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**All Changed, Changed Utterly - Employees' Perceptions and Experiences of Remote Working**

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# **All Changed, Changed Utterly – Employees' Perceptions and Experiences of Remote Working**

Diana Cvitan

A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor Business Administration  
(Higher Education Management)

University of Bath  
School of Management  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the experiences of higher education professionals with remote work in relation to organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. Using a mixed-methods phenomenological approach, surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of higher education faculty and staff in the New York City metropolitan area with remote work experience. The study collected retrospective and current data focused on three research questions: (1) How do employees experience organizational commitment and work engagement with remote work? (2) What roles do multiple foci of commitment play in the higher education context? and (3) How does perceived organizational support influence the employee's sense of organizational commitment and work engagement? The findings revealed that remote work can have a range of effects on employees' experiences of organizational commitment and work engagement and that the perceptions of organizational support and the foci of commitment are influenced by proximity dynamics. The study contributes to the literature and practice by providing a nuanced understanding of the experiences of higher education employees with remote work and the factors that affect their commitment and engagement.

# **All Changed, Changed Utterly – Higher Education Employees’ Perceptions and Experiences of Remote Working**

## **Chapter 1 Introduction and Background**

### **1.1 Introduction**

*“All changed, changed utterly . . .”*

The COVID-19 pandemic had sudden, profound, diverse, and radical consequences for the global higher education sector. It dramatically undermined the standard, classroom-based teaching model, forcing the shift to remote or hybrid learning. For many higher education institutions (HEIs) the pandemic was associated with the widespread adoption of digital technological solutions but, concomitant with this, reduced funding streams and an extended period of financial austerity. The pandemic altered the lives of students, attenuating their social networks, interactions, and ties, and weakening their social and emotional functioning. For some students, campus shutdowns were associated with reduced levels of engagement and experience of amplified anxiety. At the same time, the pandemic disrupted the personal and professional routines of staff, hugely reducing ‘normal’ contact with students and colleagues and triggering some of the same socioemotional challenges faced by students. Many staff had to grapple with the difficulties of balancing untested work practices with household/family duties. This “all changed, changed utterly” world of work of professional staff forms the backdrop to this thesis.

### **1.2 Research Motivation**

My interest in this topic arises from my role as a higher education professional and head of office in a large, private, non-profit university in the New York City Metropolitan area. Experienced at close proximity, I witnessed the breadth and depth of pandemic disruption in the higher education context. More specifically, I observed the myriad of organizational, management, and operational challenges faced by HE professional staff during this time of significant volatility and uncertainty. Using the lenses of organizational commitment and work engagement, this study aims to generate an understanding of the experience of professional staff during what was a sudden and novel contextual switch. In addition, it seeks to achieve an understanding of the influence of perceived organizational support on employees along with their multi-foci of commitment.

By the end of March 2020, the escalation of the pandemic had led to the abrupt closure of over 1,100 higher education institutions across the United States (CNBC 2020). This sudden

upheaval dramatically disrupted and restricted the lives of students, faculty, and professional staff. Campus closures forced the emergence of a new era of mass remote study, instruction, and work. For HE staff, the shift to remote work represented a dramatic departure from the traditional, deeply socialized work environment of the college campus, propelling them towards a work dynamic to which many were unaccustomed. It is important to note that the concept of remote work is not new and indeed was standard across certain industries and sectors before the pandemic. However, the phenomenon of fully remote work – driven by necessity rather than a concern for flexibility – was unfamiliar in the HE landscape until the outbreak of the pandemic.

During the initial period of campus closure, I personally experienced changing perspectives on commitment to work. I also observed the evolution of my own relationship with work engagement. Questions arose in my mind as to how my HE colleagues viewed these phenomena, and what factors influenced the perceptions and lived experiences of other professionals within the sector. Turning to the extant body of work and higher education literature, I located a significant collection of research on organizational commitment, particularly in relation to work engagement. However, it was clear that there was a dearth of scholarly discourse and insights into the intersection of both these constructs and remote work; and I did not find studies that explored this intersection in the context of higher education. It would also appear that the examination of the foci of commitment of higher education employees has been largely overlooked in the literature. These gaps are perhaps surprising, given the growth of remote work across many sectors, including higher education. Certainly, they warrant new research that can contribute to our understanding of the dynamic and evolving field of the Future of Work.

### **1.3 Background**

The geographical context of the study is the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan (NYC) Area in the United States. With the arrival of the COVID-19 virus, New York City and its densely populated suburbs emerged as the epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S. Gharehgozli et al. (2020) reported almost 2.6 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 cases in the U.S. by the end of June 2020, more than any other country. Furthermore, with new cases increasing to a peak daily average of 74,000 new cases in January 2022 in New York City alone, this placed the wider NYC metropolitan area in an unenviable position, with public and business leadership having to manage the ambiguous, complex, and unprecedented realities of the pandemic in the absence of a tested blueprint.

From the spring of 2020 to the spring of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to mandated stay-at-home orders and the closure of university and college campuses across

the states of New York and New Jersey. As a general rule employees, whose roles could be conducted remotely, were asked to work from home. Those whose work was deemed essential continued to report to on-site work facilities, whilst others, whose work could not be conducted remotely, were placed on furlough (Brynjolfsson et al. 2020).

Similar to many other organizations in the region, HEIs had very narrow windows in which to develop and operationalize business continuity plans and implement remote working arrangements for their employees. Likewise, employees were afforded little time to flex into this new world of remote working. With the easing of the pandemic and the attendant relaxation of public health mandates and closures, many (if not all) institutions maintained some form of remote work arrangements for their staff through at least the end of 2021. During that same period, many of the classes at most HEIs in the region remained online.

The challenges brought on by the pandemic were on top of those already faced by the HEI sector in the US, where demographic shifts have brought decreasing enrollments followed by budgetary and staff reductions (Noor and Ampornstira 2019). With the Covid-19 operational responses and enrollment impacts, the academic year 2020-2021 brought for HEIs falling revenues and budget shortfalls due to rising health and safety costs (McKinsey 2021). The resulting pressures were felt by staff and university leaders, who 'had to reinvent themselves in record time to keep campus operations running.' (Garcia-Morales et al. 2021:2)

In such environments focused on business continuity and safety, the consideration of employee commitment and work engagement is understandably given lesser attention. However, the longer-term impacts of the organization's operationalization of Covid-19 business continuity plans on their employees are likely unknown. There is little research to draw upon that offers comparable circumstances. Learning about the experiences and perceptions of these employees during and after this event, therefore, can provide valuable insights for our understanding in the field of human resources and the future of work as well as for future planning within organizations. The results of this thesis study address this gap by providing a deeper understanding of the remote work experience in the higher education context and offering new insights into theory and practice.

#### **1.4 Statement of the Problem**

Rapidly evolving and challenging work environments marked by volatile change bring with them uncertainty and ambiguity (Bennett and Lemoine 2014; Johansen 2012), and these settings often challenge employee assumptions and attitudes (Kegan 2009; Nicolaidis and McCallum 2013). At the same time, in order to operate effectively in these environments, employees need to identify with the goals of the organization and have the willingness to expend extra effort to achieve those goals (Bosewell and Boudreau 2001; Chalofsky and

Krishna 2009; Kahn 2010). In order to better understand the relationship between employee and organization, researchers need to look beyond organizational identification, at organizational commitment, which is more contingent on social exchange processes ‘that presumes that individual and organization are separate entities psychologically, and more closely aligned with (other) job attitudes’ (van Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006:571).

Organizational commitment is uniquely related to perceived organizational support, as well as work engagement (van Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006). Since research applying this model in remote work or higher education industry contexts is very limited, there is little to draw upon for a better understanding of how those employees experience commitment and work engagement. Additionally, the literature acknowledges the importance of discerning the targets or foci of commitment of employees (Yalabik et al. 2015), but what those foci are for professionals in higher education and how these individuals experience commitment towards those foci is not as clear.

Employee perceptions of commitment and their experience of engagement through remote work are also increasingly important areas of research. The growth of remote work across sectors, including in higher education, places a spotlight on this phenomenon. With the pandemic serving as a catalyst for this trend expected to continue by many in both industry and academia, a unique opportunity has arisen to study how workers experience commitment and engagement with remote work, how they perceive the different targets of commitment, and what factors influence the relationships between them.

### **1.5 Gap in the Literature**

The current literature on commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support within the context of higher education presents a significant gap that requires attention. While there exists a substantial body of research on commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support individually, limited scholarship focuses specifically on the interplay between these constructs in the unique setting of higher education institutions. Additionally, the evolving landscape of work, particularly the surge in remote work experiences, exacerbated by the global pandemic, has reshaped the dynamics of employee relationships with their institutions and with other foci of commitment. The sparse attention given to the experiences of higher education employees, including faculty and staff, within this transformed work environment represents a critical opportunity to contribute to the literature in theory and in practice.

### **1.6 Research Objectives**

The study takes a phenomenological approach to understand the HE employee perspective and experience as a remote worker. Specifically, the inquiry will explore the employees' perceptions of commitment to the organization and to other foci, along with their work engagement and perceived organizational support.

RQ1 How do employees experience organizational commitment and work engagement with remote work?

RQ2 What roles do multiple foci of commitment play in the higher education context?

RQ3 How does perceived organizational support influence the employee's sense of organizational commitment and work engagement?

### **1.7 Research Framework**

The research methodology is mixed methods, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with the goal of understanding the phenomenon of remote work from the perspective of the employee. Both purposeful and snowball sampling techniques are used to gather quantitative data through an online survey. In the qualitative portion of the proposed study, conducted through semi-structured interviews, a 'nested' sample is drawn from the pool of survey participants. The data collected helps explain how these employees experience engagement in the remote work setting and allows the researcher to build a deeper understanding of organizational commitment beyond the affective, normative, and continuance dimensions to a multiple-foci approach.

### **1.8 Contribution to the Literature, Theory, and Practice**

The Future of Work in the context of higher education professionals is an under-researched area. The phenomenon of remote work is a growing trend in many industries, but among traditional, campus-based institutions in the HE sector, professional work has remained primarily in-person. Recent public health emergencies have propelled the HE industry to extensively adopt remote work arrangements for its staff, bringing it in line with the broader work organization landscape. Given the limited existing research on remote work among this population and the likelihood that this trend of remote work will continue to be a strategic consideration for HEIs moving forward, an exploratory study in this area will develop new knowledge in this area and serve as a valuable contribution to the literature.

Taking the view of universities as drivers of the knowledge economy, currently the fastest growing sector of the economy, the importance of understanding the work experience of all professionals in the HEI cannot be understated. 'Higher education scholarship is focused largely on professors who guide students in their learning and students who participate in the

educational process. The contributions of professional staff (i.e., those supporting the work of faculty and students) have not been as well understood, particularly those who reside in academic departments.’ (Briody et al. 2021:297)

This thesis makes a substantial contribution to the literature on commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support among higher education employees, particularly in the context of remote work experiences and the enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study addresses a significant gap by offering a deep exploration of the interplay between these constructs through the lens of social exchange theory, shedding light on the evolving dynamics within the academic setting. By incorporating the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic-induced shift to remote work, the research underscores the need for tailored strategies to foster commitment and engagement among higher education employees.

This research also contributes significantly to the further development of social exchange theory. The changing landscape of the employment relationship, especially with the widespread adoption of remote work in higher education institutions, warrants an exploration of the evolution of social exchanges with multiple foci (Alcover et al. 2017). Additionally, understanding how employees perceive support in terms of exchange resources, communication, and reciprocity is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of these social exchanges within the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the remote work and higher education contexts (Ahmad et al 2023). Therefore, this thesis not only extends the applicability of social exchange theory to the contemporary remote work landscape but also offers practical insights for fostering positive and mutually beneficial relationships in new contexts.

Results of the research should provide a better understanding of employee perceptions of commitment in remote work settings and the factors affecting employee’s commitment and engagement, including the influence of perceived organizational support. These findings may be applied by organizations in the higher education context and other organizational settings adapting remote work arrangements for better job design and worker support. With remote work arrangements increasing across industries, this research holds significant potential for contribution to literature in the area of Future of Work and to management practice in higher education and beyond.

### **1.9 Definition of Terms**

Remote Work – a work arrangement where employees work some distance from the office, typically from home (Leonardi et al. 2023)



Hybrid Work – a work arrangement that combines work from the office with remote work/work from home (Bloom et al. 2022)

In-Office Work – a work arrangement that requires the employee to work solely from the organization's facility.

Commitment – the state of being dedicated to a cause or activity (Allen 2017)

Foci of Commitment – commitment to specific individuals or groups (Weiherl and Frost 2016)

Work Engagement – Fulfillment an employee experiences when carrying out work tasks, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Lisbona et al. 2018)

Perceived Organizational Support – An employee's view or their experience of organizational support (Caesens et al. 2016)

### **1.10 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is structured into seven chapters. Chapter 1 sets out the research motivation, background, research objectives, frameworks, and contribution to the literature on organizational commitment, work engagement and remote work and practice in organizational management. Chapter 2 is the Literature Review which provides the overview on the current body of scholarly work on social exchange theory and other relevant theoretical frameworks and the work constructs and concepts of employee commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. Chapter 3 provides the context of the study, including the higher education sector, the remote working environment, as well as contextual factors related to the Pandemic and public health emergencies. Chapter 4 is the Methodology chapter, which explains the structural foundations and design of the research. In Chapters 5 and 6, the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings are presented, and in Chapter 7 the discussion generates the results that contribute to literature and practice.

In conclusion, this thesis has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of organizational commitment, work engagement, and remote work within the framework of social exchange theory. Through a thorough review of existing literature, contextualization within the higher education sector, and a detailed methodology, the study unfolds both quantitative and qualitative findings. The subsequent discussion serves to unify these facets, yielding valuable insights that contribute to the scholarly discourse and offer practical implications for organizational management in the evolving landscape of remote work practices.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to illuminate the lived experiences of higher education professionals in the contexts of organizational commitment, work engagement, and remote work. The focus of the research was twofold viz., employees' perception of commitment toward different foci in the workplace; and their experience of work engagement in the non-traditional work setting of remote work. A key motivation of this study was to gain insights into the employees' experience and perceptions of organizational commitment, worker engagement, and perceived organizational support, and the relations between them. Several approaches were considered lenses that might be used to explain what happened when a sudden switch to remote working occurred. It was held that the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET), as an overarching theory, wielded a particular explanatory power in its application to organizations, their behaviors, and the behaviors of organizational members.

In this chapter, a summary of the literature regarding social exchange theory, organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support is presented. A comprehensive literature search was undertaken. Key words used in the search included British and American English versions and multiple terms used in the literature to describe the chosen concepts. The literature review also explores the contextual concepts and relationship models around which the research is framed. These include pandemic/public emergency response, remote work, and the higher education sector.

#### ***Macro Context – Tectonic Shifts***

Expansively described in popular and, to a slightly lesser degree, the scholarly literature, the COVID-19 pandemic has served to shift the tectonic plates of global business and society. Its dramatic, immediate, and unprecedented impact on higher education resulted in widespread campus closures and a move to emergency online education. It is against this *in extremis* environmental backdrop that the research was conducted, and the phenomena of organizational commitment and work engagement was observed. The stated employee work attitudes, and their relationships to one another and different foci, serve as the main targets of inquiry. However, it is the remote work environment that frames the investigation of the commitment and engagement constructs and the work experience of higher education employees. The remote work context assigns even more relevance of this study as a contribution to the body of literature in employee-organization research (EOR) and the Future of Work (FOW).

Pandemic impact aside, a number of global business trends, including globalization and digitalization, have significantly transformed both the nature of work and the workplace in many ways (Mauri et al. 2017). The expanded capacity of corporations to outsource and offshore jobs (Ishizaka 2019), increased workforce mobility (Patton and Doherty 2020), growing automation of work tasks (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2018), and the ubiquity of AI (Makridakis 2017), technology applications and networks (Bresnahan and Yin 2017) are widely evidenced as having shaped and influenced the rise of remote work.

Broader megatrends have emerged, bringing with them significant societal, and environmental impact, and resulting in sweeping changes in the world of work. In this context, climate change, natural disasters, and public health emergencies all present significant risks to the business sustainability paradigm, requiring organizations to re-evaluate operations and business continuity plans (Santos et al. 2014). Concomitant with this, employee expectations of work structure, work-life balance, and their relationships with their organizations, colleagues, and clients reflect critical social factors and, in turn, HRM trends that need to be considered as part of sustainable business practices (Madsen 2011). With the increased need for knowledge workers and an accelerated reliance on AI and automation, employee commitment and engagement have emerged as key drivers of strategic planning for organizations.

This chapter begins with a review of the methods used in the literature search, followed by an examination of the theoretical lens selected for this study (along with related and other relevant theories). The review continues with a thorough dive into the body of knowledge of the constructs of organization commitment, worker engagement and perceived organizational support, both independent of, and in the contexts of, the higher education sector and remote work environments. A picture is built of the relevant contextual considerations, as represented in the literature. Finally, a summary of all presented material is set out to demonstrate the gap in the literature and set the scene for study.

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical foundation acts as an essential anchor for a research study. As such, it provides a framework for the study's design, interpretation, and generalizability. This framework helps to identify key variables and their relationships and suggests how they might operate within a given context. This, in turn, allows for the development of research questions and hypotheses that are both grounded in existing knowledge, and empirically testable (Jabareen 2009). Furthermore, such a framework helps to establish the theoretical significance and practical relevance of research findings (Kaplan and Maxwell 2005).

A solid theoretical foundation should drive a study's design, interpretation, and generalizability. For this reason, it is important to carefully consider and select a theoretical framework that is demonstrably aligned to the research questions and objectives. This helps to ensure the study's rigor and validity as well as its contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the field. Without a theoretical foundation, research studies run the risk of being incomplete, inconsistent, and of limited utility. Moreover, interpretation of results can be rendered difficult and there is a heightened risk of failure to account for important contextual factors, and indeed to identify significant relationships between variables. Crucially, in the absence of a theoretical framework, a study may be less likely to contribute to the development of knowledge in the field, as it lacks the theoretical depth needed to advance the understanding of complex phenomena (Eisenhardt 1989).

In the context of organizational behavior, Social Exchange Theory (SET) can provide a useful framework for understanding the relationships between organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. Additionally, SET is particularly apposite to research in the remote work context because of its emphasis on the roles of social exchange and reciprocity in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors. This is relevant in a context where traditional forms of social interaction are limited. SET's described strengths are well evidenced across the literature in previous studies (Cho and Kim 2018; Erdogan and Enders 2007; Demir and Ozkara 2019; Liu et al. 2018).

### ***2.3 The Rise of Social Exchange Theory***

Whilst concepts behind social exchange theory appeared in the literature even prior to the 1950's, Homans (1958) is the first scholar to be credited with conceptualizing social behavior as an exchange. According to Homans (1961:13) a social exchange may be explained as, 'an exchange of acts, more or less rewarding or costly, between two or more people'. Building upon this framework, Goulder (1960) uses SET to explain the motivations behind individual behaviors and attitudes. Since the rise of SET, the body of literature around employment relationship and employee-organization relationships (EORs) has expanded significantly (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore 2008). The convergent evolution of these theories explains SET's emergence as one of the dominant theories to explain social interactions, particularly in the workplace context.

According to SET, individuals engage in social exchanges with others. Crucially, these exchanges involve individuals giving and receiving resources (such as support, recognition, and feedback) in order to achieve their goals and meet their needs. When individuals perceive that they are receiving more resources from others than they are giving, they experience a sense of obligation to reciprocate the support they have received (Blau 1964).

This sense of obligation can lead to feelings of commitment to the organization, higher levels of engagement in their work, and perceptions of greater support from the organization (Gouldner 1960). It is here that the core of SET's explanatory power is located.

***'You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours...'***

SET has become one of the most influential theories across a number of disciplines because 'it offers a flexible framework for understanding how two entities develop a (potentially high-quality) relationship through repeated interactions (i.e., exchanges of resources) that generate obligations' (Porter 2018:498). Specifically, in the context of organizational commitment, SET suggests that employees who perceive that their organization is investing in their well-being (e.g., by providing opportunities for development, recognition, and fair treatment) are more likely to feel a sense of obligation to remain committed to the organization (Eisenberger et al. 1986). This is because they perceive that the organization has invested resources in them, and, accordingly, they feel an obligation to reciprocate by investing their own resources (e.g., time, effort, and loyalty) back into the organization. The reach of SET is extensive, with the theory widely applied as a conceptual paradigm to explain several aspects of organizational behavior. (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Shore et al. 2009). For example, in the context of work engagement, SET suggests that workers who perceive that their organization is supportive of their engagement (e.g., by providing opportunities for autonomy, growth, and purpose) are more likely to feel a sense of obligation to remain engaged in their work (Saks 2006). This is because they perceive that the organization has invested resources in their engagement, and they feel an obligation to reciprocate by investing their own resources (such as creativity, innovation, and productivity) back into their work.

SET also informs the study of perceived organizational support. In this context, employees who perceive that their organization is supportive of their well-being and engagement (e.g., by providing a supportive work environment, opportunities for feedback, and fair treatment) are more likely to feel a sense of obligation to reciprocate by investing their own resources back into the organization (Eisenberger et al. 1986). This in turn can lead to higher levels of commitment, engagement, and loyalty to the organization.

According to SET, individuals refer to a subjective cost-benefit analysis when interacting with others. In the comparing of alternatives, an evaluation is conducted to determine the rewards of the exchange (e.g., approval, respect, prestige) or, alternatively, the costs of the exchange (e.g., negative responses or lost rewards) to guide the choice of response. The results of such an analysis will differ based on the role of the exchange partner (e.g., colleague, supervisor, family member). For example, quality time with friends and intimate

partners bring with it a certain intrinsic value, e.g. the happy feelings of being with people you like, while exchanges with co-workers and supervisors at work are mainly associated with extrinsic utility, such as praise and recognition (Mergener and Trubner 2022).

Overall, the author considers that SET has the advantage of being an overarching theory that displays a high degree of connectivity with other individual-level organizational theories, such as organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. SET has the advantage of being able to account for many of the organizational experiences that higher education employees are likely to have had during the pandemic. The author further contends that the use of the SET lens allows for a better understanding of the factors that contribute to a positive work environment and to a committed, engaged, and loyal workforce.

#### SET Model

In their review, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) highlight the triad of foundational characteristics of SET, viz., rules and norms of exchange, resources exchanged, and relationships that emerge. By focusing on the explanatory power of each of these theoretical components, a framework emerges through which the phenomena and experience of organizational commitment, work engagement, and the role of perceived organizational support can be explained and better understood.

**Figure 1.** Transactions and Relationships in Social Exchanges

**Figure 1**  
**Transactions and Relationships in Social Exchanges**

		Type of Transaction	
		Social Exchange	Economic Exchange
Type of Relationship	Social Exchange	<p><b><u>Cell 1: Match</u></b>  <b>Social Transaction in a Social Relationship</b></p>	<p><b><u>Cell 2: Mismatch</u></b>  <b>Economic Transaction in a Social Relationship</b></p>
	Economic Exchange	<p><b><u>Cell 3: Mismatch</u></b>  <b>Social Transaction in an Economic Relationship</b></p>	<p><b><u>Cell 4: Match</u></b>  <b>Economic Transaction in an Economic Relationship</b></p>

Source: Adapted from Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005: 887

***The Concept of Reciprocity***

Theorists in SET have often focused heavily on the *rules of exchange*, referring to the set of norms that guide the exchange and the rule of reciprocity (Rabenu 2021) Included in this set, are negotiated rules that explain the exchange of resources, and are most often seen in economic exchange transactions (Porter 2018). According to the reciprocity rule, SET also helps to explain the interaction between employees and their employers in a social context. The matching of transaction and relationship in the reciprocal exchange can be better understood through the Cropanzano and Mitchell model (2005). In this model, an employer offers a valued benefit to an employee (e.g., support), which the employee in turn feels obligated to reciprocate by giving something back (e.g., commitment to the organization, work engagement). The typology points to an important consideration of the norms structure that accounts for an appropriate matching of economic and social support, based on the relationship basis. This continued reciprocity builds a sense of mutual obligation between the parties, and a shared trust that benefits will be reciprocated. Accordingly, *trust* is an

important concept to consider in use of the SET model, particularly since there exists some risk that the benefits will not be returned (Cotterell et al. 1992).

While illustrations can help to frame our understanding of conceptual characteristics, Mitchell et al. (2012: 99) point out that SET 'does not involve a solitary conceptual model but rather refers to a family of related theoretical frameworks.' This offers both benefits and challenges when utilizing the framework in research applications. One of the main advantages, as stated previously, is the flexibility that comes with a multi-faceted framework. However, in the context of a structure of interrelated conceptualizations, differing approaches may arise. Within the SET framework, this issue may be located most prominently in the espousal of principles defining resources and relationships (Mitchell et al. 2012). This may explain why the construct of reciprocity often serves as the research focal point in the employee-organization context.

### ***The Twin Pillars of Resources and Relationships***

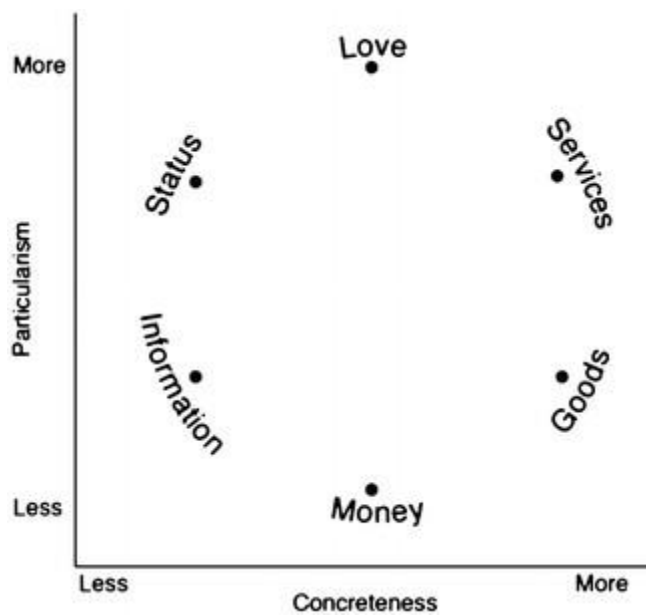
In the SET exchange model, actors weigh up not only the cost and benefits of resources exchanged; they also calibrate the relationships within the exchange. If a party in the social exchange determines that the costs outweigh the benefits of the exchange, he may decide to withhold resources or step away from the relationship (Thibault and Kelley 1959). Given that the nature of the exchange is one of a social (as opposed to an economic) context, the exact terms of the exchange may not be spelled out, but rather are left for the individual to determine (Blau 1964). And whilst the resources exchanged may straddle both the economic and social, the actual value of the reward/benefits exchanged is determined by the individual (Mitchell et al. 2012). This highlights the salient role that individual perspective and perception play in the application of SET. Despite the large body of theoretical evidence supporting social exchange in the workplace context, researchers have indicated that, "there is a lack of a priori specificity as to which resources will be exchanged." (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2017:328; Cropanzano et al. 2017).

In their *Resource Theory*, Foa and Foa (1974, 1980) proposed a model that frames social exchange resources. In this model, resources were mapped across two dimensions, with axes of concrete-symbolic and particular-universal. Falling along the concrete-symbolic dimension are goods and services vs. status and information, whilst the particular-universal dimension takes account of the value of the resource viz., love vs. money (Foa et al. 1993).



Figure 2.

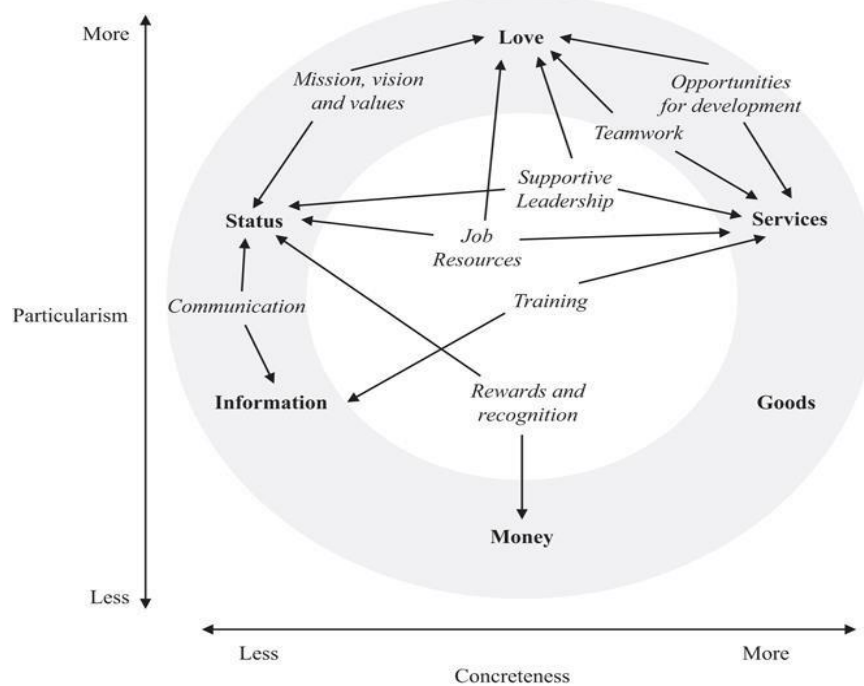
Foa and Foa – Cognitive Structure of Resource Classes



Source: Adapted from Foa and Foa (2012)

Critics of some traditional resource models challenge the principle that resources are objects to be exchanged without sufficient consideration of the interpersonal dynamics (Mitchell et al. 2012; Fiske 1991). Cook et al. (2013) draw attention to the role of emotions in social exchange and their relationship to the affective view derived from the relationship. However, it is the case that the Foa model of exchange considers the attributes of the relationship as part of the exchange. Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018) suggest that the Foa and Foa Resource Theory model requires an additional 'finesse' in order to define resources in the workplace context. To that end, they map out eight resources identified in past employment research along the axes with the six theories identified in resource theory (see Figure 2). Whilst the resources drawn from the literature in the Cooper-Thomas model may not be fully reflective of the resources relevant across all work contexts, the conceptual approach to mapping workplace resources, along the Foa model, is solid and one that could provide a useful tool for interpreting the results of this study.

Figure 3. Employee Engagement Resources Model



**Notes:** The six resources identified in resource theory are in bold font; the eight resources identified in past employee engagement research are identified in italic font

Source: Adapted from Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018)

### ***Agency, Dependence, and Power Dynamics of Relationships***

SET posits that the exchange of resources and rewards in a social exchange yield a return of the same based on the relationship of the actors involved. In this relationship, power dynamics, agency and dependence play an important role that influences the outcomes of social interactions. Emerson (1972) established a range of dimensions by which power and agency impact exchange theory and the results of social exchange relationships. Power imbalances result in greater control over the terms of the exchange thereby affecting the reciprocity of the exchange, and power itself can be viewed as a resource that can be used to influence others. Power dynamics and the resulting exchange can also be influenced by the dependence of one actor upon another. If a party to the exchange has limited agency, specifically in the form of limited choices or exchange partners, a power imbalance results that can significantly influence the exchange (Cook and Rice 2001).

Earlier and contemporary scholars have identified a range of relationships with other theoretical constructs and consequences resulting from evolving work contexts. For example, the work of Lawler and Yoon (1998) highlighted the interplay of affect and power on commitment in the exchange relationship showing that power structures are not static and their influence on the exchange may be greatly reliant on the relationship. In more

contemporary settings, Wheatley et al. (2023) found that within the remote work environment, employee-manager relationships faced an ‘autonomy-control paradox’ in which the more agency and autonomy the employee gained in the remote work setting, the more the manager attempted to exert power and control in the exchange. The shifting landscape of remote work settings and the resulting influence on proximity in relationships and exchange that is presented in the literature poses quite pertinent considerations for the current study.

### ***Criticism of Social Exchange Theory***

Despite being ‘widely adopted as the bases for employee-organization research, SET makes a number of assumptions regarding (a) who is party to the relationship, (b) the norm of reciprocity as the functioning rule, (c) the value of resources exchanged . . . yet for the most part, they have remained ignored or implicit in the research.’ (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore 2007:167). Following the same lines of review, Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) raise concerns around ‘modern exchange variables’ and argue that SET should be revised to incorporate such new workplace conditions and employee characteristics. Porter (2018), however, counters that SET is a theory with sufficient flexibility and that those modern exchange variables are consistent with conceptualization of SET.

Rather paradoxically, the flexibility of SET that Porter points to as being a benefit of the theory has also been identified as the source of some of its theoretical difficulties (Mitchell et al. 2012). Some of the concerns around resource identification and description, as well as the differing roles of relationships, may be addressed through careful consideration of context. In addition, the recognition and classification of factors specific to a research population can be important in both framing the inquiry and explaining the outcomes. For example, Shore et al. (2009) found that cultural and individual differences serve as a moderating role in explaining outcomes associated with SET. Identifying the context-specific cultural components, as well as individual factors, would therefore help to mitigate such theoretical weaknesses. By harnessing context-specific knowledge and collecting preliminary data to frame both the resources and relationships under study, such theoretical weaknesses can be addressed.

### ***Applicability of SET to this research and appropriateness for this context***

The selection of SET as the theoretical lens underpinning this study is attributable to several factors. Firstly, it is well established in the literature as a theoretical framework for studies in organizational commitment and work engagement (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Secondly, the review of comparative research highlighted the theory’s relevance to this study and its

suitability as a framework through which to investigate the stated research questions and the remote work context.

SET theory posits that social interactions involve a process of give-and-take, in which individuals exchange resources such as support, information, and recognition. In the context of remote work, social exchange theory can help explain how remote workers interact with their colleagues and how these interactions impact their job satisfaction, motivation, and performance. Even though examples of the application of SET in the remote context are limited in the literature, the emerging body of research is testament to its usefulness. For example, Hornung and Glaser (2010) investigated representations of social exchange in employee trust and commitment, whilst Caillier (2012) applied a SET lens in an empirical study of job motivation among teleworkers. More recently, Kuruzovich et al. (2021) evaluated the impact of telework on social exchange processes, job attitudes and outcomes. These studies suggest that social exchange theory can provide useful insights into the experiences of remote workers in the current study context. By analyzing the social interactions and relationships among remote workers and their foci of commitment, it will help to better achieve the answers to the defined research questions.

## **2.4 Other relevant theories**

### ***Job Demands Resource Theory***

The Job Demands – Resource Theory (JD-R) developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2014) theorizes that work environments can be categorized using two factors viz., job demands and job resources. They presented the theory as a framework for understanding how job demands and resources affect employee well-being, as well as a range of work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, burnout, engagement, and performance. JD-R theory posits that job demands and resources are distinct but related concepts (Demerouti et al. 2001). In this context, job demands represent the aspects (psychological, physical, social) and activities required that carry potential costs such as stress or exhaustion. (Saks 2009) Job resources, on the other hand, refer to the material and support that contribute to the employee's ability to carry out the work and achieve the work goals (Bakkar and Demerouti 2007).

According to JD-R theory, employees experience the interaction between job demands and resources uniquely and this can result in different outcomes for different employees. When job demands are high and resources are high, employees may experience positive outcomes such as work engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Schaufeli et al. 2006) Conversely, when job demands are high and resources are low,

employees may experience negative outcomes such as burnout, health problems, and reduced performance (van den Broeck et al. 2014).

JD-R theory has been widely used in research and practice to understand the impact of job demands and resources on employee well-being, motivation, and performance (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). It has also been applied to a variety of occupational settings and industries, including healthcare, education, and service sectors (Sonnentag and Freese 2013). Given that research has found that job resources can affect both organizational commitment and worker engagement (Dajani and Zaki 2015; Yanchus et al. 2013), JD-R theory has relevance to the current study.

Job demand and job resources are both important considerations for this study. The literature has identified organizational, social, and personal resources that influence the work experience for higher education employees (Naidoo-Chetty and Plessis 2021). These have been incorporated into the author's proposed model of resource theory of social exchange for higher education workers. Some researchers question the reciprocity component of SET and advocate instead for JD-R (Bakker and Ekerdt 2022). However, a much larger body of research continues to support SET as a better fit to explain commitment. (Cook et al. 2013)

Further comparison supports this position and demonstrates the better alignment of SET to the research questions. SET suggests that employees perceive their relationship with the organization as a social exchange in which they contribute effort, time, and skills and receive rewards and benefits (e.g., salary, job security, social recognition) in return (Blau 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). The theory argues that the quality of the social exchange relationship, such as the perceived fairness and reciprocity of the exchange, plays a critical role in shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors towards the organization. JD-R theory, on the other hand, focuses in a more targeted way, on the role of job demands and resources in shaping employee work outcomes. (Demerouti et al. 2001).

In summary, SET and JD-R are both useful theories, in the context this study. However, SET's emphasis on the importance of employees perceiving their relationship with the organization as a social exchange, in which they contribute effort and receive rewards and benefits in return, is more applicable to the goals and context of this study (Blau 1964). Through this framework, commitment and engagement can be seen as outcomes of a positive social exchange relationship, in which employees perceive that they are receiving fair and equitable rewards and benefits in return for their contributions. Perceived organizational support, which refers to employees' beliefs about how much their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being, is also a key component of the

social exchange relationship (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Together, these constructs form the basis of the study's research questions and help to justify the SET theoretical lens.

### ***Field Theory***

Field theory was first developed in the 1930s and 1940s by the psychologist, Kurt Lewin. Lewin's field theory is based on the idea that human behavior is shaped by the interplay between the individual and the social environment in which they exist (Lewin 1951). The social environment is conceptualized as a field of forces, with different actors and institutions exerting different levels of influence over individuals. These forces can both attract and repel and can create a variety of different social configurations (Giddens 1984).

#### Applicability to Commitment, Engagement and Remote Work

In a workplace context, the social environment can be seen as a field of forces that is shaped by a variety of factors, including organizational culture, leadership, work design, and social interactions. These forces can create both positive and negative influences on employee commitment and engagement (Rich et al. 2010) Positive forces within the workplace social environment, such as supportive leadership, meaningful work, and positive social interactions, can create a sense of belonging, purpose, and connection to the organization. This can increase employee commitment and engagement, leading to higher levels of performance and satisfaction. Negative forces within the workplace social environment, such as toxic leadership, meaningless work, and negative social interactions, can create a sense of disconnection, alienation, and disengagement from the organization. This can decrease employee commitment and engagement, leading to lower levels of performance and satisfaction (Spreitzer 1995).

The application of Lewin's Field Theory to remote work, as suggested by Morgeson et al. (2010), can provide a useful framework for understanding the interplay between individuals and their remote work environment. This approach can be helpful in identifying different elements of the remote work environment that can affect employee behavior and attitudes, such as technological tools, organizational policies, and social support. By taking a holistic view of the remote work environment, the factors that create a positive remote work environment, supportive of employee well-being, can be more readily identified (Morgeson et al. 2010; Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Golden et al. 2006).

#### Other theories reviewed:

***Hygiene Theory***, also known as Herzberg's *Two-Factor Theory* (1964), suggests that there are two sets of factors that influence employee motivation and job satisfaction: hygiene

factors and motivators. Examples of hygiene factors include salary, working conditions, job security, and interpersonal relationships with colleagues. Motivators, on the other hand, can include opportunities for growth and development, recognition, meaningful work, and achievement.

**Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**, developed by Deci and Ryan (1980), proposes that motivation is driven by three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the ability to make choices and control one's work environment; competence refers to the ability to master skills and perform effectively; whilst relatedness refers to the need for positive relationships with others in the workplace.

**Affective event theory (AET)** suggests that employees' emotions, specifically their affective reactions to work events, can influence their job attitudes and behaviors (Weiss and Cropanzano 1996). AET proposes that workplace events trigger affective reactions in employees, which in turn affect their job satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. The theory suggests that affective reactions to workplace events can be positive or negative and that these reactions can be short-term or long-term.

**Kahn's Theory of Engagement** has been applied in several studies on work-related attitudes (Sonnentag and Kuhnel 2020). In his theory, Kahn proposes that employees' personal selves, including their emotions, beliefs, and values, become fully present in their work roles when they feel connected to their work and can bring their authentic selves to their job. He also argues that personal engagement can lead to enhanced levels of job satisfaction, commitment, and overall well-being. In the context of organizational commitment, research has shown that employees who are able to bring their authentic selves to work are more likely to develop an emotional attachment to the organization and its goals (Kahn 1990).

Beyond these relevant theories, the author reviewed several others that had been utilized or referenced in studies of job attitudes in general, and more specifically with research on organizational commitment, employee engagement and perceived organizational support. However, their applicability to the goals of this study were found to be minimal.

## **2.5 Review and Conceptualization of Main Concepts**

Organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support are critical constructs that have gained significant attention in employee-organization research (EOR) and management literature over the years. They play a vital role in determining the behavior of employees, their job satisfaction, and their overall performance in the workplace. Organizational commitment refers to an employee's loyalty and dedication to their

organization, whilst work engagement refers to the level of emotional and intellectual involvement an employee has in relation to his or her work. Perceived organizational support, on the other hand, is the extent to which employees believe that their organization values their contributions, and cares about their well-being.

The relevance of studying these constructs lies in the fact that they have significant implications, not only for employee development and organizational outcomes, but for broader understanding of evolving work dynamics in society. Understanding the factors that contribute to organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support, particularly as related to the remote work context, can help further both theoretical development and better-informed practice at the level of the organization. Therefore, the purpose of this section of the literature review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current research on organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support and, pursuant to this, to identify the factors that contribute to these constructs in the workplace.

## ***2.6 Organizational Commitment***

Organizational commitment is a long-established area of research in organizational management and HRM literature. Commitment refers to an employee's psychological attachment and loyalty to their organization. It has been linked to several positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee performance. In recent decades, interest in organizational commitment has increased due to the evidentially supported positive effects that it has on employees and organizations. The purpose of this section is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current research on organizational commitment, including its antecedents, consequences, and measurement. The section will start by reviewing the historical and contemporary research on organizational commitment. It will then discuss the prevalent theoretical models of organizational commitment, including the three-component model and the concept of multiple foci of commitment, and how they have contributed to our understanding of commitment. The section will also review the various antecedents of organizational commitment, including job characteristics and organizational support. Finally, the section will examine the consequences of organizational commitment, and the relationship to worker engagement, and will explore how these outcomes relate to specific contexts and industries.

The concept of commitment has received a great deal of attention the literature as far back as the 1950's and 1960's. Becker (1960) proposed one of the earliest theories of commitment. In his conceptualization of commitment, employees make 'side bets' by choosing to remain with an organization. These bets, or investments in time and effort, in the



organization are then weighed up by employees against the loss of leaving the organization.

Kanter (1968: 499) reaffirmed Becker's identification of commitment as a concept of major theoretical importance, 'since it promises to join structural-functional considerations with phenomenology. She also introduced the idea of continuance commitment (as one of three axes in the social system of commitment: continuance, cohesion, and control), whereby continuance represents the employee's desire not to lose the investments made in the organization. In the same conceptualization, Kanter (1968) explains that continuance is commitment to a social role.

The work of Porter et al. (1974) on organizational commitment took an attitudinal inflection, more closely aligned with the affective domain. Mowday et al. (1979) defined the investment in terms of the employee's loyalty by giving something of themselves for the success of the organization. According to Mowday et al. (1982: 27), affective organizational commitment is 'a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization.'

Multidimensional models of organizational commitment began to emerge in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The most significant of these is the Three Component Model of Organizational Commitment by Allen and Meyer (1990). In this model, the three components of affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment draw from the unidimensional themes introduced by Becker, Kanter, and Porter et al. In their model, Allen and Meyer (1990) describe affective commitment as emotional attachment to the organization. Based on this component of commitment, the employee wants to stay with the employer due to his emotional connection to, identification with, and engagement with the organization. (Meyer and Allen 1991; Erdheim et al. 2006) The second component, continuance commitment, can be explained as fear of loss. The employee has an awareness of the costs of leaving the organization (e.g., position, status, salary level, time invested) and determines that these costs are too high (Meyer et al. 1993). The final component, normative commitment, reflects the employee's sense of obligation to the organization. In other words, the employee stays with the organization because it is viewed as the right thing to do (Allen et al. 1990; Meyer and Parfyonova 2010).

In more recent conceptualizations and discussion of organizational commitment, Cohen (2007) builds on Allen and Meyer's Three Component model by defining additional dimensions, viz., the timing of commitment and the bases of commitment. The timing of commitment differentiates between commitment attitudes existing before entry into an organization and after. The basis of commitment is divided into 'instrumental attachment,' and psychological attachment which underscores a strong 'identification with, involvement in,

and sense of belonging to the organization.’ (Roukiainen 2011:16). Other scholars have contributed to construct clarification and integration (Becker et al. 2009) and the focus has been trained on the role of specific targets in the organizational commitment model. (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001) Through this lens, affective, normative, and continuous strands remain and serve as the binding force to specific targets (foci), to which one is attached (Klein and Heuser 2009). Given that research has shown that individuals form attachment to multiple foci (i.e., targets, objects), it is also important to better understand how such attachments are formed and defined and how to fully conceptualize a multiple-foci approach as part of the research model.

### *The Three Component Model of Organizational Commitment*

Based on the above overview, it is evident that scholars have developed various models and theories to explain the antecedents and consequences of organizational commitment. The most prevalent of these is Allen and Meyer’s (1990) three-component model, consisting of affective, normative and continuance. Researchers point to the model’s ability to align earlier work (Becker 2005; Mowday et al. 1982; Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Porter et al. 1974) as a key reason for the model’s leadership in the literature. In this context, the model has been widely used in empirical studies and has demonstrated good predictive validity for job attitudes and outcomes (Jaros 2007).

### *Affective commitment*

As discussed previously, the Meyer and Allen (1991) model is structured into three distinct components of commitment: affective (representing the employee’s psychological/emotional attachment), normative (reflecting the employee’s sense of duty or obligation), and continuance (expressing the employee’s view of the cost of leaving). Of these, affective has been found to be the most reliable (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001). It has also been shown to have the strongest impact and connection to outcomes (Hackey 2012; Rhoades et al. 2001; Jaros 1997). Affective commitment was selected as the primary focus for this study, because of its demonstrated applicability to the study and the related foci of commitment, and due to its identification in the literature as a significant influencer of job outcomes (Liu et al. 2020).

### *Criticism*

Despite the wide use of the three-component model, some scholars have questioned its conceptualization and have proposed alternative models. For example, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) proposed a multidimensional model of commitment that includes affective, normative, and continuance commitment, as well as two additional dimensions viz., obligation and desire to stay. This model suggests that employees can have a strong desire to stay in their

organization, even if they do not feel emotionally attached or loyal to the organization. Alternatively, others have advocated for abandoning the normative and continuance dimensions altogether (Stazyk et al. 2011). Despite these criticisms, many researchers hold that the model remains a robust and useful tool for explaining employee commitment (Meyer and Allen 1997; Solinger et al. 2008).

## **2.7 Multiple Foci of Commitment**

The concept of multiple foci or bases of commitment has received scholarly attention over the past four decades. Reichers (1985) argued that employees are more committed to their supervisors and co-workers if they are selected as targets. Becker's (1992) research appeared to confirm that employees make distinctions between the organization, supervisors, and co-workers as bases of commitment. These more expansive interpretations are evidenced in the literature, with more researchers considering the multiple foci of employee commitment (Becker et al. 1996; Swart et al. 2014). In this context, organizational commitment has emerged with some primacy as a macro focus in the literature. The multiplicity of foci has led, perhaps not surprisingly, to challenges in defining and measuring it (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001; Becker 2009; Morin et al. 2011; Olsen et al. 2016; Yalabik et al. 2017). Researchers have grappled with these challenges by identifying the various foci and by clarifying their conceptual and empirical distinctions.

What is certain is that efforts to clarify the construct of organizational commitment have led to a more nuanced understanding of its various foci and dimensions. Porter and colleagues (1974) argued that job involvement and organizational commitment are related but distinct constructs, with the former referring to an individual's psychological identification with their job, and the latter to their psychological attachment to the organization. These distinctions have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of organizational commitment and have helped researchers to address the challenges of defining and measuring the construct.

In a recent systematic review of workplace commitment, van Rossenberg et al. (2022) identified a thematic triad viz., definition and conceptual meaning; multiple targets of commitment; and the dynamics of workplace commitment. Based on their analysis, only 8% of the total studies included, or measured, two or more foci of commitment. Van Rossenberg and colleagues suggested that future research should assess targets of commitment in terms of relevance and inclusion, taking account of the context and viewpoint of the sample population. In this study, the foci of commitment selected for the quantitative strand are based on the context of a HEI, and the perspective of professional employees working in that environment.

### *Antecedents of commitment*

If employee commitment is established as being critical to an organization's success and sustainability (Shahid and Azhar 2013), it follows that an understanding of the antecedents of organizational commitment is important to the investigation of questions surrounding the phenomenon. Work experiences have long been highlighted as a major factor influencing employee commitment (Buchanan 1974), along with the additional antecedent sets of personal characteristics and job characteristics (Steers 1977). A more specific work experience variable highlighted by Steers (1977) is 'organizational dependability'. This concept may be viewed as an organization's ability to provide challenging and engaging work, and to deliver on its commitments to and support of employees. In their review and meta-analysis, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) categorized commitment antecedents as personal characteristics, job characteristics, role states, group-leader relations, and organizational characteristics. It is of interest to note that across some research models, the relationship between constructs has been theorized as both antecedent and consequence. Such is the case with organizational commitment and work engagement.

This review of the scholarly literature reveals the range of factors that contribute to an employee's level of commitment to their organization. One key antecedent of organizational commitment is perceived organizational support (POS). POS refers to the extent to which employees believe that their organization values and supports their contributions. Research has shown that higher levels of POS are associated with greater levels of affective commitment (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002).

Another important antecedent of organizational commitment is job satisfaction. Employees who are satisfied with their job are more likely to feel a sense of commitment to their organization. This is supported by many studies, including a meta-analysis by Meyer et al. (2002), which found that job satisfaction was positively related to affective commitment. Furthermore, a longitudinal study by Lee et al. (2018) found that job satisfaction was a significant predictor of both affective and continuance commitment over time.

Situational variables such as leadership behaviors have also been identified as antecedents of organizational commitment. Transformational leadership, which involves inspiring and empowering employees to achieve their full potential, has been found to have a positive impact on employees' levels of commitment (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Meyer et al. 2010). Similarly, ethical leadership, which involves modelling ethical behavior and promoting ethical decision-making, has also been shown to be positively related to organizational commitment (Brown et al. 2005). Conversely, abusive supervision, which involves mistreatment of

subordinates, has been found to be negatively related to organizational commitment (Tepper 2000; Liu et al. 2017). Other predictors of commitment that emerged in the literature review include job autonomy (Humphrey et al. 2007), employee motivation (Diefendorff and Chandler 2011) and job characteristics (Humphrey et al. 2007; Mathieu and Zajac 1990).

Demographics have been identified as a variable in research on organizational commitment. **Age** has been found to be positively correlated to organizational commitment (Yousaf et al. 2015; Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Mowday et al. 1982). Some of the explanation for the variable's influence, may however, be linked to concomitant factors such as longer tenure and benefits (Cho et al. 2008) and higher positions (Meyer and Allen 1984). Gender has also been identified as a significant variable, with empirical studies drawing divergent conclusions. Some researchers have found that women demonstrate more commitment than men (Mathieu and Zajac 1990), whilst others have contended that men are more committed (Aydin et al. 2011) In contrast, a significant body of research found no evidence that gender significantly influence commitment outcomes (Joiner and Bakalis 2006).

**Education** level is another variable that has been found to influence commitment outcomes. Studies have found that higher education levels are correlated with lower commitment, since increased levels of education offer more job alternatives (Joiner and Bakalis 2006; Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Rowden 2000). For the purposes of this study, education level was not incorporated as a moderating factor, as most members of the study population has high levels of education. Cohen (1992) contends that factors such as age, tenure, education, gender, and marital status demonstrate a low to moderate correlation to commitment.

### *Consequences of commitment*

Just as knowledge of the antecedents to commitment is important to a researcher's understanding of the relationship between variables and constructs, so too is the view of the consequences of commitment. Recognizing and distinguishing the outcomes of commitment can reveal the influential role that commitment in respect of other constructs. Moreover, it can help to further define the relationships between different forces and concepts. Previous reviews in the literature identify a wide range of consequences and outcomes related to organizational commitment, and more specifically, to affective commitment (Mercurio 2015). Committed employees have been identified as demonstrating higher job performance, better productivity, and greater contribution to quality and client satisfaction (Meyer et al. 2002; Wright et al. 2005). Commitment has also been linked to greater job satisfaction and positive organizational citizenship (Yousef 2017), and reduced turnover and absenteeism (Imran et al. 2017).

Beyond these desirable outcomes, organizational commitment has been linked to employee innovation and change management. In this context, committed employees have been shown to be more likely to invest in needed skills development and to accept organizational change and support transitions (Herold et al. 2007). Committed employees were also identified as being willing to invest their resources to obtain the necessary results (Blau et al. 2008). In workplace and workforce settings characterized by significant change and disruption, the stated benefits of employee commitment can be quite valuable (Parish 2008). Taken together, these positive consequences of organizational commitment underscore its significance in EOR scholarship and its relevance to organizational sustainability and success in an ever-changing world of work.

### ***Commitment and Higher Education Sector***

Organizational commitment in a higher education context refers to an employee's emotional attachment and loyalty to their higher education institution (HEI) as an organization. It can be described as an employee's willingness to invest time and energy in the organization, their intention to remain with the organization, and their identification with the organization's goals and values. HEIs share these similarities with other sectoral contexts. However, these institutions present a very different organizational environment.

'Unlike corporations where collaboration can be mandated from the hierarchy, creating a collaborative context within higher education mirrors the process of inter-organizational collaboration where the parties need to be convinced of the importance of the commitment.' (Kezar 2005:846).

Kezar's summary offers an inclusive perspective of organizational commitment in the higher education workplace. In it, she identifies some of the relevant theoretical and contextual factors that should be considered in framing research plans. As stated previously, commitment must be evaluated taking into consideration the contextual factor, including employee roles and perspectives. In higher education, organizational commitment can be particularly important for faculty and staff who play a critical role in supporting the institution's mission and achieving its goals. Higher education institutions often have a unique culture and values, and employees who feel committed to the organization are more likely to align with and to promote their HEI's value set. This view is supported by Lovakov (2016), who asserted that the study of affective commitment can be quite valuable in higher education settings.

HEIs are interwoven, amorphous organizational structures, with both hierarchical and horizontal strands of governance (Gappa et al. 2007). It is within this organizational context that campus networks develop and relationships between multiple foci exist (Sim et al.

2018). In considering foci relevant to the higher education (HE) context, it is perhaps helpful to consider the approach taken in identifying multiple foci of commitment for professional service firms (PSFs). HEIs have been likened to PSFs in (McAleer and McHugh 1994; Floyd 2012), and the increased activity in consultancy, training, and corporate research partnerships within HEIs arguably further expand the parallels. Another guiding point is the relevance of the foci to the population under study. In this regard, brief surveys have been used to assess the appropriate foci (Becker 1992).

### *Multiple Foci of Commitment in Higher Education*

A review of the literature offers very little in the way of defining the foci of commitment in the higher education context. Reichers (1985) posits that before the targets of employee commitment can be specified, the individuals and groups that are relevant to an organization should be identified. One of the goals, articulated in research question number two, is to identify the role of multiple foci of commitment. A first step in that process will be to ascertain what and who is important to higher education professionals. This will in turn inform the development of a framework of commitment foci.

Despite the limited amount of scholarly literature on commitment foci in higher education, the popular and trade literature offer some additional guidance on commitment foci for workers in the higher education. Combining the available literature, the following foci can serve as a hypothesized set for inquiry:

- Organizational commitment: This type of commitment refers to an employee's attachment to the university as an organization. It is based on the employee's belief in the mission, values, and goals of the university.
- Departmental commitment: This type of commitment refers to an employee's attachment to their department or unit within the university. It is based on the employee's belief in the goals and values of the department and their sense of belonging to the department.
- Colleague commitment: This type of commitment refers to an employee's attachment to their colleagues at the university. It is based on the employee's sense of camaraderie, shared experiences, and support from colleagues.
- Discipline commitment: This type of commitment refers to a faculty or staff members attachment to the particular discipline area (e.g., history, economics, etc.) as a member of the academy or the professional occupation (accountancy, nurse, etc.)
- Student commitment: This type of commitment refers to an employee's attachment to the students they work with at the university. It is based on the employee's belief in



the importance of education and their desire to support and make a positive impact on students. When compared to a PSF, the student may be viewed as a client.

Drawing up these examples from the literature as a starting point for inquiry, the study follows the advice of Becker (1992) in first using a survey to identify foci of commitment but then goes on to determine, through empirical data collection, whether that list of foci is inclusive and the relevance and perception of those foci by the population under study.

### ***Organizational Commitment and Remote Work***

Whilst it has been suggested in the literature that remote work reduces the employee's commitment (Lim and Teo 2000), some researchers also point out that remote work arrangements help employees address personal challenges, such as childcare (Ellison 1999). Correspondingly, Wang et al. (2020) found that remote workers' affective commitment is negatively associated with psychological isolation, while their continuance commitment is positively correlated and Harris and Cameron (2005), confirm that the dimensions of organizational commitment can be relatively independent in some cases. These findings suggest extrinsic factors such as perceived benefits of the arrangement (e.g., flexibility, conserved time and travel resources) may lead workers to stay with their employers, rather than emotional connections with colleagues or the organization.

Based on the lack of consensus and congruity in the literature, it can be claimed that organizational commitment is an area of inquiry that requires continued research, despite it being well studied in the literature. Some facets that have been investigated over many decades include the antecedents and outcomes of organizational commitment. Although, the outcomes of employee commitment have been reviewed at the beginning of the section, the antecedents also merit discussion.

## **2.8 Work Engagement**

Work engagement, a concept closely aligned with worker or employee engagement, is a construct that has gained increasing attention in recent years due to its potential to enhance employee motivation, performance, and well-being (Saks 2006). Since its introduction into the literature by Kahn (1990), many new definitions and measures have emerged that parallel the concept to similar constructs such as organizational commitment. Some of the more prevalent definitions of engagement describe similar characteristics, but Shuck et al. (2017) point out that there are three distinctive conceptualizations that exist in the literature, which they classify as employee engagement, job engagement, and work engagement. Alignment of the leading models of engagement in the literature are categorized based upon this framework as follows:

Employee Engagement	Kahn 1990, Harter et al. 2002, Shuck & Wollard 2010
Job Engagement	Maslach et al. 2001, Saks 2006, Rich et al. 2010
Work Engagement	Schaufeli et al. 2002, Bakker et al. 2008

Shuck et al. (2017: 282) also go on to caution that because there are ‘different frameworks of engagement, each with a separate definition, theoretical structure, and measurement’, future researchers need to be mindful in the alignment of term to definition and to measurement. Following this guidance, the definition chosen for this study is one of work engagement offered by Schaufeli et al. (2002: 74) which describes work engagement as ‘a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption.’ Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience at work, dedication refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and pride in one’s work, and absorption refers to being fully concentrated and engrossed in one’s work tasks (Schaufeli et al. 2002). These three dimensions serve as the conceptual frame for the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES).

Other leading definitions include Kahn’s (1990: 694) originating definition where, ‘people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances’, Saks’ (2006: 602) description of engagement as, ‘a distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional and behavioral components that are associated with individual role performance’, and the description by Bakker et al. (2008: 187) of ‘a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being.’

Beyond definitions, other characteristics of the Schaufeli theoretical framework align with the research question at hand. Schaufeli et al. (2002) along with other researchers (Shuck et al. 2011; Saks 2019) focus on the use of engagement as a predictor. Their research falls under the groups of engagement as an outcome where it is a predictor of or predicted by some variable. Alternative views in the literature conceptualize engagement as either a psychological state (Sloane et al. 2012) or a process (Kahn 1990).

### *Antecedents*

Several antecedents of engagement have been identified in prior research, including job characteristics, leadership, and social support (Saks 2006). For example, Hackman and Oldham (1976) proposed that job characteristics such as skill variety, task identity, and task significance can enhance work engagement by providing opportunities for autonomy, meaningful work, and feedback. Similarly, leadership behaviors such as transformational

leadership and supportive supervision have been shown to enhance work engagement by fostering a sense of trust, respect, and empowerment (Breevaart et al. 2014). Finally, social support from colleagues and supervisors has been found to enhance employee engagement by providing emotional and instrumental resources to cope with job demands (Halbesleben et al. 2004).

Saks (2019) in his empirical study testing his previous model (Saks 2006) utilizing the UWES measure of work engagement found confirmation of the previously identified antecedents of: job characteristics, perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, rewards and recognition, procedural justice, and distributive justice. In addition, he found that fit perceptions, leadership, development opportunities, job demands, dispositional characteristics and personal characteristics also influence work engagement, sometimes independently and sometimes through mediating effects. These findings support many of antecedents identified previously in the literature. For example, on the factors of dispositional characteristics and personal resources, Bakker et al. (2006) identified increased employee resilience, and Xanthopoulou (2009) and Rich et al. (2010) found that self-efficacy and optimism functioned as antecedents to work engagement.

Finally, perceived organizational support (POS) has been identified as a significant antecedent of work engagement in the literature. POS refers to the extent to which employees feel that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Research has consistently found that employees who perceive high levels of organizational support are more engaged in their work (Eisenberger et al. 2002; Saks 2006). This may be because employees who feel supported by their organization are more likely to experience positive emotions at work, which in turn fosters engagement (Eisenberger et al. 2002). Furthermore, employees who perceive high levels of support may be more committed to their organization and its goals, which can also contribute to engagement (Meyer et al. 2002).

The wide range of antecedents identified in the literature, along with the finer characteristics of each, require careful attention to detail during data collection. Particular consideration is given to this in the coding and analysis of the qualitative data collected in this study.

### *Outcomes*

When considering the relationships with work engagement, as posed in the research questions, it is important to consider not only the antecedents of the construct, but the outcomes, or consequences, as well. Research on work engagement has shown that it is positively related to a range of desirable work-related outcomes, including job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment (Saks 2006). For example, Harter and

colleagues (2002) found that work engagement was positively related to job satisfaction, performance, and customer satisfaction in a large healthcare organization. In another study, Schaufeli and colleagues (2006) found that work engagement was positively related to organizational commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions in a sample of Dutch employees.

The benefits of work engagement have been identified at the individual and organizational levels. Reduced burnout of employees (Maslach et al. 2001) and increased employee performance for businesses (Maslach and Leiter 2008) are some examples of these benefits. In addition, the increase of 'life satisfaction' (Harter et al. 2002) goes beyond the job satisfaction category and complements the increase in psychological health and overall wellbeing that is important on both the individual and organizational levels (Shimazu et al. 2012; Freeney and Fellenz 2013). Returning to the 2019 study by Saks, an additional benefit identified beyond those already stated is 'extra-role performance'. With changing work environments and shifting work roles, outcomes that result in an increase in 'employees' discretionary and voluntarily behavior that promotes the functioning of the organization (Schreurs et al. 2012: 263) can be quite meaningful.

Overall, engagement is an important construct that has been shown to have significant implications for employee and organizational outcomes. Through careful consideration of the antecedents and outcomes of work engagement, identifying its relationship to other constructs forming the basis of the current study becomes more precise and interpreting the experience as reported by the participants in the study becomes clearer.

### ***Work engagement in the higher education sector.***

Work engagement is a well-researched area in many sectors and in the general business environment. There are few studies, however, investigating its application in the higher education context. Most of the studies set in HEIs target the student population and engagement in the various areas of the university and aspects of university student life (Loscalzo and Giannini 2019; Carmona-Halty et al. 2019; Cadime et al. 2016). The second population studied in this sector are the academics. Studies on work engagement among faculty identified autonomy, social support and performance feedback as important contributing factors to the positive engagement in professional life (VandenBerg et al. 2013; Alsyoud 2015; Gozukara and Simsek 2016). Additionally, psychological empowerment was also found to an important factor supporting engagement, especially among young academics (Meng and Sun 2019). The research on engagement of non-academic, professional staff is even more limited, but within that small body of literature interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and job security have been found to increase work engagement and

lower turnover (Takawira et al. 2014). Existing study findings align with those found with employees in other industry contexts. Given this gap in the literature, the current study is well positioned to expand on this area of research with its contribution.

### ***Work engagement and remote work.***

Remote work, which refers to work that is conducted outside of a traditional office environment, has become increasingly popular in recent years due to advances in technology and changing work preferences (Golden et al. 2006). While remote work has many potential benefits for employees and organizations, such as increased flexibility and reduced overhead costs, it also presents unique challenges for maintaining work engagement (Golden et al. 2006). This is because remote work often involves physical distance and reduced face-to-face interaction between employees and their supervisors and colleagues, which can lead to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and disengagement (Allen et al. 2015). A study by Hertel and colleagues (2005), however, found that employees who worked remotely reported higher levels of work engagement than employees who worked in traditional office settings.

Research has shown that work engagement is especially important in a remote work context, as it can mitigate the negative effects of physical distance and enhance work-related outcomes (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). For example, Huang et al. (2016) found that work engagement was positively related to job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational commitment in a sample of remote workers in China. Similarly, Shockley et al. (2017) found that employee engagement was positively related to work-life balance and job satisfaction in a sample of remote workers in the United States.

Several factors have been identified as important determinants of employee engagement in a remote work context, including communication, technology, and social support (Golden et al. 2006). Effective communication between remote workers and their supervisors and colleagues can enhance work engagement by providing clarity, feedback, and social connection (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Similarly, the use of appropriate technology can enhance work engagement by providing remote workers with the tools and resources they need to perform their job tasks effectively (Allen et al. 2015).

Finally, social support from colleagues and supervisors can enhance work engagement by providing emotional and instrumental resources to cope with job demands and maintain social connection (Golden et al. 2006).

Overall, work engagement is a critical construct in a remote work context, as it can enhance work-related outcomes and mitigate the negative effects of physical distance. As remote

work expands in many sectors, including HE, a deeper understanding of the drivers and influence of work engagement becomes more essential. In addition to this point, a better understanding of the relationship between the constructs of commitment and engagement will help inform the refinement of a working model.

### ***Relationship between organizational commitment and work engagement***

The relationship between work engagement and organizational commitment has been a popular area of research in literature. Both work engagement and organizational commitment have been linked to important outcomes such as job satisfaction, productivity, and turnover intention. Therefore, understanding the relationship between these two constructs can provide valuable insights for organizations seeking to improve employee well-being and retention. Researchers have explored various factors that influence this relationship, including job demands, job resources, and leadership behaviors (Schaufeli 2015).

Research on the interplay between work engagement and commitment among the higher education population. This is no surprise given that studies on the single concept of work engagement was already quite limited. Therefore, drawing upon studies in populations with characteristics similar to HE professionals can offer important insights and establish a foundation upon which to build research. The research by Yalabik and colleagues (2015) presents such a context. In their study of Professional Service Firm (PSFs) they found that organizational commitment is predicted by vigor and dedication, team commitment by absorption and vigor, professional commitment by absorption and dedication and client commitment by vigor and absorption. The identification of engagement dimensions that predict commitment to multiple foci is particularly appropriate to the population of the current study. HEIs, like PSFs, rely on their employees to 'generate high-quality knowledge-based outputs' and 'operate in cross-boundary environments . . . and outputs are produced with clients.' (Yalabik et al. 2015:21) Despite the frequency of joint examinations of these constructs, much still remains to be investigated, particularly as it relates to emerging and evolving theoretical models, as well as the ongoing identification and introduction of new concepts related to the two and the consideration of important contextual factors that contribute to understanding in theory and in practice (Kim et al. 2017). By examining the interplay between work engagement and organizational commitment, researchers can advance the theoretical and empirical body of knowledge that may be put into practice enhancing employee motivation and commitment, ultimately benefiting both employees and organizations.

Although the relationship between work engagement and organizational commitment is a well investigated one in the literature, the body of research reveals divergent perspectives of the relationship between these two concepts. In their review, Kim et al. (2017) identified twenty empirical studies in this area. Ten of these studies researched work engagement as an antecedent to organizational commitment, seven of the studies selected investigated organizational commitment as an antecedent to commitment, and four of the studies looked the bi-directional influence of the constructs (i.e., how they influence each other). Findings from both versions of the unidirectional studies (work engagement to organizational commitment and organizational commitment to work engagement) demonstrated that the impact was statistically significant.

Those studies which either formulated work engagement as a precursor to or as having an impact on organizational commitment (e.g., Albrecht 2012; Hu and Schaufeli 2011; Karatepe 2013; Richardsen, et al. 2006) most often conceptualized the relationship of work engagement to organizational commitment with antecedent and consequent variables (e.g., Hansen et al. 2014; Huynh et al. 2012). Kim et al. (2017) highlight the fact that work engagement was most often demonstrated to be a mediator between job resources (e.g., support, autonomy, task variety) and organizational commitment. Later studies also revealed that the relationship between work engagement and organizational commitment was partially mediated by the experience of job resources (Albrecht and Bakker 2018). Plewar and Quester (2008), however, directly studied personal engagement to organizational commitment and found a positive relationship. A summary offered by Kim et al. (2017) on the study findings of antecedent and outcome in the unidirectional model of engagement to commitment can be found in the infographic below:

Figure 4. Relationships Associated with Effects of Engagement on Commitment

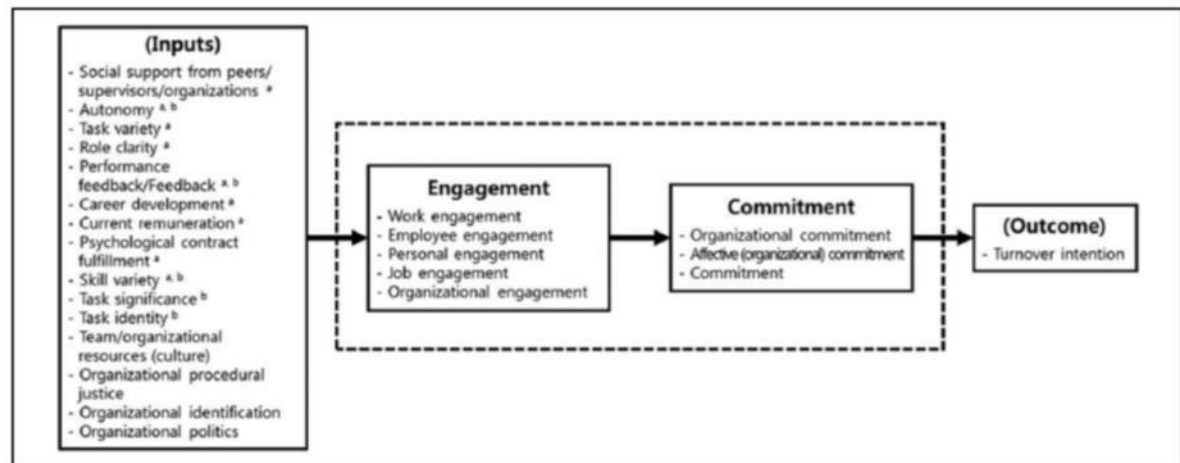


Figure 1. Relationships associated with effects of engagement on commitment.

<sup>a</sup>Job resources.

<sup>b</sup>Job characteristics.

Source: Adapted from Kim et al. (2017).

Kim and colleagues (2017) also highlighted that somewhat fewer studies framed work engagement as an outcome of organizational commitment and investigated the impact of organizational commitment on work engagement (e.g., Barnes and Collier 2013; Cantor et al. 2012). However, the results from those research frameworks were no less significant. Of those studies investing this direction of influence, most focused on affective commitment as the antecedent to engagement and considered consequent variables such as adaptability and work outcomes. All demonstrated positive influence with Cantor et al. (2012) identifying environmental behavior as a mediator between the two. The graphic summary of the antecedents and consequences of the work engagement to organizational commitment one directional model is provided below.



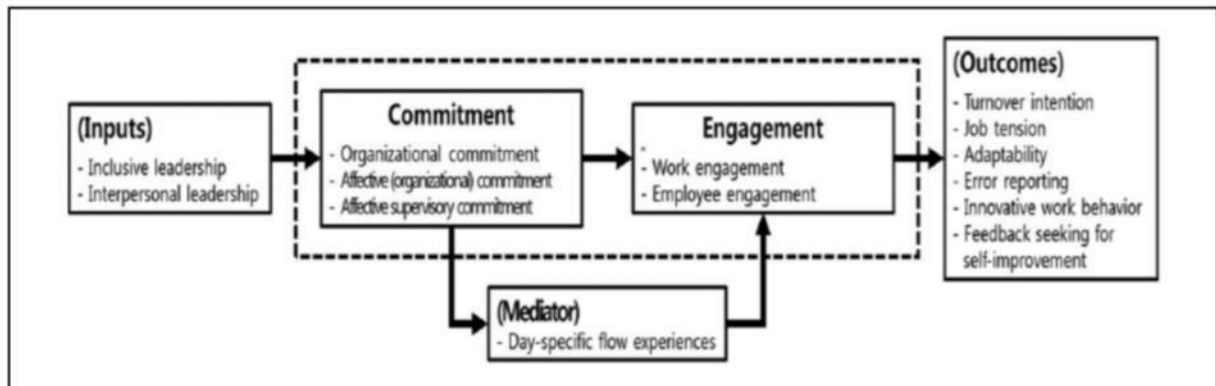


Figure 2. Relationships associated with effects of commitment on engagement.

Source: Adapted from Kim et al. (2017)

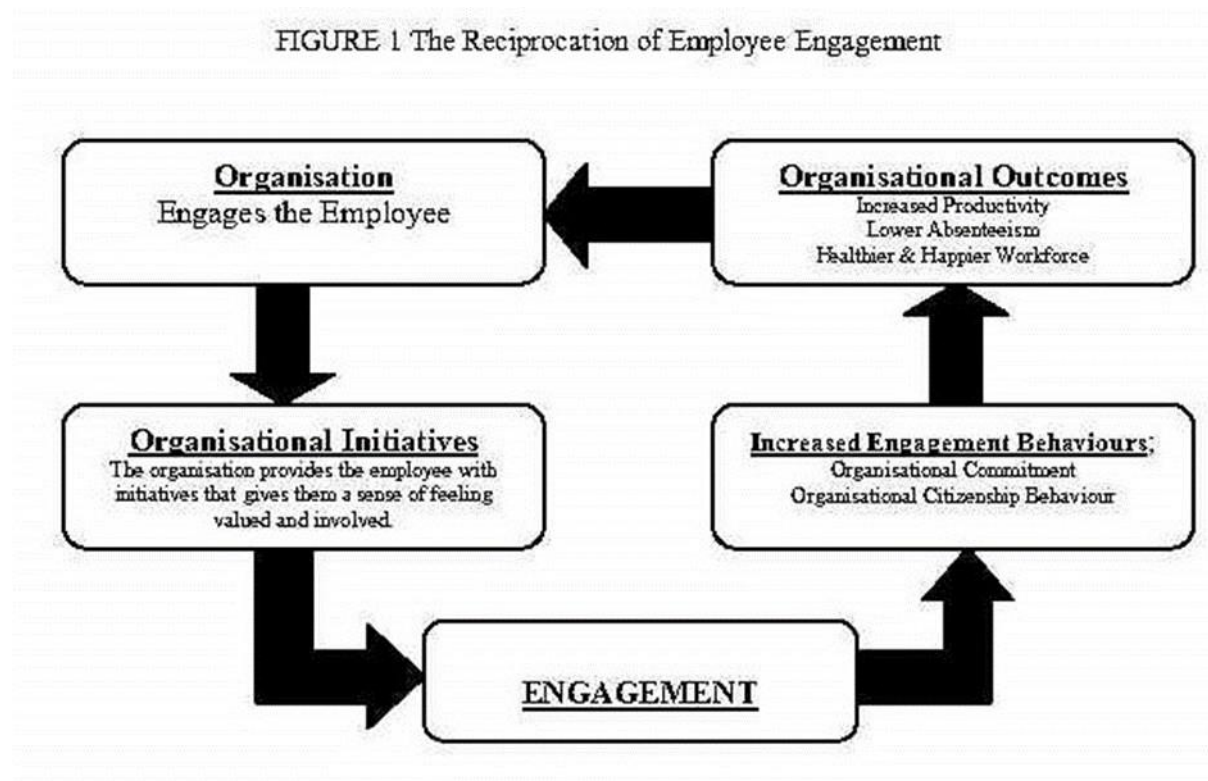
An important area of consideration for any discussion of organizational commitment and work engagement is not only the similarities but the close relationship of their constructs and their subscales that many researchers reveal through their analyses (Demerouti et al. 2010; Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006; Huynh et al. 2012). Wellbourne (2011) uses such examples of overlap in definition and similarities in conceptualization to argue that engagement is not truly a construct by a ‘field of study’. In this matter, Purcell (2014) agrees and offers a critique of much of the more current research in engagement, stating that it lacks both context and subtlety. However, others dispute the claims that engagement is an indistinct construct from commitment and stress that they are indeed separate constructs (Hallberg and Schaufeli 2006, Huynh et al. 2012). Considering the close similarities and the frequently overlapping features of the two constructs it appears quite logical that researchers should continue to advocate for continued investigation of the work engagement and organizational commitment and clearer definition of the territory of their constructs.

This review shows that research on the relationship between work engagement and organizational commitment in the extant literature provide a strong basis for understanding the one-directional effects of that relationship. However, despite this empirical foundation, Kim et al. (2017: 364) point out that few studies have considered the potential reciprocal relationship of engagement-commitment and suggest that ‘such research efforts could provide more holistic insights to conceptualizing the engagement–commitment relationship in the future.’ Looking to other empirical evidence, one finds examples to support this

suggestion and trends in this direction. For example, (Shuck at al. 2017) have highlighted the lack of clarity on the positional exchange between the two constructs of work engagement and organizational commitments, and many models of mediating and moderating factors that are considered influential in that relationship add to complexity of defining the precise roles each construct plays in that interchange.

A Reciprocal Relationship?

Figure 6. The Reciprocation of Employee Engagement



Source: Adapted from Ferrer (2005:5)

The lack of clarity and consensus on the relationship between commitment and engagement and the many models of mediating and moderating factors that are considered influential in that relationship drives the need for consideration of multi-directional dynamics. This approach may prove useful in mediating the debate between divergent positions on the relationship between the two constructs along with those who argue that engagement cannot be satisfactorily established as a construct in its own right.

Going back to definitions by Porter et al. (1974) there is a long history of similarities between engagement and commitment. Ferrer (2005) acknowledges this and suggests that through the lens of SET, and more specifically at the 'norm of reciprocity' and the work of Angle and Perry (1983), a clearer, reciprocal relationship emerges. This approach also helps to

address some of the debate surrounding the construct of work engagement, namely in the areas of conceptualization and definition, theoretical framework, and especially the question of causality and directionality between work engagement and its antecedents and outcomes.

Ferrer also suggests that by introducing the concept of perceived organizational support (POS) to this model, it allows for full extent of employee engagement to be measured: 'It could be proposed that with many similarities between employee engagement and organizational commitment, the same construct is actually being measured, but by adding POS the model will account for the commitment and support that the employee perceives the organization provides to them, thereby supporting work engagement (Ferrer 2005: 11), illustrating engagement and the reciprocal relationship model.

If the Ferrer model can be considered as a base framework for the relationship between engagement and commitment, with the addition of POS, it opens up a number of possibilities that both accepts the close relationship between commitment and engagement and allows for consideration of a multi-directional flow of influence. Additionally, it integrates well with the approach for this study, which aims to further understand the relationship between POS, organizational commitment, and work engagement, as experienced by employees. Finally, the reciprocal feature of this model aligns with the foundational tenets of SET, allowing for critical analysis through that theoretical lens.

## **2.9 Perceived Organizational Support**

The idea of reciprocity and the broader theoretical structure of SET relate very closely to perceived organizational support (POS). Eisenberg et al. (1986) proposed that the concept of POS is grounded in the social exchange processes outlined by Blau (1964) and that employees often personified the organization in their exchange relationship (Levinson 1965). Through this view, POS, is interpreted as the actions by agents of the organization to distribute material and symbolic resources based on 'organizational precedents, traditions, policies, and norms <that> provide continuity and prescribe role behaviors.' (Eisenberg et al. 1986: 500) Following SET theory, if an employee feels or perceives that the organization and its agents are supportive, valuing their contributions and providing needed resources, that employee will feel obligated to return that support to the organization in the form of commitment and engagement (Eisenberg et al. 1990; Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006).

POS is described as the degree to which employees believe that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1997). The outcomes of this belief and perception, and the organizational benefits, serve as a driver for continued research on the subject. Eisenberg et al. (2020) point to the over 1,200 studies conducted on POS between the time the concept was developed in 1986 until 2020 to demonstrate the

widespread interest in continued inquiry. It is the close relationship of POS to commitment identified in a number of these studies that makes their findings quite relevant to topic of this thesis.

Given the various examples of benefits derived from positively perceived organizational support, POS remains a relevant concept for continued inquiry and an important consideration managerially for organizations across many fields (Riggle et al. 2009). Understanding the value, benefits, and relevance of POS, we can turn our attention to those antecedents of POS identified in the literature to better understand and consider their roles in the relationship between POS and outcomes such as organizational commitment and work engagement. Broad literature reviews (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002; Ahmed and Nawaz 2015) and meta-analyses (Kurtessis et al. 2017; Rockstuhl et al. 2020) help to summarize research findings on the factors that either drive or influence the perceptions of organizational support.

As stated, organizational commitment is one of the outcomes of POS most frequently identified in the literature. This research discovered a wide range of correlations between POS and such variables as commitment and job satisfaction, but Riggle et al. (2009) found in their study of frontline vs. non-frontline employees that POS explained over 50% of the variance of organizational commitment and nearly 38% of the variance of job satisfaction. The discrepancies among previous studies, they go on to explain, may be due to moderating variables not accounted for, or individual factors such as age, gender, or education level (Riggle et al. 2006). Further examples from the literature describe the role of POS as a mediating factor in this regard (Allen 1992; Davila 2012).

### ***POS, Work Engagement, and Organizational Commitment***

Studies have found that POS increases identification with the organization, which in turn leads to affective organizational commitment. (Rhoades et al. 2001; Nayir 2012) and that the positive relationship between POS, felt obligation, and work engagement leads to proactive behavior toward the organization (Caesens et al. 2016). Kurtessis et al. (2017) confirms these earlier findings with their meta-analytic evaluation of Organizational Support Theory (OST). Through their assessment using the results of 558 studies, they were able to show that POS was positively and strongly related to affective organizational commitment ( $p=.69$ ), and whilst POS was found to be less related to job involvement ( $p=.35$ ), other factors associated with work engagement were more closely related. For example, analysis of burnout and emotional exhaustion demonstrated considerable negative relationship with POS, which suggests its important practical application.

In their meta-analysis of the antecedents and outcomes of POS, Ahmed and Nawaz (2015: 874) also suggested a strong relationship of POS to employee engagement, job satisfaction and organization commitment:

‘Organizations where employees feel supported makes them reciprocate it favorably. . . <showing> psychological congruence with organization and its goals (commitment) and psychological and mental attachment with the organization (engagement).’

These results illuminating the mechanisms of and relationships between POS, work engagement and affective organizational commitment are most relevant to this thesis study.

A broader investigation of the literature reveals that POS is also frequently mediated by several factors. For example, organizational ethical climate was found to influence employee silence as it relates to perceived organizational support (Wang and Hsieh 2013). Individual, executive skills (e.g., time management, organization, active problem-solving) were also found to have moderating effects between perceived organizational support and job performance (Atatsi et al. 2019). Along similar lines, POS was found to be moderated by the influence of such variables as locus of control (Aube et al. 2007), and employee psychological contract (Aselage and Eisenberger 2003). The many complexities of the relationships between antecedents and outcomes highlights the need for careful factorial consideration in future studies.

### ***POS as a Multidimensional Construct***

The overview of POS as a concept reveals a range of multidimensional factors that contribute to the employee experience. Eisenberg et al. (2002) describe three kinds of support by the organization that can influence POS as impartiality, managerial support, organizational incentives. Kraimer and Wayne (2004), on the other hand, conceptualized a framework that included categorizations of adjustment POS (support of the employee transitioning into a role), career POS (support for employee development and career progression), financial POS (the financial incentives and support the organization provides to employees), integrated with a stress model, among an expatriate population. Beyond these examples, there are numerous conceptualizations from the literature that identify different sources or levels of support beyond the organizational level. These include perceived supervisor support, perceived department support, and perceived co-worker support (Puah et al. 2016). From a certain perspective, this framework of ‘inputs’ mirrors the ‘output’ stratification offered by the multiple foci of commitment approach. For boundary-spanning workers, whose work extends beyond the domain of the organization in the traditional sense

(e.g., PSFs, knowledge workers, academics) this consideration may be especially valuable in helping to reduce role ambiguity and conflict (Stamper and Johlke 2003).

### **Perceived Organizational Support in the Higher Education Sector**

Perceived organizational support (POS) refers to employees' perception of how much their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. A survey of the literature reveals not only a variety of conceptualizations of POS in the higher education context, but also range of hypothesized models of influence and outcomes. Whilst the accumulated body of knowledge does offer diverse approaches to inquiry on this subject, much of the research in the context of higher education has explored how POS influences various outcomes such as job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and performance.

Of these studies that have considered POS in the high education setting, three groupings emerge. One set considers POS as a part of an interactive model with other constructs (Fuller 2006; Allen 2009). The second set focuses on a range of variables that interact with these constructs (Guan et al. 2014, Sait Dinc et al. 2022), and the final set gives particular focus on the characteristics and attributes that influence the outcomes. (Aboramadan et al. 2019; Shreffler 2019; Culver et al. 2020)

Within this group, a set of research demonstrates POS is positively related to job satisfaction and commitment in higher education employees. More explicitly, employees who perceive higher levels of support from their organization are more likely to be satisfied with their job and committed to their organization. Furthermore, POS has been found to have positive correlation to motivation and performance; this suggests that employees who feel valued and supported are more likely to be motivated to perform well (Fuller 2006; Allen 2009; Aboramadan et al. 2019).

Additionally, research has examined factors that contribute to the development of POS in higher education. One important factor is leadership behavior. Studies have found that leadership behaviors such as supportive supervision, communication, and fairness are positively related to POS (Allen 2009; Culver et al. 2020). Other identified factors include job resources such as autonomy, skill variety, and feedback. Adding to this, individual characteristics of tenure, age, position, and gender were considered (Shreffler 2019; Aboramadan et al. 2019). These explorations found that employees with longer tenure and employees who have access to job resources are more likely to perceive higher levels of support from their organization.

Overall, the research posits that POS is an important factor in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors in higher education and suggests that further investigation is warranted of

the relationships between POS and other constructs, along with the variables and characteristics that influence these relationships and outcomes of the engagement culture.

### **Perceived Organizational Support and Remote Work**

There has been some attention given in more recent studies to the issue of perceived organizational support that signal increased relevance within the context of remote work. Bentley et al. (2016), discovered that organizational social support was associated with positive wellbeing outcomes in telework and support was linked to increased job satisfaction and reduced social isolation. The relevance of these findings becomes more apparent, when one considers that studies reported that teleworking resulted in a lower perception of social support among employees, which led to increased emotional exhaustion (Vander Elst et al. 2017). During the Pandemic period, some newly remote workers felt higher POS (primarily due to greater perceived protection), while other workers perceived less support because of the enforced nature of the remote work arrangement (Bloom 2020; Liu, 2020; Daniels et al. 2022). More recently, Chun et al. 2022, explored the impact of organizational support on stress, burnout and turnover intention among university academic advisors participating with remote work and found that POS fully mediated between them.

Current literature indicates POS can be an important factor in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors in a remote work setting. Since remote work is becoming increasingly common, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand how POS manifests in this context. Additionally, studies have also found that POS can still be a significant predictor of employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction and commitment, in remote work settings. However, there may be some differences in how POS looks and is perceived in a remote work context compared to traditional work settings. For example, communication can be more challenging when consistently conducted from a distance, resulting in a weaker connection to colleagues (Bélanger and Allport 2008), and necessary support resources may be different in work from home arrangements with additional technology and training required (Greer and Payne 2014).

Overall, the studies reviewed highlight the importance of POS in shaping employee outcomes in both a higher education context and in remote work setting. The existing literature also provides insights into the important factors that contribute to the development of POS in this context. Finally, as highlighted through previous empirical studies, the relationship and influence of POS to commitment and work engagement is one of great importance and relevance for understanding the experience of employees who are increasingly shifting to flexible work arrangements and for managers and organizations who are supporting these workers and developing such evolving work arrangements.

## **Organizational Commitment, Work Engagement, and Perceived Organizational Support**

An extant review on the literature points to the relationship between organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support as the most relevant area of investigation in the given context of this study and the targets of inquiry. This is supported by the evidence and analysis presented in this chapter. Examination of the previous theoretical research confirms organizational commitment, work engagement, and POS as distinct constructs, despite the criticism and controversy that has arisen (particularly surrounding the concept of work engagement). Though the body of literature reinforces the separate construct position, it also recognizes the overlap that may exist between these concepts and highlights the important relationship between the three.

The relationship models presented in the literature not only represent different conceptualizations of the relationship between organizational commitment, work engagement, and POS, but also a wide range of variables and factors that influence and act upon these constructs. Examples of these antecedents and characteristics have been defined previously in the chapter and serve to further illustrate the interconnectedness of the constructs. The range of models offered in the literature spans many industries and contexts, but when summarized fall into four groupings that may be categorized as: mediating role models, moderated mediation models, triangular models, and integrated models.

In the group of mediated role models there exists different conceptualization of independent and dependent variables. Most common among these is the model that proposes that work engagement mediates the relationship between POS and organizational commitment (Gokul et al. 2012). However, other studies have also hypothesized POS in the mediating role, with work engagement as independent variable and organizational commitment as dependent variable (Knippenberg 2000), and more rarely with organizational commitment as the independent variable and work engagement as the dependent variable (Rich et al. 2010)

Building upon the mediating role model framework, moderated mediation models also propose that the relationship between POS and organizational commitment is mediated by work engagement (or POS-WE-OC or OC-POC-WE) but the strength of this relationship is moderated by other variables such as job resources or job demands (Demerouti et al. 2014).

The third and fourth groupings represent models in which the relationship between POS, work engagement, and organizational commitment is multi-dimensional. In the triangular relationship, organizational commitment, employee engagement, and POS are all interrelated and form a triangular schematic. This structure envisions that the three constructs individually influence the other two, and they all work together to create positive



outcomes. The integrated model expands the triangular structure into an interrelated framework in which all three constructs work together, in a multidimensional way and within a multifaceted work environment. Together, with environmental and contextual variables, as well as employee characteristics a more dynamic model emerges to explain the broader phenomena of the worker's experience.

## **2.10 Analysis of Existing Models**

The goal of reviewing the existing frameworks is not necessarily to identify the one consensus model (which, as illustrated through this chapter would not be feasible), but rather to understand the past exploration of these constructs and how researchers have envisioned the interactions of organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support based on the empirical data collected in the great number of studies over the past many decades. Building understanding of these existing conceptualizations helps to guide development of a research model and illuminates the area of the literature where gaps of knowledge currently exist. Many in the literature call for 'more holistic perspectives' of the concepts of work engagement, organizational commitment, and POS and recommend examination of the reciprocal between these constructs (Kim et al. 2017). Beyond these recommendations for future research, there is continued recognition of the multi-level interactions that influence the conceptual models and the variables included job resources and worker characteristics that interact within these frameworks. These points suggest that a more dynamic, integrated model of commitment, engagement, and POS served as the most solid basis for analyzing the data in this study.

As a phenomenological study, focused on the exploration and explanation of participant experiences, approaching data analysis through the lens of a hypothesized model can be counterproductive. In fact, the phenomenological approach requires a form of 'bracketing' to suspend judgement and instead focus on the analysis of the experience, which may be hindered by strict adherence to a hypothetical model. None the less, selecting the perspective of an integrated model such as Ferrer's (2005) to work with as a post interpretation reference is quite useful.

## **2.11 Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to provide an overview of the literature on the fundamental theoretical concepts and the empirical evidence collected in the body of knowledge of the key constructs of organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. As the focus of my research is to understand the lived experiences of higher education professionals with these constructs through remote work, the literature on those theories underlying those processes, such as SET, also formed an integral part of

my literature review. The literature I reviewed through an iterative process guided the selection of validated instruments used through the quantitative strand of data collection and helped inform the determination of semi-structured questions for the qualitative strand (and their adaptation through the data collection process). Additionally, the review informed the selection of conceptual models selected for reference through the data collection process.

Among theoretical frameworks, SET emerged from the review as the one most strongly aligned with the research questions and the concepts under study, and the Foa and Foa (2002) and Cooper-Thomas et al. (2018) models provide a valuable framework for representing and illustrating the results of data collection in that area. Through the SET lens the study is able to better understand the role of relationships and resources in the employee experience and interpret how the concept of reciprocity explains the dynamics of the commitment, engagement, and POS association.

From a conceptual standpoint, the literature on organizational commitment, work engagement, and POS is quite vast, and this review, whilst making every effort to fully cover the topics, has significant limitations in scope. None the less, the literature review provides a thorough overview of the concepts, dives deeply into those areas specifically related to the research questions, and offers a contextual basis in both higher education as a workplace and the remote work phenomenon. The Meyer and Allen (1991) three-factor model describes the affective, normative and continuance commitment that applies to this study, and the work of other scholars highlights the particular relevance of affective commitment and offers supportive rationale for the multiple-foci approach to commitment for the current research.

The review of work engagement and POS revealed the current debate on work engagement as a construct and the many facets of the POS concept. Though continually debated, work engagement is well supported as an independent construct from commitment that is defined by an employee's experience of vigor, dedication, and absorption toward work (Schaufeli 2013). POS takes on significant meaning in the remote work context, as the literature emphasizes differences in the resources and support needs from the traditional work settings and reveals a multidimensional and multilevel perception of support that suggest a possible mirror to the multi-foci of commitment concept. This offers a clearer perspective of how commitment, engagement and POS is understood in the literature.

Despite this understanding, little consensus can be found on the full relationship between the three constructs. Some models conceptualize a linear unidirectional relationship of mediating and moderating factors, while others suggest a more interactive model that incorporates more complex environment of variables and characteristics and allows for a reciprocal

relationship between organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. From a phenomenological standpoint, this study remains open to the possibility of an interactive model that offered great scope for interpretation of the experiences of the participants.

## **2.12 Research Gap**

The literature review has identified several gaps in the research. Whilst the literature is rich with studies of organizational commitment and work engagement among workers in many different industries, there are few studies that research these phenomena among workers experiencing remote work environments. Within the subset of research on remote workers, there are even fewer empirical studies researching these phenomena in unplanned and/or involuntary remote work settings (for example, for business continuity post-natural disaster).

Through the reviewed research, organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support have been established as interactive factors in the workplace dynamic. However, the relationship between the three continues to be debated in the literature. This demonstrates a need for a continued and evolving understanding of the relationship that will help illuminate the moderating and mediating factors and identify future directions for study. More specifically, the multi-foci approach has been taken in several studies, but little comparison has been made in the framework of a study with both work engagement and POS.

The continued debate in the literature suggests that this is a particularly rich area that has, until recently, been under-researched in this population. Additionally, the analysis of relationship models suggests that there is space for new theoretical and conceptual considerations, given their physical displacement from the office. Kim and company (2017) support these approaches for future study, suggesting that continued empirical research on the frameworks, investigations of reciprocal relationships, deeper consideration of variables and context, as well as conceptual considerations of the relationship between commitment and engagement, are all areas of needed research. It is my hope that through this study and the defined research questions, the findings will contribute to the literature in a meaningful way and help to illuminate future paths of study.

### CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH CONTEXT

This chapter introduces the context in which the study takes place. The inclusion of the research context is important as it provides the foundation for the research and establishes its relevance and significance. Careful outlining of the contextual background is helpful in identifying any existing knowledge gaps and more precisely defining the research motivations and objectives. Crucially, the research context can serve to bolster the framework for interpretation of the research findings. Creswell (2014: 45) captures this succinctly: ‘The research context is critical in providing a framework for the research problem and highlighting its significance within the broader scholarly conversation.’ It is clear that a well-defined research context is essential for guiding the research process, supporting the research rationale, and ensuring the scholarly rigor of the study.

The contextual overview includes a brief outline of the higher education system, including structural frameworks: institutional and environmental challenges; a description of the Covid-19 Pandemic context through the lens of natural disasters, public health/safety, business continuity, and particular consideration of the evolving setting of remote work. In addition, at the end of the chapter, the contextual background is employed to identify specific worker characteristics and demographic considerations that shaped the research design.

The selection of a research context for this study was based on several factors, including relevance, significance, feasibility, and accessibility. A review of the key concepts of the study revealed a dearth of research on these topics in the higher education (HE) workplace setting. Additionally, a rigorous examination of the body of literature found no studies investigating the defined set of research questions in the HE sector. This is surprising given that the HE industry, as a strand of the educational services sector, represents a rich context for exploration. The campus community structure and the delivery of what are largely in-person services perpetuate the traditional model of operations. In that respect, the en masse shift to remote work may have had a more significant impact on the HE employee than those in sectors that have strategically facilitated a high-intensity remote work model for a large proportion of their workforce.

The deficit of understanding of these phenomena among remote workers and the HE sector, more generally, is accompanied by a clear upward trend in remote work and an increasing likelihood of ‘black swan’ events (i.e., natural disasters, pandemics). These factors underscore the imperative for an increased understanding of the relationships between the factors and the perspectives of both the employer and employee actors. The expansion of understanding will advance scholarship in this area and serve as a contribution to knowledge.

From an accessibility and feasibility perspective, the selection of context needs to incorporate consideration of the practicality and viability of conducting the research. Feasibility refers to the likelihood that the research can be conducted successfully, taking into account the available resources, time, and expertise (Yin 2018). Accessibility, on the other hand, refers to the availability of relevant data, information, or research participants within the chosen research context (Creswell 2014). Both are guiding factors in the selection of context and serve to ensure that research can be realistically carried out with the limitations of available resources and the availability of the required data sources (materials, participants, or organizations). From my position within an HEI, I was able to confirm access to data, and channels for the recruitment of study participants, prior to the selection of the study context.

### **3.1 Higher Education Sector**

Institutions within higher education can be viewed as unique organizations in a number of ways. Firstly, there exists a traditional but distinct professional delineation between academic and non-academic staff. Secondly, the work environment is largely facility- or campus-based, with most staff working in person. Thirdly, the business of education is relatively labor intensive, so the role of faculty and staff in the delivery of the service is significant. Disengaged or dissatisfied employees, therefore, can have a direct impact on both revenue generation and the financial wellness of the HEI (Wasilowski 2017).

HE employee work engagement, organizational commitment, and perceived organizational support are all under-researched areas in the literature, but there exists a small body of research upon which the proposed study is founded. The extant scholarship in this area is rich in its contextual diversity, with the majority of research emanating from outside of the U.S., e.g., Pakistan, Thailand, South Africa, and Kenya. This offers an opportunity to expand the context, as many of the published studies highlight the importance of culture and context (Asrar et al. 2017; Tepayakul and Rinthaison 2018; Schulze 2006; Kipkebuk 2010).

#### *The U.S. Higher Education System*

The higher education system in the United States differs in important ways from tertiary education in other parts of the world. It is characterized by a decentralized structure, with a diverse range of institutions, including public and private universities, community colleges, and vocational schools. As per the US federal Constitution, power over education is the preserve of individual states. Accordingly, higher education institutions operate with considerable autonomy in terms of curriculum, funding, and governance. This is in contrast to many other countries that have centralized higher education systems, deploying national curricula and standardized accreditation processes.

The U.S. government has a very limited role in administering education at any level. State governments, local and institutional authorities, and non-governmental organizations, however, operate with significant latitude. At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education is responsible for setting specific higher education-related policies and regulations, for example, those related to civil rights. In addition to the provision of financial aid programs, the Department collects data on colleges and universities. This enables the federal body to influence relevant policy. Federal research funding from agencies like the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) supports scientific research in higher education institutions across the country.

At the state level, each state has its own system of publicly funded colleges and universities, overseen by an authoritative body. In the case of private institutions (both non-profit and for-profit), the state issues its corporate charters, regulates its standards and quality, and approves its academic programs. The states included in this study are New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Each has distinctive regulatory features (such as the Board of Regents who oversee education in New York State), but such differences do not give rise to any significant contextual variations within the sample set.

HEIs in the US are also categorized through a typology framework called the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Shulman 2001). The Carnegie Classification is a framework used to classify higher education institutions in the United States into different groups, based on various factors such as size, degree levels offered, research activity, and institutional context. The framework categorizes 3,939 U.S. institutions into a set of eight basic classifications, which are simplified into four groupings for the purposes of this study, viz., Associate's Colleges, Baccalaureate Colleges, Master's Colleges & Universities, Special Focus, and Tribal Colleges. Associate's Colleges include county and community colleges whose role had traditionally been focused on continuing education, trade school, and junior college. However, in more recent years, it has evolved into a pathway to a bachelor's degree. Baccalaureate Colleges (collapsed from Baccalaureate and Baccalaureate/Associate's), Master's Colleges (institutions offering Bachelor's, Master's, and possibly a small number of Doctorates), and Doctoral Universities (comprised of research institutions) represent the bulk of traditional students. The Special Focus group consists of a diverse set of institutions, including those focused on religious training, such as rabbinical colleges and theological seminaries, as well as professionally oriented education at undergraduate and graduate levels, including nursing, medical, and law schools, and technical training institutes. Because of the diversity of types in this final grouping, special attention needs to be paid to understanding the experience of workers in the individual organizational context.

*Table 1 – Colleges and Universities in the New York City Metropolitan Area.*

U. S. State	New Jersey	New York	Connecticut
Associate’s Colleges	Public = 19	Public = 36	Public = 12
	Private = 2	Private = 2	Private = 0
Baccalaureate Colleges	Public = 0	Public = 10	Public = 2
	Private = 4	Private = 35	Private = 6
Master's Colleges & Universities	Public = 5	Public = 22	Public = 4
	Private = 11	Private = 30	Private = 6
Doctoral Universities (Research)	Public = 8	Public = 6	Public = 1
	Private = 3	Private = 23	Private = 6
Special Focus Colleges/Religious	Public = 0	Public = 4	Public = 0
	Private = 19	Private = 125	Private = 1

The chart above shows the classification breakdown of HEIs in the states of New Jersey, New York and Connecticut, according to Carnegie Classification.

### *U.S. Higher Education External Environment*

HEIs in the US face several major challenges in the current operating and environmental contexts. The cost of higher education has been steadily increasing, outpacing inflation and wage growth, and resulting in a significant financial burden on students and their families. This challenge is compounded by the increasing student debt burden, which can limit access to higher education, and impact students' ability to pursue career opportunities post-graduation. (Martin and Dwyer 2021)

The changing demographic landscape of the US, with shifting population trends and changing student demographic, represents an additional challenge. Higher education institutions are facing changing demand patterns, with declining enrolment in some regions and increasing demand in others (Bruininks et al. 2010). This requires institutions to adapt to changing student needs and preferences, including the demand for online and flexible learning options, as well as addressing issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus.

In addition, higher education institutions face regulatory and policy challenges at both the federal and state levels. Changes in government policies and regulations, including changes in funding levels, accreditation standards, and compliance requirements, can directly impact HEI's operations and financial sustainability.

Furthermore, increasing competition among institutions for finite resources, such as research funding, philanthropic support, and top faculty talent, adds further complexity to HEI's business operating and environment contexts. Institutions must navigate these challenges, whilst fulfilling their mission of providing quality education, conducting research, and serving their communities.

### *U.S. Higher Business Models*

HEIs in the U.S. face various business model challenges in the dynamic global and domestic marketplaces. As mentioned, one significant challenge for enrollment and retention is the increasing cost of tuition and declining affordability for students. At the same time, HEIs face challenges in terms of financial sustainability, as they grapple with balancing revenue generation against a backdrop of rising costs across operations, salaries, facilities, and technology. While the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue, there is evidence that HEIs were already experiencing significant budgetary and enrolment challenges prior to the pandemic (McKinsey 2021). The precarity of HEI organization sustainability becomes more apparent when the cost of adoption and adherence to changing government compliance requirements and reduced public and grant funding levels are added to the challenging mix. The harsh reality of the difficult HE environment has been evidenced in the more frequent closures and mergers of US HEIs in recent years., for example, the College of New Rochelle (NY), University of Bridgeport (CT), and Bloomfield College (NJ) (Eide 2018).

Addressing these business model challenges requires a comprehensive response covering strategic planning, innovative revenue diversification, cost containment, and adaptability to ever-changing HE market dynamics (Koryakina 2018). The accelerating cost of tuition and fees, alongside the increasing student debt burden, has raised concerns about the affordability of higher education for many students and their families. According to a report by the College Board, the average tuition and fees at public four-year US institutions have jumped by 41% (adjusted for inflation) over the past decade, making college education less accessible for many students (Tuition and Fees and Room and Board over Time 2021). This has led to questions about the economic value of a college education in terms of return on investment (ROI) and job prospects after graduation. This was reinforced by a Gallup-Purdue University report (2020) finding that only 53% of college graduates strongly agreed that their education was worth the cost.



In this challenging environment, all units and levels of the HEI are navigating financial pressures. In this context, leadership is required to effectively administer budgets, prioritize resources, and make difficult financial decisions to ensure the financial sustainability of their institutions. All members of the organization are called on to fulfil the mission of the institution and maintain fiscal responsibility through income generation, expenditure control, and the strategic allocation of scarce resources (McNair 2017). Even faculty members, whose roles have always been defined by research, teaching, and service, find themselves in the role of marketer and salesperson for their academic program to internal and external stakeholders (Busch 2017). This approach represents a distinct departure from the traditional HE work environment.

Managing the needs and expectations of stakeholders brings additional complexity to the roles and responsibilities of HE employees. U.S. HEIs are experiencing changing demographics, including the expansion of provision for specific student population cohorts, such as first-generation students, adult learners, underrepresented groups, and students with special needs. Adapting to the particular needs of these growing HEI populations, in tandem with the more general socio-emotional challenges faced by students coming out of the Covid-19 Pandemic requires resource allocation and increased flexibility. This inevitably places increased demands on the HEI workforce (Bloom and McClellan 2016).

#### *Organizational Dynamics in U.S. Higher Education*

Organizational dynamics within US HEIs can vary widely depending on the institution's type, size, governance structure, and mission. However, there are some common patterns and trends that are particularly relevant to the study context.

HEIs in the U.S. generally adhere to the concept of shared governance, which involves the participation of faculty, staff, and students in decision-making processes. This typically includes a system of faculty governance, where faculty members have a significant role in shaping academic policies, curriculum development, and other institutional decisions. Staff and student groups also have roles in shared governance, though the power and influence these groups carry are a function of each HEI's defined governance structure. The governance configuration may reflect a union arrangement, an elected senate, or a professional organization. This tradition of shared governance is deeply ingrained in the US higher education system and is viewed as a mechanism for ensuring academic freedom, protecting faculty rights, and fostering collaborative decision-making processes (Birnbaum 2000).

U.S. HEIs also typically have a hierarchical administrative structure, with a president or chancellor serving as the chief executive officer and overseeing the academic and

administrative units of the institution. Below the president, there may be vice presidents, deans, department chairs, and other administrative positions with specific responsibilities and authority. Distinguishing HEIs from other organization types, are features such as the shared governance model and faculty tenure which establish unique power dynamics. However, in times of financial exigency, tenure does not necessarily offer the assurances and security that it provides under financially stable circumstances (Berube 2020).

### *Organizational Commitment, Work Engagement, and POS in the Higher Education Context*

The existing literature on organizational commitment and work engagement in the HE context offers some theoretical and methodological foundation upon which the proposed study is built. In addition, the shared findings provided guideposts for consideration in the development of the study. Results from research by Lacy and Sheehan (1997) indicated that environmental factors of the university (atmosphere, sense of community, and relationships with colleagues) are the greatest predictors of work engagement. In the South African context, Donald et al. (2016) found that work engagement mediates the relationship between POS and organizational commitment. Their results also showed a significant relationship, in particular between affective commitment and work engagement and affective commitment and POS. These findings generally align with the research outside of the HE context.

Viewing higher education professionals as knowledge workers allows for referencing a deeper body of literature on commitment. Looking at this population, there is a significant number of research studies focusing on commitment in knowledge-intensive settings (Ahan et al. 2013; Benson and Brown 2007; Lee et al. 2016; Yujing and Shuming 2015).

Commitment amongst knowledge workers has been found to be tied to different targets. Commitment finds expression in many contexts including, commitment to family and work-life balance (Lupu et al. 2017), commitment to clients in consultancy (Yalabik et al. 2017), commitment to the organization and university brand (Sheikh and Aghaz 2019) and, importantly, commitment to the academic profession (Alvesson and Benner 2016). However, there is little research on the concept of organizational commitment in the higher education setting (Dreis 2014; Huber 2015). Much of the limited research on commitment in higher education has focused on the student experience, rather than on faculty or staff professionals at the institutions (Felfe et al. 2014; Hagenauer et al. 2017)

Of the three commitment types, affective commitment has been found to be the most salient factor that links employees to their organization (Meyer and Allen 1997) and ultimately drives organizational failure or success (Yahaya and Ebrahim 2016; Mowday et al. 1982). Not surprisingly, therefore, organizations look to explore ways to effectively nurture commitment in employees (Choi et al. 2015). The assumption is that HE employees tend to have higher

education levels than their peers in many other types of organizations. The literature supports the view that highly educated employees have low affective commitment, due to having higher expectations than their organization has the capability to satisfy (Mowday et al. 1982). Accordingly, there is a need for institutions to understand aspects of their employees to which they can appeal through training or rewards.

Despite the limited empirical research on professional commitment in the HE context (Bennett 2017; Cohen 2000; Zhang 2015), the literature offers examples of higher levels of professional commitment in comparison to organizational commitment across other knowledge worker contexts (Alvesson and Benner 2016; Kinnie and Swart 2012; Perry et al. 2016). Particularly relevant to the study is the proposal that employees facing job insecurity and other uncertainties are likely to shift to professional commitment (McAulay et al. 2006). Similarly, researchers found that type of appointment, current organizational tenure, and job satisfaction are predictors of organizational commitment (Timalsina 2018) and work engagement (Curran and Prottas 2017).

Other HE literature may also be drawn upon to provide additional context related to the focus of the current study. Examples of relevant research in the HE context include scholarly contributions on the topics of HE worker occupational stress (Tytherleigh et al. 2005), work-life balance (Johnsrud 2002; Watersrk and Bardoel 2006), workload and coping strategies (Melin et al. 2014), work and gender (Castleman and Allen 1995), and virtualization of administrative work (Adam et al. 2017). These themes all offer important context perspectives that will help in the interpretation of the findings.

### **3.2 Change in Higher Education**

The higher education sector is known to be resistant to change. As the saying goes, “It is easier to change the course of history, than it is to change the history course.” The resistance to change from stakeholders including faculty, staff, and students can arise from concerns over job security, fear of the unknown, and perceived threat to institutional values and traditions (Birnbaum 2000). In addition, as previously stated, HEIs often operate within complex political and bureaucratic systems that can hinder the implementation of change initiatives (Kezar 2014). The collision of these traditional systems with the evolving complexities of the HE business landscape, along with the forced change brought about by the Pandemic, had required a change at a level and rate never seen or experienced by HEIs.

One area of disruption for the higher education industry in recent years has been the response to the technological advancements that are rapidly changing the landscape of higher education. These include online learning, digital resources, and data analytics.

Institutional leaders have had to adapt their organizations to effectively integrate technology into their operations, curriculum, and student services. This includes shifting modalities for instruction with a population of faculty that has, for the most part, been accustomed to in-person delivery of instruction. With the rapid closure of physical classrooms and campuses at the beginning of the pandemic, this change was immediate and complete. The (often contentious) move to online learning was by-and-large met with compliance from faculty due to necessity and lack of alternatives (Mitchell et al. 2015).

### **3.3 Remote Work in the Higher Education Sector**

Whilst the concept of remote work has existed for many years and its application across many industries prevalent over the past several decades, the higher education sector had not followed this trend, to any great extent, until the Pandemic. The literature also reflects a limited amount of research in this context area prior to the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic, beyond the trend of online learning and instruction (Linnes et al. 2022). This is a newly emerging body of literature that has been rapidly expanding as this study progressed. It will be important to revisit the new research and findings in the literature once the thesis is complete, to determine how its study and finding contribute to the scholarship completed in the interim.

### **3.4 Natural Disaster and Safety Context**

This context of natural disasters, as it relates to remote work, is a very narrow one but is relevant for consideration for this study. Reflections on remote work as an outcome in the New York Metropolitan region after Hurricane Sandy (Kontou et al. 2017) offers some geographic contextual alignment. Likewise, the rapid shift to remote work and related outcomes post-earthquake in New Zealand (Green et al. 2017) offers some comparison to the rapid shift experienced during the remote work shift during the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, there are some more recent contributions to the literature that identify issues of isolation and family stress in remote work (Beland et al. 2020). Despite the dearth of scholarship in this narrow field, this emerging field of research during/post-COVID-19 is one that is rapidly expanding.

### **3.5 Business Continuity**

Business continuity planning is a long-established component of organizational leadership. However, the environmental changes, social and political instability, and increased risk that have arisen over recent decades have pushed this issue to the forefront (Santos et al. 2014; Crain's New York Business, 2021). Colbert (2011) contends that telework arrangements are an essential part of a business continuity plan. During the COVID-19 outbreak, many

organizations around the world, including those in higher education, found themselves either without organization-wide continuity plans or with plans that failed to adequately consider remote work arrangements. New contributions to the literature highlight the need for better business continuity planning that includes remote work arrangements (Johnson 2020; Larson et al. 2020).

### **3.6 Remote Work**

The concept of remote work also appears in the literature under other terminology: most commonly referenced are telework, distributed work, telecommuting (Bailey and Kurland 2002), home-based work (Ellison 1999), homework (Reuschke and Felstead 2020; Bellmann and Hubler 2020). Most recently, work-from-home (WFH) has also entered the literature as a commonly referenced concept. Each term and its application carry a slightly different interpretation from the construct of remote work. Distributed work is described as a construct that includes collaborative workers across different corporate locations, off-site and from home (Macaulay 2018). Telecommuting, home-based work, and homework may be considered subsets of the distributed work model.

#### *Definitions*

Telework is the term most closely related to remote work. Di Martino and Wirth (1990) define telework as 'a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, with no personal contact with co-workers, but the ability to communicate with co-workers using ICT.'(529) Vartiainen (2021) distinguishes between terms such as 'telework' and 'remote work' explaining that telework requires the use of personal electronic devices in addition to working outside the office or company premises, while the concept of remote work allows for more flexible interpretation. Staples (2001) also conceptualizes remote work broadly as an arrangement whereby employees work in a physically separate location from their managers, whereas Daniels (2001) specifies that to be considered a remote work, one must be away from the traditional place of work for a significant portion of work time. Despite these fine differences, telework is generally used interchangeably with the term remote work. For the purposes of this study, the guiding definition of remote work is "a work arrangement that involves individual workers performing tasks away from their primary offices, using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to interact with others inside and outside their organization" (Shirmohammadi et al. 2022; Spreitzer et al. 2017).

### *Historical perspectives*

The phenomenon of remote work, or telework, first began appearing in the literature in significant ways in the late 1980s and early 1990's (Duxbury et al. 1987; Huws et al. 1990; Olson 1983). Facilitated by the growth of technologies and communication networks in subsequent decades, remote work has expanded in its prevalence and application.

Organizations often offer remote work arrangements to allow for work-life balance and to reduce the time and environmental impact of commuting to the office or employer location (Harpaz 2002). Research in the area of remote work has taken a number of perspectives, both from the employer and employee standpoints (Martin and MacDonnell 2012).

Additionally, prior to the enforced remote work arrangements resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic across most business sectors, the focus of remote work fell primarily into two domains: employee benefit and employer benefit. Underpinning both approaches had been the assumption of choice and the benefits of flexibility or cost savings (Offstein et al. 2010). However, the pandemic created a new contextual paradigm through which workers and organizations experienced remote work. It is within this paradigm that this study investigates the employee experience of organizational commitment and work engagement in the higher education sector.

### *Themes in the literature*

A review of the literature reveals studies in the remote work context that investigate increasingly diverse aspects of the phenomenon. This is attributable to a rise in scholarly interest brought about by the shift in workplace settings during the Pandemic period. Emerging studies and research on remote work, also known as virtual work, telecommuting, telework, flexible work, work-from-home, and work-from-anywhere, have begun to cover the prevalence of remote work across different countries and industries. The focus of the research ranges from the opportunities and challenges of remote work, and its impact on employees' work-life balance, productivity, and cultural diversity (Laumer et al. 2021). This has served to significantly expand the rather modest body of literature that had existed prior to the Pandemic.

The academic body of literature highlights for consideration, the effects of remote work on minority employees, and the importance of team belongingness and appreciation in remote work environments (Asfaw, 2022). Additionally, studies also confirm that remote work provides increased flexibility for employees and improves productivity and profitability for employers (Hajal, 2022). It also poses challenges such as difficulty in cross-cultural communication, extended working hours, and stress (Adamovic 2022). Some scholars have reviewed the effects of the accelerating adoption of remote work brought about by the

Pandemic on employee expectations, challenged traditional approaches to supervision and oversight, and shifted norms of where and how employees work (Jackson et al. 2020). Most agree that this shift to some form of remote work will remain, and employers, communities and urban planners are beginning to recognize the impact, both positive and negative, of this change (Mouratidis and Papagiannakis 2021). As a result, organizational sustainability in this new environment requires careful analysis of the factors that intersect with remote work and the dynamics of that interaction.

### *The emergence of remote work during the Pandemic*

Closure of traditional workplaces at the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic propelled many workers and organizations into a new context of work life for many. The experience of a new work setting and the accompanying work arrangements presented unique opportunities from a research standpoint. Observers monitored the unprecedented situation over the period of the Pandemic, seeking to comprehend the potential advantages and unforeseen drawbacks it may bring to organizations, individuals, and society at large. However, these initial undertakings have been challenging due to the dispersion of individual instances of remote work during COVID-19 across a wide range of interdisciplinary scholarly and practitioner literature (Tursunbayeva et al. 2022).

Along similar lines to themes identified in earlier studies, Shirmohammadi and Beigi (2022) found in their review of empirical research on remote work in the Pandemic period that flextime, work intensity, work-life balance, and technology (facility and familiarity) presented through the data as a spectrum of experiences. These experiences ranged from positive to negative with individual factors significantly influencing the outcome. In some cases, studies found that both positive and negative effects were experienced by individuals. For example, technology tools for work and communication made remote work easier, faster, and more flexible, but if workers were not familiar with these tools (Ipsen et al. 2021) or if the ease of access and communication resulted in excessive work time (Monica et al. 2020) workers experiences stress and negative impact on work-life balance.

Additional individual factors and personal circumstances also impacted remote worker stress levels and influenced work outcomes in the Pandemic period. The flextime and flexspace benefits of the remote work arrangement sometimes were outweighed by the challenges of managing and balancing time and focus between work and family demands. While it was found that flextime and the work from home offered many family-friendly features, working from home during the Pandemic came with additional challenges related to caring in the home without the benefit or support of outside help (Parlak et al. 2021; Burk et al. 2022). Likewise, with stay-at-home orders requiring whole families to remain in the same space,

workers who did not have the space or the appropriate arrangements for work areas experienced increased stress and reduced productivity (Hertz et al. 2021). These findings are particularly relevant to the current study and are important considerations in the new remote context of the pandemic.

### ***Organizational Factors***

Strategic planning is identified in the literature as a key driver of remote work arrangements. Organizations identify the advantages of a remote workforce as: reduced carbon footprint, reduced facility/office expenses, and the prospect of hiring high quality employees, regardless of their physical location (Dixon-Saxon 2020). From another perspective, many organizational leaders are facing the need to develop a strategic plan for remote work itself. A recent article from the Harvard Business Review poses the question in its title: “Does Your Company Have a Long-Term Plan for Remote Work?” (Johnson 2020).

Supervision of remote employees is a frequent theme raised in the literature. Manager concerns about cost and control often drive reluctance to support telework schemes (Bailey and Kurland 2002) and may have contributed to the controversial emergence of wearable technologies among remote workers (Miele and Tirabeni 2020).

High Intensity and Low Intensity. The balance of office vs. home/remote time has been identified as a categorizing factor in research on the subject. The literature draws a distinction between ‘High-Intensity’ and ‘Low-Intensity’ remote workers. High intensity workers can be understood to be primarily home based, while low intensity workers are primarily office-based (Belle et al. 2016). In this study, high intensity remote workers are those who customarily work outside the office five days a week and the low intensity remote workers those who work from home or remotely three days a week or less.

### ***Individual Factors***

In addition to the organizational perspective, the literature highlights a number of individual factors related to remote work. These include job attitudes, isolation, stress, and work-life balance.

Job Attitudes have been researched in the context of job satisfaction and affective commitment of remote workers. Drawing from their recent study, Howe et al. (2020) posit that a fixed mindset about remote work arrangements was associated with increased negative emotion and lesser perceived productivity among remote work employees. Other influences on these negative outcomes include isolation and stress.



Isolation is represented in remote work as both physical and psychological. Psychological isolation refers to emotional aspects of the experience, specifically the loss of meaningful connections, support and social interaction (Wang et al. 2020). Digital resources for social connection have evolved and expanded significantly since the early days of remote work research. They have offered greater opportunities for global connectivity and collaborative work (Kamerade and Burchell 2004; Wellman et al. 1996). However, despite the significant advances in technology and the benefits of digital connectivity, researchers continue to raise concerns around the adverse impact of social isolation on remote workers (Golden et al. 2008; Wang et al. 2020).

Stress is an important component of remote worker well-being, as highlighted in the literature (Curzi et al. 2020; DiMartino and Worth 1990). Its close relationship to the issues of isolation and work-life balance, as well as its potential as a mediating factor in the context of job satisfaction, warranted consideration in the study.

Work-Life Balance has been identified as a major driver of the employee movement toward work from home (Haddad et al. 2009; Ollo-Lopez et al. 2020). Remote work arrangements have allowed for greater flexibility, enabling employees to work around personal and family needs. The benefits of this flexibility for both employer and employee have been well documented in the literature (Felstead and Helseke 2017; Wang et al. 2020).

However, it is important to remember that remote work arrangements are not necessarily without drawbacks. Coming through the pandemic-driven societal experiment with remote work, questions have been raised about its impact on remote workers, particularly in the area of equity (Bonacini and Schiticano 2020) and well-being (Shukla and Yadav 2022).

For some employees, the boundaries between home and work can easily blur (Ellison 1999), with work hours increasing and challenges to work-time organization (Tipping et al. 2012; Bellmann and Hubler 2020). Border theory suggests that the negative spillover from work to home life inevitably increases in remote work situations (Crosby and Moore 2004). Even among those with families (for whom remote work has been identified as being particularly beneficial), Zhang et al. (2020) found that family-life stage has a significant impact on remote work behavior and that parents were less likely to work remotely compared to those without children. These dynamics and the divergence they represent are considered in this study.

### ***Outcomes***

A long-held belief in corporate circles has been that workers at a remove from the on-site oversight of supervisors would work less and be less productive. Much of the literature investigates the benefits and advantages from the employer perspective and has focused on

establishing the extent to which remote work outcomes compare to those in traditional work arrangements (Allen 2012). In their meta-analyses of remote work at the organizational level, Martin and MacDowell (2012) found that remote work is perceived to increase productivity, secure retention, strengthen organizational commitment, and improve performance within the organization. It is noteworthy that the most recent contributions have shifted to a worker-centered view of benefits and risks (Vayre et al. 2022). The results of the study, along with others, contribute to an important body of literature on the subject of remote work. This author acknowledges that the outcomes of remote work are an important and significant consideration on both a theoretical and a practical level but recognized that question of outcomes is too broad a research area to be included as a target of inquiry in the study.

### **Inferences for the Current Study**

Drawing from the literature we find that there are many contextual factors to be considered in the design and implementation of the study. From a higher education context, the current social, political and economic environment creates challenges that have the potential to impact POS, engagement, and commitment in significant ways. This needs to be considered in the interpretation of the data before drawing any conclusions.

Additionally, the unique context of the Pandemic can be viewed in some ways as non-generalizable. However, the potential for other natural, environmental, political disaster looms large in society, so the lessons learned about work and management in this context could have potential for application in both theoretical and practical settings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR -- METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodology selected for the study and reviews the epistemological and ontology considerations that contributed to the design of the study. The context of the study is set out as is a detailed description of the research design, including participant selection, data collection method, and data analysis. In that process, the rationale for the methodology and research design selected is highlighted and the rationale for these choices is evidentially supported. A comprehensive explanation of the steps taken in the empirical data-gathering process is provided; this covers the robust approach to data analysis and the attendant instruments and tools. The role of the researcher, taking account of considerations of ethics and subjectivity, is reviewed to provide the requisite reflection in advance of the findings.

### **4.2 Research Context and Rationale**

This study was motivated in part by calls for further scholarly research in the organizational commitment and work engagement arenas (Meyer and Maltin 2010; Kim et al. 2017). However, it was primarily inspired by the unprecedented and wide-ranging environmental changes brought about by the organizational response to the Covid-19 pandemic event. There was a dearth of available research in the literature at the outset of this inquiry. This knowledge stretched across higher education employee experience with organizational commitment and work engagement; their perceptions of organizational support, particularly in the remote context and served as the prime driver for this study. Such an exploration of the lived experiences of higher education professionals enhances our understanding of employees' perceptions of commitment, engagement and support; it also illuminates the relationships between these constructs. The research further expands our knowledge by shining a light on identified foci of commitment and the ways in which the remote work setting shapes workers' perception and experience. Such understandings may guide organizational planning; support the continued integration and expansion of remote work; and inform practice for the higher education sector, and industry more generally.

### **4.3 Research Aims**

As previously described, the research study aimed to build an understanding of higher education professionals' experience and perceptions of commitment, engagement, and support in the context of the remote work phenomenon. Specifically, the inquiry was designed to answer the selected research questions.

**RQ1 How do employees experience organizational commitment and work engagement with remote work?**

**RQ2 What roles do multiple foci of commitment play in the higher education context?**

**RQ3 How does perceived organizational support influence the employee's sense of organizational commitment and work engagement?**

Based on these questions, the researcher proceeded to reflect on her research philosophy to determine the best approach to developing a research design.

#### **4.4 Research Philosophy**

Choosing a research philosophy is a critical step for a research study. As noted by Bryman (2016), research philosophy refers to the set of beliefs and assumptions that guide the researcher in the choice of research methods and techniques, as well as in the interpretation of the data collected. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) state that research philosophy underpins the researcher's worldview and influences the way the research process is approached. Therefore, choosing the right research philosophy is essential, as it determines the methodological approach to the research and data analysis.

The most commonly used research philosophies are positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory. Positivism emphasizes the use of scientific methods to study the social work. According to positivism, social phenomena can be explained and predicted using scientific methods similar to those used in the natural sciences. Interpretivism, on the other hand, emphasizes the subjective interpretation of social phenomena and the importance of context and meaning (Saunders et al. 2018). In contrast, critical theory incorporates political and ethical perspectives into research, emphasizing the role of power and ideology in shaping social structures and phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

A researcher's choice of research philosophy guides the selection of research methods and design. For example, a positivist research approach might lead to choosing quantitative methods such as surveys or experimental design, while an interpretivist approach might deploy qualitative methods such as interviews or observations to explore subjective experiences and meanings (Bryman 2016). Nonetheless, these methods are not necessarily limited to one philosophical approach or the other.

In selecting a research philosophy, the researcher should be aware of her own biases and assumptions and carefully consider the implications of their choices for the research process and outcomes (Saunders et al. 2018). Additionally, it is important to remember that the focus of the selected research method is to guide the researcher to the tools that provide the most

comprehensive understanding of the problem and that increase the richness of the research design and analysis (Morse and Chung 2003).

#### **4.5 Ontology and Epistemology**

All research methodologies are underpinned by philosophical assumptions about the nature of the world (ontology) and the ways that humans make sense of their surroundings (Ruane 2005). Good research practice starts with the identification of a topic or problem, with the research paradigm guided by the researcher's world view (Creswell 1994). The selected topics for this proposed study are organizational commitment and work engagement of remote workers. Since data is needed to understand how these phenomena are embedded in the experiences and perspectives of the workers, the researcher needed to engage with the workers (participants) in order to collect the data.

Ontology represents our understanding of social reality and how it is formed. While an objectivist or realist ontology holds that there is one reality based on facts, interpretivism or relativism recognizes that individuals with construct their own realities (Schwandt 1994). A contention that one's understanding of the world is based on individual, subjective experiences led the researcher to accept an **interpretivist ontology**. It is this researcher's view that study participants construct their realities, informed by their individual experiences.

Interpretivism is a research paradigm that emphasizes the importance of achieving an understanding individuals' interpretations of the world, rather than the pursuit of objective, universal truths. Phenomenological research fits within this paradigm because it seeks to understand individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions. Accordingly, a phenomenological study can be considered interpretive in nature, as it aims to understand and interpret those meanings and perceptions of the people experiencing a phenomenon, rather than simply collecting and analyzing objective data. The interpretive paradigm informed the researcher's approach to the study. Research utilizing the interpretive approach assumes that reality is socially constructed with multiple interpretations of an event or experience (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). In seeking to learn how employees understand and describe their work experiences and how they perceive support, engagement, and commitment, the research relies on the participants' interpretations and subjective realities.

Such an approach aligns with a constructivist epistemology. According to Groenewald (2004), a researcher's epistemology is 'her theory of knowledge, which serves to decide how the social phenomena will be studied.' In a **constructivist epistemology**, realities are socially and experientially based, and are dependent on the individual or individuals holding their construction (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The paradigm recognizes the social construction of organizations and the perceptions of workers who experience the remote

working environment. Leveraging the constructivist paradigm, the researcher develops findings based on the constructed realities of the participants.

Other epistemological approaches were considered and rejected. In addition to constructivism, Guba and Lincoln (1994) categorize three additional inquiry paradigms: positivism, post-positivism and critical theory. Positivism and post-positivism both rely heavily on quantitative and objective data. For a positive researcher, data and objectivity drive the explanation of human behavior and reality (Carson et al. 2001). Given the researcher's experience and understanding of the remote workers in the HE context, she believes individuals construct the reality and interpret the experience of remote work in different ways. Cohen et al. (2007) contend that the positive approach fails to consider such facts as individuality, emotions, beliefs, habits, and choice. The researcher agrees with Cohen and colleagues that the failure of positivism's approach to consider these factors, and the possibility of multiple realities, rendered it unsuitable for this inquiry.

#### **4.6 Research Approach and Strategy**

The selection of an interpretivist ontology and constructionist epistemology informed the researcher's approach and strategy as it emphasizes both the subjective nature of reality and the importance of understanding how individuals construct meaning and interpret their experiences. The interpretivist ontology stresses the importance of understanding the subjective experiences and meanings that individuals attach to their social world, while a constructionist epistemology holds that knowledge is socially constructed and contextual.

My ontological and epistemological choices influenced the study's approach and strategy in several ways. Firstly, they suggest that in my roles as researcher and practitioner in the field of study, I would not assume a fully objective stance. I therefore acknowledge my own subjectivity and values, recognizing the influence of my background on the research process. Secondly, both stances emphasize the importance of qualitative research methods that allowed for an in-depth exploration of individuals' subjective experiences and meanings. Thirdly, the view of the construction of knowledge suggests that as researcher, I worked collaboratively with the participants to build knowledge and meaning. Finally, the findings captured the diverse perspectives of the participants and the complex meanings of meanings of their experiences, rather than holding to the primary focus of generalizability.

This understanding of the interpretivist ontology and constructionist epistemology provided a framework for conducting research and developing the appropriate research methods that emphasized the importance of understanding how individuals construct meaning and interpret their experiences.

Robson and McCartan (2016) describe research methods as the specific techniques applied in research study. These techniques are guided firstly by the research questions, secondly by the researcher's epistemological stance, and finally by the methodological model that best serves the inquiry. Specific techniques that form the framework of the research design to be defined include population, sampling, data collection and analysis.

Using these guideposts, the researcher reviewed the range of possible methodological approaches to select the most suitable approach to achieve the research aims. As a starting point, I considered the major traditions of qualitative research as defined by Creswell (1998) i.e., biography, grounded theory, ethnography, case study and phenomenology. Given the social (relational) dynamics and individually perceived (psychological) realities associated with remote work, a phenomenological approach was determined to be most desirable, as the goal of the study was to concretely describe the essence of the worker experience with remote work, perceptions of commitment and engagement.

#### **4.7 The Phenomenological Approach**

Phenomenology is a research approach that seeks to understand the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, in relation to a particular phenomenon or situation.

Phenomenological studies seek to understand the lived experiences of a group of people (Creswell and Poth 2016). Phenomenological analysis involves identifying key themes, patterns, and meanings in the data, and synthesizing them into a coherent description of the participants' experiences and perspectives (Giorgi 2009; Moustakas 1994). One of the key strengths of phenomenology is its emphasis on understanding the rich, complex, and subjective experiences of individuals, which can often be overlooked in other research approaches.

Phenomenology has been used in a wide range of fields. For example, van Manen (2014) used phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of teachers in relation to their work and identity. A review of the literature reveals many studies that have used the phenomenological approach to better understand and analyze worker experience of commitment and engagement (Martin and Roodt 2008; Lemon 2019). The methodology has been increasingly utilized in the context the emerging area of remote work (Dolezal 2009). By leveraging phenomenology, researchers have been able to uncover the rich and complex experiences of individuals, and to gain insights into the meanings and perspectives that underlie these experiences. In doing so, they have contributed to our understanding of the human experience in a way that would not have been possible with other research approaches.

As with all methodological approaches, phenomenology is not without its limitations. One potential vulnerability in this approach is the risk of bias or subjectivity in the interpretation of the data, as phenomenological analysis is a highly interpretive process. To address this, I aimed to be transparent about my assumptions and interpretations and followed the advice of (Ashworth 1996) who recommends that a researcher should bracket their own assumptions and biases, and instead focus on the descriptions provided by the participants themselves. Another risk of phenomenological analysis is located in the potential for over-generalizing the findings, beyond the specific participants and context studied (Drisko 2005; Hycner 1985). However, van Maanen (2014: 23) argues that phenomenological research can provide insights that are ‘meaningful, informative, and transferable’ and that they are ‘applicable to a wide range of human experience.’ In summary, there is some debate on whether insights gained from phenomenological research can be transferable to other contexts or populations. Accordingly, any attempt to generalize the findings will be done with caution.

#### **4.8 Mixed Methods**

The phenomenological approach is traditionally grounded in qualitative methods (Koster and Fernandez 2021). However, one way in which a researcher can both strengthen the approach and mitigate some of its inherent limitations is by incorporating a quantitative element to the research design. A mixed methods approach can help minimize the limitations of both quantitative and qualitative thereby allowing the researcher to understand the phenomenon of interest more deeply (Hanson et al. 2005). In this context, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2006) offer a set of models that describe how such mixed methods phenomenological studies can be structured. One of which as a mixed methods design starting with quantitative “*quant*” data collection, followed by qualitative “*QUAL*”. In this model, “quant – QUAL” capitalization is done to signify the dominant strand of research.

Mixed methods research is an approach to inquiry involving the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study. In the mixed method approach the data are collected concurrently or sequentially; given priority; and integrated through the process of research (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Creswell et al. 2003). Based on the Tashkkori and Teddlie (2006) model, the study was designed following the *quantitative-qualitative* format. The quantitative and qualitative strands of the study were conducted sequentially: the qualitative strand was given priority in the analysis, and the quantitative data informed the design of the qualitative stand with reflexive considerations.

The employment of multiple research methods can offer significant value to discovery. Critics of the singular method approach point to the limitations it places on advancement in



fields such as social science (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). As researcher, I agree with the concerns expressed in this regard. Limiting the research activity to a single method may impede scientific progress and limit the scope of inquiry. Given the difficulties in making generalizations from the individual perspectives of a phenomenological, qualitative study, the incorporation of quantitative data can assist in determining wider applicability and may help to reduce some of the subjectivity that is inherent in the phenomenological approach (Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie 2015).

Ultimately, when selecting the research approach, the research question(s) dictate the methods of inquiry. Researchers should utilize methods which 'best answer the research question' (Creswell and Poth 2016: 27). Based on the research questions underpinning this study, a mixed method, phenomenological approach was determined to be the best suited strategy for the research study. The integration of multiple approaches to the design, data collection and analysis within the single study was deemed to be the optimal approach to generate the data required to answer the research questions. Proponents of the mixed methods approach assert that it brings together the strength of both quantitative and qualitative methods, combining both rigor and specificity with rich, contextual understanding (Johnson et al. 2007).

#### **4.9 Research Design**

The research study explores the phenomenon of employees' experienced sense of organizational commitment, whilst engaged in remote work. The aim of the research was not to test a hypothesis as might be done through an experimental design, but rather to gain an understanding of employee's experience and perceptions of organizational commitment and work engagement in remote and hybrid work contexts. The related factor of perceived organizational support was also measured and analyzed. This allowed for a better understand of this experience and the potential relationship and role of organizational support within the constructs of commitment and engagement, and through remote work experience.

As described in the previous section, the researcher utilized the phenomenological approach to learn about the remote work experiences through the eyes of the HEI staff member. The phenomenological approach is particularly well suited to this purpose, as it examines an experience as viewed from the lens of the individual (i.e., a first-person perspective). This enables the researcher to gain an understanding of individual experiences and the meanings attributed to those experiences by the individual study participants (Neubauer et al. 2019).

The mixed methods study expands upon the limited existing literature on high and low-intensity remote workers' perceptions of organizational commitment and work engagement.

It achieves this through a descriptive-exploratory design that begins with a descriptive statistical analysis of survey-based data (quantitative) followed by a phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interview data. The two strands collectively inform the discussion and findings.

Descriptive-exploratory refers to a type of research methodology that is used to gather and analyze data about a particular phenomenon or population. It aims to describe and explore the characteristics and patterns of the data, without making any assumptions or testing any hypotheses. The goal of descriptive-exploratory research is to gain a better understanding of the data and to identify any patterns or trends that may exist within it.

The research design for this study follows this sequential pattern:

1. Pilot survey developed
2. Pilot Survey launched to test group
3. Feedback integrated into revised survey
4. Final survey distributed to sample set
5. Results of survey analyzed through descriptive statistics
6. Findings inform the selection of questions for semi-structured interviews
7. Interviews piloted to test group
8. Nested sample of interview participants drawn from survey participants
9. Interviews coded and analyzed for themes and connections
10. Discussion of findings

The conceptualization of the study presented demonstrates *integration* in an exploratory sequential design (Fetters et al. 2013). Through this process, quantitative data are first collected, and the findings of the qualitative analysis inform the subsequent qualitative data collection (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2010). The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed-methods study can dramatically enhance the value of that research (Bryman 2016; Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011; Fetters et al. 2013).

Further *integration* may be found at the methods level. Creswell et al (2011) suggest that integration occurs through the linking of methods of data collection. Fetters et al. (2013) agree and offer a set of four approaches by which integration may occur viz., connecting; building; merging; and embedding. The *connecting* approach occurs when one type of data links with the other through the sampling frame. In this study, the *connecting* approach is evidenced in the sampling frame, whereby interview participants are selected from the population of participants who responded to the survey. By giving careful attention to integration at the design and method levels, this study sought to enhance the quality of its

mix-methods approach, with goal of generating rigorous evidence that makes a worthwhile contribution to both knowledge and practice.

#### *Survey Timing Reference*

To obtain a fuller picture of understanding of the phenomenon experienced, survey questions solicited data from participants. The questions were based on their experience across two timeframes viz., 2020 (retrospectively) during the enforced remote work period, and 2022 timeframe, when remote work was optional and the environmental factors less threatening. The rationale for including both respective and current scenarios was to identify any changes and variances in the employee experiences, and to learn how support was perceived in the earlier time frame as compared to later, when organizations had presumably adjusted to the 'new norm'. The research holds divergent perspectives on the collection of retrospective survey data.

### **4.10 Data Collection**

#### 4.10.1 Sampling

##### *Sample Frame/Research Cohort and Unit of Analysis*

This study takes a single-stakeholder approach, that of the employee. Despite assertions in the literature regarding the need for increased multi-stakeholder research (Colakoglu et al. 2006), the researcher believes that the objectives of the study and attendant research questions are best answered through the lens of the employee. While multi-stakeholder research designs were considered, but rejected, it is valuable to note that the sample set of single stakeholders is representative of different roles and positions in the institution and thereby reflects, staff, managers, and senior leadership. Shuck et al. (2011) asserts that in such cases, the single-stakeholder perspective can be a valuable contribution to scholarship. For these reasons, the unit of observation is the employee.

The study looks at professional staff from HEIs in the New York City metropolitan area. Prospective participants were invited to complete an online survey through email network and social media group announcements. The survey began with featured a set of demographic questions. This was followed by a set of questions that measured organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. The questions were derived from the short forms of validated instruments. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview with contact information. Professional staff and faculty in administrative roles were selected as the unit of analysis, rather than faculty/research staff, as professional staff are less likely to have had extended periods of work from home. For example, faculty

may have had the option to work from home during periods of research.

#### 4.10.2 Selection Criteria

In addition to the criteria mentioned above, participants also needed to meet the following conditions in order to be included in the study:

- Exempt (salaried) employees of public and private HEIs in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area, employed full-time by their current employer.
- Limited to HEI employees whose work assignment was primarily in-person and located on their institution's physical campus, prior to 1<sup>st</sup> of April, 2020.

*Population* – The target population of the study was higher education professionals at tertiary institutions in the New York City metropolitan area. More specifically, participants were required to have a full-time, permanent professional staff or faculty administrative/management position. Employees with a part-time or hourly roles were excluded from the study due to significant job type variation and often a limited capacity for remote work. In addition, during the pandemic a significant percentage of the part-time, hourly employees were either within a category that was required to report to work in person (e.g., public safety officer) or were placed on furlough (e.g., cafeteria worker). For the purpose of this study, the geographic range of New York City Metropolitan area is defined as 100 miles radius from the center of Manhattan, including the states of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and a very small area of Pennsylvania that borders New Jersey. These geographic parameters were chosen for both methodological and conceptual reasons. Access to the population was most likely for the researcher among institutions in the New York/New Jersey environs. Additionally, by limiting the study to employees of institutions in that region, it provided greater consistency in the external environmental experience and located the study in one of the greatest sites of change and volatility when the pandemic struck.

#### 4.10.3 Sampling Approach

In this study, the researcher took a non-probability approach to sampling through purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative studies (Bryman 2016) as it allows the researcher to select participants on the basis of specific criteria associated with the research question (Teddlie and Yu 2007). Since purposeful sampling relies on the judgement of the researcher in selecting the units of measure, they must have sufficient knowledge of the population and the criteria of selections. Purposeful sampling is considered appropriate when it is more 'convenient and economical' and allows for the study of populations that may 'not be amenable to probability sampling' (Brink and Wood 1994:131) or in instances where it allows for a sample of participants who represent diverse

perspectives and experiences (Leedy and Ormrod 2001).

In addition to purposeful sampling, the snowball sampling approach was applied to expand the reach through the networks of recruited participants. Through snowball sampling, study participants recruit future participants from their base of contacts (Noy 2008). This added method of sampling helps to widen the sample pool by encouraging participants to forward a link to the survey to others who meet the necessary criteria of the study.

Though the purposeful/snowball sampling approach was best suited to this study, it is not without its limitations. The researcher recognizes that the proposed sample may not be completely representative of the entire population, and accordingly, the results may not be generalizable. However, the purpose of this inquiry is not to produce fully generalizable results, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of the remote work phenomenon among higher education professionals.

The researcher identified and recruited from among their network of contacts at HEIs across the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area and asked those participants to invite others in their network who met the criteria of the study. This approach was planned on the basis that the researcher has a significant number of individual contacts at institutions across the geographic area and enjoys close contact with senior leadership at four diverse institutions in the area who would be amenable to sharing it more broadly within their organizations. While this sampling approach is methodologically appropriate, the choice was also driven by concerns around time and access constraints.

#### *Quantitative Survey Sample Size*

The targeted sample size was 300 usable survey responses. However, the number of survey responses received was 58, with 51 usable samples. Attempts were made to expand the sample pool by extended outreach beyond the initial contact list of 85 HEI professionals. Invitations were issued via two HEI contact listservs. Recruitment was conducted on LinkedIn directly to connections in the geographic area who met the criteria as well as more broadly to HEI community members. Despite these extensive attempts, the number of responses fell below expected levels.

#### *Response Rate*

The response rate is difficult to accurately calculate, as it is not known what effect the social media posting and snowball distribution may have had. The estimated number of the sample pool, based on the direct contact made by email, social media and listserv, is 260. Added to this are an estimated 100 potential participants reached by social media and snowball distribution, yielding an overall sample pool of 360 and a response rate of 16%. In hindsight, a modest incentive to participate may have increased the response rate.

While the sample size fell significantly short of the researcher's target, the results still yielded important insights that were used to guide the development of the semi-structured interviews. It is also important to note that the goals of the quantitative research were not intended to determine a definitive causation/correlation analysis in order to prove a model or theory. Rather, its goal was to inform and guide the qualitative research process. This would allow for the quantitative strand to shed light upon and build a better understanding of the employee experience.

#### *Qualitative Interviews - Sampling Method*

The sample for the semi-structured interviews was drawn from the pool of participants completed the quantitated survey. In this way the qualitative sample is 'nested' in the quantitative. The researcher acknowledges the same limitations to this approach as expressed with the quantitative sample; however, she believes this approach best serves the needs of the study.

### **4.11 Quantitative Strand**

#### *Quantitative Data Gathering and Analysis*

##### 4.11.1 Informed Consent

The first part of the survey consisted of a consent form that reviewed all the required and necessary information for the potential participant to make an informed consent regarding their participation in the study. Basic information included the study title, researcher's name, academic (doctoral) institution affiliation, and professional HEI affiliation. The purpose of the study was presented, and the structure and options for participation were reviewed. Key details were shared on how data would be handled (including confidentiality and anonymity policies) and participants were advised that they could withdraw from participation at any time. All these points adhere to the recommendations for ethical research practices and in compliance with the requirements of the Ethics Board at the University of Bath and the IRB at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

##### 4.11.2 Survey Instrument Reliability and Validity

The survey instrument was tested with a sample of participants from the population pool, prior to the general distribution. This *pilot survey* was conducted to provide validation of the complete survey instrument (four-section compilation) and to also identify any logistical issues in relation to use of the Qualtrics platform. The pilot and validation process broadly followed a content-validation-by-expert-judgement format utilizing a framework guided by the Content Validity Index (CVI). This approach engaged five experts from the study population who were familiar with the constructs and the contextual factors, to provide, not only *face*

*validity*, but to consider the *content validity* factors of relevance, clarity, simplicity, and ambiguity (Yaghmaie 2003).

In its testing of the survey instrument, the pilot study yielded critically valuable feedback that, in turn, was utilized to adjust and correct the instrument. One very important outcome of the expert review was the questioning of the retrospective time-period references for the first series of responses to the survey. Initially, the retrospective time-period began prior to the outbreak of the pandemic and carried on into the pandemic shutdown period. The expert pointed to the logical flaw in the start and end date for such a period. They held that the respondent would have difficulty answering from the perspective of that timeframe, given the divergent setting and experience before and after the initial pandemic shutdown. Another important result was the suggestion of adding the referenced time period to each question, rather than only at the beginning of each set of questions. This was proposed as important for maintaining clarity on the time-period for reference each time the respondent answered. Finally, in the demographic section, the question of a participant's married or domestic partner status was challenged by one expert as a variable as devoid of significant relevance to the constructs. Additionally, the expert tester suggested that having such a question might be viewed as participants as intrusive, leading to fewer completions. Upon reviewing the relevant literature, it was found that there was insufficient justification for its inclusion and the question was removed. The incorporation of expert feedback served to maintain relevance and clarity in a simplified survey with reduced ambiguity.

### ***Instrumentation***

Selection of the appropriate instruments to assess participants' perceptions of the studied constructs was critical to the success of the study. Survey instruments are quite useful methods for collecting data and analyzing relationships between constructs and variable. However, they can also undermine the reliability of a study's findings if they have not been sufficiently validated (Mills and Gay 2019). In this context, those standardized questionnaires that have been statistically validated can offer many benefits to advancing the research goals of the study. More specifically, validated surveys are particularly useful in gathering data from larger samples of participants in an efficient manner, and, when administered electronically, can reach a wider range of the population. Carefully designed surveys can also be tailored to the specific research questions and allow for statistical analysis of multiple variables and their relationships to each other, and to the theoretical constructs under study. Survey instrumentation is particularly helpful in the study of latent constructs because it allows researchers to collect data on variables that are not directly observable, such as attitudes, beliefs, values, and personality traits.

### ***Latent Constructs***

Latent constructs refer to unobservable variables or concepts that underlie a set of observable behaviors or responses. Latent constructs are not directly measurable, but they are inferred, based on the observable behaviors or responses that they generate.

Organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support are all considered latent constructs (Valentine et al. 2002; Naz et al. 2020).

Organizational commitment is considered a latent construct in research because it refers to an employee's emotional attachment and loyalty to their organization, which is not directly observable. Rather, it is inferred from a range of observable behaviors such as productivity, and turnover rates. Likewise, work engagement and POS are not directly observable but are gathered through observation or reporting of employee behaviors, attitudes, and performance. These observable behaviors may be assessed through different methods or measurement tools, but researchers most often use questionnaires or survey instruments, together with statistical methods of analysis of that data, to extrapolate and identify. Whilst the data collection and analysis of such latent constructs might be complex, they are an important area of research that help scholars to gain critical insights into the factors that influence the construct outcomes, as well as to develop more accurate models of how they function in the world of work.

### ***Survey Instruments***

In this study, the researcher uses four different survey questionnaires, combined into one sequential instrument (essentially presented to the participant as one survey with four sections). The first section (survey) was a simple demographic questionnaire, verifying qualifying participant criteria and collecting those data points deemed useful and necessary for later analysis, typology and categorization. The second section (survey) consisted of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire- Affective (Meyer and Allen 1997). The third section (survey) utilized the UWES-3, an ultra-short measure for work engagement (Schaufeli et al. 2017), and the fourth section (survey) was the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (Eisenberger 1984). The instruments selected are all open sourced and well validated in the literature. The four sections were combined into one survey, using Qualtrics (for ease of data analysis) with a link sent electronically to invited participants. At



the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. (See Appendix A for Survey)

### Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) – Meyers and Allen (1997)

The Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) is a popular survey tool used for measuring organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen 1991,1997). The OCQ assesses the three dimensions of commitment: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. The OCQ is a reliable and valid measure of organizational commitment, having been tested in numerous studies and shown to have good psychometric properties (e.g., Cohen 2007; Mathieu and Zajac 1990). It has been deployed in a wide range of research contexts, including studies of, inter alia, employee turnover, job satisfaction, and work-life balance (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001). As such, it is a well-established tool for measuring organizational commitment and provides accurate and useful data for a research study.

As widely accepted as the OCQ is, the instrument is not without its conceptual criticisms. One of these is the charge of an excessive emphasis on affective commitment. Even from the perspective of one of its creators, whilst affective commitment is an important aspect of commitment, it may not be the most relevant or useful measure in all organizational contexts (Meyer and Herscovitch 2001). They argue that normative commitment, which reflects a sense of obligation or duty to remain with the organization, may be a more relevant measure in certain situations.

Despite these concerns, affective commitment is considered to be the most stable and enduring component of commitment, meaning that it is less likely to be influenced by external factors or changes in the work environment. Meyer and Allen (1991) note that affective commitment is the most enduring and pervasive form of commitment, and that it is less susceptible to situational variation than the other forms of commitment. Porter and Smith (1970) and Mowday et al. (1982) also suggest that affective commitment is the most stable component of commitment, and that it is less influenced by external factors such as job satisfaction or changes in the work environment. Rhoades and Eisenberger's (2002) work supports this view with their finding that affective commitment may be a more relevant measure of commitment than normative or continuance commitment, particularly in work contexts where employees have a high degree of autonomy and are less likely to be influenced by external factors.

This study takes a retrospective and current view of employee commitment and places this experience in the settings of remote, hybrid and in-person work. In this context, the

suggestion that affective commitment may be a more reliable measure over time, and one less influenced by change in work environment, guided the choice to limit the study instrument to only the affective section of the OCQ.

### Foci of Commitment

The selection of the commitment foci to be applied to the affective portion of the OCQ was determined through a three-step process. First, a thorough review of the literature was conducted for previously identified commitment targets in the higher education context. As explained in the Literature Review and Research Context chapters, a significant gap in the literature was found as it relates to multiple foci of commitment in the higher education and remote work contexts. Therefore, this approach offered little guidance. Much of the research on commitment in higher education takes the perspective of students and their commitment to the degree and to study (Cownie 2020). However, of the extant published research that investigates commitment in the higher education context, the commitment foci most often identified were organizational commitment and professional (field or discipline) commitment (Weiherl and Frost 2016; Sheikh and Aghaz 2019).

As a second step in the process, the researcher spoke with colleagues in the higher education setting to ask about commitment targets that came to mind and utilized her 20+ years of experience in the industry as reference to select students as an important commitment target. There is an established basis in the literature for using practitioner expertise and professional judgement in research, particularly in areas of evidenced based research and among research-practitioners (McGrath et al. 2022). Additionally, the application of “face validity” in the adoption of instruments using practitioner expertise is accepted in research (Lyon et al. 2020). ‘Situated expertise’, the concept defined by proficiency and judgement that has been developed by professionals over years of practice, also provides defense to this approach (Johri 2015).

Together, these three identified foci of commitment: organization, professional, and student, were reviewed through the lens of multiple foci of commitment literature from other contexts, such as Knowledge Intensive Organizational (KIOs), in which foci of commitment included the organization, profession, team and client (Yalabik et al. 2016). Recent trends in higher education reconceiving the focus of commitment to students have led some to view the student as ‘customer’, providing an even stronger parallel to the KIO framework (Calma et al. 2020). To further align the foci of commitment for the higher education context, and to keep a manageable number of foci for the study, the professional and team foci were combined into the ‘department’. The rationale for this is twofold: In the organizational structure of universities, many departments are aligned along professions or disciplines, and designating

the 'department' as a one of the commitment foci helped establish a target that might be much more proximal than the 'organization' or the 'students' (Becker and Kernan 2003).

#### Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) – Schaufeli

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) is widely used to measure work engagement. Work engagement is defined as 'a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption' (Schaufeli et al. 2002: 74). The UWES has been found to have good psychometric properties, including high levels of reliability and validity (Schaufeli et al. 2006). The scale has been used in numerous studies across a range of industries and countries, an indication of its cross-cultural applicability (Shimazu et al. 2010). This suggests that the UWES is a robust and reliable measure of work engagement that can be applied in different organizational and cultural contexts.

Another reason why the UWES is a good instrument for this research study is that it measures work engagement as a multidimensional construct. The UWES consists of three subscales that measure different aspects of work engagement: vigor (having high levels of energy and mental resilience); dedication (feeling a strong sense of significance and enthusiasm for one's work); and absorption (being fully immersed and focused on one's work) (Schaufeli et al. 2002). This multidimensional approach allowed the study to more closely examine different facets of work engagement and the factors that contribute to work engagement.

Beyond the UWES, there are several validated instruments that measure work engagement. These include the Job Engagement Scale (JES; Christian et al. 2011), the Employee Engagement Scale (EES; Rich et al. 2010), and the Work Engagement Inventory (WEI Schaufeli et al. 2002). However, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) is considered a superior instrument for several reasons. The UWES has been extensively validated and tested across different countries, cultures, and occupations, demonstrating its cross-cultural applicability and psychometric properties (Schaufeli et al. 2002; Shimazu et al. 2015). Furthermore, the UWES has been shown to have strong predictive validity, meaning that it can accurately predict outcomes (Christian et al. 2011).

#### Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) - Eisenberger

The survey of perceived organizational support (SPOS) measures the extent to which employees perceive that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. POS has been linked to a range of outcomes, including organizational commitment and work engagement, so it can offer valuable data to better understand the relationship between these constructs (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Kurtessis et al. 2017).

Similar to the other instruments selected for this study, the SPOS has been validated and tested in a variety of settings, including education and business sectors. This points to its cross-cultural applicability and psychometric properties (Eisenberger et al. 1986; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). Additionally, the SPOS is a relatively short and easy-to-administer survey, which made it a particularly convenient tool for compilation with the other instruments.

### Demographic Survey Section

The quantitative strand of the study used three established and validated self-report scales to measure the variables of interest. In addition to the data collected with instruments to measure organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support, demographic information was collected to determine if the sample set is representative of the overall study population (Lee and Schuele 2010) and to use as variables in the data analysis process (Creswell 2014). The collection of demographic information was limited to those identified in the literature as relevant and influential. This was with the aim of minimizing the amount of personally identifiable information collected and associated privacy risk, and to limit the survey length and respondents' possible discomfort with sharing personal details.

Selected demographic information was collected from participants in this study, based upon the findings of previous studies and the individual characteristics identified in the literature as being influential in the employee experience and relevant to understanding and analyzing the relationship between the study constructs. Among the most cited are gender, age, family structure, length of service, and position (Mathieu and Zajac 1990). In addition to the demographic variables associated with the research constructs, the influential characteristics associated with the study population (HE professionals), and with the remote work context, were also reviewed and included.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) employ a diverse workforce with various characteristics that should be considered in research. Some of the worker characteristics of higher education employees that may be relevant for research include job types, employment status, demographics, and educational background (Bensimon et al. 2000; Leslie 2013; Powell and Greenhaus 2010; Trower 2010). Demographics, such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity/diversity dimensions are important characteristics of higher education employees that may influence their experiences, perceptions, and outcomes in the workplace.

Research on demographic characteristics of remote workers can explore issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in remote work, as well as workforce dynamics, leadership,

and organizational culture (Byrd 2022, Howard-Greenville 2020). The impact of family dynamics, particularly younger children, has been shown to impact organizational commitment and work engagement in remote work settings, particularly in the shift to remote work during the pandemic, when schools and care facilities were also closed (Chanana 2021).

Reviewing the overlapping matrix of demographic characteristics and variables associated with organizational commitment, work engagement, POS, remote work, and HEI work settings, a set of shared and unique factors was compiled. From this set a simplified subset was drawn that represented overlapping and critical individual factors included in data collection. The selection process was guided by scientific and methodological needs (rationale and application) but balanced by pragmatic considerations such as survey length and participation loss. The demographic questions used in the survey, along with the respective rationale and application, are outlined in the table below.

*Table 2. Participant Demographics*

Demographic Questions	Rationale and Application
HEI Employer Type <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public</li> <li>- Private, Non-profit</li> <li>- Private, For-profit</li> </ul>	Important contextual and environmental variable, To confirm the sample is representative of the population, To use for statistical analysis by category, To draw from as guidance in the semi-structured interviews.
HEI Role <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Administrator</li> <li>- Professional Staff</li> <li>- Faculty</li> </ul>	Job roles and level are important contextual variable and influence perspective, To confirm the sample is representative of the population; To use for statistical analysis by category, To draw from as guidance in the semi-structured interviews.
Job Status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full-time</li> <li>- Part-time</li> </ul>	To verify inclusion criteria.
HEI Location <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New York</li> <li>- New Jersey</li> <li>- Connecticut</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>	To verify inclusion criteria, To confirm representative sample, To include for statistical analysis by category.
Length of Service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 0 - 2 years</li> <li>- 2 – 5 years</li> <li>- 6 – 10 years</li> <li>- 11 – 20 years</li> <li>- 21+ years</li> </ul>	Variable associated with commitment, engagement, and general work context, To confirm representative sample, To include for statistical analysis, To draw from as guidance for the interviews.
Age range <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Under 30</li> <li>- Between 31 - 40</li> <li>- Between 41 – 50</li> </ul>	Variable associated with commitment, engagement, POS, remote work and higher education context, To confirm representative sample, To include for statistical analysis,

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Between 51 – 60</li> <li>- 61+</li> </ul>	To draw from as guidance for the interviews.
Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Female</li> <li>- Male</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>	Variable associated with commitment, engagement, POS, remote work and higher education context, To confirm representative sample, To include for statistical analysis, To draw from as guidance for the interviews.
Young children at home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Age 5 and under</li> <li>- Age 6 – 12</li> <li>- No</li> </ul>	Variable associated with commitment, engagement and remote work, To confirm representative sample, To include for statistical analysis, To draw from as guidance for the interviews.

### ***Overview of data cleaning***

In total, 58 number of surveys were received. The data set was downloaded from Qualtrics onto an Excel spreadsheet for review and manipulation. The Likert scale descriptive responses were converted to numerical equivalents for quantitative analysis. With the numerical data represented in the spreadsheet, reformatting was applied to make the presentation and review of the data clearer and easier. Next followed a review of the submissions for accuracy and completeness.

Out of the set of 58 responses, seven surveys were determined to be unusable and were removed during the data cleaning process. Five of the respondents did not complete the survey, and two of the respondents entered unreliable data.

## **4.12 QUALITATIVE STRAND**

### **Semi-structured interviews**

#### *Qualitative Data Gathering and Analysis*

The data gathered from qualitative interviews can offer a richer, deeper understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives on a topic or phenomenon (Creswell 2007). In order to gain a deeper understanding of both the survey results and the constructed realities of the employees' remote work experiences, the researcher chose to include a semi-structured interview protocol in the study. Semi-structured interviews are described as 'a data collection method that pairs pre-determined survey questions with interviewer-initiated open-ended, ad hoc follow-up probes.' (Ahlin 2019: 2) This interview format creates the space for interviewees to express their thoughts on the topic, while maintaining a set of survey questions that are asked of all respondents. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suited to research that demonstrates a need to understand the perspective of the

respondent (Ahlin 2019) because they allow for the conversation to flow and evolve beyond the questions, lead to rich and descriptive data and unique insights (Ravitch and Carl 2015).

The interview process originally targeted between 10 – 12 participants drawn from the survey participant group. Taking account of the lower-than-expected level of participation in the quantitative strand, the target for semi-structured interviews was increased to n=19. These interviews enabled the researcher to further investigate findings from the survey data and subsequent analysis. In addition, the interviews provided an opportunity to explore topics and themes that emerged through the employee's participation and reflection on his/her experience, or issues and considerations that may not have been captured through the survey data.

### ***Interview Administration***

A list was compiled of the survey respondents who indicated that they would be willing to participated in a follow up interview. Email invitations were sent to those who provided email, and, for those who gave phone numbers for contact, a phone call made to confirm interest, pursuant to which a follow up email invitation was issued. Out of 23 participants contacted, 18 were confirmed for interview participation.

After confirmation, a pre-interview sheet with background and contact information, sample questions for review, and reminder of interview appointment date, time and Zoom link was sent to all participants. (See Appendix B for Pre-Interview Sheet.) The Zoom medium allowed for flexibility in respect of both interviewer and interviewee. In addition, the Zoom platform facilitated video recording and supported audio-to-text transcription.

### **Pilot Interview**

The questions for the semi-structured interview were developed with guidance from results of the qualitative analysis.

### **Interview Questions:**

1. What was your work arrangement during the pandemic lock-down? Was that arrangement enforced or optional?
2. While working during the pandemic lock-down, what kinds of support did you receive from:
  - a. Your institution?
  - b. Your supervisor?
  - c. Others?

3. What other kinds of support would you like to have received?
4. What was most important to you about your work during the period of the of the pandemic lock-down?
5. Who/Which groups were relying on you to carrying out your work role at that time?
6. How did you perceive your connection to these people/groups?
7. What is your work arrangement presently? Remote/Hybrid/In-person, and how does this differ from the pandemic lock-down period?
8. How is the support you receive different now from the earlier lock-down period?
9. Who is relying on your work in the present period?
10. What is your perception of your connection to these people/groups now?

Once these were developed, two independent representatives from the population (who also had participated as experts in the quantitative strand of research) were asked to participate in the interview. The test interviews functioned well, and the structured questions and open discussion were found to yield appropriately targeted and useful data.

### ***Interview Procedure***

Informed Consent – At the start of each interview, each participant was reminded of the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation and the right to withdraw at any time, and the risks and benefits of participation along with procedures implemented to protect confidentiality. These aligned with ethics requirements and informed consent guidance in the literature (Groenewald 2004).

### Memo-ing and Journaling

During the interview, the researcher took notes of points and statements the interviewee raised that were concepts or variables identified in the literature, through quantitative data collection, or aligned with points raised in the other interviews. This helped to guide the follow-up questions throughout the interview as well as serving to identify areas where further detail and description were required. Additionally, this allowed the researcher the opportunity to keep notes for later reflection on the process.

### Sample Size

The targeted sample size was 20 participants, or until saturation. Moustakas (1994) confirms that this is an appropriate sample size for a phenomenological study.



### Saturation

In qualitative data collection, it is often difficult to estimate or forecast what sample size is required to achieve the goals of the research. One valuable concept that provides guidance in this regard is saturation. The saturation point is where no new insights are achieved from new samples. Scholars assert that saturation occurs when no further new themes emerge from the data and there is sufficient information to replicate the study (O'Reilly and Parker 2012, Walker 2012). Patton (2007) asserts that sampling should stop when no new information is found to be emerging from the data.

The saturation point in this study was found to be n=15. However, data collection continued with the two interviews that had been prescheduled bringing n=17. After preliminary analysis and a review of the distribution of the sample, it was determined that in the interest of representation, at least one more sample needed to be collected to include the perspective of HR in the sample set. Two more interviews were secured, bringing the n=19.

### **Data Storage**

Interviews were conducted and recorded over the Zoom platform. Upon completion of recording processing and rough transcription, email links to the cloud files were sent by the Zoom system to the researcher's email. Files were downloaded and coded with designated interviewee numbers to maintain anonymity. Additionally, files were stored in password-protected files for security purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, a hybrid of inductive-deductive coding and thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) was deployed, using a hermeneutic or interpretive approach (Neubauer et al. 2019). As a member of the population, the researcher had significant experience and understanding of the multi-faceted contexts of the study and, accordingly, was in a unique position to interpret the data provided by the interviewees.

For the qualitative interview data, the researcher utilized NVivo to assist in coding and analyzing the interviews. The coded results facilitated the comparison of quantitative and qualitative data and assisted in building the narrative in the analysis. Factors related to commitment, engagement and support were examined through the data. Finally, results were analyzed through the lens of the theoretical frameworks selected.

The sequential steps in the analysis of the qualitative data were as follow:

1. Memo-ing and journaling.
2. Transcription and review of each interview.

3. Extraction of significant statements from the interview.
4. Coding of transcripts to identify thematic clusters.
5. Descriptions of thematic clusters developed.
6. Explanation of descriptions through theoretical lens and reference to literature and findings of the quantitative strand.
7. Inferences on roles and relationships of job attitude constructs and remote work drawn from the interviews.

#### **4.13 Role of the Researcher**

The researcher relied on a hermeneutic, or interpretive, role in data collection and analysis. In an interpretive role the researcher reflects on their own experience and on the essential themes of the participant experience throughout the data collection process. This allowed the researcher to develop a robust and nuanced analysis and consider how the parts of the data contribute to whole (phenomena) analysis. However, in this process, the researcher must remain 'aware of the influence of the individual's background and account for the influences they exert on the individual's experience of being.' (Neubauer et al. 2019: 94). Despite these concerns, Giorgi (2017: 89) asserts 'unless one shares the viewpoint of the research community under study it is not at all clear that the work of that community is properly understood.'

The personal experience of the researcher guided their initial observations of the phenomenon presented for study and drove the desire to explore deeper and broader understanding. As higher education practitioner, with over 20 years in the field, the researcher has a strong understanding of the population and the context and was cognizant of the boundaries of utilization of her practitioner lens. The researcher was also mindful throughout of her role and remained diligent in avoiding personal and researcher biases in the data collection and analysis.

#### **4.14 Subjectivity**

##### Epoche/Bracketing

Scholars assert that epoche or bracketing is essential in phenomenological studies as it enables the researcher to temporarily set aside preconceptions and biases in order to explore the phenomenon in its purest form. Giorgi (1994: 206) states that the phenomenological method requires that the researcher 'bracket or disengage from all past theories or knowledge of the phenomenon.' The purpose of epoche is to enable the researcher to describe the phenomenon in an accurate way that reflects the subjective experience of those who have lived it (Crotty 2003). The assertion that researchers must

'bracket' their preconceived ideas, habits of thoughts, prejudices, and theoretical assumptions, draws from Husserl's description of the necessity of reduction and a "systematically abstractive attitude" (*abstractive Erfahrungseinstellung*) (Husserl 1970, 1997). Finlay (2008) concurs that reduction allows objects to emerge and answers to reveal themselves.

However, as much as epoche may be used as a means of addressing research bias, researchers must reflect on and acknowledge their own subjectivity in order to maintain awareness throughout the process (Sandberg 2005). Practitioner-researchers, such as this researcher, have valuable knowledge and experience which may be drawn upon through the research process, but this close connection to the experience and to the population under study arguably calls for extra vigilance, awareness and acknowledgement of potential subjectivity and bias.

#### **4.15 Research Ethics**

Ethics need to be of primary concern to any researcher, especially as ethical breaches may arise in quite unexpected ways. Some forms are high risk, particularly those that are experimental or involve high risk populations (children, prisoners, etc.). However, even researchers conducting studies deemed low risk must remain vigilant in the ethics arena. As Patton (2007) points out, there are often greater ethical concerns associated with qualitative research.

Israel and Hay (2006) highlight several ethical considerations that qualitative researchers should ask themselves regarding the benefits of the research, limitations of harm, and risk (particularly for vulnerable populations, informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy). These issues are also well outlined in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) applications and documents of HEIs in the U.S. The researcher served as a non-scientist for many years on the IRB of Fairleigh Dickinson University and is therefore well acquainted with the requirements of her home institution.

The researcher submitted the completed research proposal for approval to University of Bath Ethics Board, as required for candidature status. In addition, the proposal was reviewed with Fairleigh Dickinson University's IRB office (the researcher's employer and institutional participant) and the study was deemed exempt from full IRB review. Study participants were provided with all of the necessary and appropriate disclosure forms and their approval was obtained prior to their participation in the study. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the entire process and anonymity was ensured through disaggregation of the survey data.

#### **4.16 Limitations of Research**

No research endeavor is without its limitations, and the researcher acknowledges this. It is beyond the scope of this study to control for personality-related characteristics in the participants or for the extent to which external factors of stress (work-family life, public health issues, etc.) may have influenced the worker's perspective on work and the organization. Additionally, it is acknowledged that the study is limited in scope as it very specific in terms of sector, geography, time and context i.e., it targets the HEI sector within the New York City metropolitan area during the mid/post-pandemic timeframe, and potentially in the context of continued government-mandated closures.

The study may have limited replicability or generalizability to HEI sectors in other geographical contexts, or beyond certain segments of the service sector in the targeted geographical context. Additionally, methodological decisions, such as sampling, may also impact the generalizability of the findings. Limitations of generalizability are not uncommon in research within specific geographical or cultural contexts (Linton 2020).

#### **4.17 Presentation of Findings**

Presentation of the research findings are presented in presented in Chapter 5 – Quantitative Results and Chapter 6 – Qualitative Results.

## **Chapter 5 – Quantitative Findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

As part of the mixed-methods research design, the data collection was conducted in two parts. The quantitative survey was administered first, followed by the qualitative interviews. The goal of the survey and analysis was to gather preliminary data on HEI employee commitment to multiple foci, work engagement, and perceived organizational support from both a retrospective and current view. This process allowed the researcher to tap a broader range of viewpoints to consider, than would have been possible by interview alone and gave her additional insights into the perspectives of the sample set, through their survey responses. Additionally, the survey data served an important role in informing how to qualitative interviews were designed.

It is important to recognize that the study is phenomenological in nature and the qualitative strand is the key source of data collection for analysis. None-the-less, the quantitative data collection contributed in many ways to the development of the qualitative data collection and subsequent findings and discussion. The implementation of the survey and collection of responses enabled the researcher to draw together a sample subset for the interviews to follow and introduced the topics of focus to the prospective participants. Engaging the participants in the survey first also allowed them to become familiar with the research and researcher and may have helped to make them more comfortable in volunteering for the interviews.

Beyond the introduction and pathway developed by the survey implementation, the quantitative data collected illuminated areas to investigate and topics to discuss during the qualitative interviews. This mixed methods approach enables a deeper understanding of the findings (Creswell and Creswell 2017) and allows the research to address both breadth and depth (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). A more detailed description of how the survey findings informed the design of the qualitative interviews will be provided at the summary of the chapter.

### **5.2 Statistical Analysis**

The statistical analysis started with verification of the assumption of normality and an investigation of whether the scales presented reliable constructs. Statistical normality was determined by exploration of the skewness and kurtosis. Skewness is a measure of the asymmetry of a data set, while kurtosis is a measure of the peakedness of a data set. Following Kim (2013), z-values were calculated by dividing the absolute values of the skewness and excess kurtosis of each variable by the standard error. The strict value of  $z <$

1.96 was considered to be no violation of normality, based on which parametric testing was deemed appropriate. Reliability of the scales in terms of internal consistency was determined by Cronbach's alpha, which is a measure of how related the items are as a group. Values closer to 1 represent more reliable scales. As a rule of thumb,  $\alpha > .70$  is considered to represent acceptable for surveys, and  $\alpha > .80$  represent good internal consistency (Taber 2018). If sufficiently reliable, it was considered appropriate to continue the analyses on the scale level instead of on the item level.

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to examine effects of work arrangement (Remote, Hybrid, or In Office), gender and interaction effects of work arrangement by gender on commitment, support, and engagement. This way, not only effects of both independent variables (work arrangement and gender) could be examined, but it would also reveal when the work arrangement might have a different effect on any of the dependent variables for men and women (Field 2018). This analysis was first carried out for the retrospective period of June 2020-June 2021 (Time 1) and then for the present (Time 2). Any significant effects were followed up by post-hoc testing, using a Bonferroni correction in order to counteract the multiple comparisons problem, which otherwise would result in increased chances of obtaining false-positive results (type I errors) (Field, 2018).

Simple associations between commitment, support and engagement were subsequently analyzed using Pearson correlations, where values closer to 1 indicate stronger, positive associations between variables; values around zero suggest that variables are not related; and values closer to -1 indicate stronger, negative associations (Field 2018).

Subsequently, two different models were tested for Time 1 and Time 2. First, linear regression analysis was used to verify to what extent commitment and support were able to predict Time 1 and Time 2 engagement. It was also tested whether the effect of commitment was different for different levels of support. This is referred to as moderation and can be tested by creating an interaction term, which is included after controlling for any main effects (Field 2018).

Second, a model with commitment as the dependent variable was tested, verifying whether the relationship between perceived support and commitment would be mediated by engagement. In other words, it was tested whether perceived support is associated with more engagement and this in turn would explain (partly) the relationship with commitment. This mediational model was tested using the PROCESS macro (model 4) of Hayes (2013). After this, the moderation models were repeated for organizational commitment specifically. This enables comparison of the models in order to investigate whether perceived support would be more strongly related to organizational commitment than overall commitment and whether this could be explained by engagement.

Finally, time comparisons were made. Perceived support, engagement, and commitment at Time 2 were compared to Time 1 using paired sample t-tests (Field 2018). A paired sample t-test compares two measurements that are completed by the same individuals (Field 2018). Whereas the stability of a measure over time, showing whether people who initially had higher scores, will also have higher scores at the second measurement, was already revealed by the Pearson correlations, the paired sample t-test shows whether the means tended to go up or down (or stay the same in case of insignificance) (Field 2018). As a final time-effect it was also examined if the remembered support, commitment, and engagement could explain current engagement. This was done using linear regression analysis (Field 2018).

### **5.3 Results**

#### Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the quantitative variables. There was no finding of severe skewness nor kurtosis, with all z-values < 1.96. All scales showed good to excellent internal consistencies, as indicated by high values for the Cronbach's alpha. With respect to the introductory questions, participants gave a range of answers to the question whether or not they had worked remotely, indicating that even within the period they were reflecting on, it sometimes had included both periods of full-time remote working as well as full-time working in the office. Yet, it became clear that few people had worked at the office full-time in the period June 2020-June 2021 (i.e., 3.9%), whereas a small majority (56.9%) of the participants had worked remotely full-time. For one person it was unclear. In contrast, only 9.8% of the participants reported they currently worked full-time on a remote basis. The majority of the participants (72.5%) reported a hybrid combination of working remotely and working in the office, and only 17.6% worked at the office full-time.

**Table 3***Descriptive Statistics for the Quantitative Variables*

Variable	Cronbach's	<i>min</i>	<i>max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Time 1							
Commitment							
Organization	.89	1.88	7.00	4.67	1.59	-0.17	-1.35
Department	.87	2.00	7.00	5.09	1.43	-0.54	-0.84
Students	.86	2.25	7.00	5.08	1.29	-0.36	-1.06
Support	.94	1.25	7.00	4.06	1.77	0.08	-1.20
Engagement	.82	1.00	7.00	4.94	1.33	-0.68	0.51
Time 2							
Commitment							
Organization	.91	1.25	7.00	4.43	1.65	-0.15	-1.02
Department	.93	1.50	7.00	5.03	1.57	-0.43	-0.76
Students	.93	1.75	7.00	5.08	1.44	-0.36	-0.98
Support	.94	1.00	7.00	3.88	1.69	0.26	-1.01
Engagement	.90	1.00	7.00	5.09	1.46	-0.91	0.72

## Remote Working and Commitment, Support and Engagement

Table 4 represents the mean scores on commitment, perceived support, and engagement by work arrangement. Whilst the averages of the participants working in the office full-time seemed to be lower than those who worked fully remotely or in a hybrid arrangement, it is not possible to draw any conclusions based on these data, as there were only two participants who reported full-time work in the office. The remote and hybrid groups seemed rather similar in their reports, and this was confirmed by a Multivariate Analysis of Variance showing no effect for group,  $F(5, 40) = 1.21$ ,  $p = .323$ . There also were no gender effects, with  $F(5,40) = 1.59$ ,  $p = .185$  for the main effect of gender and  $F(5, 40) = 0.93$ ,  $p = .469$  for the Gender x Group interaction. These results suggest that the retrospective reports of commitment, support and engagement were not affected by the work arrangement, nor by gender in any way, and these findings will be further explored in the qualitative research.



**Table 4.**

*Average Scores on Commitment, Support and Engagement Separated by Remote, Hybrid, and Office Workers for June 2020-June 2021 (Time 1)*

Variable	Way of Working	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Commitment to organization	Remote	4.89	1.33	29
	Hybrid	4.49	1.94	19
	Office	2.94	0.09	2
	Total	4.66	1.60	50
Commitment to department	Remote	5.29	1.19	29
	Hybrid	4.88	1.74	19
	Office	3.88	1.59	2
	Total	5.08	1.44	50
Commitment to students	Remote	5.14	1.21	29
	Hybrid	5.14	1.43	19
	Office	3.63	1.06	2
	Total	5.08	1.30	50
Support	Remote	4.35	1.80	29
	Hybrid	3.66	1.79	19
	Office	3.38	0.53	2
	Total	4.05	1.78	50
Engagement	Remote	4.99	1.38	29
	Hybrid	4.88	1.33	19
	Office	4.33	0.94	2
	Total	4.92	1.33	50

Then for the current time, the averages are shown in Table 5. A significant effect was found based work arrangement,  $F(10, 88) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .035$ ,  $\eta^2 = .19$ . Follow-up testing revealed that the effects on organization commitment and department commitment were significant,  $F(2, 48) = 4.75$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta^2 = .17$  and  $F(2, 48) = 4.17$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $\eta^2 = .15$  respectively. The post hoc Bonferroni corrected pairwise comparisons revealed that the differences between the Hybrid group and the Office only group were significant, with  $p = .040$  and  $p = .019$  respectively. This requires some careful interpretation given the small group sizes of the office workers and especially full-time remote workers. Yet, the finding is in clear contrast with the idea that workers need to be at the office full-time in order to feel optimal commitment as the hybrid group reported the highest levels of commitment on these scales. These findings point to a rich area for investigation in the qualitative interviews.

For further understanding about the lack of effects of work arrangement on engagement, the group mean scores were also compared on the item level, but this also revealed no significant results,  $F(6, 90) = 0.60$ ,  $p = .732$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$  and  $F(6, 90) = 0.99$ ,  $p = .441$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$  for Time 1 and Time 2 respectively.

**Table 5.**

*Average Scores on Commitment, Support and Engagement Separated by Remote, Hybrid and Office Workers for the Present (Time 2)*

Variable	Way of Working	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Commitment to organization	Remote	3.60	1.57	5
	Hybrid	5.06	1.38	37
	Office	3.65	1.81	9
	Total	4.67	1.59	51
Commitment to department	Remote	4.83	0.78	5
	Hybrid	5.40	1.21	37
	Office	3.97	2.01	9
	Total	5.09	1.43	51
Commitment to students	Remote	4.20	1.20	5
	Hybrid	5.34	1.15	37
	Office	4.50	1.59	9
	Total	5.08	1.29	51
Support	Remote	4.65	1.28	5
	Hybrid	4.18	1.74	37
	Office	3.21	2.00	9
	Total	4.06	1.77	51
Engagement	Remote	4.53	2.68	5
	Hybrid	5.10	1.09	37
	Office	4.52	1.26	9
	Total	4.94	1.33	51

#### Associations Between Commitment, Support and Engagement

Table 6 shows the correlations between the variables. It can be seen that the commitment towards the organization, department and students are strongly intercorrelated in the retrospective reports, and moderately correlated in the reports about the present. This means that people tend to perceive commitment towards the three domains in somewhat similar ways in the present, and in their memories, the forms of commitment are even further merged. Further, commitment and engagement were found to be correlated, both for concurrent reports as well as across time. This means that participants who reported more

commitment also tended to report more engagement and vice versa. Whereas support was also found to be positively associated with commitment and engagement, support reported for June 2020-June 2021 did not significantly correlate with current commitment to the department, commitment to the students or engagement (see Table 6). Present support was also not significantly associated with prior student commitment. In other words: several over-time correlations between support and commitment and engagement were insignificant, revealing unlikely or only weak long-term associations. As can be seen from Table 6, however, perceived support was moderately stable over time in the sense that people who tended to perceive more support at Time 1 tended to also perceive more support at Time 2. With respect to the different foci of commitment, organizational commitment showed the strongest associations with support and engagement at Time 1. These correlations were also strong for the present, however, the commitment to the department showed an even stronger correlation with engagement during this period. The correlations drawn from the survey data on the associations between commitment, perceived organizational support and work engagement, and variations in commitment to the different foci between time periods will be important areas for examination in the qualitative data collection. In addition, associations that demonstrated little or no statistical correlation in the survey data will likewise be investigated further in the qualitative data to gain clarification or explanation.

**Table 6.**

*Correlations Between Commitment, Support, and Engagement*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>June 2020-June 2021</b>									
1 Commitment to organization									
2 Commitment to department	.75**								
3 Commitment to students	.75**	.72**							
4 Support	.68**	.48**	.37**						
5 Engagement	.59**	.49**	.48**	.47**					
<b>Present</b>									
6 Commitment to organization	.69**	.44**	.48**	.42**	.43**				
7 Commitment to department	.45**	.53**	.31*	.19	.30*	.75**			
8 Commitment to students	.44**	.32*	.60**	.21	.39**	.68**	.61**		
9 Support	.46**	.32*	.21	.64**	.31*	.72**	.61**	.49**	
10 Engagement	.43**	.37**	.28*	.21	.54**	.67**	.72**	.52**	.54**

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## Perceived Support as a Moderator in the Relationship Between Commitment and Engagement

Linear regression analysis on the retrospective reports showed that commitment to organization, department and students, together with support could explain 37% of the variance in engagement,  $F(4,46) = 6.78, p < .001$ . However, none of the predictors showed a significant effect, which can be explained by the strong intercorrelations and the small sample size. Therefore, to test for moderation of the effect of commitment on engagement by perceived support, a total score for commitment was taken by using the average of the three subtypes of commitment. This total commitment score showed a moderate correlation of .58 ( $p < .001$ ) with support. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 7. In the first step, engagement was regressed on engagement and commitment. It was confirmed that 37% of the variance in engagement was explained,  $F(2, 48) = 13.69, p < .001$ . As can be seen in Table 7, only the effect of commitment was significant. Then in the second step, the moderation effect was added by creating the commitment\*support interaction term (grand mean centering was used for commitment and engagement). The moderation was not confirmed,  $\Delta R^2 = .02, F(1, 47) = 1.13, p = .294$ . To better understand and clarify the effects of perceived organizational support on commitment and engagement, directly or as a moderator, it will be necessary to include this line of inquiry in the qualitative data collection.

**Table 7.**

*Engagement Regressed on Commitment, Support and Commitment x Support for Retrospective Reports About June 2020-June 2021*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>
Step 1				
Commitment	0.46	0.14	0.45	3.23**
Support	0.16	0.11	0.22	1.56
Step 2				
Commitment	0.51	0.15	0.50	3.40**
Support	0.12	0.11	0.16	1.06
Commitment*Support	0.08	0.08	0.13	1.06

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

For the reports about the present, the regression analysis results are presented in Table 8. Although the correlations between the predictors were lower and the three separate

forms of commitment were used in the model, it is noted that there still was limited statistical power. It was found that 56% of the variance in engagement was explained in the first step of the regression analysis,  $F(4, 46) = 14.39, p < .001$ . However, only the effect of commitment to the department was found to be significant. In the second step, moderation by support was not found to significantly improve the variance explained in engagement,  $\Delta R^2 = .04, F(3, 43) = 1.40, p = .255$ . These results suggest that the effect of commitment on engagement is not affected by perceived support. Further research and analysis through the qualitative research will be needed.

**Table 8.**

*Engagement Regressed on Commitment, Support and Commitment x Support for Reports About the Present*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>T</i>
Step 1				
Commitment to organization	0.22	0.17	0.25	1.32
Commitment to department	0.45	0.14	0.48	3.14**
Commitment to students	0.03	0.14	0.03	0.21
Support	0.04	0.12	0.05	0.34
Step 2				
Commitment to organization	0.27	0.17	0.31	1.64
Commitment to department	0.39	0.15	0.42	2.64*
Commitment to students	0.05	0.14	0.05	0.33
Support	0.01	0.13	0.02	0.11
Commitment to organization*Support	0.16	0.09	0.29	1.72
Commitment to department*Support	-0.19	0.10	-0.30	-1.79
Commitment to students*Support	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.58

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

## Time Effects

As was shown in Table 6, commitment, support and engagement showed relative stability between the reports for the past and the present with moderately strong correlations. Paired sample t-tests were carried out to verify if there had been significant increases or decreases in these variables between the two timeframes. The reader is referred back to Table 3 for the means and standard deviations. None of the tests were significant. There was no significant change in the average engagement,  $t(50) = -0.81, p = .424$ . There also was no significant difference in the average support reported for June 2020-June 2021 and the present,  $t(50) = -0.87, p = .388$ . Neither were there any changes in commitment, with  $t(50) = 1.32, p = .193$ ,  $t(50) = 0.32, p = .747$ , and  $t(50) = -0.01, p = .989$  for organizational, department and student commitment respectively.

Finally, it was tested whether support and commitment remembered for June 2020-2021 had an effect on the currently experienced engagement that was not explained by engagement retrospectively remembered. This was done using linear regression analysis. Retrospectively remembered engagement could explain 30% of the current engagement,  $F(1, 49) = 20.69, p < .001$ . However, neither remembered support received in the past ( $B = -0.11, SE = 0.12, p = .377$ ) nor remembered past commitment ( $B = 0.22, SE = 0.18, p = .237$ ) contributed to the prediction of current engagement,  $\Delta R^2 = .02, F(2, 47) = 0.82, p = .449$ .

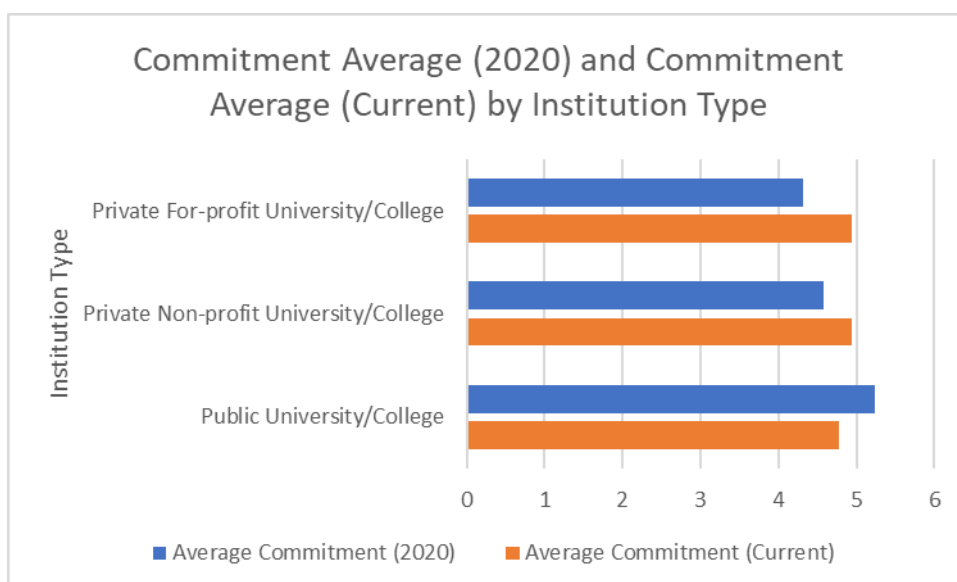
## Demographic and Category Variables

The quantitative survey results were reviewed and analyzed through a number of lenses in order to check the data from different perspectives for the purpose of guiding the qualitative design. Beyond the statistical analyses shared previously, review was also conducted through cross-tabulation of the survey data. This allowed for further exploration of the relationships between variables and constructs and assisted in identifying patterns and trends and cases for more in-depth investigation. Of particular interest were the demographic factors and how they may have influenced the experience of commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support in a context with remote work. These are explained further in the description of findings and crosstab tables and charts that follow. The results of these findings will be used to guide the development and design of the qualitative data collection.

## Institution type

Variations in organization type, even from within the same industry, can result in different work environments and yield different work experiences (Schneider et al. 2013). Such is the case in the higher education context in the US. Segmenting average commitment scores from the survey for the 2020 and current time periods by private for-profit, private non-profit, and public institutions yielded the results presented in Table 9. Through this data visualization, it can be seen that the commitment average in private institutions increased between the time periods. In public institutions, however, the commitment average in the earlier time period was higher than the private institutions but was reported to be lower in the current period. Discerning whether particular differences in the public vs. private institution environment, policies, workforce, etc. was therefore identified as an important consideration for examination in the interview (qualitative) process.

Table 9. Commitment Average by Institution Type



## Position type

Work roles have been shown to have significant influence on affective commitment (Gormley and Kennedy 2010), and the nature of one's work role and position in organizational hierarchy present a set of dynamic that can be viewed as important factors influencing commitment. A segmentation by position type of survey participant reported commitment to the foci of organization, department, and students, and the average of those commitments are presented in Table 10. Here differences in the commitment to the three foci can be noted in the group, but also notable is the increase in commitment to all foci by administrators between the earlier and later time period, which is contrary to the trend visible among the faculty and professional staff. These two groups reported decreased commitment to each

foci and in average from 2020 to the current period. To better understand the possible drivers of these differences, interview questions will seek to draw from participants a better understanding of the experiences and perspectives from their roles as administrators, faculty, or professional staff.

Table 10. Commitment Foci and Average by Position Type

Position Type	Commitment to:						Commitment Average (2020)	Commitment Average Current
	Org 2020	Org Current	Dept 2020	Dept Current	Students 2020	Students Current		
Administrator	4.50	4.56	4.86	5.11	4.90	5.47	4.75	5.05
Faculty	4.85	4.60	5.19	4.90	5.13	4.98	5.06	4.83
Professional Staff	4.82	4.37	5.35	5.18	5.25	4.84	5.14	4.80

### Organizational Tenure

Organizational tenure stands as a critical factor influencing commitment within the workplace. As employees invest more years into an organization, a sense of familiarity, belonging, and attachment tends to develop (Baek et al. 2019; Meyer and Allen 1991). As employees accumulate tenure, this often leads to the formation of significant relationships with colleagues and a deep understanding of the organizational culture (Andrews et al. 2019). Based on the literature, it could be expected that levels of commitment would rise with longer tenure. However, the data collected does not consistently align with this expectation. In Table 11, the <2 years and 15-25 years groups stand out as reflecting higher and lower levels of commitments relative to the other groups, particularly for the current period. In the qualitative interviews, particular attention will be given to the analysis of the reported data from participants through the lens of their organizational tenure to ascertain the how this might influence the participants experience and perspective.

Table 11. Commitment Foci and Average by Organizational Tenure

Organizational Tenure	Commitment to:						Commitment Average (2020)	Commitment Average (Current)
	Org (2020)	Org (Current)	Dept (2020)	Dept (Current)	Students (2020)	Students (Current)		
< 2 years	4.19	5.25	4.13	5.56	4.75	5.94	4.35	5.58
2 - 6 years	4.88	4.59	5.08	4.89	5.02	4.72	4.99	4.73
7 - 14 years	5.06	4.97	5.28	4.96	5.15	5.03	5.15	4.99
15 - 25 years	2.75	3.00	4.38	3.75	6.13	6.25	4.42	4.33
25 years +	4.87	4.52	5.11	5.12	5.15	5.18	5.04	4.94



## Perceived Organizational Support and Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment and perceived organizational support scores were examined through demographic variables to explore potential patterns or trends in the data. The results of these analyses yielded few distinguishable or remarkable patterns, aside from the those emerging from organizational tenure segmentation. Results have been presented in the scatter plot of Table 12. The scatter plot depicts the relationship between organizational commitment and perceived organizational support for each range of organizational tenure. The scatter plot provides not only visual assessment of the dispersion and clustering of data points, but curious patterns that will inform the selection of question prompts to be included in the interview (qualitative) portion of data collection.

Based on earlier findings in the literature review chapter, it was anticipated that a positive correlation between the two variables would be observed as a general trend, where higher levels of perceived organizational support correspond to higher levels of organizational commitment, and this trend can be generally observed in the visual representation of the data. However, outliers in this pattern can be observed, particularly in the <2 year grouping. In addition, the pattern of lower organizational commitment in the current period, as compared to 2020, presented in Table 12 can also be observed here with most groups, along with lower perceived organizational support in the current period, compared to 2020. Again, the < 2 year group stands as an outlier, with the 7 – 14 year group relatively consistent between time periods.

Given the limited statistical power of the data, no conclusions or definitive relationships may be claimed. Instead, these patterns and outliers raise important questions to be addressed in qualitative data collection, namely, clarification of participant's individual understanding of the relationship between organizational support and organizational commitment and his/her perceptions and experiences with support during the two time periods that influenced the level of organizational commitment.

Table 12. Perceived Organizational Support and Organizational Commitment by Organizational Tenure



### Perceived Organizational Support and Work Engagement

Further review of the data on perceived organizational support and work engagement through the lens of position type offered additional consideration for the development of the qualitative interviews. Table 13 shows higher work engagement in the current period for all position types. The implications for interviews will be developing an understanding how work engagement differed from the Pandemic period and learning how the remote work context may impacted participants. Additionally, the different reported levels of work engagement, particularly in the 2020 period, will have implications for the qualitative interviews to learn if and how the work experience varied between the different position types. Finally, perceived organizational support was reported to be lower in the current period. Since the quantitative data cannot confirm or explain this, it will be necessary to identify through the interviews what support was given during and post-pandemic period and glean an understanding of how this support impacted the participants' experience and feelings of commitment and engagement.

Table 13. Perceived Organizational Support and Work Engagement by Position Type

Position Type	Perceived Organizational Support (2020)	Perceived Organizational Support (Current)	Work Engagement (2020)	Work Engagement (Current)
Administrator	4.10	3.99	5.13	5.22
Faculty	4.04	3.71	4.72	4.97
Professional Staff	4.03	3.88	4.90	5.05

Commitment, Perceived Organizational Support, and Work Engagement by Gender and with and without Children

Gender and parenting responsibilities are well-established in the literature as factors influencing commitment, work engagement and perceived organizational support (Scandura and Lankau, 1997, Petts et al. 2021). As such, an analysis of the survey data through the lens of gender, along with subgroups of each representing those with and without children offers a valuable opportunity to consider how further research of these segments may best be pursued through the qualitative interviews. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 14, suggest that there are differences in the experience of commitment, perceived organizational support, and work engagement between 2020 and the current period. Female participants reported decreased commitment and perceived organizational support between time periods, while male participants reported increases in commitment, perceived organizational support, and work engagement between the same two time periods.

Consideration of parenting responsibilities between the two genders also illustrated differences in reported experiences. Repeated patterns between the time periods can be observed for both female and male, with some notable exceptions. For women with children under age 6, perceived organizational support and work engagement were slightly higher in the current period (relative to 2020), and for men with children under age six, commitment, perceived organizational support, and work engagement were all reported to be lower in the current period compared to 2020. Given the small numbers of respondents in these segments, it is not possible to draw any conclusions. Therefore, it will be necessary to rely on the qualitative data for analysis and to answer the research questions and obtain a deeper understanding of the experience of participants based on gender and parenting roles.

Table 14. Commitment, Perceived Organizational Support by Gender and Children

Gender and w/ or w/o Children	Commitment Average (2020)	Commitment Average (Current)	Perceived Organizational Support (2020)	Perceived Organizational Support (Current)	Work Engagement (2020)	Work Engagement (Current)
<b>Female</b>	<b>5.09</b>	<b>4.75</b>	<b>3.95</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>5.00</b>	<b>4.94</b>
No	5.07	4.79	4.13	3.82	5.00	4.94
Yes, ages 7 - 12	5.29	4.64	3.31	2.31	5.00	4.75
Yes, under age 6	4.97	4.54	3.04	3.13	5.00	5.22
<b>Male</b>	<b>4.71</b>	<b>5.18</b>	<b>4.38</b>	<b>4.62</b>	<b>4.73</b>	<b>5.44</b>
No	4.63	5.14	3.89	4.24	4.52	5.39
Yes, ages 7 - 12	5.17	5.76	6.08	6.25	5.89	6.33
Yes, under age 6	4.29	3.75	4.75	3.88	3.67	3.33

### Summary

Through this quantitative findings review, the survey data has been summarized and analyzed to guide the development of the qualitative data collection. The quantitative results helped to lay that groundwork for addressing the research questions by clarifying areas of focus, illuminating areas of the unknown, and confirming the paths for further exploration.

#### *Findings drawn from the quantitative data*

With respect to the first research question “How do employees experience organizational commitment and work engagement with remote work?”, the quantitative results found that there is no sign that full-time working in the office is necessary for commitment or engagement. Commitment to the organization and the department were strongest for the workers who had a hybrid remote/office work arrangement. Building upon these limited findings, the qualitative part of the study is needed to for clarification the experienced pros and cons of remote and in-office working and to fully investigate and answer the research question.

With respect to the second question “What roles do multiple foci of commitment play in the higher education context?” the results of the quantitative survey revealed that the different types of commitment were correlated, and especially so in the memories (retrospective

reports) of the participants. That being said, from the different types of commitment, departmental commitment was most strongly associated with present engagement, showing the only significant unique association. Survey data segmentation also highlighted some differences in level of commitment toward the foci based on position type and length of organizational tenure. In order to fully investigate and explain the roles of multiple foci in this context, the qualitative study is needed to further research these foci of commitment and identify any additional commitment that may arise.

For the third research question “How does perceived organizational support influence the employee’s sense of organizational commitment and work engagement?”, limited conclusions may be drawn from the quantitative data. Analysis of the survey results found some correlations between the constructs which require more thorough investigation through the qualitative approach. Likewise, the associations and patterns identified through demographic segmentation offer several lines of inquiry to pursue through the qualitative interviews. The qualitative data collection will aim to identify relationships that participants themselves perceive between the variables of organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. Participants may shed light on how these variables affect one another and/or which third variables might play a role in the relationships that are found, and if specific factors show relevance to the experience of commitment, support, and engagement.

#### *Informing the qualitative design*

The quantitative findings helped to inform and navigate the researcher into the qualitative study, where through semi-structured interviews, participants will explain the changes experienced at work and at home and how those experiences changed how they felt about their work environment. The design of the interviews is guided in great part by the findings from the quantitative surveys. The question prompts are specifically informed both by the identified areas requiring deeper exploration and those that were unclear and unknown. More specifically, the qualitative research will search to answer the research questions with particular consideration of the issues illuminated by the quantitative data, including understanding employee experiences with commitment and work engagement through different work arrangements. The analysis of survey data indicated that work arrangement did not impact affect commitment or work engagement, but commitment to particular foci emerged as stronger. The qualitative research is needed to fully investigate these questions. Similarly, the associations between perceived organizational support, commitment and work engagement emerging from the survey data are unclear, so the qualitative research will focus on understanding employee experiences and perceptions in the context of the different

work arrangements. Once qualitative data collection is completed a fuller understanding of the study phenomenon will be achieved, thereby enabling a thorough and detailed discussion of the findings as they pertain to the research questions.

## **Chapter 6 - Qualitative Findings**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a mixed-methods research design. It explores the experiences of HEI professionals with remote work and their perceptions of organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. In the previous chapter, the findings from the quantitative data collection were reviewed. These findings informed and helped to guide the plans for the design and implementation of the qualitative data collection process. Incorporating quantitative methods into a phenomenological methodology generated a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation and aided greatly in the selection of questions prompt and follow up and helped the researcher prepare for a fuller and deeper understanding of the participant experience expressed through the interviews. Building upon the broad insights and enhanced preparation for inquiry generated by the quantitative data, this chapter switches the focus to the qualitative results generated by the semi-structured interviews. It serves to illuminate in detail the individual participants' experiences, thus making for deep and rich interpretation and understanding. The section begins by providing a brief overview of the interview process, the participants, and the demographic characteristics of the sample. It then moves to a detailed exploration of the profiles and experiences of the individual participants as well as a discussion of themes and patterns that emerged from the data. The section concludes with a summary of the key findings and their implications for understanding the experiences of HEI professionals in remote work settings.

### **6.2 Overview of the interview process**

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gather in-depth information about the work experiences of participants during both the earlier period of the Pandemic shutdown (Late Spring/Summer/Fall 2020) and the current period (Winter/Spring 2023). As the primary data source for the study's mixed method design, the qualitative strand was critically important to the researcher's attempt to build a deeper and richer understanding of the phenomenon of the remote work experience. The interviews allowed the researcher to delve into very detailed discussions with the participants, which generated a textural, often 'messy', picture of their past and current experiences. The results of the interviews yielded significant levels of valuable data, from which salient themes and findings emerged. Through extensive analysis, these individual experiences and perceptions offered clearer evidence to support the research questions and offered findings that helped to expand understanding of the remote work experience from the HEI employee perspective.

### *Sampling*

Interviewees were selected from the pool of survey respondents who had indicated a willingness to participate in a subsequent interview. Of these 25 individuals who shared contact information on the survey, 22 were contacted. From these, five were not reachable or deemed themselves unable to participate in the interview. The initial group of 15 HEI professionals were interviewed over the period of February 2023 to April 2023, until which time the researcher sensed that a saturation point was reached. However, for confirmatory purposes, two additional interviews were conducted. These revealed that saturation had indeed been achieved.

The interviews were conducted using an open-ended approach that allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words. Key questions were framed around both the literature review and the results of the quantitative analysis. Whilst the questions served as an anchor to each interview, participants had the latitude to depart from scripted questions. This allowed them to express their ideas and to fully describe their perspective of commitment, engagement, and support in the context of their remote work experience. The data gathered from these interviews were analyzed, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify common themes and patterns in participants' experiences. Initial coding and identification of themes were conducted concurrently with the data collection. This approach allowed the researcher to collect preliminary results tied to the researcher questions and simultaneously to observe the themes that emerged from the participants rich and textural descriptions. It also enabled the researcher to identify when *saturation* had been achieved.

Following this preliminary review, the demographics of the interview respondents were mapped out. These data provided the researcher with valuable information on the population sample.

A review of the job types/areas revealed an important participant diversity gap, viz., that of the HR employee. The addition of the HR perspective was determined to be important for a thorough and well-rounded understanding of the HEI remote work experience. HR personnel are at the heart of workplace policy implementation and serve to support all employees at the institution. Accordingly, two HR representatives were recruited from the study population. Neither interviewee was part of the survey cohort. However, this deviation from the stated sampling plan was warranted as it ensured a representative sample of the population.



In addition to the two HR representatives, the review of participant demographics revealed a lack of representation from the age demographic of 30 and under. Adding the perspective of this population was important, as literature has found that early career professionals experience commitment and engagement differently, may perceive support differently than colleagues in other age categories and, generationally, may have a different relationship to the workplace and remote work (Crome et al. 2019; Venter et al. 2013). Since there were no survey participants from the early career age group, it was not possible to pull a representative from that sample. Following the same rationale that guided the recruitment of the two HR representatives, a representative from the targeted age demographic was identified and recruited for the study.

The researcher acknowledges that this change in sampling approach opens to a greater chance of bias across sampling, confirmation, and reporting. However, every attempt was made by the researcher to remain aware of such biases in the selection, interview, and interpretation processes. The determination was made that the risks associated with the addition of these sample units were outweighed by their omission from the sample set. The demographics of the interview sample set are presented below.

Table 15. Demographics of Interview Participants

<b>Demographics of Interview Participants</b>			
<b>Variable</b>		<b>Participants</b>	
		<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
	Female	13	65.0
	Male	7	35.0
	Other	0	0.0
<b>Age</b>			
	30 and under	1	5.0
	31-40	6	30.0
	41-50	5	25.0
	51-60	6	30.0
	61+	3	15.0
<b>Length of Service</b>			
	0 - 2 years	2	10.0
	2 - 6 years	4	20.0
	7 - 14 years	5	25.0
	15 - 24 years	6	30.0
	25+ years	3	15.0
<b>Young Children</b>			
	Age 5 and under	1	5.0
	Age 6 - 12	4	15.0
<b>HEI Employer Type</b>			
	Public	10	50.0
	Private Non-profit	10	50.0
	Private, For-profit	0	0.0
	Research Institutions	8	40.0
	Masters/Bachelors	10	50.0
	Community College	2	10.0
<b>HEI Location</b>			
	New York	6	30.0
	New Jersey	12	60.0
	Connecticut	2	10.0
<b>HEI Role*</b>			
<b>*Some held multiple roles</b>	Administrator	6	30.0
	Professional Staff	14	70.0
	Faculty	3	15.0
<b>Departments/Areas Represented</b>			
Admissions, Bursar, Academic Scheduling, Student Advising, Student Support			
Assessment/QA, Technology, Instructional Design, Faculty Services			
Provost's Office, Campus Central, International, Study Abroad			
HR, External/Industry, Communications/Socia Media			
Academic Areas: English, Social Science, Business			

### **6.3 Data Collection Procedures**

Participants from the qualitative strand (survey) who indicated that they would be willing to join in follow-up interview were contacted. Once accepted, a Zoom appointment was arranged and confirmed by email and an accompanying pre-interview sheet (See APPENDIX B). To optimize anonymity, each participant was assigned a participant number, not necessarily in the order of participation. The pre-interview sheet reviewed details of the study, the structure of the interview, and the necessary informed consent and confidentiality information. Zoom sessions were recorded with participant approval. The interview durations ranged from 45 to 105 minutes. During the interviews, the researcher engaged in active memo and notetaking to highlight relevant points and themes and to guide the open-ended discussion.

Once the recordings were available from Zoom, the researcher downloaded them into passcode-encrypted file folders on their computer. The initial transcripts were reviewed and converted to text formatting that could be viewed and edited through regular software packages such as MS Word. A review of the transcripts was undertaken to help the researcher better understand the full meaning of each participant's experience. Through this process, the researcher was also able to reconcile the transcript with the contemporaneous notes and conduct an initial identification of relevant codes and reference by the interviewees. Transcripts were then uploaded to Nvivo for coding and further analysis.

### **6.4 Approach to Analysis**

An Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was used to analyze the data. IPA is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. IPA is rooted in the phenomenological tradition, which emphasizes the subjective nature of experience and the importance of understanding how individuals perceive and interpret their world. The goal of IPA is to uncover the meaning and significance of participants' experiences through a detailed exploration of their accounts.

IPA was selected over other methods of analysis because it affects a rigorous and systematic analysis that can be applied to data gathered through in-depth interviews. Several other thematic analysis approaches were considered and rejected for use in this study. For example, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is a widely used method that involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Whilst the Braun and Clarke approach is flexible and can be adapted to various research contexts, its focus encapsulates the broader patterns but may not capture the richness richness of individual phenomenological accounts offered by IPA through in-depth exploration of individual experiences and the participant's unique perspective (Larkin,

et al. 2021). Beyond the breadth versus depth distinction, Spiers and Riley (2019) found that the Braun and Clarke approach was more pragmatic compared to IPA's commitment to understanding the nature of participant experience and existential concerns. Research also suggest that IPA might be more suitable for smaller sample sizes as compared to other thematic analysis approaches such Braun and Clarke (Smith and Osborn 2008; Spiers and Riley 2019). Given the ability of IPA to allow for more profound engagement with the interpretative aspects inherent in phenomenological research, it more closely aligns with the research methodology than the Braun and Clarke approach.

Similarly, another thematic analysis approach, the Gioia method, was considered but rejected. The Gioia method was developed to offer a framework and more systematic approach to qualitative data analysis (Gioia et al. 2013). The Gioia method has great appeal due to the structure it provides, however, there are limitations in how its approach addresses interpretation, a critical need for understanding participant experiences through phenomenological research (Mees-Buss et al. 2022). The holistic and iterative nature of phenomenological inquiry requires an analysis method such IPA, which provides the flexibility for interpretation.

The IPA approach focuses on the detailed examination of individual cases, with the aim of identifying common themes and patterns across participants' experiences. Additionally, IPA is particularly useful in exploring complex or ambiguous phenomena that may be difficult to capture via other methods. (Smith and Osborn 2015). The approach is flexible and iterative and allows the researcher to adjust the analysis as new insights of themes are discovered. Finally, given the complexity of the phenomenon under study, the researcher contended that the ability of the IPA approach to capture the nuances of the lived experience would help most truthfully reflect the answers to the research questions.

## **6.5 Coding Approach**

In the realm of IPA, researchers invariably embrace an inductive coding approach as their framework. This approach involves reading and re-reading the data to identify patterns and themes that emerge from the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Through this iterative process, text representing patterns and themes are identified and coded, and these codes are then grouped together to form broader themes that represent the essence of the participants' experiences (Alase 2017). In the context of the present study, the researcher applied a blended inductive-deductive coding approach, with an initial inductive approach identifying patterns and themes, followed by further deductive analysis. This combination of

inductive and deductive coding was determined to be the best approach to examine the participants' experiences, whilst also drawing on existing theories and concepts. More specifically, the rationale for applying the dual-coded approach was twofold: first, to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' narratives without the imposition of pre-conceived notions; and second, to leverage established theories for a more comprehensive understanding. This approach offered the researcher the opportunity to explore multiple levels of analysis for the most accurate and descriptive understanding of the employee experience and is established in the literature (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006)

### 6.5.1

#### Coding Process and Procedures

In the implementation of IPA coding procedures in this study, the researchers' approach aligned with the overarching aim of phenomenology: to attain a comprehensive, profound, and nuanced grasp of the meanings and structures embedded in participants' lived experiences. Adhering to the multi-layered review structure recommended by scholars in IPA, particularly as articulated by Alase (2016) and Smith et al. (1999), the coding procedures were systematically organized into a three-cycle review of the interviews.

#### First-cycle

Before delving into the intricate process of reading and re-reading transcripts (with occasional reviews of video-recordings), several steps were undertaken to prepare for a robust analytical foundation. Specifically, the notes taken during the interview process were gathered for later reference and the transcript was reviewed for transcription errors and corrected and edited for reading clarity. The cleaned transcripts were then read for familiarization and broad understanding of the individual participant's experience. Initial notes were taken that captured thoughts on key phrases, emotions, and notable aspects of the experience shared by the participant. Emergent codes were then gathered from the initial impressions gained through the first readings.

#### Second-cycle

In the second round of review the interview transcripts were re-read to expand the development of codes, which were identified by searching for words, phrases, and meanings present in participant responses. These codes were then preliminarily clustered into common themes based on patterns and emerging connections between codes. The researcher was also mindful in the second-cycle review to read for statements that revealed participant's 'state of mind' and the effect of the subject matter on the lived experience of the participant. This helped to capture the 'meaning unit' as described by Graneheim and

Lundman (2004). As each subsequent interview was re-reviewed, connections and patterns were explored across cases to identify commonalities and differences within themes.

### Third-cycle

The interview transcripts were again read for a third time to refine and define the themes and subordinate themes and to review for clarity and correct categorization of the patterns that emerged. The researcher was mindful in the final full cycle of review to ensure that the coding, patterns and thematic structure identified and codified were fully representative of the essence of each participant's experience of the researched phenomena.

Overall, the coding process was labor intensive and demanding but resulted in rich understanding of the data, as has been described in the literature (Larkin et al. 2021).

Themes that emerged from the interviews by means of inductive analysis are listed later in this chapter. To complement these findings and explore additional layers of analysis, thematic codes were drawn from the literature in order further understand and explain participants' lived experiences and perceptions. These additional themes were tied to the constructs of organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support; and the antecedents and consequences of the constructs (see Kim et al. 2017), and resources identified in the Cooper-Thomas (2017) and Foa and Foa (2012) models. The addition of a deductive coding analysis on completion of the inductive coding revealed additional thematic patterns that had not fully emerged through the inductive approach.

## **6.6 Presentation of Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative findings are presented in three sections. The first section offers an overview of both the shared experiences and unique perspectives of HEI workers with remote work and in the contexts of the HE sector and the Pandemic. The second section analyzes the data through the lens of each individual research question. This allows for explanations to emerge from the data, and it also provides an opportunity for the reader to build a deeper understanding of the employee's perspective and experience as framed through the research question. The third section presents the themes that emerged from the data to reveal insights into how HE professionals experience remote work and what environmental and contextual influences exist for these employees.

### **Section 1**

#### **Overview – The Shift to Remote Work**

As the Covid-19 pandemic became an expanding threat to public health and safety in the NYC Metro Area in February and March of 2020, public and private institutions of all types

began to close, or limit access to, their facilities. With official declarations by the governors of the states of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut effective from March 18, 2020, all schools and non-essential businesses were closed. HEIs found themselves with different levels of preparedness for business continuity. Similar to the wider community, managers and employees of HEIs were unaware of the prolonged duration of institutional closures that would ensue due to the Pandemic. Survey participants confirmed this feeling of working with the unknown. Participant #3 captured the experience at the time stating that he “kind of treated it as a snow day that was extended.”

All participants confirmed that their institutions implemented an enforced remote work arrangement, but none recalled any policies that had been developed, apart from the business continuity plans their individual offices and departments had developed. All twenty participants were fully remote in the initial period of the pandemic shutdown, although two of them later made occasional visits to the office.

The initial transition to remote work experience was described differently among the participants. Some focused on the abruptness of the shift to working from home, feeling that they “were all kind of just thrust right into it” (Participant #10), while others were skeptical of how such a massive transition could be successful: “I didn’t think universities could be remote . . . that was my take on it.” (Participant #6). Despite the concerns about whether and how remote work arrangements would function, some participants found fewer difficulties in the move to working from home. Participant #18 explained that it was, “an easy transition, because I can do my job remotely, easily. You know, it’s all possible with technology today, with a computer and conference calls. It didn’t matter whether I was on campus or not.”

Interestingly, the interviewees, for the most part, felt that they were provided with the technological resources and support needed to work remotely by their organizations. According to Participant #12, “<Tech Services> were able to provide us with pretty much anything we needed, like printers, cameras, monitors, certain equipment. We were set up as if we were in the office. Participant #9 acknowledged that she “had a pretty good setup at home, technology-wise.”

The experience for participants during the early remote work period was marked by a high emotional intensity and an elevated attentiveness to addressing the needs of the crisis. This was particularly prevalent among those employees who held positions in areas critical to remote delivery and operations. As shared by Participant #3: “I was thinking of the <interview> questions last night, and I was almost triggered by some of these. I am still on my journey of processing the pandemic experience.” Participant #11 reflected on the Pandemic’s toll on their personal life: “My stepfather passed away during Covid; then my mother had to move in with us.” Participant #17 described the urgency of the situation in the

early days of the Pandemic: “We had students overseas, whose parents were in a panic to get them home. It was a 24/7 operation to make sure everyone was safe and find space on flights.” Participant #13 also referred to the confusion of students in the early days of campus closures: “Students needed our help; we were trying to help them navigate while we, ourselves, were figuring things out.”

### **The Remote Work Period (Spring 2020-2022)**

As the Pandemic continued through the spring of 2020, participants appeared to sense a gradual shift in perspectives when it became apparent to them and their organizations that the remote work arrangement would be continuing for some time. According to Participant #20, “We started to realize at the start of summer that this was going to be for the long haul, but that was OK by me. I liked it at home.” Others, such as Participant #2, expressed concerns about this prospect: “I didn’t know if I would be able to continue like that – my husband is home, the kids are home. But it got easier with the summer when we could use the outdoors.” Supervisors, such as Participant #6, also worried about the emotional well-being of their subordinates: “There are certain people in my staff who live alone, and its lonely for them. Life is work, and they like to interact with people.”

Workdays were long and boundaries blurred. Participants expressed feeling strongly motivated to carry out their duties together with a keen sense of responsibility and purpose in their roles. Participant #5 shared that “it was very stressful, and the workload was tremendous, but it was something I loved doing, so I put everything into it.” Participant #16 and her staff adjusted to early morning and late evening schedules “to enable students from around the world to take classes at a time that was not so extreme for them . . . that was the adjustment we readily agreed to do out of necessity.” Several participants stated that they frequently lost track of time and that the workload and needs of the organization, faculty, and students required that expanded effort: “I was working 16 -18-hour days, continuously, and it was because I felt like I had to.” (Participant #7)

Almost all participants referenced concerns around layoffs, furloughs, and job losses. Such concerns perpetuated throughout the remote work period. As an HR representative, Participant #19 recounted their experiences of advising employees, via virtual meetings, that they were being laid off: “It was really difficult. For some of the people, I knew their personal circumstances. . . However, one employee I had known for years told me that he was glad that I was the one to hold the meeting with him. It gave him some comfort. That really made me feel better.” Participant #8 shared his feelings at the time, “I was a mess. I felt like I could be let go at any time. They were laying off others, and there was no guarantee, so it was a big concern of mine.” For some, the concern still lingers. The effects of such underlining uncertainty were captured by Participant #20. “I felt like any day I was going to



get that email from HR asking for a meeting. The way things are looking today, I don't feel any more confident."

### **Returning to the Office (2021 - 2022)**

Whilst public health and safety were primary in determining when operations could return to campus, policy decisions were also driven by business necessity. Institutions announced return to campus plans, and these were received both positively and negatively by employees. Some employees felt that returning to the office was a relief and a happy 'return to some normalcy'. For others, it brought either fear or dissatisfaction with an unwelcome move away from a beneficial work arrangement. The interviews reflected this divergence of opinion. Participant #2 "couldn't wait to return to the office. I had requested to be allowed into my office and there was a whole process of dispensation we needed to receive to enter an empty building." Similarly, Participant #9 highlighted a situation where she and her supervisor viewed the remote work arrangement differently: "So my boss is actually kind of a 'germaphobe'. . . he didn't want me back in the office, but I ended up coming in just because, mentally, it was better for me not to be in my house 24/7." Participant #14, on the other hand, enthusiastically, endorsed his remote work arrangement, "I love it. I enjoyed it. It was perfect for me. It suits my preferences." Participant #7 expressed concerns about health and safety around a return to on-campus work: "It was important that we were able to work remotely during that time. If I had to come to campus, I don't think I would have been comfortable with that." Participant #19 also pointed to challenges of public transportation for employees who would be returning campus: "People were not comfortable taking trains, buses and subways, if they were even running regularly enough."

Participants recalled that all institutions mandated a return to full or partial in-office work hours at some point after public health restrictions were lifted. Student feedback was stated as one of the most significant drivers of this move to in-person. Some outlier institutions required staff to return as early as Fall of 2020. As narrated by Participant #11: "<My institution> could not afford to lose the room and board revenue, so from March until August, I was remote, then we went back in that fall semester until Thanksgiving. From Thanksgiving on, we were remote, then back for the spring semester." Participants reported that the pressure to return to campus started to accelerate at the end of Spring 2021. "They wanted us back on campus full time for Fall 2021, and we were told that remote was not an option without extenuating circumstances," according to Participant #17. Participant #13 highlighted contradictory narratives, "we were advised that students were complaining that they could not find people on campus for services, but all the students in contact with me were thrilled to be able to connect virtually."

Mandates to return on campus during that time, were not received well by most of the study

participants. Participant #1 reflected the experience of several others when she shared that, “<leadership> in one area announces that everyone is expected to return to the office, but then you see others in roles with similar type functions, and they were permitted to work remotely, at least some of the time.” Participant 7 echoed this experience and the feeling that because, “the decision is left down to the department level, it become an issue of fairness among employees”. Of the study participants who were content to come back to campus at that time, or understood the necessity of same, all expressed a feeling of unease about not having had any opportunity for a hybrid arrangement. According to Participant #20, “It felt unreasonable at the time, that we could have done our job so well full remotely, and even had remote work time before the Pandemic, and now they wanted us to be physically on campus, all the time.” Participant #3 summarized the irony in his example: “We weren't seeing a single student coming into the academic advising center. But there's this huge push for them to come back because of the optics of people seeing them, where, in reality, they were doing less work when they're in person.”

### **Positive Outcomes**

Drawing from the remote work period 2020-2022, study participants shared a wide range of additional experiences, that merited presentation. Most significant among these are a diversity of positive outcomes that provided important perspectives on the subject area and supported the goals of the study. The details are shared below.

#### *Channels of Communication*

Participants shared that, whilst they experienced some isolation and reduced socialization with colleagues during the Pandemic period, many of them found that the remote work context opened new channels of communication with colleagues and a connection to peers that had not existed previously. As Participant #10 explained, “I got to know other colleagues, where I wouldn't have, had it not been for Covid.” Participant #2 also described examples of new communication developed through the remote period, “For colleagues in other departments, with whom I collaborate closely, I found that we have more open, honest, and straightforward communication. Maybe it's because we go through so much together and there is a new level of trust and comfort.”

#### *Autonomy Breeds Opportunity*

Study participants described in their interviews a welcoming advent of a new autonomy, which created opportunities for those who wanted to change operations, propose or implement new ideas or projects or design different work activities. Participant #8 described the opportunities that opened up for them to join representative bodies at the institution: “In summer 2020, I was nominated for Staff Council, and I thought it sounded like it would be good for me . . . to be a representative on different committees focused on communications

and professional development.” Opportunities also opened for Participant #3, who explained: “Things that people resisted, I was able to get through because we had no other choice right? . . . I was glad for the opportunity to do things like online orientation.” Opportunities to be creative were highlighted by Participant #16, “I did have to become innovative in solving issues, there were challenges to overcome.” The initiative emanating from autonomy, albeit serendipitous, was also apparent as Participant #4 explained, “nobody was responding regarding plans for set up, so we just set it up ourselves and ended up creating a space that works really well.”

### *Digital Revolution*

Much of the emerging creativity and innovation was facilitated by the availability of new technologies. Concomitant with this the necessity of digital communications and data management allowed for a monumental shift away from hard copy/paper processes. Information sharing and business processes became much more efficient. Participants spoke expansively on how digital documents became widely accepted for institutional processes having theretofore been deemed either unnecessary or impracticable on the grounds of risk.

### *Opening the Toolbox*

Rather reassuringly, the remote environment and Pandemic context appeared to foster a desire to support others and to share expertise. Employees developed new skills and served as peer trainers. Participant #11 stated that, “We found ways to support each other. Some of us had expertise already in certain areas, some of us, by hook or by crook, developed expertise. And so, we shared all of that.” Others had special unused expertise that suddenly found expression and utility in the pandemic context. Participant #5 explained that she “had expertise in another area that was needed immediately. Basically, it was critical. . . I helped faculty, held group and department training and one-on-one.”

### *Be kind to yourself and others*

Several participants indicated that the experience of the remote period influenced culture and expectations in a number of ways. Participants felt that the experience, further heightened by the Pandemic, resulted in greater levels of compassion, as extended to individuals themselves and to others. Participant #11 captured this change succinctly, “The Pandemic humanized me as a professor. I didn’t have the compulsion to be perfect all the time.”

### **New Challenges**

The remote work period, however, did not foster kindness and a gentler culture in all cases.

The stress of isolation, combined with an ever-increasing desire for support of important social movements, led Participant #3 to describe the online conflicts he witnessed as, “The Marginalization Olympics.” Several participants made references to increased toxicity in relationships and communications between colleagues and departments. Some of this was attributed to restructuring or the layoffs that were occurring across institutions at the time of the shutdown. Some of this experience perpetuates today. In this context, Participant #16 describes “increased incivility among colleagues”, since the community returned to campus for normal operations.

It is possible of course, that some of this negative behavior may be attributable to employees stepping back and reassessing their personal and professional lives during the Pandemic. The shut-down period also laid bare poor institutional operations and personnel activities. Participant #11’s experience with colleagues was that “good faculty did the right thing, and bad faculty got worse.” Participant #3 also found that the experience “shed some light in very dark corners of management, and how people lead, and how they supervise.” These new experiences led employees to change their perspectives on work and boundaries connected to work life and home life. Participant #14 confirmed: “It definitely changed my perspective of the work and of the duties that are involved in work, whereas I didn’t feel that way back in 2019, 2018.”

### **Current Work Arrangements**

In the current period only one participant was fully in office (by choice); the other 19 were on some form of hybrid work arrangement. Based on participants’ descriptions, however, not all hybrid approaches are created equal. Whilst remote work is not required among the sample set, a hybrid arrangement is optional for all. Most participants (15) have a flexible framework for designing their hybrid arrangement with their supervisor. However, five participants work to a prescribed hybrid structure of 2-3 remote working days every week. All participants with prescribed hybrid arrangements work in public institutions. However, not all public institutions have prescribed hybrid arrangements.

Participants expressed a sense of frustration with what they perceived as the ‘irony’, ‘hypocrisy’, and implicit unfairness of in-person requirements, both in the office and in the classroom. Participant #11, a faculty member, described leadership’s view as “We don’t want you to run your class via Zoom because we don’t want students to have an excuse not to be on campus.” Participant #15, a faculty administrator, explained her experience, whereby “Almost every instructor wanted to teach, at least in part, remotely, but our leadership has come down against remote across the board.” Most participants described their experiences with remote work and their supervision of employees as productive and satisfying and were supportive of options for remote work.

All study participants found the hybrid work arrangement (remote and in person) to be a favorable experience, and all but two described the hybrid experience to be better than fully remote. Participant #10 explained: “I like that balance. I like being able to be in the office, having the support of the office, and seeing my peers and students, and the energy and the connection to the physical institution”. Participant #1 stated: “I can do my job equally well from home. I understand that we need to take turns for in-person/on-campus availability, so I don’t mind sharing that responsibility . . . but if you ask me what I would prefer, definitely fully remote.” Participant #3, however, raised the issue of leadership-environment fit: “as a relational leader. So, in many ways virtual environments are like the antithesis of where I thrive.”

## **Section 2**

In this section, examples and evidence are interpreted from employee experiences to offer explanations in support of the research questions.

### **RQ1. How do employees experience organizational commitment and work engagement with remote work?**

During the remote work period, the employees interviewed described their experiences from the perspective of the start of the Pandemic and enforced remote work period, the extended remote and hybrid period, and the present time, when hybrid is the dominant work arrangement.

While some shifts in commitment were identifiable in the participants’ descriptions, it is not altogether clear when these shifts took place or precisely which factors may have contributed to these shifts. Throughout the course of the remote work period, participants most strongly associated with normative commitment, though, the overlap between affective and normative toward certain foci became increasingly apparent. Continuance commitment was quite dominant during the early part of the remote work period, when the Pandemic was at its highest point and most participants articulated experiencing levels of job loss fear and

a conscious gratitude for having a job, as HEIs were not hiring at that time.

As the public health situation stabilized and workplace options began to open up, the qualitative data show a participant shift from continuance commitment to affective commitment. Normative commitment also was reduced in the later part for the remote work period, as participant descriptions from the earlier time period more frequently referenced 'duty' and similar terms such as 'relying' and 'depending'. These participant experiences generally support alignment with normative commitment, though careful interpretation of the coding was required to accurately ascertain meanings assigned by the interviewees. In some cases, the expression of commitment reflected both affective and normative.

Examples of the overlap is most clearly represented in descriptions by Participant #2: "I really care about the students; they are going through so much, and they are relying on me," and Participant #13: "I worried a lot about the students' emotional wellbeing . . . and I have a responsibility to help them. This is my role."

Two participants changed employers during the remote work period 2020 – 2022, three changed positions or roles within the organization (either shifting positions or supervisors), and two participants indicated that they were actively interviewing for new roles at other institutions. Despite the shift away from continuance and normative commitment towards affective commitment later in the remote work period, some evidence indicates that continuance commitment still maintains a hold. This is demonstrated in references to the current hybrid arrangement by several participants, whereby the prospect of increased office work time requirement was described as a 'dealbreaker' and would be the point at which 'they start to lose people'.

In terms of the three dimensions of work engagement, participants most often reflected dedication, followed by vigor. Despite the indications of 'being lost in their work', 'losing track of time', and working extremely long hours, these were more often a reflection of dedication and/or vigor, rather than absorption. Responses that at the surface level could have been understood to represent of a high level of flow, normally associated with absorption, could instead, through careful interpretation, be understood as part of the temporal disorientation and lack of routine that many employees experienced through the Pandemic.

## **RQ2. What roles do multiple foci of commitment play in the higher education context?**

Interestingly, out of the three foci of commitment identified as targets for this study (organization, department, and students), only students emerged as a significant focus of commitment for the study participants. In fact, students were the primary focus of commitment, even in the case where employees did not have direct involvement with

students. Some of the study participants viewed their commitment to faculty as a moderator for commitment to students. Participant #7 describes it as follows: “If I didn't do it, then the students wouldn't be getting the same kind of support. By helping the faculty, I was helping the students directly.”

Commitment to students was expressed in some interesting ways. For example, Participant #10 explained: “I love working with students and supporting the students. In that regard I felt as if I was doing something productive. I felt valued by the customer, the student.”

Participant #11 shared that she “felt compelled to be really present for students, and I guess maybe that was because I didn't feel like I was present for the people who I reported to.

Through the interviews, participants described other foci of commitment not originally included. These were faculty, peers/colleagues, and employees. The focus on the faculty and employees follows the same logic as the focus on student in that for many departments who are not student-facing, faculty and employees are the direct ‘customer’. It is through this direct customer that the worker reaches the indirect customer, i.e., the student. Peers or colleagues represented a significant target of commitment for the participant group. Through the description of experiences across the full timeline of the remote period, the positioning of peers/colleagues enjoys primacy in participant interviews. The role of peers during the Pandemic period took on new meaning and the social bonds and relationships forged during that time demonstrate an experience that Participant#2 described as a “Band of Brothers”. This helps build understanding of how commitment to peers and colleagues carried through and, crucially, sustained even after the return to campus.

### **RQ3. How does perceived organizational support influence the employee's sense of organizational commitment and work engagement?**

Perceived organizational support is uniquely defined by each individual. The participants in this study were given open opportunities to describe their experiences with support during the remote work period and the types of support they received and/or would have liked to have received. Most participants indicated that technological support in the form of equipment, software, and suchlike, were readily available when asked for, but not always offered. Some knew of this through their position and connections within the institution, while others only found out when they observed that others had been able to secure the needed equipment or technology. This sometimes resulted in a delay in receiving supporting materials. The availability of these resources was often attributed to Pandemic Relief Funds (CARES Act), whereby funding was distributed by the U.S. government to support businesses. Participant #11 draws upon the experience when those relief funds supporting technology were depleted: “They pushed all the resources toward tech for a year and a half, then they pulled a lot of resources away after the fact.” Several participants pointed to this retraction of

technological resources as influencing their sense of commitment toward the organization in the post-pandemic period.

Support, in terms of financial or personnel resources, was very limited. According to participant recollections, budgets at their institutions were frozen for most of the remote period. Salary increases or monetary recognition or rewards were rare, and hiring was extremely limited until 2022. Even in the critical areas with need, the hiring process was significantly extended such that on-boarding of newly hired staff took much longer than usual. This delay of staffing resources in essential areas resulted in increased workload for some supervisors and staff and increased work engagement in the form of vigor, during the pandemic period. However, participants also described experiencing burnout after such long periods of heavy workload and limited staffing resources.

Some survey participants described limited supervisor support, and many worked on without significant supervisor guidance or feedback. Participant #10' experience was that her supervisor "was never available or reachable," and Participant #5 captured the views of several others when she explained, "I never felt like my supervisor had my back." Whilst the lack of supervisor support in the form of guidance or feedback was not necessarily viewed as problematic by most participants, the security of knowing that a supervisor would defend the participant and support their decisions was important for the participants who experienced it, and, conversely, was missed by those who had not.

Social and emotional support was very important to all the participants, although they derived this support from different sources. Some received the social support from a supervisor, others received it from colleagues. Very few interpreted the social and emotional support resources issuing from HR, or official organizational channels, as particularly meaningful or helpful. Some participants understood that support was being triaged during certain periods of the pandemic: "A lot of the support wasn't feasible because other things took more precedent." (Participant #8)

"I think a lot of the support wasn't given because it wasn't understood to the extent how disruptive this was going to be, and then, I think, once it was understood how disruptive the pandemic was going to be, all focus went to triage and just survival." (Participant #3)

Perhaps the most interesting reflection on support was from those participants whose positions provided extensive support to others. Several employees in these roles felt that they were not receiving support, while they were expected to be a continuous source of support for others. This is eloquently reflected in the interviews.



Participant #9: “It kind of made me laugh thinking about how I was supported. I want to know how people felt about my support, because I ended up doing a huge chunk of support but didn’t receive much in return.”

Participant #5: “I really didn’t feel very supported. I felt that I was being used to support others. The reason I don't feel like I was really supported was because I felt like I was not being valued. I was being definitely used . . .excessively.”

### Themes

Other important themes emerged from the data and are listed in table below, together with an illustrative quote from the interviews. Further analysis of these themes, and attendant detailed description of their relevance to the findings and recommendations, will be shared in the Discussion Chapter that follows.

*Table 10. Emergent Qualitative Research Themes*

THEME	FINDING	QUOTE
Trust	Employees valued trust demonstrated to them by all levels of the organization. This, in turn, encouraged trust in others.	“Supervisors would often fall into the habit of assuming people were doing as little as possible when the true reality was that we were all doing as much as we could.”
Communication	During times of crises, communication is critical. Excessive communication, however, can lead to burnout	“Something I wish I would have seen more of, and I think it's support, is the importance of language.”
Information Sharing	Lack of information sharing during a time of crisis, uncertainty or significant change is harmful to morale. Remote environments are particularly susceptible.	“...that false intimacy that you get from gossip. So that was really impactful on me, because I just felt like I had to be part of that game, because that was the only game being played.”
Autonomy	Autonomy present opportunity and allows creativity to shine	“I had to kind of find my own way to find my own use, and I’m glad I did it, because in many ways that sustained me into my position”
Job Crafting	In new contexts such as remote work, having the ability to design your work activities, workflow, and working day, offers agency and can keep employees engaged and commitment.	“I could tell there was something I could form, that I could create my own. I could do something really useful if I just started a bi-weekly meeting with these folks..... I'm still really proud that I built that tradition “
Teamwork	Building channels for teamwork support the remote and in-office connection	“A sense of joint purpose, being in it together, getting through it, demonstrates commitment”
Leadership	Leaders who communicate, recognize employee contributions, and instill a	“I saw myself not so as a survivor, but somebody that was both knowledgeable, but also forward thinking.”

	culture of fairness may support engagement and commitment	
Proximity	Engagement and Commitment are impacted by proximal and distal influences, and remote work magnifies their effects	“I was receiving queues from my supervisor that because it wasn't visible what I was doing, and that I need to, somehow hustle.”
Social Support	Social support from peers and colleagues plays an important role to successful remote work	“The support I received that was really helpful was people being intentional, keeping in contact with me.” “Seeking out interactions with folks when it's very easy to go the whole day without speaking to other anybody . . .was very important.”

## Summary

The qualitative findings revealed a rich and textual accounting from participants of the experience of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through their insights it was possible to more clearly understanding how they experienced work engagement and commitment during that period and the importance of different foci for their commitment. The data also identified different types of support and how these impacted the worker's experience. Additionally, several themes emerged that are help to both scholarship and practice, namely:

1. Channels of communication are essential at all levels for trust and comfort.
2. Providing autonomy to the remote worker allows for greater flexibility, creativity and engagement.
3. Technology is an ever-expanding tool for productivity and creativity, and the remote work period propelled us exponentially forward in the familiarization and utilization of these tools.
4. Compassion is especially important in the post-pandemic and every effort should be made to foster this in workers and to create policies, culture and environment where employees are kind to themselves and others.

The discussion of findings in the next chapter offers further insights.

## **Chapter 7 - Discussion of Findings**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the findings of the qualitative data collection strands are discussed, starting with the contribution of the research to the literature. The research questions are presented, and the findings are applied to explain the phenomenon and to answer the stated research questions. The findings are then reviewed through the lens of the SET theoretical framework, thus generating a more complete picture of the phenomenon. Conclusions are presented to provide contributions to both theory and professional practice. Finally, the chapter sets out key recommendations, a summary of the study limitations, and proposals for future research directions.

### **7.2 Contribution of the research to the literature**

As summarized previously and demonstrated through the presentation of findings and the resulting discussion, the current study contributes to the body of knowledge on several fronts. From a theoretical standpoint, the research expands the applicability of social exchange theory in the higher education and remote work contexts, as under-researched and rapidly emerging areas of scholarship respectively. The findings of the study also build our understanding of how the constructs of work engagement, perceived organizational support, and organizational commitment are experienced among higher education workers and in a remote work setting, as well as the paradigms of influence and interplay between them. Of particular value to scholarship are the discoveries in the area of foci of commitment among higher education workers and in the remote work setting, addressing a significant gap in the literature. Expanding the contribution of all of these areas is the comparative retrospective and current layers of the study, which enhance the research landscape and build upon existing literature pointing to the dynamic nature of commitment foci and employee work attitudes. Finally, by exploring of the phenomena through the experience of the higher education, remote worker, the thesis expands the body of knowledge and identifies paths for future lines of inquiry.

### **7.3 Overview of findings**

On the matter of work arrangements, data analysis concluded that full-time, in-office work was not necessary for commitment or work engagement, but also, that fully remote was not the preferred work setting. Participants reflected very positively on the hybrid work arrangements and expressed stronger commitment to the organization and department from those arrangements. These findings suggest that the hybrid model may be the optimal work arrangement for higher education worker with sufficient considerations for the factors

influencing successful remote and in-person work. The qualitative findings enrich our understanding of the elements of the hybrid model that work well (or not) and those elements that contributed to the employees' commitment and engagement. **Flexibility** was identified as a key factor in the design of the individual hybrid model. These findings align with previous studies which found that the way a hybrid work model is configured and implemented can significantly affect work engagement (Prevot and Magi 2022) and organizational commitment (Choo et al. 2016). Along similar lines, current study participants with enforced or prescriptive models of hybrid work reported lower levels of commitment (in particular affective commitment), leading to lower levels of job satisfaction and increased levels of both intention to leave and turnover. Sharma (2023) concurs that there is no 'one size fits all' model of hybrid work arrangement; flexibility is key, and without appropriate planning, work engagement may suffer leading to exhaustion and burnout.

From a social exchange (SET) perspective, this finding can be better understood in the context of the employee perceiving flexible work arrangements as a job reward (Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu 2018). In terms of reciprocity, employees value flexible work arrangements and in receiving them reciprocate to the organization through positive behaviors and increased engagement. However, resources are not necessarily valued in the same way by all employees. Earlier studies have theorized through SET that certain flexible work arrangements would lead to the desired worker engagement outcomes; however, they found that this was not consistently the case (Berkery et al. 2020). The referenced study's authors explain this result as an example of the "Pollyanna Fallacy", whereby not every worker will perceive the offered benefit (in this case work arrangement) as useful and will therefore not reciprocate with the intended behaviors. This only further supports the relevance of individualized approaches to work arrangements that emerged from the current study data.

Some participants from the present study placed greater value on office access, while others valued more time working remotely, However, participant views of mandated work arrangements (outside of the pandemic health emergency period) were consistently negative, and several participants described the impact of mandated work arrangement on their commitment to organization and department as negative. The findings that emerged from this line of inquiry supported 'perceived location autonomy' and 'work environment choice' as a valued rewards in the social exchange (Spivak and Milosevic, 2018) and suggest that flexible work arrangements positively influence overall commitment, aligning with earlier findings in the literature (Galea et al. 2013).

The hybrid model of remote work, while positively aligned with participants' job attributes (e.g. work engagement), presented some challenges in terms of support, particularly for

workers with supervisory responsibilities. Across the sample population of administrators, faculty, and staff, close to 70% had some supervisory role. Perceived organizational support and levels of commitment to different foci were notably influenced by the role of supervisor for those participants who described it as part of their job responsibilities. Needing support and giving support created a paradigm of competing demands for many workers in this position and re-affirmed that perceived organizational support played an important role in the balance. Ipsen et al. (2021) and Hassard and Morris (2021) also found that supervisors in remote work settings, in the pandemic period, struggled to balance the demands of providing support (as well as serving as the conduit for organizational support) and their needs for support. Like many of their subordinates, workers in supervisory roles found weak support from upper-level administrators, but interestingly, identified peers across other departments and subordinates as sources of support.

From an SET perspective, these experiences support the significance of proximity in the exchange relationship. Feeling a sense of interpersonal proximity changes the relationship and exchange (Scerrati et al. 2022), and from the data reported, participants in the present study expressed this same feeling. Furthermore, the shifting power dynamics represented in the data (e.g. supervisors relying on subordinates for support) and increased agency experienced by remote workers (e.g. flexibility in work arrangement) also redefined, to some extent, the contours of the social exchange relationship. If managers and employees were “all in it together”, the result of an increased egalitarian orientation in the relationship would be expected (Pines 2002).

The present study had findings that were representative of the reciprocity tenet of SET. Participants reported strong associations between departmental commitment and work engagement specifically for the current period and in general alignment between sources of support and commitment foci. This also led to a new focus of commitment emerging from the interviews, that of the peer or colleague. For some, peers and colleagues are situated within the department, and for others, these colleagues reside in departments outside their own. Some of the affective commitment toward the department, therefore, may be explained by the overlapping focus toward colleagues. Additionally, some individuals described their socialization and bonding with colleagues and peers (virtually and in-person) as a particularly fulfilling experience. Interestingly, because peers and colleagues represent proximal foci on multiple levels, affective commitment towards them may be more significant (Harney and Cafferkey 2014).

The relationships between supervisor and subordinate, departmental colleagues, and peers outside of the departments all hold unique features but each of these reciprocal exchanges

is more proximal than the organization. Based on earlier empirical research, it is expected that employees rely more on proximal relationships such as workgroup (Self et al. 2005) and in the context of the pandemic and the remote work setting that proximity can be understood as social and cognitive/organizational, rather than physically or geographically (Boschma 2005). The alignment of source of support and foci commitment is demonstrative of the reciprocal relationship held by SET.

**Communication** was identified by participants as an important resource and support in the remote work setting. It was viewed as a particularly critical in the early period and played an important role in the employee's sense of commitment to the organization and other foci. The role of proximity also surfaced through the data, as it related to communication. Li and colleagues (2020) propose that frequent, substantive, interactive, and authentic communications play an important role in developing perceived proximity and commitment. In the context of the current study this reciprocal exchange of frequent and substantive communication occurred at all levels. However, the interactivity and authenticity were only perceived at the level of supervisor, department and amongst peers. This suggests that the style and nature of communication plays a significant role in the social exchange relationship. Saglam et al. (2020) identified an empirical link between reciprocity and communication quality, which they define as relevant to the subject, timely and reliable. The results of the present study support the link between reciprocity and communication; however, it suggests that the features and definition of communication quality should be revisited. It may be argued that the features of 'frequent', 'substantive', and 'authentic' (proposed by Li et al.) align with 'subject relevance', 'timeliness', and 'reliability' (though in the present study authenticity was described by participants as a much more multi-faceted and personal concept). This, nonetheless, omits the element of interactivity, which fundamentally underpins the idea of relationship and reciprocity.

#### **7.4 Findings as Applied to the Research Questions**

##### **RQ1. How do employees experience organizational commitment and work engagement with remote work?**

The study found that employees' experience within the remote work context evolved over time. This aligns with findings of previous studies and those recently completed during the Pandemic period (van Rossenberg et al. 2018; Klein et al. 2022) The bases of commitment (i.e., affective, normative, and continuance) for employees have also evolved over time in the remote work period and in response to work context. Employees most frequently identified with normative commitment during the remote period. This increase has also been found in other studies set in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Davidson and Andiappan

2023; Gifford 2022). Findings from an empirical study by Sholesi et al. (2023), however, run contrary to the those from the present study and others in the literature in particular aspects of remote work. Sholesi and company found a weak relationship between normative commitment in fully remote work, but a strong relationship between normative commitment and hybrid remote work.

Since the present study identified strong normative commitment during the early pandemic period, when workers were fully remote, this contrast merits some additional consideration. Throughout the interviews, participants often referenced 'just surviving' and 'getting through it' when describing the experience of the first year of the pandemic. This mindset may help explain how and why the employees experienced heightened normative commitment in the present study context. It is important to note that the study by Sholesi and colleagues was set in Nigeria, where cultural context might have influenced divergent results.

Affective commitment, which has dominated the research realm of organizational commitment for some time (Mercurio 2015), features prominently in the experiences of the study participants. However, the research found that for the current employees studied, affective and normative commitment were closely related. It is possible that this is due to the dominance of a normative commitment at that time or, indeed, that this experience is representative of a new theoretical overlap between affective and normative commitment. It was not possible to definitively infer from the data. However, it serves as a signpost for future investigation. One area of research that does offer explanation are those studies which have theoretically and empirically identified the bases of commitment as evolving on a continuum. Researchers have found that commitment shifts in crises and dynamic environments (Meyer and Morin 2018; Klein et al. 2020) and following changes in work context (Cafferkey et al. 2017). The enforced remote work context, and the challenges presented by the Pandemic environment, presented constant change, ambiguity and uncertainty, a context that aligns with the findings in the previous research.

Continuance commitment was also identified in the experiences of just under half of the interview participants. In this context, they referenced concerns about layoffs/redundancies and being thankful for having a job during that period. The fear and anxiety about job uncertainty were quite prevalent during the pandemic closure period, but participant perspectives on their experience with remote work in the current period did not reflect the continuation of those concerns. Rather, they reflected a newfound resilience in employees, one of increased self-efficacy and engagement.

Work engagement was found to be high throughout the remote work period. Whilst most interview participants described moments of absorption, and being 'in the flow', the work

engagement dimension most often identified was dedication, reflecting a sense of significance and pride in one's work. The dimension of vigor, reflecting energy, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude, was represented in employee experiences at different points in the remote work period for different individuals. Engagement was particularly high in the present period for those who were satisfied with their current work arrangement, which most often reflected a hybrid, flexible model. Those employees experiencing high engagement found satisfaction in the autonomy they had been granted to pursue meaningful work through a work arrangement they had designed.

## **RQ2. What roles do multiple foci of commitment play in the higher education context?**

Of the three foci originally identified at the start of the study (the organization, the department, and the students), the student emerged as the most significant focus for HEI employees. Even those participants who did not have direct contact with students viewed them as their primary focus. These employees explained that, by focusing on helping faculty, they served as mediators of the commitment toward students.

Participants frequently referred to students as 'clients', 'customers', 'consumers' and similar-meaning terms. This is in line with the literature review's proposition, that HEIs may in many regards be viewed as PSFs and the students, in a focal context, as clients. The primary focus on students is not new to the HEI context, and the increased momentum to put the 'student first' is arguably one reflective of the precarity of the HEI marketplace. The targeted commitment to students was identified as more normative than affective, and the reasons for same are unclear, based on the data. The finding does, however, align with the general commitment profile and may be a sign of the effects of marketization of the HE sector. This line of inquiry was beyond the scope of the stated research and might be worthy of consideration in future research.

Peers or Colleagues (Peers/Colleagues) were identified as a very significant focus of commitment through the qualitative data. Peers/Colleagues represent individuals in the organization who are of similar professional level and may or may not be from the same department, unit, or area of the institution. Peers/Colleagues were identified as having an increasingly important role over the course of the pandemic, and the commitment was described as affective. This stands in contrast to the other foci, which were predominantly reflective of normative commitment. Descriptions of the support received by and given to peers and colleagues during the period of remote work, and the bonds that emerged from that socialization, may explain the strong affective commitment to this target.



Faculty also featured prominently as a target of commitment. However, it was often referenced as a mediator to students and as normative commitments. The department, employees (new), and the organization were also referenced, but within a very limited scope.

### **RQ3. How does perceived organizational support influence the employee's sense of organizational commitment and work engagement?**

The qualitative study investigated the relationship between perceived organization support (POS), organizational commitment, and work engagement with the intent of understanding how employees perceive and describe any relationships between the constructs and to identify if and ways in which POS influenced both organizational commitment and work engagement. Based on the study results, POS was found to significantly influence commitment and work engagement. This relationship aligns with what has been found in previous empirical research (Kim et al. 2017). Participants identified limited POS, and as a result, commitment to the organization was also limited. However, where other sources of support were identified as strong (for example through colleagues and peers), the commitment toward that target was also strong. These findings closely align with the SET model of relationship and reciprocity.

Several types of perceived organizational support, and support from other sources, were also incidental findings through this line of inquiry. Significant supports and resources emerging from the qualitative data include physical and material support in the form of technology, hybrid work models, increased autonomy, and job crafting opportunities. These all positively influenced work engagement and organizational commitment. Communication support and resources, along with emotional support, and 'communities of practices' that organically evolved over the course of the pandemic were all significant forms of support and resources tied to supervisors, departmental colleagues, and peers. These also had a strong positive influence on work engagement and commitment to the respective foci.

Further findings of the qualitative research, however, were limited in their contribution to understanding the influence and relationship between POS, work engagement, and organizational support. This is not surprising, as such causal relationships are often determined through quantitative methods and other, such as experimental, research designs (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017). Despite the acknowledged challenges, the value of the qualitative data on this research topic lies in the rich explanation, description, and detailed examples that qualitative findings can provide.

In the context of the remote work phenomenon, the perceived supports identified offer insights into participants' sense of work engagement and commitment to the organization

and other foci. The identified supports also may be further viewed as resources through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (SET). This will be discussed in the next section.

### **7.5 The SET Lens: Resources, Relationships and Reciprocity**

The qualitative data collection revealed many examples of support, resources, and rewards that applied specifically to the remote work context. Participant experiences also offered examples of the resource and relationship exchange that led to both positive and negative outcomes of work engagement and organizational commitment. In this discussion, it is important to recognize the effect that the Pandemic crises also had on the relationship and exchange model. Examples of employee willingness to engage in extra-role and organizational citizen behaviors, as well as self-sacrificial leadership, emerged throughout the data. This trend has been documented in other research during the Pandemic period (Su et al. 2022; Alshaabani et al. 2021; Shah et al. 2020).

In this study, these behaviors emerged from within the SET context of relationships, resources, reciprocity. Employees demonstrated willingness to forego resources and supports during the remote, pandemic period, in exchange for an anticipated future reward. These decisions by the employee are examples of an interdependent forward-looking exchange (Pilippaers et al. 2017). The psychological contract, however, is a delicate one, and in times of uncertainty and instability a psychological contract breach can have detrimental effects on well-being and job attitudes such as work engagement and organizational commitment (Karani et al. 2023).

Such was the case among participants in this study sample set. Resources and rewards were implicitly or explicitly offered for some future time point in exchange for employee commitment and engagement at the current time. However, this psychological contract has gone unfulfilled in the present day, and as a result, these employees have either left the organization for a new position or have formed an intention to leave. Another consideration in the paradigm is the level to which the social exchange transaction was appropriately matched to the relationship. (See Cropanzano 2005, Model of Transactions and Relationships in Social Exchange – Figure 1). Evidence suggests frequent mismatches between social/economic and relationship/transaction.

An added area of findings relevant to SET centers on the correlation between relationship shifts and commitment shifts. This emerged from discussions of shifting foci of commitment, and the evolution of relationships in the remote work setting and as part of the social exchange. The fluidity of the work structure and environment, as well as the redefining of proximal and distal relationships in a remote work context, call for some further consideration

of how the shifts in foci of commitment are influenced by the social relationships of the SET model.

These study findings of relationship and resource exchange offer a **contribution to theory**, by outlining how SET may fit into the context of remote work.

## **7.6 Contribution to Practice**

In addition to contributions to theory, the study offers a number of contributions to professional practice, both in the HEI sector and in the general context of the future of work and organizational management. Whilst all of the recommendations are reflective of the remote work environment, some might be more specifically related to the Covid-19 emergency context. Many critics of such contextual research point to the non-generalizability of findings and recommendations. However, this researcher would argue that with the many social, political, economic, and environmental challenges our society has faced in recent decades, the prospect of such emergencies and natural disasters occurring in the future is, unfortunately, very much in the realm of possibility.

*Recommendations for Policy Makers:*

**Share information and engage in honest and authentic communication.** During the over two years of Covid-19 pandemic remote work experience, employees have come to appreciate honest and authentic communications. Policies that are not clearly communicated, or that seem contrived or lacking in logical foundation, will not be well-received by employees; and organizations will face increased challenges in a poverty of employee buy-in. Recent strikes by faculty and staff at a major, public institution in the geographical area of the study illustrate the disruptive impact that poorly communicated plans and policies can have (Inside Higher Ed, April 17, 2023). Policy makers should open channels of communication that offer opportunities for interactive information sharing. This may be done via feedback loops or mechanisms by which the public, employees, etc. are not only recipients of information but are also offered a voice and channels of expression, both of which closely align with the desire commitment and work engagement (Budd et al. 2010). This is particularly important in the HE setting, where the academic concept of 'collegium' and shared governance have long influenced a culture of information sharing and exchange.

**Build institution-wide opportunities for rituals that create community and provide contextual frameworks for socialization and shared celebration.** At the most fundamental levels, employees need social opportunities. The data show that employees who want to work in office or in hybrid work/remote arrangements do so, in part, because of

the desire to socialize with colleagues and partake in common office rituals. It must be noted that one of the greatest emerging challenges, in this regard, is the paradoxical dilemma of campus/workplace/office life with hybrid work arrangements. Employees want to come into the office for socialization rituals, but when they do, they may find few people there. Some examples of ways to address this need in the HE context include: 1. Standing gathering opportunities, such as weekly team huddles, 2. Ceremonies for recognition, awards, or appreciation, 3. Team building or thematic events, and 4. Innovation challenges or similar contests involving collaboration. Collaboration and interactivity are the key features that make on-campus and in-office time meaningful and relevant (Fayard and Khan 2021).

#### *Recommendations for HR Support Services*

**Consider remote work policies that are flexible.** Data have shown that remote work arrangements are not a one-size-fits-all offering. Employees value having the option to structure a remote work plan that meets and balances their personal and work needs. Blanket institution-wide policies, that are ostensibly prescriptive but in practice left to the front-line manager to interpret and operationalize, result in disparate arrangement and perceived unfairness. Organizational procedural justice is an important consideration for employees, and when remote work policies are the topic of discussion, employees who worked very productively from home during the pandemic question the rationale for the limitation of remote options. Employees in the HE context have demonstrated the ability to affectively and responsibly design work arrangements that support productivity. One approach to offering flexibility may be through the design of a departmental framework that enables supervisors and managers to ensure business needs are met, while allowing individuals to propose work arrangements that match their needs. If individual needs cannot be fully met within the contours of the defined framework, the department may develop incentive, rewards, or compensatory options that balance the equation. In institutional contexts where hybrid work offerings have implications for contracts and rewards frameworks, HR might develop a staff charter outlining responsibilities to students and the university which could help to address these concerns.

#### ***Offer opportunities for cross-training and cross-unit social exchange opportunities.***

Employees who worked remotely greatly appreciated the opportunity to shift into new roles and responsibilities when past enforced remote work period was implemented. This helped some employees who had been at risk of furlough, offering opportunities for learning and growth, and leading to increased feelings of being valued and a sense of participation in meaningful work. Additionally, such cross-training can support the organic development of social connections among peers through cross-boundary teams. Social connections and

social support from peers and colleagues were identified in the data as one of the more valuable structures supporting employee engagement and commitment. In the HR context, this program would likely need to be developed and administered centrally, with departmental buy in. It is not uncommon in a HE context for an employee to be seconded to a different unit or institution altogether, and in a similar fashion the opportunity would be voluntary, and incentives could be put in place to encourage participation.

#### *Recommendations for Academic/Business Units and Frontline Managers*

**Have business continuity plans and resources available.** The Covid-19 emergency was the first such global pandemic in a century, and it caught organizations and managers alike unprepared. The current experience can inform us well on how and what should be considered in future plans. A guiding framework should be shared from a central emergency management unit (EMU) on campus, but each unit or department should develop their own designated plan to include up-to-date teaching methods and tools that can transfer modalities, communication and networking plans, and advance simulation exercises to remain current with needs and associated resources (Izumi et al. 2021).

**Be available remotely; don't be remotely available.** Employees expressed frustration at the inaccessibility of their managers, and some business units, when trying to contact them during the remote work period. Such practices have continued in the present time, even when many are on a hybrid schedule. It is unclear whether this represents a cultural shift in organizations and a 'new normal'. However, employees certainly identified the practice of being out of communication - or the expectations of delayed response - as being counterproductive to their work and outcomes. Employees rely on regular and meaningful communication to stay informed and to remain connected. Setting a time each day to be in contact during remote work periods (and offering other designated times of availability, should the need arise), may serve as a good practice.

**Provide autonomy to your staff.** Many examples of the benefits of employee autonomy during the remote period emerged from the data. This autonomy led to creativity, opportunities for job crafting, and more meaningful work, leading to greater productivity, work engagement, and job satisfaction. McGregor's (1960) Theory Y (assuming employees are self-motivated and want the best job possible) motivation approach should be modelled. Provide opportunities for autonomy might take the form of presenting a problem or business need to a staff member and requesting their proposed approach and plan for addressing the issue. For supervisors who need to maintain awareness of tasks or projects and timelines, asking the employee to design a work plan and deadline for feedback could be an approach that allows the employee both flexibility and creativity.

**Show authentic appreciation and recognition.** Employees have expressed a distaste for performative praise, which was frequently received but viewed as being inauthentic. Supervisors should be mindful of excessive casual praise, but rather they should familiarize themselves better with that advances or changes a staff member makes and be sure to recognize such progress.

#### *Recommendations for Individuals*

**Be your own hero/heroine.** Use whatever autonomy is granted to apply your creativity and self-efficacy to design a job and work activities that best achieve your desired or assigned outcomes. The data show that employees who exercised initiative during the remote work period, even in settings where autonomy was limited, successfully developed and implemented new solutions, projects, and new programs that continue today. This resulted in greater job satisfaction and sense of pride and accomplishment for many. Individuals should be empowered through feedback mechanisms to proposed solutions, suggest new initiatives and volunteer for new opportunities. These serve to foster sustainable, entrepreneurial universities (Davies 2001).

### **7.7 Summary**

This phenomenological study of organizational commitment, work engagement and perceived organizational support in a remote work context among higher education professionals in the NYC metropolitan area has confirmed findings of previous research into these constructs, their relationships to one another and employees' experience of them. The study has also revealed many new findings which make contributions to the literature in this emerging area of study, to theory on the dynamics of SET in a remote work setting, and to practice in identifying the ways employees experience remote work and perceive the supports that help them stay engaged and committed. This is especially important as the world of work is become more virtual, and the HE Sector will continue to be part of this trend. HE professionals have adapted and thrived in this new environment. With the right supports, they and their institutions will be better positioned for success moving forward.

### **7.8 Reflections of the Practitioner as Researcher**

As a practicing professional in higher education in the NYC metropolitan area, I fall into the population in the study and have experienced the same phenomenon as those whose experiences were represented in the results. Sitting at a worktable in my basement, at the height of the Pandemic, with all other members of the family situated in their respective corners of the house, I found myself calling into question my roles as a professional, as a doctoral student, and as a wife and mother, wondering how I would balance it all. Listening

to the stories and explanations offered by the study participants, I was drawn back to those periods of the early and late Pandemic, recalling very similar emotions, challenges and relief as the Pandemic dissipated and work and life returned to the 'new' normal. It was a transformative experience for me as a practitioner and scholar to see the same phenomenon through the eyes of others who perceived the experience in many different ways. Learning about the challenges each participant faced during this challenging period, and how they overcame these through creativity and resilience has been both informative and motivating. Taking on the researcher 'cap' from the seat of a professional having experience the phenomenon under study truly offered me the opportunity to see both sides of the experience and to be transformed in the process. The research experience has been an extraordinary one, and I look forward to continuing the journey.

### **7.9 Study Limitations**

The researcher recognizes that this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study is limited to the geographical area around the NYC Metropolitan area. This geographical context was chosen because it was accessible to the researcher for sampling purposes, and it was very familiar to the researcher for contextual considerations. As a result, it is recognized that the findings may have limited generalizability beyond this specific geographical area. Similarly, the HEI context is a unique one, and the work and organizational dynamics may not be representative of other populations, industries, or sectors.

Other limitations to the geographical and HEI relate to changes over time. An attempt was made to capture the evolution of the phenomenon from the early and later periods of Pandemic, with the hope that evolving perspectives and experiences would be represented in the findings. However, the study is not longitudinal and retrospective reports of experiences and perspectives have their limitations.

In addition to the contextual limitations, the study is limited in scope and does not make incorporate analyses of all possible personal characteristics as variables. This was beyond the scope of the study.

Beyond these limitations, the researcher recognizes that whilst all attempts were made to address potential biases, they are still a risk. One such bias that results from the non-probability sampling method is self-selection bias, which can result in a sample that may not be fully representative of the entire population. Despite measures to counteract this potential bias, it should be nonetheless acknowledged.

The small sample size on both the quantitative and qualitative strands of data collected pose some limitations findings and conclusions, particularly as it pertains to any quantitative data. The number of interviews is generally standard for a phenomenological study. However, the nature of a phenomenological approach, limits the findings to an understanding of the lived experience of the phenomena and therefore does not support the development or proposal of any causal or relational models of organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support that might have also been helpful contributions to the literature.

### **7.10 Recommendations for Further Research**

The data yielded an interesting array of incidental findings that point to opportunities for further research beyond the research questions of this study.

One area that has interesting relevance but was not covered in the scope of their study was the roles and influence of personal characteristics, demographics, and social identities on the remote work experience, POS, work engagement, and organizational commitment. Whilst it was not reported in the research, the interview sample represented some diversity in terms of social identity. The researcher contends that there is significant scope for a greater understanding of the diverse experiences of people across different social strata and social identities. The literature provides many examples of studies set in the HEI context that investigate such variables, and since the Covid-19 shutdown and associated remote work period have been identified as having disparate effects on different populations, an expansion of the existing framework could be beneficial.

There is significant potential to investigate the same experience through the lenses of different cultural contexts. Such studies could illuminate other aspects of diversity, whilst providing the possibility of greater generalizability. Contributions to the body of knowledge of the phenomenon through the lens of workers from HEI and other organizations in different geographical and cultural contexts also helps to support results that are more representative of a globalized workplace.

Designing the lines of inquiry along a quantitative model might provide an opportunity to develop and test hypotheses in the relationship between organizational commitment, work engagement, and perceived organizational support. Another approach might be investigating the difference sources of perceived support and their alignment with commitment toward those same foci.



Since this study was limited to the worker's experience and perspective, future studies might explore the phenomenon through the lens of supervisor or administrator or look at the link with different work attributes or outcomes such as satisfaction or productivity.

Finally, future studies exploring these research topics across multiple sectors would contribute to our understanding and the potential for greater generalizability of the findings.

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## APPENDIX A

# Remote Work Experience

---

## Start of Block: CONSENT FORM

### Consent

**Study Title:** Exploring Organizational Commitment and Work Engagement: A Phenomenological Study of Higher Education Professionals in the NYC Metropolitan Area **Researcher:** Diana Cvitan  
**Academic Affiliation:** University of Bath, UK, School of Management, HEM Doctoral Candidate  
**Professional Affiliation:** Fairleigh Dickinson University, Office of Global Learning and Partnerships

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about the work experiences of university employees. The research is being conducted for my doctoral thesis in the Higher Education Management program, School of Management, University of Bath, UK. Please review the below information to decide on whether to consent for participation.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomena of organizational commitment and work engagement as experienced by higher education professionals. More specifically, I am investigating the role of perceived organizational support in this experience by those who have worked in remote settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this research will contribute to our understanding of remote working arrangements and organizational commitment, work engagement and perceived organizational support in the context of the higher education sector.

### Participation

This survey should take you between 10 and 15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymized and will be used only for the purpose of the stated study. You may withdraw your participation at any time. It is estimated that 300 respondents from multiple institutions in the NYC metropolitan and surrounding areas will participate in this study.

If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete the online survey which follows this consent form.

- The first section of the survey will ask some demographic questions which will help to analyze the results and confirm that there is appropriate representation of the population.
- The second section has two parts. It will consist of questions in the form of a statement, where you will be asked to indicate your level of agreement with the statement. In the first part, you will be asked to answer the questions thinking of your experience and perspective from July 2020 to June 2021. In the second part, you will answer the questions from your current experience and perspective.
- The third and final section will offer you the opportunity to share additional feedback you may have and indicate whether or not you would be willing to participate in a possible follow up discussion/interview.

Thank you for your assistance with this study,

APPENDIX A

Diana Cvitan

Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Management, University of Bath, UK

I CONSENT (1)

I DO NOT CONSENT (2)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Study Title: Exploring Organizational Commitment and Work Engagement: A Phenomenological Study of... = I DO NOT CONSENT*

End of Block: CONSENT FORM

---

Start of Block: Demographic Information

Dem1 Please select your higher education institution (HEI) employer type.

Public University/College (1)

Private Non-profit University/College (2)

Private For-profit University/College (3)

Other (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to answer (5)

---

Dem2 What is your role at the HEI? (Check all that apply.)

- Administrator (1)
  - Professional Staff (2)
  - Faculty (3)
  - Other (4) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to answer (5)
- 

Dem3 Are you full-time or part-time?

- Full time (1)
  - Part time (2)
  - Prefer not to answer (4)
-

APPENDIX A

Dem4 Where is your institution located in the wider NYC Metro Area?

- New York (1)
  - New Jersey (2)
  - Connecticut (3)
  - Other? (4) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to answer (5)
- 

Dem5 How long have you worked for this institution?

- Less than 2 years (1)
  - 2 - 5 years (2)
  - 6 - 10 years (3)
  - 11 - 20 years (4)
  - 20 years + (5)
  - Prefer not to answer (6)
-



Dem6 Please indicate your age range:

- Under 30 (1)
  - Between 31 - 40 (2)
  - Between 41 - 50 (3)
  - Between 51 - 60 (4)
  - 61+ (5)
  - Prefer not to answer (6)
- 

Dem5 Gender

- Female (1)
  - Male (2)
  - Other (3) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to answer (4)
- 

Dem8 Do you have young children at home?

- Yes, under age 5 (1)
- Yes, between 6 - 12 (2)
- No (3)
- Prefer not to answer (4)

Dem9 How would you describe your remote work experience **during the period July 2020 - June 2021?** (please check any that apply)

- Fully remote/work from home (1)
  - Hybrid remote/office (2)
  - Work from office only (3)
  - Enforced/required (4)
  - Optional (5)
  - Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Dem10 **At the present time,** how would you define your remote work experience? (please check any that apply)

- Fully remote/work from home (1)
- Hybrid remote/office (2)
- Work from office only (3)
- Enforced/required (4)
- Optional (5)
- Other (6) \_\_\_\_\_

End of Block: Demographic Information

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Start of Block: Intro Part 1 2019-2020

APPENDIX A

Intro 1 Thinking about your work experience **July 2020 - June 2021** please answer the following block of questions based on your perspective **from that time frame.**

End of Block: Intro Part 1 2019-2020

---

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Com1 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I would have been very happy to spend the rest of my career working with \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break

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APPENDIX A

Com2 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I enjoyed discussing  
\_with people outside of it.

(Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com3 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I really felt as if  
 's problems were my own.  
 (Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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APPENDIX A

Com4 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I did not feel like "part of the family" at/with \_\_\_\_\_

(Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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APPENDIX A

Com5 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I did not feel "emotionally attached" at/with \_\_\_\_\_

(Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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APPENDIX A

Com6 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021,  
 \_had a great deal of personal meaning for me.  
 (Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com7 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I did not feel a strong sense of belonging to \_\_\_\_\_

(Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com8 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I did not feel any obligation to stay with my current \_\_\_\_\_

(Please answer for all three targets)

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup1 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization valued my contribution to its well-being.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup2 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization failed to appreciate any extra effort from me.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup3 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization would ignore any complaint from me.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup4 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization really cared about my well-being.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup5 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break



APPENDIX A

Sup6 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization cared about my general satisfaction at work.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup7 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization showed very little concern for me.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup8 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, the organization took pride in my accomplishments at work.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Eng1 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, at my work, I felt bursting with energy.

- Never** (1)
  - Almost Never** (A few times a year or less) (2)
  - Rarely** (Once a month or less) (3)
  - Sometimes** (A few times a month or less) (4)
  - Often** (Once a week) (5)
  - Very Often** (A few times a week) (6)
  - Always** (Every day) (7)
- 

Eng2 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I was enthusiastic about my job.

- Never** (1)
  - Almost Never** (A few times a year or less) (2)
  - Rarely** (Once a month or less) (3)
  - Sometimes** (A few times a month or less) (4)
  - Often** (Once a week) (5)
  - Very Often** (A few times a week) (6)
  - Always** (Every day) (7)
-

APPENDIX A

Eng3 Reflecting on my experience during the period July 2020 - June 2021, I was immersed in my work.

- Never** (1)
- Almost Never** (A few times a year or less) (2)
- Rarely** (Once a month or less) (3)
- Sometimes** (A few times a month or less) (4)
- Often** (Once a week) (5)
- Very Often** (A few times a week) (6)
- Always** (Every day) (7)

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APPENDIX A

End of Block: Default Question Block

---

Start of Block: Block 5

Intro 2 Now please answer the following block of questions from your **current experience/perspective**.

End of Block: Block 5

---

Start of Block: Current Questions

Com1B I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career working with \_\_\_\_\_

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break

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APPENDIX A

Com2B I enjoy discussing \_\_\_\_\_ with people outside of it.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com3B I really feel as if \_\_\_\_\_'s problems are my own.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break



APPENDIX A

Com4B I do not feel like “part of the family” at/with \_\_\_\_\_

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com5B I do not feel “emotionally attached” to \_\_\_\_\_

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com6B \_\_\_\_\_ has a great deal of personal meaning for me.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com7B I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to \_\_\_\_\_

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

APPENDIX A

Com8B I do not feel any obligation to stay with my current \_\_\_\_\_

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Moderately Disagree (2)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)	Slightly Agree (5)	Moderately Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
My organization (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My department (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The students (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Sup1B The organization values my contribution to its well-being.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

---

Page Break

Sup2B The organization fails to appreciate any extra effort from me.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

---

Page Break

Sup3B The organization would ignore any complaint from me.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

---

Page Break



Sup4B The organization really cares about my well-being.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

APPENDIX A

Sup5B Even if I did the best job possible, the organization would fail to notice.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

Sup6B The organization cares about my general satisfaction at work.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

Sup7B The organization shows very little concern for me.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

Sup8B The organization takes pride in my accomplishments at work.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Moderately Disagree (2)
- Slightly Disagree (3)
- Neither Agree nor Disagree (4)
- Slightly Agree (5)
- Moderately Agree (6)
- Strongly Agree (7)

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Page Break

Eng1B At my work, I feel bursting with energy.

- Never** (1)
- Almost Never** (A few times a year or less) (2)
- Rarely** (Once a month or less) (3)
- Sometimes** (A few times a month or less) (4)
- Often** (Once a week) (5)
- Very Often** (A few times a week) (6)
- Always** (Every day) (7)

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Page Break

Eng2B I am enthusiastic about my job.

- Never** (1)
- Almost Never** (A few times a year or less) (2)
- Rarely** (Once a month or less) (3)
- Sometimes** (A few times a month or less) (4)
- Often** (Once a week) (5)
- Very Often** (A few times a week) (6)
- Always** (Every day) (7)

---

Page Break

Eng3B I am immersed in my work.

- Never** (1)
- Almost Never** (A few times a year or less) (2)
- Rarely** (Once a month or less) (3)
- Sometimes** (A few times a month or less) (4)
- Often** (Once a week) (5)
- Very Often** (A few times a week) (6)
- Always** (Every day) (7)

End of Block: Current Questions

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Start of Block: Block 6

Q53 If selected, would you be willing to participate in a brief follow up discussion / interview? If so, please share your contact information below.

- Name (1) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Email (2) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Phone number (3) \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q61 Is there anything you would like to share regarding your work experience for either the period July 2020 - June 2021 or currently?

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APPENDIX A

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End of Block: Block 6

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## Research Study: Organizational Commitment and Work Engagement among Higher Education Professionals with Remote Work Experience

### Pre-Interview Sheet

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a post-survey interview for my research study. As preparation for the interview, I am sharing with you this pre-interview sheet. The document includes definitions that will be helpful for you to have before our discussion, along with some introductory questions to help guide the interview. If you could please complete and return the form to me the day prior to our interview, it would greatly help me to make the most of our brief interview period.

#### Definitions

Remote – Working outside of the office/campus, usually from home.

Hybrid – A combination of remote work and occasional work from the office/campus.

In-person – Working only from the office/campus setting.

Enforced (work arrangement) – A required work arrangement, e.g. mandated to work in-person.

#### Introductory Questions (please feel free to enter your answers right after each question)

1. What was your work arrangement during the pandemic lock-down? Was that arrangement enforced or optional?
2. While working during the pandemic lock-down, what kinds of support did you receive from:
  - a. Your institution?
  - b. Your supervisor?
  - c. Others?
3. What other kinds of support would you like to have received?
4. What was most important to you about your work during the period of the of the pandemic lock-down?
5. Who/Which groups were relying on you to carrying out your work role at that time?
6. How did you perceive your connection to these people/groups?
7. What is your work arrangement presently? Remote/Hybrid/In-person, and how does this differ from the pandemic lock-down period?
8. How is the support you receive different now from the earlier lock-down period?
9. Who is relying on your work in the present period?
10. What is your perception of your connection to these people/groups now?

Please let me know if you have any questions or information you would like to receive prior to our interview.

Our interview is scheduled for: \_\_\_\_ @@@@ \_\_\_\_\_

Link: <https://fdu.zoom.us> @@@@

Participant Number: @@

Thank you,

Diana Cvitan, [dcvitan@fdu.edu](mailto:dcvitan@fdu.edu) or [diana.begonja@gmail.com](mailto:diana.begonja@gmail.com) , 201-370-0187

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