP. - High workplace stress increased LBP likelihood. | - High prevalence of LBP among UoN teaching staff. - Modifiable risk factors: physical inactivity, lack of lumbar support, and workplace stress. - Recommended advocacy for physical activity, team-building, and improved office infrastructure. |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ruthie C. Rono and Lucy Waithera Kung'u** | 2021 | Review of articles, journals, advisories, and personal experiences at USIU Africa to reflect on the psychosocial impact of COVID-19. | - COVID-19 caused mental, social, and psychological challenges for university faculty and students. - Universities were unprepared for online learning due to inadequate infrastructure, internet connectivity, devices, and skills. - Older staff worked remotely due to social distancing measures. - Planned workplace interventions: mental health training, team-building, crisis management. | - Faculty and students are vulnerable to mental and psychosocial effects of COVID-19. - Recommendations: mental health awareness, training mental health providers, encouraging help-seeking behaviour, and creating inclusive universities. |
| **Vundi A.N.** | 2022 | Mixed-methods study (primary and secondary data); data collected from 160 respondents (students, administrative staff, lecturers) via questionnaires; interviews with senior managers; 5-point Likert scale used for questionnaire responses. | - Examined self-leadership, technology adoption, communication, and employee motivation/satisfaction. - Challenges: lack of remote work skills, isolation, and work-family conflict. - Younger faculty had better digital skills than older faculty. - Guidelines on digital technology use improved productivity and reduced withdrawal. - 60% of employees were satisfied working from home, improving performance. - 10% dissatisfied due to poor internet and non-conducive home environments. - 60% of employees made decisions independently. | - Kenyan government and universities need to establish mechanisms for online education and adopt blended learning. Budgetary allocations are required to address issues such as internet connectivity and energy supply. |

# DISCUSSION

**Challenges of Remote Working and Impact on Mental Health**

- **Increased Stress and Anxiety** – The overall transition from physical learning to remote and online teaching remains a major stressor for most staff members. The Coronavirus Pandemic resulted in rapid shifts and there was inadequate preparation for staff. Unfortunately, this resulted in feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed. Rono and Kung'u (2021) affirm that the described changes led universities to cancel graduation ceremonies and implement other radical changes (p. 74). Staff members are currently working in challenging environments, where there is an increased risk of various mental issues, including anxiety, panic, depression, obsessive behaviours, addiction, paranoia, and hoarding.
- **Work-Life Balance** – Workers in Kenyan universities working remotely are struggling to balance work and family life. The explained challenge has led to fatigue and burnout. Vundi (2022), for example, reveals that the typical female staff, who works from home, must first tend to the needs of her home before working and this leads to fatigue and energy loss that could lead to burnout (p. 3).

- **Technological Difficulties** – Staff continue to experience challenges navigating online platforms. The problem is much worse due to unstable internet connections and frequent power outages. Rono and Kung'u confirm this by stating that faculty must also deal with the anxiety that is brought by power outages in various parts of Kenya and internet issues that could occur during online classes (p. 77).
- **Feeling of Isolation** – Remote work has resulted in a reduction in social interactions as workers rarely visit offices. The explained situation creates a feeling of isolation among faculty. Vundi (2022) affirms that employees are affected by remote working due to isolation and reduced social interactions with colleagues and other members of the university (p. 3).
- **Job Insecurity** – The dramatic shift from physical to online learning created anxiety about job security. Mwendwa et al. (2019) reveal the anxiety that staff in Kenyan universities face due to the frequent changes in higher education. Most staff could have felt insecure about their jobs due to the radical changes (p. 52).
- **Inability to Deliver Online Pedagogy** – Staff members in Kenyan universities could feel anxious about delivering online lectures effectively and managing exams properly. According to Rono and Kung'u (2021), staff are apprehensive that students could cheat during online assessments and have confidence issues regarding their ability to deliver online lectures (p. 77).

## Coping Strategies

Fortunately, the studies reveal that faculty members can deploy multiple coping mechanisms to deal with these mental health challenges that occur due to remote working arrangements.

- **Self-leadership** – Working from home could encourage staff to develop specific virtues like self-leadership. The explained development could be imperative in maintaining work satisfaction and job performance. Vundi (2022) shows that faculty are governing and controlling themselves through self-leadership and this results in specific cognitive and behavioural tactics that enhance employee motivation (p. 3).
- **Holistic Health Practices** – Staff members should engage in regular physical exercises, cook healthy meals, and prioritize their mental well-being. Mwaura et al. (2024) show that most individuals take advantage of the extra time they get by working remotely for personal growth and self-reflection. During these periods, individuals prioritized their well-being by engaging in physical exercises, cooking healthy meals, reading more books, and brewing homemade drinks (p. 11042).
- **Mindfulness Techniques** – Staff members could practice mindfulness to manage the intensity of emotions and adapt to new realities. Rono and Kung'u (2021) affirm that techniques like mindfulness could help individuals adjust to new developments, deal with work-related anxiety, have a greater sense of control, and protect their psychological capital to teach more effectively (p. 78).
- **Social Connections** - Staff must explore ways of remaining connected with friends and family. The mentioned social connections provide essential support during the transition and these challenging times. Mwaura et al. (2024) indicate that promoting social relationships enables individuals to benefit from acts of kindness and compassion that foster a sense of solidarity and belonging (p. 11045).

## Institutional Support

Kenyan universities should adopt the following measures to support staff members and help deal with their mental and technical issues as they work remotely.

- **Mental Well-being Awareness** – Kenyan universities should organize seminars and workshops to educate staff and communities about the health impacts of COVID-19. Mwaura et al. (2024) contend that organizing these sessions could offer a platform for staff to express their problems and get support from universities and communities to ensure that they deal with these problems.
- **Support System** – Kenyan universities should implement robust mental health support systems for staff members and students. Some of these measures should include peer mentoring, support groups, and regular counselling services. As Mwaura et al. (2024) have pointed out creating and implementing support system measures could help address mental health challenges facing faculty and students (p. 11045).

- **Employee Assistance Programs** – Universities should provide training and support through personalized employee assistance programs for their employees and managers. Rono and Kung'u (2021) show that these interventions can be effective and training and support could be essential in addressing mental health issues.

- **Regular Communication** – Maintaining consistent and clear communication, including offering information about stress management, could help deal with anxieties. Rono and Kung'u (2021) note that communication should focus on how staff can manage stress, the physical symptoms of anxiety, stress, behavioural, and emotional symptoms, and how to monitor oneself to avoid becoming overstressed.

- **Investment in Infrastructure** – The shift to a remote learning environment requires universities to invest in reliable energy supplies, internet connectivity, and the latest computing equipment. Vundi (2022) reveals that faculty capacity building is another crucial development and universities should help staff members handle these challenges (p. 24).

- **Digital Skills Training** – Universities should not assume that staff members have the necessary digital skills. Vundi (2022) reveals that there is a positive influence between universities' strategic leadership and when it comes to technological adoption resources and the digital skills training in these learning establishments (p. 2).

- **Flexible and Supportive Environment** – Kenyan higher learning establishments should strive to create stable and supportive environments, where staff members can thrive and adapt to these transformative changes. The explained situation could include implementing efficient operational strategies to deal with frequent changes in the Kenyan higher education system. Mwendwa et al. (2019) recommend that universities lay strong foundations and appropriate strategies for stability, which will create environments where staff members can realize their full potential.

- **Promoting Physical Activity and Team-Building Activities** – Universities should advocate for team-building activities and physical exercises to promote wellness and reduce stress. Diallo et al. (2019) reveal the need to strengthen advocacy for team-building activities and physical activity and invest in office infrastructure to mitigate the impacts of LBP within learning establishments (p. 2).

# CONCLUSION

The Kenyan higher education segment has shifted to remote working arrangements that continue to present both opportunities and challenges for academic staff. Indeed, while remote work provides flexibility and self-management, it has also resulted in mental health challenges for faculty members, including increased stress levels and isolation. The explained challenges stem from the rapid transition to online learning, inadequate preparation, and the blurring of work-life balance. However, staff members have demonstrated resilience by employing multiple coping mechanisms, including self-leadership, prioritizing health, and maintaining social connections. Fundamentally, the success of remote work and the well-being of staff members depend on institutional support from higher education organisations. Universities can create supportive environments through mental health awareness programs, counselling services, clear communication, infrastructure investment, and digital skills training. Universities can help mitigate the negative impacts of remote work by fostering a more supportive academic community and ensuring that faculty can thrive in the evolving landscape of higher education.

## Limitations

In the end, this systematic review is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the study is limited by the small number of articles that met the inclusion criteria. The review only analysed five peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024. This restricted sample size may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across all universities in Kenya and might limit the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the inclusion criteria limited the studies to those published in English, potentially excluding valuable research published in other languages. Thirdly, the search strategy, while comprehensive, may not have captured all relevant studies, and may be subject to some bias. Additionally, the review relies on the accuracy and completeness of the data presented in the included studies. The heterogeneity of methodologies and contexts across studies presents a further limitation, which was not explored in this study due to the scope of the systematic review. Finally, the focus is specifically on the Kenyan context, which may limit the applicability of these findings to other regions or educational

systems. Future studies should explore these issues further, using a larger data set, and include more universities, different populations, and various study methodologies to offer a deeper and broader understanding of the mental health challenges affecting university staff working remotely.

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