

## **SOCIAL WELL-BEING IN MULTI-LOCATIONAL WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF A FINNISH UNIVERSITY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the way of working in many fields, including higher education (Sjöblom et al., 2022; Uusiautti et al., 2021). One of the major changes was a drastic increase in remote work, although this trend toward more flexible working arrangements was already emerging before the pandemic. Research has found that more than half of employees would like to work remotely or in hybrid mode (e.g., Bababour et al., 2021). However, employees also wanted to see their co-workers and appreciated the sense of community more than before (Procentese et al., 2019). Our research focuses on the higher education sector as a multi-locational workplace, specifically in Finland. The research is topical because the Finnish higher education system has undergone considerable transformation in recent years and multi-locational work is also transforming how work is done. The university we chose to focus on recently introduced multi-locational work guidelines.

Traditionally, Finnish universities have been committed to freedom of research, art, and higher education, as stated in the university law. In recent years, several reforms have influenced the Finnish higher education system and work conditions at universities. The performance management system was established from 1992-2005 and includes reward-based salary systems. Institutional mergers have taken place since 2007, and the number of universities overseen by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2023 was 13. A four-stage career model was established for universities in 2011, allowing only a few permanent work contracts for the first two career stages. In 2010 universities ceased to be administered by the state and staff no longer had civil servant status. Since 2017 Finnish higher education institutions have established stronger profiles and performance indicators (Aarrevaara et al., 2021; Ahola, 2014; Pinheiro et al., 2019). All these reforms have affected the modes of work, management, and work conditions discussed in this article.

Together with the aforementioned changes, the implementation of multi-locational work can also have several consequences. While multi-locational work arrangements can help an organization find more efficient work methods, the academic culture, interaction, and participation are at risk (Procentese et al., 2019). Universities have been forced to pay attention to their organizational cultures and well-being, as well as the management of these (Oades et al., 2011). Our research focused on one small Finnish research university, located in a remote area. It functions as an example of how non-metropolitan universities work as multi-locational higher education workplaces.

Indeed, the concepts of remote, virtual, and hybrid work are common in work settings today. In this article we refer to the concept of multi-locational work as we focus on work arrangements that allow employees to work both at the workplace and at home or in other places where it is possible to work online. The cutting-edge

technologies in higher education offer new methods for collaborating on multi-locational work regardless of time and place (Da et al., 2022; Rawas 2023). However, not all employees have similar opportunities and competences with regard to using technology in their work, and thus work opportunities are not equal for all (Burchell et al., 2021). When researching the impact of hybrid work on employee well-being, more focus should be placed on different employee groups in order to build a holistic understanding of the construction of social well-being and collaboration (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). This article focuses on employees in different positions at one Finnish university and their perceptions of the connection between multi-locational work and social well-being.

## **SOCIAL WELL-BEING IN MULTI-LOCATIONAL WORK**

### **The Job Demands-Resources Model as the Framework of Social Well-Being at Work**

This article discusses social well-being in the context of multi-locational work in higher education. As described by Boreham et al. (2016), the multidimensional concept of social well-being at work may be defined as the culmination of a physical and mental state that interacts with the social context in which an individual lives and works. This is a broad definition of an employee's social well-being. The concept of social well-being is based on the view that social resources enable a sense of community of affect within the work community. These social resources can be divided into workers' personal resources and workplace resources (Hakanen, 2011).

Multi-locational work faces obstacles and opportunities in universities that relate to both the community and the individual's approach towards their work. Collegiality determines the nature of interaction in work communities in universities and the ways in which the appreciation of work is determined. The work is promoted through the principles of leadership, based on which literature has identified effective leader behaviors (Samad et al., 2021). Multi-locational work may present several opportunities as well as challenges with regard to the well-being of university personnel, and the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) serves as a framework in this article (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The connection between multi-locational work and the JD-R model lies in the specific resources and demands multi-locationality places on individual employees' work in the university. According to the JD-R model, work resources support the achievement of work goals, reduce the depletion of resources caused by work demands, and promote individual growth, learning, and development (Evans, 2015). Employees' social well-being is also linked to job satisfaction, and employee job satisfaction increases as the employee develops more positive relationships with their supervisor and other colleagues (Beckel & Fisher, 2022).

### **The Relationship Between Social Well-Being and Multi-Locational Work**

In our study, social well-being is classified as one of the resources at work which multi-locationality may affect. These resources make it possible for employees to fulfill their psychological needs and have a sense of freedom and a sense of community. In a university, the resources at work are manifold: the work content is often perceived as important and engaging by employees, but a large proportion of academic discussions and innovations happen through face-to-face encounters and teamwork (Foster et al., 2022). In addition, multi-locational work allows people to work anywhere.

Multi-locational work offers employees flexibility when it comes to arranging their daily lives, and yet every employee reacts to this flexibility individually. This kind of flexibility requires self-management skills to control the rhythm and amount of work (Sjöblom et al., 2022; Grobelny, 2023), but basically job autonomy is related to greater job satisfaction (e.g., Zhang & He, 2022). On the other hand, working from multiple locations may cause employees to feel loneliness and experience isolation from the rest of the work community (Babapour et al., 2021). Therefore, in multi-locational work, the social well-being perspective should not be ignored.

Another perspective on multi-locational work and its impact on social well-being is that it can be difficult for employees to keep work and their personal life separate (Koch & Binnewies, 2015). Employees need the skill to set boundaries between work and the rest of their life (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) report that in the academic world, flexibility and the freedom to choose where to work can help employees shape the space between work and their personal lives when balancing their different roles (Foster et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2018).

When it comes to perceived social well-being, multi-locational work can be seen not only as a resource but also as a demand (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Our main interest in this research is how university employees' social well-being is affected by multi-locational work. Hill et al. (2022) found that employees who only work remotely can sometimes feel isolated from their work community, impacting on their sense of participation and inclusion. Social isolation in knowledge workers is connected to emotional exhaustion, especially if the employee has low levels of self-confidence or optimistic attitudes (Uusiautti et al., 2025). Multi-locational work can increase stress levels as interaction with colleagues is possible only using digital platforms, and thus has an impact on employees' commitment to the organization.

At the work community level, multi-locational work can create challenges related to interaction and participation. A work community needs its members to create and share common goals (Babapour et al., 2021). In order to flourish, an organization needs to ensure a multitude of social resources are available to the community, including respect, supervisors' trust in employees, work commitment, and motivation (Neupane et al., 2022). Boreham et al. (2016) note that specific features related to well-being in a work community are opportunities to participate and trustful and open interaction between supervisors and employees (see also Mahomed et al., 2022). Social support is therefore also an important job resource from the community perspective (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Organizations can support the social well-being of their community members by offering new digital solutions to maintain interaction and participation between employees (Straus et al., 2022), and by creating clear guidelines related to multi-locational work (Carroll & Conboy, 2020; Williamson & Pearce, 2022). However, organizational culture and management practices can affect how different work arrangements actually support employees' social well-being (Newman et al., 2020).

In sum, social well-being in multi-locational work contexts is a multifaceted phenomenon which encompasses the sense of communality in the workplace and opportunities to collaborate and interact with others, which can be a significant resource at work. In addition, the phenomenon concerns employees' subjective perceptions and evaluations about how work arrangements conform to their personal lives and expectations.

## METHOD

The main goal of this article is to analyze how university employees' well-being is affected by multi-locational work. As the literature review showed, there are many ways to approach the phenomenon. We aimed to deepen our understanding of the university employee experience by choosing a mixed methods approach to answer the following research questions: (1) How is university employees' social well-being affected by multi-locational work? and (2) How do university employees describe the relationship between social well-being and multi-locational work?

We applied the convergent parallel mixed methods design, in which two sets of data complement each other but still retain their own particular characteristics (Borrego et al., 2009; Creswell, 2014). This kind of approach acknowledges that there are multiple realities and ways of conceptualizing reality (Johnson, 2017). Research Question 1 aims to find measurable connections between social well-being and multi-locational work and therefore, it is focused on quantitative survey data and analyses. However, we were also interested in employees' personal accounts of the phenomenon, and therefore Research Question 2 requires qualitative interview data and analysis of employees' own experiences and perceptions. The advantage of using this combination of methods is that it makes it possible to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from many different perspectives (Creswell, 2014); in this case, multiple perspectives on social well-being in multi-locational work are obtained, which bring out the experiences of employees holistically. By employing mixed methods we can perform a profound analysis, through which the survey findings can be explained by the employees' perspectives as discussed in the interviews.

### Survey Data Collection and Statistical Analyses

The first dataset was obtained using an online survey, which was completed by personnel of the target university during the fall of 2023. The themes selected for the survey were based on an understanding of the explanatory factors connecting multi-locational work and social well-being formed as a result of the analysis conducted for

the literature review. The questionnaire was tested in a limited pilot conducted with respondents who were not part of the sample population. This made it possible to get feedback on the structure and functionality of the survey.

In this survey, we asked about factors related to multi-locational work and communality, factors related to multi-locational work and interaction, factors related to multi-locational work and participation, and multi-locational work itself. The staff members who participated in the survey were asked to provide the following background information: Age, gender, work experience, job description (research and teaching staff or service and expert staff), and the degree of multi-locational work. In addition, the survey included some open-ended questions that were not used in the analysis of the data. We analyzed our data using SPSS 28.0 for Windows software. The questionnaire mainly consisted of statements with a five-level Likert-type scale (5= “fully agree”, 4= “somewhat agree”, 3= “neither agree nor disagree”, 2= “somewhat disagree”, 1= “fully disagree”).

The research participants (N=167, response rate 23%) represented research and teaching staff (N=62) and service and expert staff (N=105). Of these, 120 were female and 39 were male, while six chose not to provide their gender information and two selected “other gender”. The majority of participants were 45-49 years old, with an average of 10.5 years of work experience. Of the respondents, 99% worked from home, 95% at the office, 50% on work trips, and 23% from elsewhere, such as a library or cottage. Many respondents chose more than one option.

Exploratory factor analysis was selected as we had a prior understanding of what kind of theory is suitable for examining aspects of social well-being. The analysis yielded a three-factor model. All factor loadings with a value of at least 0.3 are shown in Table 1. In this study, the lower limit is 0.3.

As a result, several factors were created (see Table 1), all of which were subjected to Cronbach’s alpha test. The applicability of the factor analysis was tested with variables. The cohesion of the variables was examined, and suitable sum variables were formed based on the Cronbach's alpha results. We tried different combinations of variables and compared the alpha values obtained.

Three factors emerged from the results: communality, interaction, and motivation. The *communality* factor includes essential forms of community such as commitment, support, and worth. The *interaction* factor consists of different parties to the interaction. The *motivation* factor consists of the flexibility and motivation involved in multi-locational work. These factors were used as sum variables for further analyses (see Table 2). The unity between variables (reliability) is represented by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. The value of this coefficient varies between 0 and 1: the higher the value, the better (Al-Osail et al., 2015). The value for all factors was above 0.6, which means that the reliability is good.

**Table 1**  
*Factor Loadings*

SUM VARIABLE	FACTOR LOADING	SUM VARIABLE	FACTOR LOADING	SUM VARIABLE	FACTOR LOADING
<b>Motivation</b>		<b>Interaction</b>		<b>Communality</b>	
Multi-Locational Work Helps With Daily Routines	0.519	Accessibility	0.600	Communality	0.431
Multi-Locational Work Increases Motivation Towards Work	0.790	Supervisor allows multi-locational work	0.775	Work community	0.657
Multi-Locational Work Adds Self-Leadership	0.641	Fairness in work with work community	0.526	Work atmosphere	0.632
Opportunity To Work Anywhere	0.739	Fairness in work with supervisor	0.796	Commitment	0.545
		Working in different locations	0.338	Support	0.663
				Worth	0.764
				Help	0.705

**Table 2**  
*Reliability Statistics for the Formation of Sum Variables*

Sum variable	Factors	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Communality</i>	communality, work community, work atmosphere, commitment, support, help, worth	0.796
<i>Interaction</i>	working in different locations, supervisor allows multi-locational work, fairness in work with work community, fairness in work with supervisor, accessibility	0.755
<i>Motivation</i>	multi-locational work helps with daily routines, multi-locational work increases motivation towards work, multi-locational work adds self-leadership, opportunity to work anywhere	0.666

## **Interview Data and Qualitative Content Analysis**

The second dataset comprised qualitative themed interviews with eight staff members of the university (four research and teaching staff and four service and expert staff members) carried out during October-November 2023. Six of the participants were female and two were male. There were no supervisors among the interviewees. To protect their anonymity, we did not collect any other identity information. Participants signed up voluntarily to the interviews, which were conducted online. The interview themes included communality, participation, interaction, attachment to the university, and daily multi-locational work. For example, we asked what community spirit meant to them and how they would describe their work attachment at the university at the moment.

We assigned each participant a code name: research and teaching staff members 1-4, and service and expert staff members 1-4. We analyzed the data using qualitative data content analysis. Using NVivo for the initial coding, we found the following main codes: balance between work and other areas of life, opportunities to feel a sense of belonging, and opportunities to maintain interaction. The main codes were compared to identify differences and similarities and sorted into sub-codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). The goal of the data analysis was to form new perspectives and new meanings during the interpretation and synthesis phase.

## **RESULTS**

### **Degrees of Social Well-Being in Multi-Locational Work**

To investigate how the university employees' well-being was affected by multi-locational work, we compared the sum variables with the background information factors (age, gender, work experience, job description). All sum variables reacted identically to the background information factors. Table 3 depicts the levels of communality, interaction, and motivation among research and teaching staff and service and expert staff. Table 3 shows that both the research and teaching staff (84%) and service and expert staff (88%) felt that communality was well or very well actualized in their work. Research and teaching staff experienced that interaction (82%) was well or very well actualized and service and expert staff felt that interaction (93%) was well or very well actualized. Motivation in multi-locational work was well or very well actualized among both research and teaching staff (92%) and service and expert staff (89%).

Linear regression analysis attempts to explain the variation in a response variable using one or more variables (Ali & Jounas, 2021). The variables should be continuous and approximately normally distributed. The basic assumption of linear regression analysis is that the dependence of the response variable on the explanatory variables is linear.

With the help of a linear regression model, the connections between the sum variables communality, interaction, and motivation in multi-locational work and the individual variables which explain social well-being were investigated. Tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate the connections between the sum variables and individual variables. Loneliness at work is negatively associated with communality ( $B=-0.134$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) (Table 4). The results indicate that the respondents experienced loneliness to some extent. Staff members' loneliness appeared to significantly decrease social well-being.

In Table 5, the interaction variable appeared to be positively supported by the variables participation ( $B=0.207$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and university support ( $B=0.242$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Maintaining interaction was associated with increased participation and university support. In academic work, thinking together, participation, and university support are seen as key factors of working together. Loneliness at work was negatively associated with interaction as well ( $B=-0.123$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Table 6 shows how distance meetings ( $B= 0.186$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), participation ( $B=0.207$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and communication applications ( $B=0.258$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) positively affect motivation. Virtual applications enable work to be done anywhere and anytime, and this might explain why distance meetings and communication are highlighted as part of motivation. Loneliness at work was negatively associated with motivation as well ( $B=-0.128$ ,  $p<0.001$ )

**Table 3***Levels of Communality, Interaction, and Motivation Among Research & Teaching Staff and Service & Expert Staff*

	Research & Teaching Staff		Service & Expert Staff	
	%	n	%	n
<b><i>Communality</i></b>				
Reasonably actualized	16.1	10	12.4	13
Well actualized	32.3	20	35.2	37
Very well actualized	51.6	32	52.4	55
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>105</b>
<b><i>Interaction</i></b>				
Reasonably actualized	17.7	11	6.7	7
Well actualized	22.6	14	21.9	23
Very well actualized	59.7	37	71.4	75
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>105</b>
<b><i>Motivation</i></b>				
Reasonably actualized	8.1	5	11.4	12
Well actualized	32.2	20	18.1	19
Very well actualized	59.7	37	70.5	74
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>105</b>

**Table 4***Linear regressions that explain the connections to Communality*

Independent Variable	R2	Adjusted R2	F	B	Sig.	df	t
Loneliness at work	0.113	0.108	21.024	-0.134	0.001	166	53.228
Communication apps	0.03	0.024	5.035	0.081	0.026	166	27.259
Distance meetings	0.045	0.039	7.812	0.126	0.006	166	44.483
Participation	0.090	0.085	16.384	0.155	0.001	166	23.730
University support	0.054	0.048	9.311	0.149	0.003	164	16.748

**Table 5**  
*Linear Regressions that explain the connections to Interaction*

Independent Variable	R2	Adjusted R2	F	B	Sig.	df	t
Loneliness at work	0.075	0.070	13.423	-0.123	0.001	166	47.259
Communication apps	0.030	0.024	5.079	0.091	0.026	166	24.724
Participation	0.130	0.124	24.558	0.207	0.001	166	21.044
University support	0.113	0.108	20.758	0.242	0.001	164	14.178

**Table 6**  
*Linear Regressions that explain the connections to Motivation in multi-locational work*

Independent Variable	R2	Adjusted R2	F	B	Sig.	df	t
Loneliness at work	0.069	0.064	12.261	-0.128	0.001	166	43.879
Communication apps	0.202	0.197	41.640	0.258	0.001	166	21.388
Participation	0.109	0.103	20.148	0.207	0.001	166	19.393
Distance meetings	0.135	0.130	25.751	0.186	0.001	166	35.398

Employees' social well-being was affected positively by feelings of community, interaction, and participation. Respondents' loneliness appeared to significantly decrease social well-being. One explanatory factor for the increase in work motivation could be the opportunity given to employees to do their work flexibly, which in turn increased the employees' sense of autonomy.

### **Elements of Social Well-Being in Multi-Locational Work**

In the interviews, the employees described their experiences of multi-locational work comprehensively and provided further details that helped in understanding the survey findings. Their experiences could be categorized into three main themes that illustrate the different elements of social well-being in multi-locational work. Firstly, they highlighted the role of creating a balance between work and other areas of life and how this impacted their social well-being. In addition, they discussed opportunities to feel a sense of belonging. The third theme was opportunities to maintain interaction.

#### **The balance between work and other areas of life**

**Family-life balance.** According to staff members, their experiences with multi-locational work were divergent. The connection between all these experiences was the opportunity for multi-locational work, which was considered essential by every respondent. The advantage of flexibility was that employees could arrange their work freely according to their life situation. For some respondents, multi-locational work allowed them to balance work, childcare and leisure:

“I have a few small children here every other week. That's why this multi-locational work opportunity was a prerequisite for me taking on the job.” (Research and teaching staff 3)

“It substantially reduces stress when you are able to be where your physical presence is really needed. For example, being able to be physically present at my mother-in-law's house when my mother-in-law was sick with this really difficult disease.” (Service and expert staff 2)

Multi-locational work improves employees' personal lives by allowing them to spend time with their families, reducing the time spent travelling to work, and reducing stress levels. Other examples included doing grocery shopping and doing household chores.

According to the aforementioned results, the balance between work and other areas of life indirectly improved social well-being at work because it helped the employees cope better at work. However, flexibility could also prevent participation in the activities of the work community. This emerged in interviews where the employees described situations where they could not easily get to the workplace and participate in communal events:

“And then sometimes, of course, some events are held nearby, and you can't attend if you happen to be in another town. Maybe you just have to accept that you can't always be everywhere.” (Research and teaching staff 4)

**Setting boundaries.** The interviewees indicated that it was sometimes difficult to set boundaries regarding when to stop working, especially when they had big projects. One interviewee reported that they even had to change their working pattern. Being available all the time was sometimes perceived as being related to the prevailing organizational culture and management. Employees had developed skills and behaviors related to boundary setting:

“But I personally don't feel that it has gone so far as to be a strain, I still think I can forget those work tasks quite well if necessary.” (Research and teaching staff 4)

“Yes, but if you don't want to carry your work with you at home, then you have to draw the line yourself, and that is, in my opinion, an essential part of that well-being, to be able to turn it off.” (Service and expert staff 2)

Some participants felt that academic work could be challenging because it is mentally difficult to meet the requirements of the job. New situations, methods, and tasks were challenging to learn without the support of the community:

“Academic work is hard; some people overdo it and there is an awful lot of burnout, which is really worrying.” (Research and teaching staff 4)

All in all, it is good that employees find skills and behaviors to limit their work, including planning and scheduling work and planning breaks and keeping in touch with social contacts.

“Friends and family support employees' social well-being outside work.” (Research and teaching staff 4)

**Organizational guidelines.** The university played an important role in the implementation and supervision of multi-locational work. The majority of participants opined that the guidelines should consider the viewpoint of multi-locational workers better in the different phases of work. For example, if an employee mainly worked from home, there was no automatic inclusion in the onboarding process:

“I don't remember that the orientation process automatically viewed and considered the point of view of employees doing multi-locational work.” (Research and teaching staff 3)

This was considered crucial for social well-being. Not only in orientation, but also in other phases of work, it was considered important that the guidelines explicitly state how social relationships can be supported at work and how they can be maintained in the future as well. The respondents indicated that organizational culture can be based on trust and supporting social well-being at the same time.

### **Opportunities to feel a sense of belonging**

Being part of a work community, support from colleagues, and participation emerged as three critical aspects of social well-being.

**Work community.** All interviewees observed that the basis of social well-being was the feeling of being part of a community. However, the participants had different opinions about what communality was and how communality was constructed at work. For some, multi-locational work did not impact their sense of communality while for others community meant first and foremost daily, face-to-face interaction:

“Colleagues can be seen at the workplace or remotely. That's enough for me.” (Service and expert staff 1)

“Communality doesn't depend on a time or a place. You don't have to be at the university to experience communality.” (Service and expert staff 3)

“Communality means a lot to me, because communality brings social resources, and it is a foundation for the work.” (Service and expert staff 4)

Overall, the respondents thought that all employees should maintain and develop communality together. They described many ways to do this. A work community needs to share a common goal; this was perceived as the glue that binds the community together. A socially prosperous work community was viewed as consisting of shared events, social support, appreciation of each other, and regular connections. Factors that decreased social well-being were poor supervisory work, a large amount of work, a sense of hurry, and community members being in different locations at different times.

**Social support.** Building relationships at work was considered essential for social well-being. Interviewees reported that academic work could sometimes be very lonely. The social support of colleagues can be a simple way to address this, and merely talking about a research topic can increase the sense of communality and sense of social well-being. Social support can offer new ideas about research topics and provide new resources, for example help with writing. The participants also pointed out that multi-locational work itself did not decrease the sense of communality and the level of social well-being if the work community showed respect and worked well together otherwise:

“That sense of community means a lot, because that networking is important and that sharing of information is really important. You always get the same new energy when you get to talk with someone about your own research topic, whether it be in a coffee [break] room or at a conference.” (Research and teaching staff 1)

With regard to multi-locational work, the factors that increased social well-being were positive feedback, trust between colleagues, and respectful attitudes. Most interviewees indicated that teaching and guiding students brought plenty of joy and validation. Participants also noticed that the feeling of value was based on trust in each other's expertise. While the most immediate social resources for employees were their supervisor and closest team members, the work community was also considered to be broader than that, e.g., to include international networks.

**Experience of participation.** Most of the employees reported that the experience of participation was essential for their social well-being, including planning and doing work together with co-workers. One of the main tasks of academic work is thinking together, and sometimes this requires informal participation and encounters. Some interviewees thought that all staff members should be available at the university, not only via e-mail or digital platforms. However, experiences of being able to participate and being appreciated by colleagues were more prevalent in the data:

“Working from home is not somehow inferior to sitting in the office.” (Research and teaching staff 3)

“And in a certain way, the same threshold of contact exists in terms of the team, which has lowered quite substantially. Which I think is a really positive feature.” (Service and expert staff 2)

Overall, employees understood that people could participate in meetings, for example, from different locations. Multi-locational work was also seen to enable participation in these cases.

## Opportunities to maintain interaction

Building relationships and maintaining communication channels with colleagues at work was a common theme for the interviewees in terms of maintaining social well-being. Functional and open interaction was an important part of social well-being. The majority of examples cited involved staff members using virtual tools and platforms naturally and spontaneously.

**Varied interaction.** Virtual interaction carries its own challenges in multi-locational work. This was especially true for multi-locational work groups as it was more difficult to interpret gestures and facial expressions, and so virtual meetings could hinder social interaction. In addition, it was considered harder to express or come up with ideas or justify opinions. Therefore, maintaining a dialogue was more challenging online and required familiarization and trust building:

“When people who didn't know each other before joined the group, we got to know each other well. After that, it was natural and easy to interact virtually.” (Service and expert staff 3)

Employees communicated with each other daily through the Teams chat. While it facilitated faster interaction, the number of everyday encounters was reduced, and interaction was often perceived as being very task-oriented.

The employees emphasized that functionality was a positive element of virtual interaction. This functionality refers to virtual connections feeling somehow more present than a simple phone call, especially if you use your camera. The employees highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for informal virtual interaction:

“During the Corona period, we started virtual coffee breaks, where we talked about pets or gardening.” (Service and expert staff 1)

“It is incredibly convenient, that you can sit there with a cup of coffee in front of the screen. You can save money and time as well.” (Research and teaching staff 4)

In terms of the collective cohesion of the work community, it is still important to meet face to face. Face-to-face interaction allows people to get to know each other with ease:

“But I did like the atmosphere that was there during the development days. That's when I got the feeling that I belonged to the group. Kind of like a sense of community.” (Research and teaching staff 3)

“It's because Teams is enough for a lot of things, but not everything, and sometimes it's nice to see people in the same place, in the same space.” (Service and expert staff 1)

Face-to-face meetings usually consisted of lunch meetings and corridor discussions. A few kept the office door open so colleagues could stop by.

**Functional and open interaction.** Another perspective on interaction that emerged from the interviews was the significance of fostering open interaction and positive emotions among colleagues, regardless of the mode of interaction. A person with strong work bonds will get a lot of joy and increased well-being from working among colleagues. Employees with many years of work experience indicated that they were very strongly attached to the university, but that feeling could also be maintained by living away from the university location.

In multi-locational work, open communication was seen as a crucial factor which helped employees cope with work and enhanced positive relationships between employees:

“The work community is of great importance for social well-being.” (Research and teaching staff 3)

The employees pointed out that it would be beneficial to consider how competencies specific to multi-locational work could be further developed to support individuals' social well-being and to enhance open communication.

## DISCUSSION

With regard to the research question on how social well-being is affected by multi-locational work, the findings show that on a general level, multi-locational work does not in itself weaken employee participation, interaction,

or sense of community, as employees are offered new opportunities to connect with their networks from a different location. At the individual level, the university employees' experiences of multi-locational work varied extensively. Some reported feelings of loneliness, and in academic and knowledge work, professional isolation can become a burden (see also Uusiautti et al., 2025).

Our second research question focused on university employees' perceptions of their social well-being in multi-locational work. The research results show that the flexibility offered by multi-locational work increased employees' sense of well-being and coping at work. The employees described their strengthened motivation towards work, and planning their own work was reported to increase their sense of autonomy. In addition, based on the research results, it can be said that employees' social well-being is supported by an organization that provides opportunities for multi-locational work.

It is noteworthy that employees needed new kinds of skills and resources to participate, interact, and be part of the community in multi-locational work settings. This notion was evident from both sets of data, providing a multidimensional understanding of how university employees perceive the relationship between social well-being and multi-locational work. When viewed through the lens of the JD-R framework, it seems that in knowledge work, multi-locationality can become a resource that supports social well-being only if employee perceptions are thoroughly considered when designing work arrangements. We will further elaborate on these findings next.

Flexibility is one of the key elements of multi-locational work according to employees. The flexibility increased employees' overall well-being and thereby helped them cope at work. Our data supported the view that flexibility increased employees' motivation to work. One explanatory factor behind the increase in work motivation may be the increase in employees' sense of autonomy (Petrou et al., 2012; Wepfer et al., 2018). Tims et al. (2013) found in their study that planning one's own work had a positive effect on an employee's well-being. Similar results were also obtained by Carvalho et al. (2022) during the remote work period in the Covid-19 pandemic. Social support at work has a positive effect on "tuning" (Schulz-Knappe & Ter Hoeven, 2023).

However, due to the flexibility, it was difficult to set limits around work. Multi-locational work may make it difficult to define when work starts and when work ends, as Cijan et al. (2019) state in their study. When it came to social well-being, individuals' coping style and solutions influenced the work community positively and negatively. Our findings are supported by Koch and Binnewies (2015), who found that setting boundaries could also be facilitated by the support and example provided by colleagues.

At the community level, we discovered that for social well-being, a common goal and shared understanding of the guidelines for multi-locational work were crucial. Likewise, Ogbonnaya (2019) observed that when one or more employees work towards a common goal and inspire each other, it creates a pleasant working atmosphere (see also Babour et al., 2021). Staff members can share responsibility and effective management can promote cooperation (Ogbonnaya, 2019).

It is also worth noting that at the work community level, multi-locational work can pose challenges and offer opportunities for all members of the work community through the experiences of community, participation, and interaction. Academic work can be lonely sometimes, and social support can take the form of being able to talk about your research topic with a colleague. The most important thing in multi-locational work is ensuring the availability of social support through the work community, regardless of location or time (Goel et al., 2023; Wallin et al., 2020).

Based on our findings, in terms of the collective cohesion of the work community, it was still important to meet face to face from time to time even though many participants reported that online interaction worked well. Spontaneous face-to-face conversations were considered important to academic work, but they had significantly decreased. The finding in our study that interaction in multi-location work did not negatively affect the functioning of the work community itself was similar to those of Jämsen et al. (2022) and Wallin et al. (2020).

For the individual, the experience of participation created a feeling of being part of the work community and therefore improved the employee's social well-being. The academic work of educators and researchers involves a common system that cannot exist without participation, but the nature of work allows university employees to participate in the work community from different places (see also Heiden et al., 2021). It seemed that work

practices and communication methods were well developed and agreed upon among employees. However, based on our findings, more effort should be focused on increasing our understanding of how employees can participate equally in collective tasks, and on orientation for new employees.

According to the JD-R model, work resources include the support received by the employee, the experience of autonomy, and receiving feedback (Bakker & Demerouti 2007). These resources can be found in our research results. Therefore, our findings brought new insights about how multi-locational work can be viewed within the framework of JD-R model: while enhancing multi-locational participation could be a resource, numerous demands were identified as well, threatening the nature of academic work. Therefore, we suggest that multi-locational work management requires more attention and research.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The data included limitations which affect the generalizability of the results. The research focused on one university and the results represent the point of view of only this university. The target university is located in a remote place away from the major cities in Finland. This means that many of the university's employees work remotely and live elsewhere in Finland. This may be one of the reasons why employees have such a positive attitude towards multi-locational work. On the other hand, it is reasonable to ask whether those employees who had the most positive attitudes participated in this research while those with negative perceptions did not find it important to contribute their opinions by participating.

Another limitation is that the numbers of survey participants (167, response rate 23 %) and interviewees (eight) were quite small. However, by employing mixed methods, we were able to perform a profound analysis through our data. The quantitative analysis showed that employees sometimes felt lonely and this affected their social well-being to some extent. Social support proved to be an important factor in both datasets. The qualitative analysis deepened our understanding of how employees who perform multi-locational work maintain interaction and participate in the work community. This also makes it possible for universities worldwide to understand the multiple perspectives and apply the findings in their settings.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Multi-locational work can act as a resource in work in higher education (Beckel & Fisher, 2022). One of the enablers of multi-locational work is technology and effective interaction with other members of the work community, but this dimension brings conflicts into the organization's operating environment (Ferrara et al., 2022). Technology-mediated interaction can cause mental or social fatigue. In addition, multi-locational work requires new kinds of competences in academic and support personnel so that they can face the new demands and feel competent in terms of collaborating in the changing context of higher education (Phuong & Duong, 2022; Sanford & Kinch 2016). The increased flexibility in the era of multi-locational work has brought new demands, too, which were apparent in our study. The results indicated that multi-locational work evidently increases loneliness at work, which is a problem in the formation of functional work communities. These problems can be managed in the university context through leadership, participation, and with cutting-edge communication tools.

Employees' participation, interaction, and sense of community at work are not in themselves negatively affected by multi-locational work, as employees are offered new opportunities to connect with their networks from a different location. In this multi-locational work environment, it is vital to develop and maintain the daily contact and sociality of the work community by various means, so that no one is left alone and shared tasks and responsibilities are evenly distributed, with all members of the work community contributing.

Based on our research, it is evident that management strategies that pay attention to a broad conception of social well-being have become increasingly important in today's higher education workplaces (see also Syväjärvi et al., 2014). Our research showed that more attention should be paid to how common tasks are led and organized in multi-locational contexts, and how equal participation can be enhanced and ensured. While the employees themselves had created functional working methods, the main issue that emerged from our research as requiring further study was the management of multi-locational work and how to ensure the academic culture at

universities fosters social well-being. How the new multi-locational collaboration culture is led and built can have a significant impact on research activities, for example (Kienast, 2023).

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