

## **CHALLENGES OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A STUDY BASED ON THE ACADEMIC STAFF OF THE SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Covid-19 has created many challenges around the world in different fields. In that respect the higher education is also affected and adopted working from home system to continue the education activities for the undergraduate students. Anyhow there are many challenges faced by the academic staff in the system of WFH practically. Thus, the major aim of the study is to examine the challenges of working from home based on the academic staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. In order to that this study analyzes the IT and technical related challenges, environmental, personal life as well as other challenges. This study selected the total population to collect the data and 105 responses were gathered among them from all the faculties of SEUSL. Data for this research was collected through the structured questionnaires and discussion method. The findings of the study reveal that most of the staffs are facing network issue while doing lectures, do not have a dedicated area for work, working with kids is very hard, unable to complete the scheduled tasks on time and students are not controllable in online. Therefore, this research recommends to the flexible hours for staff to work, providing internet packages, facilitating loan arrangements to reset the home to work freely and investing in technological infrastructure to reduce the Challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** Academic Staff, Challenges, Covid-19, Working from Home

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

No one can forget the starting period of 2020 due to the effect of Covid-19. WHO declared the Covid19 outbreak as a global health emergency on 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 (David, 2021). According to the data of 7<sup>th</sup> of August 2021, there were 201 million cases of Covid 19 and 4.27 million deaths worldwide and also the United States, India, Brazil, and France were mostly affected by this disease (Johns Hopkins University, 2021). To manage and save their people every government followed some safety measures and strict restrictions.

Among those restrictions, the workforce was unable to work in their workplace physically. So, some organizations and industries continued their work from their living places. This system is denoted as Work from Home (WFH) and it is described as a "situation in which employees are not present at their workplace or don't carry out purchasing physically" (Dias & Nireesh, 2021). WFH was started by western countries and lastly it was adopted by other nations. However, it's not a new term. In 1995, around 9 percent of workers did their work from home, in 2006 it increased to 32 percentage and that number increased to 37 percentage in 2015. In 2016 more than 30 percentage of employees work from home in Australia. WFH system recorded less than 50 percentage in almost every country before 2020 (Sooriyapperuma, 2021). But covid-19 created a new platform for WFH.

Sri Lanka is one of the South Asian countries that was also affected by the Covid-19. The first Covid-19 infected Sri Lankan was identified on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 in Sri Lanka (Erandi, et al. 2020). From that day government provided safety measures and guidelines to control the spread of disease. However, the number of affected cases increased continuously. Sri Lankan government imposed curfew, lockdown, and

self-isolation to take the situation under control. Due to this process, economic sectors were affected gradually. In Sri Lanka, after 7 months of lockdown, some private sectors started their works from home.

Software and IT industries easily moved from the traditional way to online mode but other sectors need to be prepared for that. The educational system was also vastly affected by this pandemic. It's not only about the students but also about the staff. The activities followed in the Covid-19 period such as travelling restriction, following distance maintenance and closing of all institutions have created a barrier to continue the academic activities including lectures, tutorials, assignments, group discussions, practical, projects, and research works on higher education systems in Sri Lanka. The closure of all universities affected both sides of students and academic work. There should be a satisfactory communication between students and lecturers to conduct the lectures and other discussion. In this sense there are more challenges faced by the academic side also.

Thereafter, universities of Sri Lanka started their academic and administrative work from home on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2020. According to that South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) also started its academic and administrative work from home. The staff of SEUSL has been continuing their duties through the VLE, Moodle, Zoom, etc. However, working from home has many challenges in practice. Providing guidelines, fixing working hours, and managing work without internet interruptions are challenging for authorities too. Therefore, this study tries to find out the challenges of working from home based on the academic staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this research is to identify the challenges of Working from Home during Covid-19 pandemic based on the academic staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. From this main objective, it includes sub-objective as:

- To find out the IT and technical challenges faced by the academic staff.
- To find out the environment related challenges faced by the academic staff.
- To find out the challenges related on the personal life faced by the academic staff.
- To find out the other challenges faced by the academic staff.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

To achieve the objective of the study, primary data was collected through the well-structured questionnaires and discussion among the staff of the south Eastern University. The total population has been taken for the data collection. Accordingly, 277 questionnaires were issued among all of the staff of SEUSL and 105 responses were collected from them. The questions are designed as five Likert scale questions and 'yes' or 'no' type of questions.

## **4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

During the Covid-19 health crisis, there are many research articles have done all around the world connecting with the pandemic of Covid-19. In this part we can identify the past researches on challenges of working from home during the period of Covid-19.

Kaldeen & Nuskiya (2021) investigate WFH challenges and impact based on the academics of state higher education sectors in Sri Lanka. For that purpose this study takes 360 samples and the results are explained

using descriptive manner with frequency distribution, mean value and tables. Based on the findings of the study it show that there are challenges in the WFH but it is moving towards good results. Therefore the study suggests to follow feasible and effective strategies regarding the environments to achieve the best return from the human resources.

Ambikapathy & Asiah (2020), examine the impacts of working from home and identifies the challenges faced by employees. To examine the objective, this study uses cost-saving, productivity, work-life balance, self-discipline, face-to-face contact, communication, and atmosphere as variables. This study conducted questionnaires based on close-ended questions and analyzed them with descriptive analysis. This study finds that working from home give a positive impact on saving cost and time, productivity.

Almaghaslah & Alsayari (2021), examine the satisfaction of academics staff with the web based education system that are following at the college of pharmacy, King Khalid University. This study specifically analyze the effect on the administrative work, research and community. This study used a cross-sectional, self-administered, anonymous online questionnaire as well as the questions are based on Likert scale method. According to the findings of the study, the web based education and administrative works are moving effectively without any disturbances.

Butler & Jeffe (2020) focus on understanding the challenges and gratitude of WFH and how they create impact on their work satisfaction. This study developed with 435 participants and learned about their experience over the 10 weeks of the WFH. The qualitative method was used to analyze the data. They found that having too many meetings, feeling overworked, and physical & mental health are the challenges.

Galanti, et al. (2021) investigate the impact of working from home. To achieve the objective the study uses cross-sectional study and the data was collected from 209 employees who are involving of WFH during the pandemic and the data was collected through the online questionnaire. The assumptions of the study is based on hierarchical linear regression. This study finds that individual and work related aspects both hinder and facilitate WFH during the Covid-19.

Manjaree & Perera (2021) assess the employee engagement in WFH in Sri Lanka with the current level of employee engagement in WFH and what are the factors affect the employee engagement. Using the random sampling method 150 employees were selected as sampling. To collect the data, questionnaire survey was done and the SPSS package was used to analyze the data. The analyzing part have done descriptively and regression was also included. According to the finding, the technological readiness is positively impact on the employee engagement. The next important factor is empowerment and it is also has a positive effect on the employee engagement in WFH. As well as enhancing Learning Support, Reward, Recognition, Organizational Procedure, Leadership, Job Security, Safety, and Trust also can be increase the employee engagement. The Rewards and Recognition are identified as the least endowment in work from home setting.

## **5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### ***5.1 General profile of the respondents***

Based on the 105 respondents the general profile of the academic staff can be identified as follows. It includes the structure of gender, marital status, the position of the staffs and faculty of the academic staff. According to the survey based on the 105 respondents of this study below tables are the results for the general profile of the academic staff.

**Table No 01: Gender and Marital Status**

Gender		Marital Status	
Male	Female	Single	Married
44%	56%	16%	84%

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

Based on the above table, 44 percentage of male and 56 percentage of female staffs are responded to the questionnaire survey as well as 16 percentage of them are single and 84 percentage of them are married.

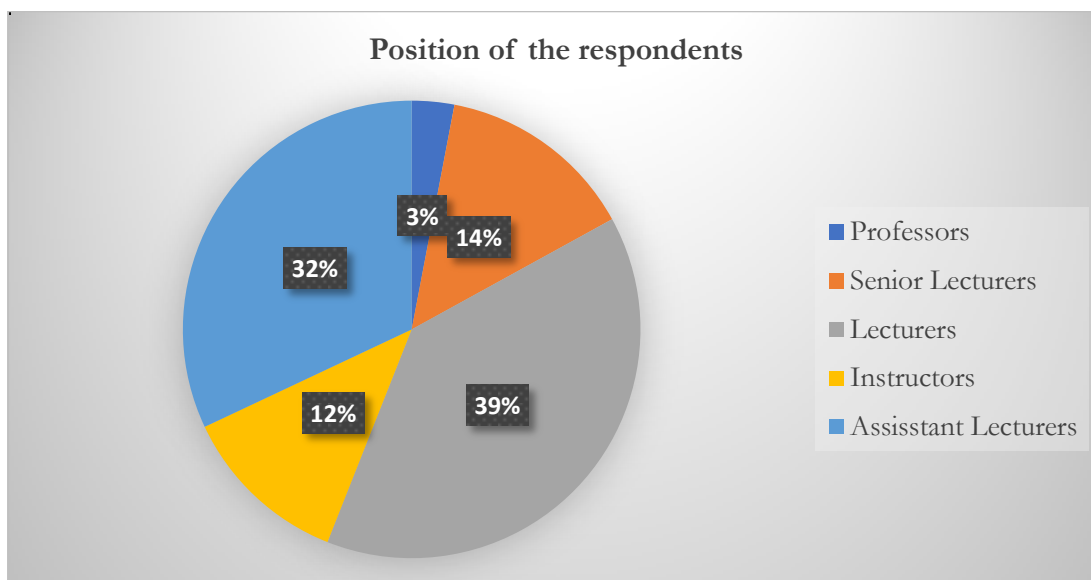
**Table No 02: Faculty of the Academic Staff**

Faculty	Percentage
Faculty of Arts and Culture	32%
Faculty of Management and Commerce	11%
Faculty of Applied Sciences	8%
Faculty of Engineering	15%
Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Languages	24%
Faculty of Technology	10%

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

Among the 105 respondents of the academic staffs, 32 percentage of staff are from the faculty of Arts and Culture and they are the higher percentage than other faculty staffs and also only 8 percentage of them are from the faculty of Applied Sciences who are the lower part of respondents.

**Figure No 01: Position of the Academic Staff**



Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

According to the figure, higher responses were collected from the lecturers and very lower responses were collected from the professor level academic staff.

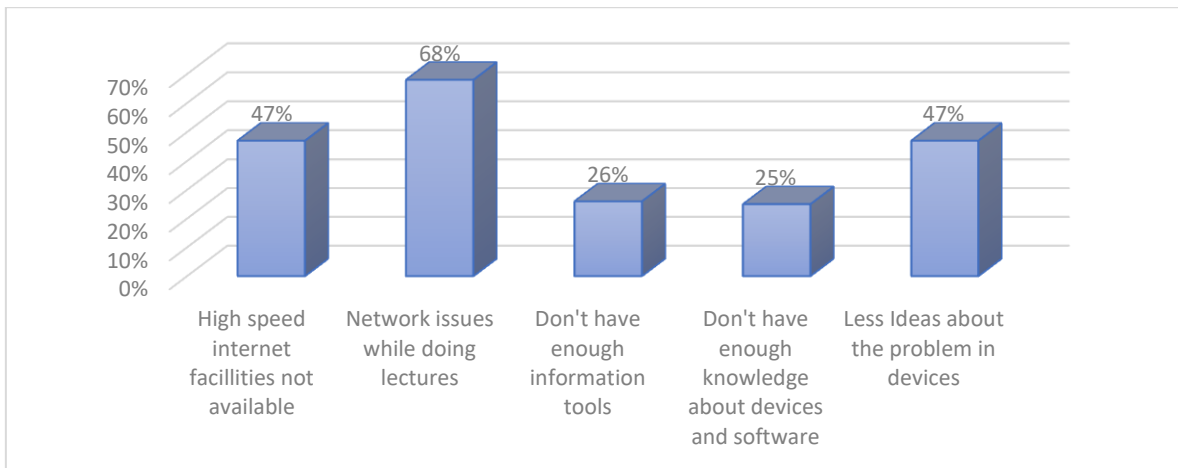
**5.2 Challenges faced by the Academic staff of SEUSL**

This main objective of the study is to identify challenges faced by the academic staff of SEUSL through work from home. It is explained as follows.

**5.2.1 IT and Technical challenges**

Under the IT and technical challenges, we find out some issues that are faced by the academic staff. According to the below graph, 47 percent of the staff said they don't have high-speed internet facilities. Therefore they cannot do lectures continuously; internet speed is a challenge for them. And also 68 percentage of staff agree that they have network issues while doing lectures. 26 percentage of the staff don't have enough information on tools that helps to complete the WFH, they don't have the proper equipment and 25 percentage don't have enough knowledge about devices and software. Furthermore, 47 percentage of the staff said that they have less idea on the problems which suddenly occur in devices and they have no idea on how to fix those problems.

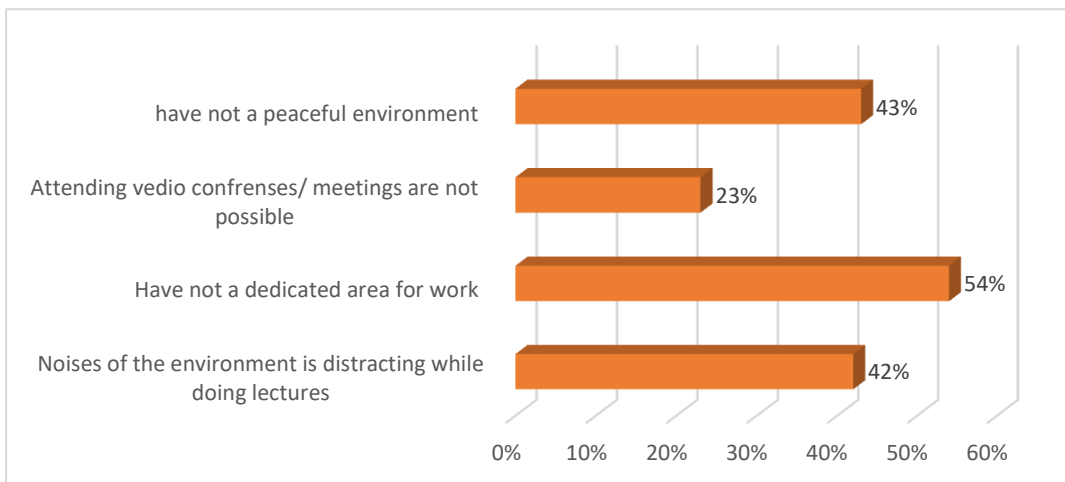
**Figure No 02: IT and Technical challenges**



Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

**5.2.2 Environment related challenges**

**Figure No 03: Environment related challenges**



Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

While we look at the environment related challenges, the working environment is an essential factor to the efficient work of a staff. Based on that, 43 percentage of the staff say that they don't have a peaceful environment to do their lectures, that's a barrier to them and 42 percentage of the staff said the noises of the environment is distracting them while they are doing the work. They cannot work with peaceful mind, which will affect the students also. 23 percentage of the staff said that attending video conferences and meetings is not possible in-home environment and also 54 percentage of the staff said they don't have a dedicated area for work, that's free from disturbances. So staff have many issues related on the environment.

### 5.2.3 Challenges related on the personal life

Under the personal life, we can include family situation, life balance and time management. Here 54 percentage of the staff are female, and 84 percentage of the staff are married so they have family responsibilities too. They need to manage both sides in WFH.

**Table No 03: Challenges related on the personal life**

Statements	Yes	No
Time for family and work is manageable	54%	46%
Family situations distracting while doing lectures	65%	35%
Family members are mature enough to understand the WFH	64%	36%
Working with kids is hard	80%	20%

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

Under the survey, this questionnaire included a few statements regarding personal life challenges, according to that 46 percentage of the staff said they cannot manage the time between family and work in WFH, and they are facing challenges in balancing the life between work life and family life. (Butler, 2021) also find out the work life balance in WFH of software engineers. 35 percentage of the staff responded that family situations distract them while doing lectures, they cannot do work only at home, but they need to take care of their family. 36 percentage of the staff said their family members are not mature enough to understand the WFH and 80 percentage of the staff said working with kids is hard. (Galanti, et al. 2021) also explain that the family- work conflict is negatively impact on WFH.

### 5.2.4 Other challenges

**Table No 04: Other Challenges**

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Completing scheduled work on time is difficult	-	31	15	28	31
Students are controllable in the online environment	-	25	31	19	30
Research activities are badly affected	-	5	28	72	--

Attending conferences and meetings is affected	-	14	19	72	-
Collaboration and communication are challengeable	-	14	19	72	-
WFH is very stressful	-	16	26	63	-

Source: Questionnaire Survey, 2022

According to the above table, 31 academic staffs disagree with the statement that completing the scheduled task on time is difficult and 31 academic staffs strongly agree with the same statement. 28 academic staff said that completing the scheduled task on time is difficult for them in working from home. 49 academic staff responded that students are controllable in an online environment, 31 staff responded neutral to that statement and 25 academic staff disagreed with the same statement. According to 72 academic staff research activities are badly affected. 5 academic staffs disagree and 28 academic staff are neutral to the statement and no one strongly agree or disagree that research activities are badly affected. 72 academic staff mentioned that attending conferences and meetings are affected and collaboration and communication are challenging. 19 academic staff recorded neutral to the two statements and 14 academic staff disagree with the statement. WFH is stressful for 63 academic staff, not stressful for 16 academic staff, and neutral for 26 academic staff. (Almaghaslah & Alsayari 2020) agree with the challenges in research work and attending meetings as well as (Butler, 2021) also find out the challenge of collaboration in WFH.

And also, the staff mentioned as managing household work during work hours is the toughest job, if relatives or friends come to home during the working hours, we cannot manage both sides, need to take care of visitors. Managing family responsibilities is also a challenge in working from home. "Being a housewife during work hours is challenging, if the kids, spouse, and other relations are at home it is difficult to focus on work, I have to educate and direct the kids as well as on their studies with many other household works."

Apart from these challenges some of the other difficulties are also identified by the academic staff. When we discuss with the staff, most of them are mentioned that they missed eye contact with the students. Because of that it is difficult for the lecturers whether the students have enough understanding about the lectures or not and they cannot understand the students' mentality. One of the academic staff mentioned, "Students misuse the zoom classes. Virtually they are present but mentally they were absent." Also, they mentioned practical sessions are very difficult to teach online. Handling equipment for the practical part is very challenging and also difficult to do practical exams through online lectures, so students' exams are also affected. Students do not communicate well in online lectures. Some of the academic staff mentioned that continuing online lectures causes some mental and health issues, it's not only for lecturers but also students. They said it made them stressed. In WFH there is no limit on working hours so that makes stress.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Covid-19 pandemic created socio economic issues from a diverse perspective. Due to this crisis traveling to work was completely disturbed and made people unable to attend the workplace. In that situation Sri Lanka's higher educational institutions were also badly affected by this crisis; those were not operating. Sri Lankan educational institutes shifted normal work practices into work-from-home (WFH). The advance practices with the use of information and communication technology (ICT) has changed the life study and work routine of the people. With the help of ICT SEUSL also has shifted its work into WFH.

The title of the research "Challenges of Work from Home during Covid-19 pandemic: A Study Based on the Academic staff of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka" has included both main and sub-objectives. The results of the study clearly explain the objectives of the study. In the particular research area, primary data was collected through well-structured questionnaire and discussion among the academic staff of SEUSL.

According to the collected data, 56% of the academic staff responded to the questionnaires. Data were analyzed using a descriptive manner. The findings of this study explain through the graphs and tables. According to the survey's results staff has many challenges while conducting the work from home. Specifically in the part of IT and Technical side as well as environmental and personal life related challenges are faced by them. And also, completing scheduled work on time, controlling students in an online environment are challengeable. Moreover research activities are affected, attending conferences and meetings are affected, and challenges in collaboration and communication are identified as challenges.

This present study identifies the challenges of WFH. So, the recommendations focus on how to solve those challenges of WFH by the researcher.

The administration of the university must provide internet facilities to the staff to do their work properly. Providing internet packages and government can introduce free or low-budget packages to the staff through the sponsors like Dialog, Mobitel, Airtel and so on. Administration can arrange the training programs about WFH and arrange the workshop to understand the software, and fix the problem in devices. Providing tools to the staff like microphones, webcams, and routers. The management need to make the investment relating to the technological advancements and infrastructure to reduce the challenges. Government should allocate more money for the work-from-home activity in the budget. Providing laptops and internet equipment to the staff will reduce the challenges. The environment is the most important part of WFH. , setting up a home environment is necessary for work efficiently from home, home organizing is suggested to consider to facilitate the staff with a conducive WFH environment, so providing a loan scheme for setting up a home office may be a better option to avoid disturbances. A separate workplace can reduce their mental stress and they can work peacefully.

Working hours should be limited then they can do their family responsibilities too. They can spend time with family too. Flexible hours must be allocated. To avoid health and mental issues stress management activities need to be implemented, like leisure time activities, and some free talk meetings should be arranged. The administration should develop guidelines for academic staff in setting up a healthy working environment at home and should provide appropriate equipment, set admissible work-from-home days; clarify the working days.

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