



**The Ethical Implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the Workplace
Culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal:
A Case Study of the New Arts Building**

Submitted by Siphokazi Vezi

Student number: 220005448

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School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, South Africa.

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Supervised by

Prof. Beatrice Okyere-Manu


DECLARATION

I, Siphokazi Vezi, declare that:

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2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
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Siphokazi Vezi

Date: 25 November 2025


Prof. Beatrice Okyere-Manu (Supervisor)

Date: 25 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Extensive scholarship exists on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions globally. However, limited attention has been directed toward understanding how these disruptions have specifically reshaped workplace culture, staff morale, communication practices, and daily operations within this particular context. This study was motivated by the need to critically examine how pandemic-induced changes continue to influence staff experiences and organisational functioning in the post-pandemic period.

Anchored in a thorough literature review and guided by the ethical theory of consequentialism, the research evaluated the outcomes of institutional decisions and practices implemented during and after the pandemic. A qualitative research approach was adopted, employing an exploratory case study design focusing on staff members operating in the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Purposive sampling was used to select twelve participants, and data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

The findings reveal that the pandemic has significantly altered workplace culture, resulting in both positive and negative outcomes. Participants reported decreased staff morale, weakened communication, reduced workplace vibrancy, and heightened emotional strain during the pandemic. While institutional support mechanisms were in place, several shortcomings, such as inconsistent communication, inadequate engagement strategies, and limited responsiveness, were identified. Although some improvements have been observed in the post-COVID-19 environment, persistent challenges remain, including lingering stress, reduced interpersonal interaction, and incomplete efforts to rebuild workplace cohesion. From a consequentialist standpoint, institutional actions were ethically insufficient where negative consequences outweighed intended benefits.

The study recommends strengthening communication structures, enhancing staff support and engagement practices, and prioritising ethical decision-making to rebuild a positive and sustainable workplace culture. Directions for further research are also provided.

Keywords: COVID-19, workplace culture, ethical implications, consequentialism, staff morale, communication, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

DEDICATION

To all the people we lost during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

To my mother, who has been supporting me throughout my academic journey, and to my beloved son, whose love and patience have been a constant source of motivation.

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First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to God Almighty for His endless grace, strength, and guidance throughout this journey. The verse that kept me going is “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*” (Philippians 4:13). Indeed, His presence carried me through every challenge and moment of doubt.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
NAB	New Arts Building
NICD	National Institute for Communicable Diseases
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SARS-CoV-2	Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
WHO	World Health Organization
WP	Workplace participant

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study sought to explore the ethical implications of the changes in workplace culture resulting from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in the New Arts Building, Pietermaritzburg Campus. This study explored, through the lens of consequentialist theory, the effects of COVID-19 before, during, and after the pandemic, focusing on the ethical implications for academic and administrative staff in terms of staff morale, engagement, and communication. This chapter presents the general introduction to the research. It includes the background and motivation for the study, the aim of the study, key research questions, research sub-questions, key research objectives, a preview of the methodology, research delimitations and scope, a preview of the theoretical framework, a preview of the literature, the significance of the study, an outline of the chapters, and a conclusion.

1.2 DEFINITION OF CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious respiratory disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was first identified in late 2019 and spreads primarily through respiratory droplets, leading to a range of symptoms from mild illness to severe respiratory complications and death (Mohan & Nambiar, 2020:29).

1.3 BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

The workplace has changed significantly since COVID-19. People's perception of the workplace was radically transformed after being compelled to work from unexpected places, such as their dining rooms, living rooms, kitchens, or even bedrooms (Bonenberg & Lucchini, 2022:102). The term 'new normal' was subsequently adopted to describe how the pandemic had fundamentally altered people's working lives and careers (Anderson et al., 2021:43). Organisations had to reevaluate the significance of offices in people's careers and adjust to changing business practices driven by the pandemic. The pandemic changed how employees communicated with suppliers, customers, stakeholders, and each other. Companies across the world faced the unique challenge of demonstrating that they could adjust to unforeseen events by putting crisis management plans into place and creating new work environments that safeguarded workers. However, as organisations are moving from the initial responses to the pandemic to the 'new normal'.

According to Mohan and Nambiar (2020:30), Wuhan, in the Hubei region of China, reported the first COVID-19 case in December 2019, whereafter it spread to other nations. The initial virus that produced COVID-19 was SARS-CoV-2, manifesting in a fever and cough. SARS-CoV-2, a member of the *Coronaviridae* family, COVID-19 was initially identified in the 1930s when coronaviruses caused respiratory, hepatic, neurological, and digestive disorders in chickens. (Mohan & Nambiar, 2020:31). Lawrence (2020:24) confirms that COVID-19 was present in China from December 2019 to the end of January 2020. It was first classified as an international public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO), but in March 2020 it was classified as a pandemic, which prompted lockdowns and other changes. The first case of COVID-19 in South Africa was reported on 5 March 2020, according to Moonasar et al. (2021:43), who added that when COVID-19 struck South Africa in early 2020, the shift from in-person to remote work was abrupt. Life in South Africa changed fundamentally since the onset of COVID-19., marked by economic downturns, job losses, and business closures – effects that reverberated across workers and workplaces globally (Lawrence, 2020:23).

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted businesses across the globe. Organisational culture, integral to work operations, became a critical concern as policies and procedures embedded in corporate culture required immediate adjustment (Kabadayi et al., 2020:35). When the COVID-19 virus was initially identified, workplaces were unprepared for its impact (Azman & Abdullah, 2022:12). In an interconnected world, environmental, economic, health, educational, and social crises originating in one country can rapidly spread across borders. Both governmental and private institutions appeared ill-equipped for the virus's propagation, which gradually escalated into a global pandemic (Milojevic, 2021:19).

The COVID-19 outbreak unfolded in various phases characterised by frequent regulatory changes. In March 2020, official guidelines were published promoting social distancing. These measures included quarantining and isolating infected individuals, limiting gathering sizes, closing schools, and restricting access to establishments where alcohol was sold and consumed. Most businesses closed in March 2020, except those engaged in the manufacture and delivery of essential goods. Inter-provincial, inter-city, and inter-district travel was prohibited, except for the transportation of essential goods.

Four years have passed since the COVID-19 outbreak. Although the pandemic has subsided, its effects on social life, the economy, and daily routines continue to be felt. COVID-19 introduced

new ways of living and working across all sectors of society. This study explored the ethical implications of these workplace transformations within UKZN's New Arts Building, where significant cultural shifts were observed following the outbreak.

1.4 RESEARCH PROBLEM

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered workplace culture through rapid shifts to remote work, revised communication practices, and new health and safety protocols. While these changes were necessary to ensure organisational continuity and employee safety, they also introduced ethical challenges related to staff morale, engagement, communication, and fairness within the workplace. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), particularly within the New Arts Building, these transformations disrupted established workplace norms and interpersonal dynamics. Although the pandemic has subsided, the ethical implications of these cultural changes in the post-COVID-19 'new normal' remain insufficiently examined. There is limited empirical research on how these workplace transformations have ethically affected employees' experiences, organisational culture, and decision-making processes in higher education institutions. Consequently, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the ethical implications of COVID-19-induced workplace culture changes at UKZN's New Arts Building.

1.5 RESEARCH AIM

To examine the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture at UKZN, focusing on the New Arts Building, by exploring how institutional support, shortcomings, and ethical considerations during and after the pandemic affected staff morale, engagement, and communication.

1.6 KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the ethical implications of the outbreak of COVID-19 on the workplace culture at UKZN?

1.7 RESEARCH SUB-QUESTIONS

1. What constitutes workplace culture?
2. What was the nature of the pre-COVID-19 workplace culture within UKZN's New Arts Building?

3. What was the nature of the workplace culture during COVID-19 within UKZN's New Arts Building?
4. What is the nature of the workplace culture post-COVID-19 within UKZN's New Arts Building?
5. How can the theory of consequentialism inform the current workplace culture within UKZN's New Arts Building?

1.8 KEY RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To define workplace culture.
2. To describe the nature of pre-COVID-19 workplace culture within UKZN's New Arts Building.
3. To describe the nature of workplace culture during COVID-19 within UKZN's New Arts Building.
4. To describe the nature of workplace culture post-COVID-19 within UKZN's New Arts Building.
5. To explore the extent to which the theory of consequentialism responds to the current workplace culture within UKZN's New Arts Building.

1.9 PREVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is an essential tool for gathering information about the proposed study, acquiring findings, and determining how to conduct the research (Pandey, 2021:15). Research methodology further elaborates on how data will be collected and which tools or methods will be used to collect the information. It also explains how the literature review will be presented (Marczyk et al., 2010:14). Exploratory and descriptive research designs were employed in this qualitative study.

1.9.1 Research design

This study used exploratory and descriptive research designs to determine the exact nature of the problem to be investigated. Research conducted to better understand a problem or identify new opportunities is known as exploratory design (Erickson, 2017:2). It is commonly employed when a researcher wants to learn more about a subject with which they are unfamiliar. An exploratory

research design serves as the framework or strategy that guides the study. In addition to setting study objectives and collecting data, it focuses on identifying issues that would be hard to pinpoint without such exploration. Defined by Aanstoos (1983:243), descriptive research aims to maximise intuitive representation by exploring, analysing, and describing a specific phenomenon as freely as possible from unexplained presuppositions. According to Marshall and Rossman (2021:6), descriptive research records the phenomena of interest in their actual setting. For the current study, the descriptive research design allowed the researcher to examine and characterise COVID-19 as a phenomenon. The effects of COVID-19 on the workplace were also investigated in this study.

1.9.2 Research approach

Teherdoost (2014:57) presents three different kinds of research methods: mixed, qualitative, and quantitative approaches. In quantitative research, numerical data are gathered and analysed to determine trends, connections, and patterns (Dowrick et al., 2021:21). To comprehend ideas, experiences, or social situations, qualitative research methods gather and analyse non-numerical data (Ferreira et al., 2021:45). To provide a more thorough grasp of research topics, mixed methods of research incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Qualitative research is referred to as such when there is evidence for what is explicitly stated, either from observing behaviour or from examining written sources (Gwimbi & Dirwai, 2003:2). Instead of measuring and quantifying a phenomenon, qualitative research focuses on comprehending its context and significance. In qualitative studies, participants offer insights to the investigator. A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. The choice of research approach, which focused on critically analysing existing publications to explore the post-COVID-19 workplace culture in South Africa ethically, determined the research strategy for the project.

1.9.3 Data collection

The researcher used primary and secondary data gathering techniques, with the participants' responses constituting the primary data. The location was selected based on noticeable changes that had taken place, prompting a deeper examination. A thorough examination of the literature presenting the results of earlier studies pertaining to workplace culture post-COVID-19 in South Africa served as the secondary data. An extensive analysis of scholarly publications was used in this study (Walsham, 2010:5), including books, journals, and newspapers.

1.9.4 One-on-one Interviews

One-on-one interviews were conducted with staff of UKZN's New Arts Building before and after the pandemic. Participants were selected using random sampling. By giving each member of the population an equal chance of being chosen, random sampling produces a representative sample (Alvi, 2016:5). This approach improved the validity and generalisability of the study findings while reducing selection bias. The researcher achieved a diverse and inclusive sample that reflected the characteristics of the larger population by randomly selecting 12 individuals ranging in age from 22 to 60 years, inclusive of all genders. This method guided the researcher in gathering objective data, enabling precise generalisation of the findings and supporting thorough and statistically valid conclusions (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010:61). Snowball sampling was also employed, in which identified participants could also suggest additional, appropriate individuals to take part. Because the interviews were open-ended, respondents were able to express personal perspectives in their answers. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the nature of this study, a number of precautions were taken to ensure participant respect and integrity. All participants were asked to provide informed consent and were assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be upheld through coded identification (WP1–WP12). Respondents were free to withdraw at any time without facing any repercussions. To ensure that the study was carried out ethically and with respect, the researcher followed UKZN's ethical research guidelines.

1.11 RESEARCH DELIMITATIONS

The New Arts Building on UKZN's Pietermaritzburg campus, which houses many departments under the College of Humanities, was the subject of the research. The researcher restricted the study's scope to a single institutional environment by examining staff experiences prior to, during, and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The results offer valuable insights into the ethical and cultural dynamics within this particular employment setting, even though they may not be generalisable to the entire university or other establishments.

1.12 PREVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To accomplish the goals of the study, which focused on the consequences of the post-COVID-19 workplace culture at UKZN, the researcher used the ethical theory of consequentialism as a descriptive and prescriptive tool to direct the research.

Consequentialist theory is a normative ethics theory that aims to explain how individuals determine what is right and wrong in morally challenging circumstances (McNaughton, 2013:377). According to the consequentialist perspective, the anticipated result of the action is taken into consideration when making judgements. When a favourable result is anticipated, an individual behaves in a morally upright manner; when an unfavourable result is anticipated, they behave immorally. Hooker (2000:1) explains that assessing whether or not a favourable outcome is anticipated is the basis of consequentialist philosophy. Consequentialist theory can be understood through various lenses. For instance, it maintains that an action is only ethically acceptable if it maximises overall happiness. According to consequentialist theory, a decision is morally acceptable if it produces a better result than the alternative (Audi, 1995:824). Therefore, this theory assesses the morality of actions according to their outcomes. The consequentialist viewpoint holds that a course of action can only be ethically justified if it offers all parties at least as much positive benefit as any other course of action the person may have taken. What matters, given consequentialism's emphasis on how others are affected by an individual's actions, are the preferences or wellbeing of everyone that their actions affect (Audi, 1995: 824). Therefore, an action's consequence determines whether it is good or bad; no action may be deemed good or bad in itself.

The moral theory of consequentialism holds that a course of action is only morally acceptable if it results in a comparable degree of positive benefit for all stakeholders. This implies that the best course of action is the one that produces the best outcomes in a particular situation, particularly considering the phenomena being studied (Audi, 1995:824). In the case of this study, the phenomenon was the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture at UKZN. Ekvall (2019:2) asserts that the foundation of consequentialist theory is the anticipation of a favourable or unfavourable predicted result.

The concept may be divided into three categories: ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and ethical altruism. Thomas Auguste Comte developed the concept of ethical altruism, which is predicated on the morality of others. Altruism is the act of prioritising the needs of others before one's own.

Altruists reject self-interested behaviour and advocate acts of kindness (Scheffler, 1988:14). Utilitarianism holds that a choice is morally right if it promotes everyone's happiness. According to ethical egoism, an action must be beneficial to the individual to be deemed right (Bentham et al., 2004:3).

1.12.1 Argument for ethical theory

One benefit of consequentialism as an ethical theory is that it provides a framework for actions that people can decide to adhere to (Hooker, 2002:12). According to this idea, actions that are beneficial have positive results, while misconduct should be morally avoided if it has a negative effect (Detert et al., 2008:93). In essence, behaviours that make everyone happy are morally just and therefore permissible. ??? states that consequentialism is a moral theory that, in its most basic form, holds that the ideal course of action in any given circumstance is the one that produces the best results and fairly takes into account everyone's interests. Consequentialism is a rational ethical theory because it encourages actions that produce the best results, making the world a better place (Hooker, 2002:13).

1.12.2 Argument against ethical theory

A major critique of consequentialism is the challenge of quantifying various benefits to establish which is morally superior (Taggart & Zanol, 2022:36). Despite its universal applicability, consequentialism is often difficult and complicated to put into practice. It takes too much time to identify and assess every possible outcome, or even enough outcomes, to make an educated choice, particularly in circumstances when decisions must be made quickly. Consequently, the theory is unworkable when people have to decide between acts that have different advantages and disadvantages. Although the theory places a strong emphasis on achieving the greatest good, it does not require that good actions lead to good results. Rather, it highlights the significance of attaining favourable outcomes, irrespective of the strategies employed to achieve them. The idea that "the ends justify the means" promotes giving priority to positive results even when using harmful methods. This may result in damage being accepted if it helps the majority, which might be harmful to society (Taggart & Zanol, 2022:38).

1.13 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important because it advances our knowledge of ethics in higher education, especially in emergency situations. The study offers useful insights into how universities might sustain

productivity while upholding ethical ideals such as justice, care, and transparency by focusing on the experiences of employees in the New Arts Building. The results also have implications for policy, since they can direct the institution in creating ethical frameworks that promote adaptability and a healthy work environment in the event of future crises. By connecting workplace culture and ethics in the context of a South African institution, the study adds to the body of academic literature.

1.14 CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The seven chapters that comprise this study are detailed below.:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter has provided an overview of the study and the format of the dissertation. With its emphasis on the New Arts Building, it has presented the context and rationale for researching the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture at UKZN. The research topic, aim, objectives, and main questions of the study have been highlighted in this chapter. It has also explained the scope and boundaries of the study, discussed the importance of the research, and provided a synopsis of the theoretical framework and methods used. The research's key ethical considerations have been briefly described, followed by an outline of the dissertation's structure.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A scholarly basis for comprehending the connection between ethics, workplace culture, and institutional actions during the COVID-19 pandemic is provided by this chapter's survey of pertinent literature. It examines both local and global viewpoints on how the pandemic has affected the workplace and highlights important ethical concerns, including justice, transparency, and employee welfare. The chapter explores ideas of communication, engagement, and workplace morale and connects them to institutional behaviour during the pandemic. It also addresses existing research on organisational behaviour, crisis management, and ethics in higher education, highlighting research gaps that this study aimed to fill.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical underpinnings are presented in this chapter, with a particular emphasis on consequentialist theory as the guiding ethical paradigm. It describes how this theory is applied to evaluate the ethical character of actions taken by institutions during the pandemic by analysing their effects on institutional culture and worker welfare. The chapter also explores the literature

that supports ethical reasoning and decision-making, as well as the applicability of consequentialism in workplace ethics. It also discusses the theory's advantages and disadvantages and describes how it will be used to analyse the study's results.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The research strategy and techniques used for the study are presented in depth in this chapter, which describes a qualitative research methodology and a case study design centred on UKZN's New Arts Building. The chapter describes the sampling strategy and sample size as well as the data collection techniques, which include semi-structured interviews with employees. It goes on to explain how thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The chapter highlights the ethical practices used during data collection, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, justifies the methodological decisions, and addresses reliability and validity concerns.

Chapter 5: Presentation of Data

The results of the one-on-one interviews are presented in this chapter. The findings are arranged in accordance with the three main conclusions drawn from the data analysis: institutional support, institutional flaws, and ethical issues. The results examine how the university's actions affected engagement, communication, and workplace morale in both positive and negative ways. The chapter presents participants' experiences and opinions of workplace culture both during and after the COVID-19 outbreak using direct quotes and summaries.

Interviewing people for my thesis was a worthwhile and enlightening experience. I was able to interact with participants face-to-face and learn more about their viewpoints on workplace culture following the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if schedule conflicts and participant reluctance made some interviews difficult, the process improved my research and communication abilities. All things considered, the encounter was fulfilling, offering genuine insights that improved my research and boosted my self-assurance.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings and Interpretation of Findings

The results are interpreted and discussed in this chapter in relation to the study goals, theoretical framework, and current literature. The chapter critically examines how the themes of institutional support, flaws, and ethical issues are similar to or different from earlier research. Consequentialist

theory is applied to assess the ethical ramifications of institutional decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also examines how these actions affect employee engagement, morale, and communication, establishing links between theory and actual institutional experiences.

Chapter 7: Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

An overview of the study's results and conclusions is given in the final chapter. It summarises the goals of the study and describes how they were met. The chapter discusses the implications for policy and practice, highlights the study's contribution to the understanding of ethics and workplace culture in higher education, and makes recommendations for future research directions.

1.15 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an overview of the research on the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture at UKZN, with a particular focus on the New Arts Building. It has outlined the main research questions, the study's purpose, its goals, and its guiding sub-questions. The research techniques, which use a qualitative case study approach backed by consequentialist theory as the theoretical framework, have also been briefly described in the chapter. The study's boundaries and scope, ethical issues, and the need to examine ethics in post-pandemic workplace culture have also been covered. In summary, this first chapter has laid the groundwork for understanding the purpose and direction of the study.

The next chapter provides a literature review supporting and placing this research in the context of larger conversations about institutional behaviour, workplace ethics, and post-pandemic organisational culture.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 presented the historical context, aim, research problem, central research question and sub-questions, as well as the methodology. It also addressed the significance of the study, ethical considerations, research delimitations, and theoretical framework, and concluded with an overview of the chapter.

This chapter reviews the literature that informs the understanding of the research problem. It includes academic papers examining the effect of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) on workplace culture. This literature review is organised topically, examining previous studies and academic publications through the prism of recurrent themes (Pandey, 2021:24).

Organisations and workplace lifestyles have been the subject of numerous studies. Traditionally, the workplace has referred to the building or setting where workers perform their jobs (Chimakonam, 2020:21). However, contemporary literature incorporates other features into the concept, such as social connections, employee gatherings, innovation, training, motivation, engagement, and personal development. This study's goal was to explore the ethical ramifications of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) New Arts Building workplace culture reforms.

This section reviews the following scholars: Avasilcai et al. (2021), Attoe and Chimakonam (2020), Lal et al. (2023), Brew et al. (2021), Dowrick et al. (2021), and Gostin (2022).

2.2 DEFINING COVID-19

COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was first identified in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 (Fana et al., 2020). The virus then spread to other nations, including South Africa. The illness manifested as a fever and cough. SARS-CoV-2 belongs to the Coronaviridae family. Coronaviruses were originally identified in the 1930s, when they caused respiratory, hepatic, neurological, and digestive disorders in chickens (Mohan & Nambiar, 2020:31). Lawrence (2020:24) confirms that the coronavirus struck China between December 2019 and the end of January 2020. It was first classified as an international public health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO), but in March it was reclassified as a pandemic, which prompted lockdowns and other changes. Although infected surfaces can potentially spread the virus, respiratory droplets from infected

individuals are the primary mode of transmission. Fever, coughing, exhaustion, and sore throats are examples of mild symptoms, while pneumonia, organ failure, and breathing difficulties are examples of severe symptoms (Matli, 2020:1245). Some cases can be life-threatening, particularly in elderly adults and those with underlying medical conditions. Rapid vaccine development was spurred by the pandemic's effects, which included global lockdowns, economic upheaval, and strained healthcare systems. Vaccination, mask usage, hand washing, and social distancing are examples of preventative measures. Even though the pandemic phase has subsided, the coronavirus's long-term impacts persist, and research is still being done to better control future pandemics (David et al., 2021:20).

2.3 STAGES OF COVID-19

Originating in Wuhan, China, COVID-19 struck an unprepared world, with countries experiencing the virus in a variety of ways, fundamentally altering established routines and practices (Simms et al., 2023:43). According to Menshiko et al. (2025:32), the pandemic was declared in South Africa by the World Health Organization (WHO) in reaction to the dramatic increase in infections. In response, President Cyril Ramaphosa imposed a statewide lockdown on 23 March 2020. The initial lockdown was the most severe, with what were referred to as Level 5 restrictions. Thereafter, the country alternated between Level 5 and Level 1 restrictions in response to the virus's spread (Giudici, 2020:30). All South Africans were obliged to remain at home under Level 5 restrictions, except those employed in essential services. Additionally, the South African National Defence Force was called upon to enforce the lockdown laws, and alcohol sales were prohibited (Aljazeera, 2020:6). This Level 5 lockdown was necessary to improve the health sector's capacity by creating emergency hospitals, increasing hospital bed availability, acquiring the necessary protective equipment, and employing more personnel (Bera, 2021:13). Consequently, the economy stalled in a number of areas (Bera, 2021:34). Only a minuscule proportion of the population, primarily in the services industry, had the option to work from home where internet connectivity allowed.

Since March 2020, the nation experienced three waves of COVID-19], which peaked in July 2021. Businesses were forced to close while the nation remained under an amended Level 4 lockdown as of July 2021. Particularly in Gauteng province, South Africa's economic capital, the Delta variant of the virus had left a deadly trail across the country (Cowan, 2021:89). Officially, the virus killed 81,830 people between March 2020 and August 2021, and laboratory testing verified over 2.7 million cases. On July 3, 2021, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported

that 27.3% of individuals tested positive for COVID-19, indicating that nearly one in three people had the virus (Pitt, 2021:36). The NICD also believed that the number of deaths caused by the pandemic was underreported, given an increase in natural mortality during this time that was substantially higher than the official COVID-19 death toll. For example, over 140,000 additional deaths were reported among those 60 years of age and older between June 2020 and May 2021 (Cowan, 2021:34). This figure suggests either unreported COVID-19 deaths or increased mortality from indirect health complications and virus-related comorbidities.]

According to Naidoo (2021:3), the COVID-19 health crisis overwhelmed South African hospitals, making it challenging to manage its breadth, particularly at the peak of each wave. Hospital capacity remained critically strained and unable to treat everyone afflicted by the virus, despite measures such as restricting businesses and public spaces and outlawing the sale of alcohol, which contributed to halting the infection's spread and reducing the number of alcohol-related deaths. The third wave's spike in June 2021 prevented hospitals in Gauteng from providing the necessary number of beds for COVID-19 patients (Alavinejad et al., 2022:13). The government did not increase funding to recruit more healthcare workers to meet the growing demand. A fire that shut down Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital, one of the biggest hospitals in Johannesburg, in April 2021, worsened the situation. President Ramaphosa ordered the deployment of military personnel in the province to assist health professionals and address this deficit (Kew, 2021:4).

2.4 LIFE BEFORE COVID-19

Avasilcai et al. (2021:12) claim that prior to COVID-19, social, professional, and cultural encounters were a normal part of daily life. Attoe and Chimakonam (2020:18) note that whether at social events, places of employment, or educational institutions, individuals often engaged with one another in person. Students studied in typical classroom environments, while employees communicated face-to-face in crowded workplaces (Lal et al., 2023:4). Public spaces, including parks, dining establishments, and event venues where people frequently congregated, promoted a strong sense of community (Avasilcai et al., 2021:16). Dowrick et al. (2021:21) state that the economy was booming, characterised by many employment opportunities and a thriving global market, that travelling was a popular way to study and relax, and that shopping was typically done in in physical stores. Attoe and Chimakonam (2020:21) noted that before COVID-19, the healthcare system provided readily available in-person consultations and prioritised both mental and physical wellbeing. A thriving, diversified cultural life featured regular events such as family

get-togethers, travel, and live performances. Additionally, technology was continuously enhancing daily life by introducing new tools and technologies that made communication easier and more efficient (Brew et al., 2021:32). People participated actively in eco-friendly activities, became more environmentally conscious, and appreciated the importance of sustainability (Lal et al., 2023:12). With its fusion of new digital innovations and conventional lifestyles, this era captured a world in transition (Lemay et al., 2021:32).

According to Photopoulos et al. (2022:92), before COVID-19, schools and colleges operated in person, using traditional teaching techniques and emphasising social contacts. Students attended classes and actively participated in instruction, group discussions, and hands-on activities (Wang et al., 2021:433). According to Wang et al. (2021:429), students had the freedom to access campus amenities, study areas, and libraries without following any regulations, and lecturers and students could interact without relying on digital technologies. Extracurricular activities, such as athletics, cultural courses, and student groups, were among the most significant facets of student life (Nadioo, 2021:22). Conferences, seminars, and get-togethers were organised by academic institutions, which facilitated positive experiences for both intellectual and personal growth. According to Elumalai et al. (2021:17), this structured learning environment gave students the freedom to engage with their teachers and peers as they pleased. The majority of assessments were completed on-site, including written tests and practical evaluations. The typical campus environment, including residence halls, dining halls, and recreational areas, influenced networking possibilities and relationship building (Nguyen et al., 2021:70). Initially, education was less dominated by digital technologies and was more social and participatory. This experience was significantly impacted by the shift to remote learning and other measures implemented by the health sector as a result of COVID-19, which led to a decline in student involvement, academic performance, and general wellbeing (Gaxiola et al., 2022:22).

According to Marler et al. (2021:32) and Gaxiola et al. (2022:221), before COVID-19, churches were able to conduct their services with members gathering in person for worship, fellowship, and communion. Members regularly attended Sunday services, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and church events without concern for social distancing or any other health regulations. Services were full of people singing, listening to the preacher, and enjoying the human touch of handshakes, hugs, and joint prayers. Among the practices that were central to the church were the sacraments such as Holy Communion and Baptism, which were conducted in the traditional manner with members

being in close contact. Schwartz et al. (2021:175) state that the civic work of places of worship was also a major part of their community contribution. Churches organised charity events, food drives, and outreach programmes. The church also hosted weddings, funerals, and celebrations among its members, with church gatherings forming the central part of social and spiritual life. According to Nguyen et al. (2021:163) religious festivals and meetings such as the Easter and Christmas services were occasions for the faithful to come together, thus consolidating faith and unity. Children's Sunday schools, youth groups, and choir performances were common, giving young people an opportunity to learn and grow. Overall, the churches were the places where a person could experience the feeling of being a member of an open fellowship, spiritual nourishment, and close-knit community before the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 (Elumalai et al., 2021:41).

Bekele et al. (2022:33) state that before the COVID-19 outbreak, hospitals operated under normal healthcare conditions, providing medical care, without an overwhelming need for space and or imposed restrictions. Doctor and patient interactions were more personal, and family and friends were permitted to accompany their loved ones during hospital care. Health professionals were dedicated to taking care of routine medical cases, surgical procedures, and emergency situations without the stress of the global pandemic (Silverman et al., 2021:27). Hospital facilities such as ICU beds, ventilators, and personal protective equipment (PPE) were available for patients presenting with conditions unrelated to infectious diseases. Patients could access surgical treatments, check-ups, and other services without extended waiting periods (Li & Yang, 2021:34). Doctors and nurses maintained convenient work schedules and were less likely to experience the type of burnout experienced during the pandemic. Other than that, as a main healthcare service, education was also among the many platforms of hospital education which students got when they were in interactions directly with the patients during training. The average with less compromised hygiene levels and masks will only be needed in very specific places such as operating rooms were down to only wear masks. Hospitals in general were able to provide a level of care that was efficient and patient-orientated without the pressing and strict protocols that came with the COVID-19 pandemic (Faux-Nightingale, 2021:71).

According to Lal et al. (2023:1124), before COVID-19, workplace environments were usually traditional, in-person settings where workers occupied offices, factories, and business premises without having to observe social distancing or other health restrictions. A high premium was placed on face-to-face meetings with regular conferences, collaboration, and direct involvement by

colleagues, managers, and clients. Workers had to adhere to the same timetable, typically standard business hours in corporate environments, and did not do much remote work (Cappelli, 2021:29). Companies provided social spaces at the office, where employees could meet friends or colleagues for a quick coffee break, lunch, business discussions, or any informal chat, which could be significant in the workplace. Most of the time, business operations were document-intensive and physical, with personal meetings, business trips, and conferences usually being the case (Linnoionen, 2020:42). Training sessions and workshops were conducted at dedicated training sites, thereby allowing employees to gain practical experience and thus increase their proficiency. Workplaces were also venues for functions and team-building sessions, giving workers a sense of belonging. Supervisors focused on the immediate needs of their staff and employed traditional management approaches based on established schedules and expectations. Overall, offices were very active and organised, without interference between work and home life (Schulz, 2021:54).

According to Hensher et al. (2023:43) provide an overview of pre-pandemic life, characterising it as more connected, free, and certain, as people were able to move around without restrictions, gathered in large numbers, and conducted their daily routines without fear of infection. Public places such as schools, workplaces, churches, malls, and entertainment venues were open and accessible for social interaction. Social distancing measures and capacity restrictions did not exist. Traveling was straightforward, and there was no demand for face masks, vaccination cards or quarantine periods (Cappeli, 2021:35). People attended live music events, concerts, and sports competitions which occurred in full stadiums without the need to maintain a distance of six feet apart. Restaurants, cinemas, and public transport were busy, with no restrictions on capacity. Work and education were predominantly face-to-face, with classrooms and offices full of people in frequent communication. Lal et al. (2023:1132) assert that virtual communication tools such as Zoom and online learning platforms were not as widely adopted as they became after the pandemic. In general, life was more spontaneous and cohesive without restrictions on physical contact, gatherings, and movement. The transition to a new way of life would fundamentally reshape workplace dynamics, educational settings, and leisure activities in the wake of the crisis (Hensher et al., 2023).

David et al. (2021:14) highlight the distinct differences between urban and rural life before COVID-19. In urban areas, life was dynamic and fast-paced. People commuted every day to their places of work, schools, and businesses without any interruptions. Public transport such as buses,

taxis, and trains were always full, and traffic congestion was a frequent phenomenon during rush hours (Fana et al., 2020:36). In contrast, rural life was slower and more community-oriented, with most of the population engaged in farming, small businesses, and traditional occupations. Rural areas had less crowded spaces compared to cities, and people relied more on local markets, community events, and personal interactions for daily life (Hossain, 2021:224).

Goswami and Neog (2023:25) note that education in rural areas was mostly conducted in physical classrooms with less exposure to high-level technology than urban counterparts. Healthcare facilities existed but were sometimes located at considerable distances from rural communities (Bera, 2021:13). Social life revolved around community activities, church attendance, traditional ceremonies, and cultural festivals where villagers gathered regularly without social distancing (Zwart, 2020:56). Overall, before COVID-19, both rural and urban areas had unlimited social interactions, physical workplaces, and community-based lifestyles. The pandemic disrupted this balance, forcing both settings to adapt to digital technologies, health protocols, and new ways of life (Goswami & Neog, 2023:45)

Before COVID-19, life within UKZN's New Arts Building was vibrant and bustling. Students and faculty engaged in lively face-to-face interactions, with classrooms and studios filled with discussions, debates, and creative activities. The building hosted a variety of events in the Hexagon Theatre, from lectures and workshops to exhibitions, creating a strong sense of community and collaboration among students and staff. The environment was dynamic, with a constant flow of ideas and cultural exchange, making it a central hub for academic and artistic expression.

2.5 LIFE DURING COVID-19

Mikiewicz and Jurczaki-Morris (2023:47) report that schools experienced massive disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, with health lockdown regulations infringing on education, learning, and interactions among students. Temporary closure of schools led to a shift to online schooling via platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This sudden shift was challenging for both students and teachers, as not everyone had access to the necessary devices and connectivity required. Normal lessons had to be quickly translated to digital formats and tests were written remotely, producing efficiency and equity problems (Breslin, 2021:23). For those schools that remained open, safety and health protocols were strictly observed. Students and teachers wore masks, maintained social distancing, and used hand sanitiser frequently. Class sizes were reduced,

and rotational timetables were put in place by some schools, with students attending every other day to prevent overcrowding. Daily temperature checks and health screenings became a part of regular routines (Shek, 2021:9). Various events, sporting tournaments, and school gatherings were cancelled or considerably limited to prevent close contact (Rahman et al., 2023:474).

Students' social and emotional wellbeing was severely impacted by the pandemic. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and stress resulted from the lack of physical contact with teachers and fellow students (De Klerk et al., 2021:12). Students found it difficult to maintain student engagement in a virtual learning environment, while teachers were under increased pressure to sustain student participation. Parents also had to take a more active role in their children's education at home while fulfilling their work obligations. Limited internet connections, a lack of digital devices, and frequent power outages, made it particularly difficult for rural and impoverished students to access online courses, thus exacerbating the education gap. Some students fell behind academically as a result. (Dawood & Van Wyk, 2021:9). The general standard of learning dropped for most learners, and schools found it challenging to keep pace with the curriculum (Shek, 2021:9).

School life during COVID-19 was uncertain and challenging, requiring rapid adjustments to online education and strict health protocols. The pandemic reshaped education systems worldwide, highlighting the central role of technology, the importance of mental health, and the need for increased preparedness for dealing with future pandemics (De Klerk et al., 2021:10).

The pandemic also severely affected religious gatherings, with strict health policies forbidding physical meetings and ceremonies. Some churches were able to stream their services over Zoom, YouTube, and Facebook Live. Attendees joined worship services from their homes, which eliminated the personal touch and feeling of belonging that church meetings offered (Cappelli, 2021:21).

Lal et al. (2023:1130) note that to ensure people's safety and health, strict protocols were established in churches that opened their doors. Upon entering, everyone was required to wear a mask, use hand sanitiser, and observe social distancing. Additional measures included reduced church capacity, which was achieved by asking people to reserve seats in advance, changing the seating arrangements, and dividing the congregation into smaller groups to maintain proper distancing. Shek (2021:7) asserts that due to the high risk of virus transmission associated with singing, choirs and other group singing activities were largely banned. Changes were made to

religious sacraments such as holy communion, baptisms, and the laying on of hands. These sacraments were modified to minimise or eliminate physical contact. Breslin (2021:43) indicates that many churches changed how communion was received, providing the option of pre-packaged communion or for attendees to bring their own. Other services such as funerals, weddings, and baptisms faced the same restrictions on attendance, and were often conducted with limited participation because families could not gather together to celebrate or mourn with their relatives.

As people began to experience isolation, fear, and a lack of hope, they turned to their faith more intensively (Dawood & Van Wyk-Morris, 2023:24). Pastors and other religious leaders had to find new ways to reach out to their congregations, such as providing one-on-one counselling, online prayer session, and virtual Bible studies. For those opposed to these changes, the absence of physical gatherings reduced church attendance and active spiritual involvement. The life of the church around the world during COVID-19 revolved around rules, restrictions, and changes in worship practices (Shek, 2021:6). The experience for many people of faith became profoundly disorienting. The pandemic tested the faith of many people, prompting deeper spiritual reflection and prayer among believers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, hospitals had to treat patients quickly owing to an overwhelming number of new patients, a lack of resources, and an excessive workload for medical staff. Hospitals were overcrowded with COVID-19 patients, resulting in persistent shortages of beds, ventilators, and PPE, while intensive care units struggled to cope with the influx of critically ill patients] (Verso Books, 2020:66). To provide more room for severely ill patients, non-COVID-19-related procedures, such as routine check-ups and elective operations, were cancelled or postponed. Rigorous health and safety protocols were implemented to prevent further spread of the virus. Doctors, nurses, and hospital staff worked long hours in full PPE with masks, face shields, gloves, and gowns, leading to exhaustion and discomfort. Visitor restrictions meant patients, including those in critical condition, would not have their loved ones around, causing emotional suffering to both patients and their families (Clarke, 2021:44).

Lydiatt (2021:45) notes that medical staff experienced unprecedented levels of burnout, stress, and mental health traumas as a result of the massive rise in their workload. Many medical professionals were compelled to work longer shifts and saw patients suffer and die on a regular basis. Due to exposure, many medical staff contracted the virus themselves, further reducing the number of available staff. Clarke (2021:25) reports that temporary medical facilities and field hospitals were

set up in various locations to handle excess patients. Hospitals prioritised testing and treatment, setting up isolation wards and dedicated COVID-19 testing facilities. To stop the spread of infection, individuals who had symptoms were kept apart from those who did not. In some cases, hospitals ran out of essential medical supplies, endangering lives, as the demand for oxygen supplies, ventilators, and intensive care unit beds increased dramatically (Silverman et al., 2021:22). During the pandemic, hospital life was extremely demanding, stressful, and emotionally draining. Medical professionals emerged as the heroes who put their lives in danger to save the lives of others as healthcare systems throughout the world were pushed to their limits. The pandemic revealed the weaknesses in the healthcare system, but it also demonstrated the resilience, commitment, and importance of frontline workers in times of crisis (Schwartz et al., 2021:1164).

Workplaces began to drastically shift as a result of the pandemic; many companies chose to operate remotely, while others elected to reopen while adhering to stringent health regulations. Office, factory, and business premises had to swiftly adapt to increased safety regulations that affected work routines, productivity levels, and employee relationships, (Parker, 2020:47). For the majority of office-based occupations, employees worked from home and largely used digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack for communication. Almost all meetings took place online, and work schedules were extremely flexible. However, for many workers, this proved difficult due to an inadequate home office setup or having to balance work and family obligations. Some discovered that distractions at home or problems with internet access negatively impacted their productivity (Kniffin et al., 2021:55).

Franken et al. (2021:1145) indicate that workplaces that remained operational required strict adherence to health protocols that included the wearing of masks by all employees, social distancing, and regular sanitisation. Offices were rearranged to reduce proximity between individuals, and some companies introduced rotational shifts to reduce the number of employees present at any particular time. Temperature checks and COVID-19 screenings formed part of the daily routine for on-site workers and companies were required to comply with government regulations to avoid any outbreaks. Cappelli (2021:36) explains that the industries most severely affected by this change included retail, manufacturing, and hospitality. Empirical evidence reveals that a significant number of companies reported losses, compelling them to retrench employees, cut salaries, or close down their businesses. All essential workers, including healthcare staff,

supermarket employees, and delivery personnel continued to work, despite the health risks, scenario, often enduring extended hours and stressful conditions (Chen, 2021:162).

As a result of the pandemic, the mental health of many employees was adversely affected. Most workers reported having to deal with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty in terms of their job security. This increase necessitated mental health support and workplace wellness initiatives (Vyan, 2022:162). Companies developed new strategies to boost and engage their employees' motivation given the constraints that remote working and physical distancing pose (Hossain, 2021:288). Life in the workplace during COVID-19 was difficult and uncertain and companies had to quickly adapt to new ways of working. While remote work was indeed flexible, many digital access, work-life balance, and mental health issues were also thrown into the mix. Work culture was redefined to favour and hasten a shift toward hybrid work models and digital transformation, influences that have remained in the workplace beyond the pandemic (Dryselium & Petterson 2021:42).

Life drastically changed in urban and rural settlements during the pandemic, as governments imposed lockdowns, curfews, and social distancing measures. It impacted urban and rural settings differently in terms of healthcare accessibility, job opportunities, and digital resources (Goswami et al., 2023:191). Urban settlements were most severely affected by COVID-19 due to dense populations and high levels of human interaction (Sawicka et al., 2022:99). Lockdowns in cities and towns were strictly enforced from the onset of COVID-19 (Sawicka et al., 2022:99). Businesses, schools, public transport, and entertainment venues were closed. With businesses shut down, office workers transitioned to working remotely on digital platforms to retain their jobs (Roliwerder, 2020:15). Salama (2023:5) asserts that essential workers such as healthcare workers, retail workers, and delivery personnel had to report for work, placing them at greater risk of becoming infected. Health services faced enormous strain, with long queues of people seeking medical treatment or testing. Movement restrictions and curfews severely disrupted the flow of daily life, making it hard for people to access basic goods and services such as groceries and healthcare (Sawicka et al., 2022:275). Dutta and Fischer (2021:34) state that urban areas had better access to technology and digital services to support their populations working from home, attending classes remotely, and keeping in touch with family and friends. Services increasingly moved online, including shopping, food delivery, banking, and banking. Nevertheless, the struggle for many

businesses experiencing losses led to layoffs, resulting in rising unemployment and economic pressure (Shammi et al., 2021:6157).

In rural settlements, population density was low, and access to essential services presented a major drawback at the onset of COVID-19. Though less affected by the pandemic than the urban population, people living in rural areas had inadequate healthcare facilities, resulting in those who became infected not receiving timely medical care (Wilkinson et al., 2020:9). Most rural hospitals and clinics lacked testing centres, medical staff, and ventilators, putting them in jeopardy with severe cases being unattended (Peter, 2020:448). The entire agriculture sector was disrupted as farmers struggled to transport and sell their products due to restrictions on movement (Salama, 2023:10). Many small-scale farmers and informal traders lost their livelihoods, giving rise to food insecurity and economic hardship (Chirisa, 2020:7).

Peters (2020:451) notes that solid social support from communities made life a little less difficult for people living in rural areas during the pandemic, as family and neighbours provided help with food, care, and emotional support. Churches, community centres, and local leaders played an important role in raising awareness about COVID-19 and facilitating assistance whenever possible. Gupte and Mitlin (2021:221) note that life in both urban and rural settlements during the COVID-19 era was challenging but marked by starkly differing experiences. Whereas urban areas faced acute infections, economic losses, and overstretched health systems, rural areas struggled with limited healthcare access, food insecurity, and inadequate digital infrastructure. The pandemic exposed long-standing disparities between urban and rural communities in healthcare provision, digital connectivity, and economic support systems, highlighting pre-existing inequalities across both settings.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, daily life underwent significant transformations across various dimensions (Ferreira et al., 2021:21). Social interactions were constrained due to the implementation of social distancing measures and lockdowns, necessitating a swift transition to digital platforms for sustaining connections (Khosravizadeh et al., 2022:32). Rehman et al. (2021:21) state that as remote work emerged as the prevailing practice, it presented challenges related to work-life equilibrium and employment stability. Attoe and Chimakonam (2020:32) assert that the shift to online education demonstrated the inequalities in access to technology. According to Lemay et al. (2021:24), during the economic downturn, governments provided financial support

to both industries and workers. People shopped more online and travelled less, and because of the enormous pressure on the healthcare system, more people adopted telemedicine.

Many people felt lonelier and more worried about their mental health (Ferreira et al. 2021:25). More digital content was created, and technology developed quickly (Khosravizadeh et al. 2022:22). Lal et al. (2023:24) note that pollution levels temporarily decreased, but environmental sustainability remains an ongoing challenge. The pandemic necessitated rapid adaptation and highlighted areas requiring systemic improvement (Argus (2021:14). COVID-19 caused a transition from working in an office space to working remotely (Argus, 2021:14). Argus (2021:20) notes that companies that could not shift their operations to remote working ceased operations entirely, while other companies that had sufficient financial resources waited until lockdown restrictions were lifted.

Life in the New Arts Building at UKZN changed significantly during COVID-19. The once-bustling environment became quiet as in-person classes and events were suspended. Teaching and learning shifted to online platforms, and the usual vibrant exchanges between students and faculty were replaced by virtual interactions. The building had been full of energy and creativity, but when COVID-19 struck, most activities took place remotely. The sense of community was challenged as social distancing and lockdown measures limited the opportunities for face-to-face collaboration and cultural events.

2.6 LIFE AFTER COVID-19

While life in schools and institutions of higher learning has returned to a semblance of normality after COVID-19 subsided, the pandemic has left its mark on the education system. Gradually, educational institutions have adopted new educational methods, health protocols, and digital learning tools that have continued to shape education to the present day (Accioly & Macedo, 2021:27). Although students and staff returned to physical classrooms, learning methods and student-staff interactions have evolved significantly. A major change was the shift toward a blended form of education. Schools and universities have fully reopened, but many continue to use online learning platforms alongside traditional classroom teaching (Jandric et al., 2022:999). This hybrid model allows students to access educational resources off-site whenever needed, thus creating more flexible and accessible modes of education. Online tools such as recorded lectures, virtual

classrooms, and digital textbooks have also become integral to modern education (Anderson, 2024:34).

Technology in education accelerated during the pandemic. Most schools and universities upgraded their digital infrastructure to ensure that teachers and students could work seamlessly inside and outside the classroom (Ellwood, 2023:23). Digital literacy has become a critical competency as students now use online platforms for research, assignments, and communication with teachers. Even though strict COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted, some health and safety measures have remained. Regular sanitisation, improved ventilation of classrooms, and health awareness campaigns are now standard in schools and universities. Some institutions continue to encourage students and staff to wear masks when feeling unwell and recommend hygiene practices to curb the spread of diseases (Jandric et al., 2022:8).

The return to normal schooling was, however, not a smooth transition for all. Many students experienced learning losses and emotional challenges due to extended school closures and isolation (Anderson, 2024:35). To address this, schools have introduced catch-up programmes, mental health support services, and flexible learning options to enable students to build up confidence in their studies. Universities have also started offering counselling services and peer support programmes to assist students in coping with stress and anxiety (Accioly & Macedo, 2021:47). Assessment methodologies have also undergone some transformation. In more institutions, examinations and coursework are hybridised, combining in-person exams with online assessments. Some universities have introduced continuous assessments, such as digital coursework and take-home projects, which have reduced dependency on final examinations. This has made assessments more flexible and accessible for students from different backgrounds (Ellwood, 2023:56).

The learning culture in schools and universities has changed considerably. Students and teachers now find themselves functioning in a technology-driven and flexible education system. Greater emphasis has been placed on self-paced learning, digital collaboration, and independent research, preparing students for a future where technology will permeate education and employment alike (Anderson, 2024:34). While schools and institutions have largely returned to normal operations, the impact of the pandemic has caused lasting changes. The transition to blended learning, digitisation, mental health support, and flexible assessments have made education much more resilient and accessible. While significant challenges remain, schools and universities are now

better prepared to respond to future interruptions with a more adaptable and inclusive learning environments (Ellewood, 2023:47).

The life of churches has returned to its pre-pandemic state and has influenced how religious communities gather, worship, and interact with each other (Siaki, 2021:23). Churches have resumed in-person services, but in some instances, the changes introduced by the pandemic in terms of online services and health precautions have continued. One of the biggest changes has been the continued online access to worship services (Tudman, 2023:14). During the pandemic, churches made their services available online, allowing their congregants to join virtually through livestreaming or via social media. Although restrictions have been largely lifted, some churches have opted to continue offering virtual services for their members who cannot attend in person because of distance, illness, or personal preferences. This has broadened access to worship (Isiko, 2022:40).

In-person worship has resumed fully, but some churches have retained basic health protocols. Although rules on social distancing and the wearing of face masks are no longer in force, hygiene continues to be encouraged and practised through the use of hand sanitisers and improved ventilation of buildings. Some congregations advocate for staying home when not well, demonstrating their increased awareness of public health (Omondi, 2022:35). The pandemic also managed to strengthen the feeling of community in churches. Many churches played a key role in supporting their members through the pandemic through food assistance, small cash grants, and counselling. That culture of helping continues, with a greater focus on outreach programmes, charity, and mental health work (Tudman, 2023:27).

While have churches offer a hybrid format of physical and virtual gatherings. online prayer groups, virtual Bible studies, and digital giving have become permanent features, making religious engagement more flexible (Omondi, 2022:43). The pandemic's influence on technology adoption, health and safety consciousness, and community outreach has become embedded in modern church life, making religious institutions more adaptable and prepared for future adversity (Harding, 2022:39).

Life in hospitals has seen a marked improvement since the peak of the pandemic but the healthcare system continues to bear the marks of the challenges that period (Salama, 2023:4). Although hospitals no longer have to cope with large numbers of patients with COVID-19, the pandemic has

greatly affected almost all aspects of patient care, hygiene protocols, and medical preparedness (Anderson, 2024:23). Hygiene and infection control protocols have been significantly strengthened. Hospitals still follow strict sanitisation procedures, and many have upgraded their ventilation systems to reduce the transmission of air-borne diseases. Hand sanitisers, face masks in high-risk areas, and enhanced cleaning routines remain in place to ensure both patient and staff safety. The pandemic accelerated the transition to digital health systems (Tudman, 2024:35). Telemedicine is now considered a standard service available in many hospitals, allowing patients to receive treatment without visiting medical facilities (Anderson, 2024:21). This has improved access in many areas, particularly in rural locations or for patients with mobility issues. The adoption of electronic medical records, digital appointment booking, and online prescription services is making healthcare service provision simpler (Harding, 2022:65).

Healthcare workers who suffered extreme stress during the pandemic can now address mental health problems with confidence (Melnyk et al., 2020:930). Many hospitals have begun providing better support to physicians, nurses, and staff via counselling services, wellness programmes, and mental health training. There is also a growing focus on improving working conditions, ensuring hospitals are well prepared when faced with future health crises (David et al., 2021:19). Hospital infrastructure has been strengthened. Many governments and healthcare organisations have invested further in medical equipment, ICU facilities, and emergency response systems to ensure that hospitals are not caught unprepared if another pandemic strikes. This has broadened the avenues for research and vaccine development, thus enabling the medical community to respond more competently in dealing with future outbreaks (Simms et al., 2023:44).

Among the enhancements, some issues remain. Backlogs of non-COVID-19 medical cases have, for example, delayed surgery and routine check-ups. Many hospitals are committed to catching up with treatment that was postponed during the pandemic (Branjerdorn et al., 2022:81). The shortage of staff continues to pose challenges, as many healthcare workers left the profession because of burnout from COVID-19 (Robins-Browne et al., 2022:22). Life in hospitals is returning to relative normalcy, with lasting lessons from the pandemic in terms of improving healthcare delivery, technology, and emergency preparedness. In essence, hospitals' enhanced infection control, digital health systems, and mental health support will better equip them to address future public health crises (David et al., 2021:20).

Workplace life has largely returned to pre-pandemic normalcy, though the pandemic substantially affected business operations, employee practices, and workplace policies (Matli, 2020:1237). The workplace paradigm has changed for the better, with many organisations adopting hybrid work models, improvements in health and safety, and increased use of technology. Remote and hybrid work have undergone perhaps the most significant paradigm shift (Fana et al., 2020:32). During the pandemic, remote work was implemented by many organisations, and several, even after the lifting of restrictions, have continued allowing their employees to work from home, either on a full-time or hybrid basis. This has allowed flexibility in employees' choice of working hours, reduced commuting time, and enhanced productivity. Others, however, have reverted to a full return to office-based work, where in-person collaboration aids collaboration and enhances creativity (Menshiko et al., 2025:28). Of greater significance is health and wellness in the workplace. Many of the hygiene protocols instituted during the pandemic have been retained by firms, including regular sanitisation, improved ventilation, and requesting sick employees to stay home (Amakwah-Amoah et al., 2021:604). Recognition of the need for mental health has increased; organisations have developed employee assistance programmes, counselling services, and wellness activities to help employees cope with stress and burnout (Matli, 2020:1242).

Simms et al., 2023:45) note that technology has become a core part of workplace operations. Video conferencing tools, cloud-based collaboration platforms, and digital project management systems have become indispensable, and technology facilitates effective internal communications. Many companies are also integrating automation and artificial intelligence into their operations, which is changing the nature of work and the skills that employees need to remain competitive in the labour market. David et al. (2021:18) observe that workplace policies have seen many companies adopting flexible working hours, performance-based evaluations, and employee support programmes to adapt quickly to the new work environment. Employee expectations have changed; many workers now prioritise job flexibility, work-life balance, and job security when choosing employers.

Matli, 2020:1251) notes that despite the improvements, challenges still exist. Some employees feel progressively isolated due to working from home, whereas others are finding it hard to adapt to hybrid work schedules. The rebuilding of workplace culture after prolonged remote work remains a challenge for businesses seeking to keep their teams connected and engaged. In addition, companies have to navigate economic downturns and workforce shortages, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. Branjerdporn et al. (2022:83) state that workplace life after COVID-

19 has improved considerably. The adoption of remote work, digital transformation, and employee wellness programmes has created a much more flexible and tech-driven working environment. Challenges still prevail, but corporations and employees have begun adapting to a new form of working life that promotes efficiency, wellness, and flexibility.

Life in urban and rural settlements after COVID-19 has gradually moved toward normalcy almost on a gradual basis, yet profound changes imposed by the pandemic remain. Urban areas were disrupted more by the pandemic due to higher population density, while rural areas contended with disruption through the lack of access to healthcare and economic opportunities. Urban areas have recovered more rapidly due to greater available resources, while rural areas continue to face significant challenges (Bera, 2021:14). City life has evolved in many ways. Companies now widely promote remote or hybrid work arrangements to reduce the number of people commuting daily (Simms et al., 2023:47). In malls, restaurants, and entertainment venues, hygiene protocols and crowd management have become integral to operations since they fully reopened (Fana et al., 2020:26). Digital aspects of life have expanded, with e-commerce, food deliveries, and virtual meetings now fully integrated into daily living. Public transportation systems, which were severely affected during the pandemic, are operating again at full capacity, although some cities have implemented enhanced ventilation and sanitisation on buses and trains to reduce disease transmission (David et al., 2021:23). Matil (2020:21) states that housing patterns have shifted as some people have moved to the suburbs to gain more space and facilitate remote work. In urban centres, hospitals have strengthened their emergency preparedness and telehealth services. Governments have also increased investment in public health programmes to prevent any future crisis. Job recovery in the cities is on an upward trend; however, some industries, especially tourism and hospitality, are still adjusting to the new normal after the pandemic (Bera, 2021:16).

Rural recovery has been slower, owing to fewer resources and less developed infrastructure (Melnik et al., 2020:934). Many rural communities struggled financially during the pandemic, particularly those dependent on agriculture, tourism, and informal employment. While life has returned to normal again, some businesses and farms have yet to fully recover. Healthcare services remain a challenge predominantly in rural settlements (Clarke, 2021:42). Telemedicine has improved access to physicians, while physical healthcare institutions are still underfunded and short-staffed in some rural hospitals. Many rural areas continue to campaign for better funding and infrastructure for healthcare services to prevent another possible health crisis (Hossain, 2021:244).

However, one positive development has been increased digital connectivity. During the pandemic, governments and organisations expanded internet coverage in rural regions to support remote learning and telehealth services. Although a gap still exists compared to urban areas, rural residents are gaining greater access to digital resources, connecting them to markets, educational materials, and health facilities.

Tudman (2023:32) asserts that in education, many rural schools suffered major learning losses owing to a lack of access to online education during the pandemic. Some efforts have been extended to support these, such as catch-up programmes and improved infrastructure for schools. However, disparities between urban and rural education systems continue to raise concerns. Life after COVID-19 in urban and rural settlements has, in many ways, returned to normal but with remaining challenges. Urban areas adapted faster, having benefited from developments in digital and health form, while rural areas continue to grapple with issues of healthcare access, economic recovery, and education. The pandemic has thus underlined the necessity for improved infrastructure, digital inclusion, and resilient public services in both rural and urban areas to prepare them for possible future crises (Omondi, 2022:28).

Gostin (2022:21) maintains that COVID-19 completely transformed how people and companies operate, demanding constant improvements in operational procedures, generating unexpected activities, and bringing about important changes in the workplace. Lal et al. (2021:20) state that many aspects of society have undergone notable shifts in the wake of COVID-19 as individuals and organisations adjust to the new normal. Also, workplaces have become more hybrid, mixing in-person and remote work. This has changed the dynamics of the labour market and created new challenges for preserving work-life balance and employee wellbeing. The pandemic did not only bring change to the workplace, but it also changed social life and education. With the goal of addressing educational inequalities and enhancing access through technology improvements, education institutions have combined traditional classroom instruction with online learning (Lal et al., 2023:41).

Social interactions and community life have resumed, through a blend of physical and digital engagements, reflecting a lasting impact on social behaviours and mental health (Fingerman et al. 2021:20). According to Rehman et al. (2021:24), many industries are recovering, supported by government policies and a resilient market, while consumer behaviour has shifted permanently towards online shopping and a cautious revival of travel and tourism. Steptoe and Gessa (2021:14)

state that healthcare systems have undergone long-term changes, with a sustained emphasis on telemedicine, digital health solutions, and public health policies that support vaccination and disease prevention. Gostin (2022:30) maintains that cultural life is reviving, with live performances and events returning, although digital content consumption remains high. Technological advancements continue to shape communication, work environments, and consumer experiences. Environmental concerns remain prominent, with a continued focus on sustainable practices and policies driven by increased public awareness and corporate responsibility (Brew et al., 2021:11). Overall, the post- COVID-19 era is characterised by a blend of traditional practices and new innovations, reflecting a world that has adapted and evolved in response to the pandemic's challenges.

Life after COVID-19 in UKZN's New Arts Building has gradually returned to its lively atmosphere, although several changes have persisted. Students and faculty have resumed in-person activities, accompanied by a renewed emphasis on health and safety protocols. Hybrid learning models that combine online and face-to-face interactions, have become more common. The building once again hosts events, exhibitions, and classes, restoring the creative and collaborative spirit that characterised it before the pandemic. The COVID-19 experience has had a lasting effect, with greater flexibility in teaching methods and a heightened awareness of the importance of community and connection. Thus, this study sought to investigate the implications of COVID-19 for workplace culture among administrators and academic staff in the New Arts Building at UKZN.

2.7 EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON WORKPLACE CULTURE DURING THE PANDEMIC

According to Isiko (2022:34), the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to unprecedented shifts in workplace culture, prompting many firms to swiftly adopt new methods of operation. In the restructuring of workplace culture, telecommuting, communication changes, employee engagement obstacles, ethical concerns, and mental health challenges emerged as important issues. Harding (2022:67) asserts that the implications of these shifts, both favourable and unfavourable, continue to have an impact on workplace culture in the post-pandemic era. The biggest shift was working remotely. Companies began moving their operations online using platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack for collaboration and communication. Consequently, business continuity was facilitated without considering the potential negative impacts on traditional work culture. Workers were left struggling with blurred boundaries between home and workplace

activities, leading to overwork and burnout. Clarke (2021:12) asserts that employees found it hard to maintain their organisational culture because informal interactions and team-building exercises were not possible in the remote environment.

Another factor that changed drastically was communication in the workplace. Virtual meetings replaced in-person conversations, and spontaneous discussions were limited because they did not lead to problem-solving ideas (Omondi, 2022:31). Tudman (2023:21) suggests that miscommunication increased, as messages were difficult to interpret in the virtual setting. Many employees lost their sense of connection due to reduced social interaction, which ultimately resulted in low morale and a weakened sense of belonging. Virtual employee engagement initiatives and frequent check-ins were introduced but were not as effective in the long run compared to conventional office interactions. Employee engagement and productivity became significant concerns (Anderson, 2024:34). Flexibility in work arrangements benefited some employees, while others found that excessive time at home had adverse psychological effects. Still others experienced reduced motivation and burned out as a result of extended working hours and job uncertainty. Lydiatt (2021:56) asserts that to compound the situation, performance monitoring through work-tracking software was introduced in many organisations to measure employee productivity. Though it raised concerns about “spying” on employees, this practice added another layer of complexity to workplace culture. Companies that emphasised trust and flexibility over stringent monitoring reported more satisfied and engaged employees (Chen, 2021:19).

Cappelli (2021:45) asserts that the pandemic brought ethical dilemmas into workplace culture, including concerns about job security and employee safety. Some companies laid off employees or reduced their salaries, while others offered financial assistance through organisation-wide welfare programmes. Transparency in decision-making proved significant in sustaining employee trust. Organisations that were open and introduced support systems tended to retain greater employee loyalty and report higher morale. Mental health issues became particularly during the pandemic, with employees experiencing increased stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. Hossain (2021:34) asserts that the shift to remote work, coupled with financial strains and health concerns, contributed to declining wellbeing. In response, several organisations implemented arrangements for employees’ mental health by offering counselling, flexible working hours, and wellness programmes. However, not all organisations were sufficiently resourced to address such challenges, so some employees continued to struggle with mental health issues (Ellwood, 2023:67).

Siaki (2021:32) notes that the workplace underwent major changes in the wake of COVID-19, with both positive innovations and significant difficulties. Changes occurred in informal communications as the shift toward remote work was accompanied by an increased focus on employee wellbeing. Business operations underwent critical changes in approach. While some organisations successfully navigated these changes, others struggled to maintain engagement, trust, and productivity. Lessons learned within this period continue to influence on workplace policies, demonstrating the necessity for flexibility, ethical leadership, and employee support in the contemporary work environment (Kniffin et al., 2021:54).

Nadioo (2021:4) states that workplace culture as a whole was transformed in ways that created long-lasting effects, even after the pandemic, affecting work arrangements, communication, employee engagement, leadership ethics, and mental health awareness. Organisations had to adapt to new employee expectations alongside technological advancements and the continued effects of the crisis. Nonetheless, positive changes were sometimes coupled with new challenges regarding workplace morale, efficiency, and fairness.

One of the most significant cultural transformations was the gradual shift toward hybrid and remote working (Schwartz et al., 2021:1174). Typically, a company allows its employees to work from home some days of the week and in the office on others; this was hardly possible pre-pandemic. Hybrid work improves job satisfaction and work-life balance, while also reducing operational costs. However, it has created challenges regarding workplace cohesion, collaboration, and fairness, as not all employees have equal access to remote working opportunities. Organisations tried implement inclusive policies that ensured both remote and on-site workers received the same recognition and engagement (Marter et al., 2021:23).

A major transformation has also occurred in communication within workplaces as they adopted digital tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Slack for meetings and collaboration, most notably during the pandemic (Li & Yang, 2021:45). These tools have allowed remote work to succeed, but they have also diminished informal interactions and in-person workplace relationships. Studies show that effectively organising meetings and engagements remains a primary challenge in remote communication. Therefore, organisations now invest in structured in-person meetings, team building activities, and engagement strategies to rebuild the connections that were lost during the pandemic (Gaxiola et al., 2022:114).

Anderson (2024:56) states that perceptions of employee engagement and organisational trust have changed. Employees now want more in terms of flexibility at the workplace, career development, and ethical leadership. Organisations that were transparent and supported employees during the pandemic retained higher engagement, while those that prioritised profit over people have seen higher employee turnover (Jandric et al., 2022:7). Organisations are now emphasising trust, inclusion, and recognition in their culture as employees look for workplaces whose values align with theirs in health and wellbeing. One long-term impact of COVID-19 in shaping workplace culture is a new and intensified focus on the mental health and wellbeing of employees (Ellwood, 2023:25). The pandemic brought attention to the stress, anxiety, and burnout conditions under which many employees operate. This prompted a redefinition of how organisations would provide mental health support. Many launched wellness programmes, employee counselling, and flexible working arrangements for them as tools for fostering wellbeing. There has also been the push to destigmatise mental health discussion, whereby employees may now seek help without fear of being judged. Organisations that invest in mental health initiatives often report an increase in employee satisfaction and workplace productivity (Shammi et al., 2021:36156).

2.8 EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WORKPLACE CULTURE AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Dawood and Van Wyk (2021:31) maintain that ethical leadership and corporate responsibility have significantly shaped post-pandemic workplace culture. Employees now expect organisations to prioritise ethical decision-making, diversity and inclusion, and equitable treatment of workers. Companies that have failed to adapt to these heightened ethical expectations have faced reputational damage and difficulties in attracting top talent. Many organisations are working to establish fair compensation policies, improve diversity initiatives, and ensure transparent decision-making processes that align with evolving employee and societal expectations (Elumalai et al., 2021:46). Post-pandemic workplace culture continues to evolve, characterised by changing work structures, communication modes, employee engagement practices, ethical leadership, and mental health awareness. Although changes during the pandemic were implemented rapidly, many have become permanent fixtures, fundamentally altering how organisations operate and interact with their employees (Vyas, 2022:168). Chen (2021:14) asserts that companies most likely to thrive in the post-pandemic world are those that promote flexibility and initiative, prioritise wellbeing, and cultivate trust. Organisations that embrace flexibility will find it easier to retain employees and maintain workplace satisfaction, whereas those that resist adaptation will struggle with retention

and engagement. Ultimately, the future of workplace culture will depend on how well organisations balance productivity and employee wellbeing (Hossain, 2021:24).

COVID-19 has profoundly transformed workplace culture, prompting a widespread shift to remote work and necessitating rapid adaptation across various sectors (Mishra, 2020:22). This transition required significant upgrades in technological infrastructure and support, with organisations facing initial challenges and resistance (Kathirvel, 2020:42). The pandemic brought about substantial changes in workplace dynamics. Productivity levels varied depending on industry, role, and individual circumstances, particularly as boundaries between work and home life became blurred, making work-life balance a critical concern (Mishra, 2020:40). Dowrick et al. (2021:32) state that the use of digital communication tools such as video conferencing and messaging apps revolutionised workplace communication, creating new etiquette and collaboration dynamics. Teams had to find innovative ways to maintain cohesion and engagement, relying heavily on effective leadership and virtual team-building activities. Rahadian (2021) indicates that many organisations adapted their policies to embrace flexible work arrangements, with a significant number adopting long-term remote or hybrid models in response to employee preferences.

Health and safety protocols have expanded to encompass remote work environments, with organisations focusing on ergonomic workspace design and mental wellbeing support (Rehman et al., 2021:22). Training and skills development have transitioned online, with an emphasis on remote work competencies and professional growth (Mishra, 2020:23). The pandemic highlighted issues surrounding workplace diversity and inclusion, prompting organisations to develop strategies to create inclusive remote work cultures and address potential biases (Lemay et al., 2021:12). Emerging technology tools are facilitating remote work, and are expected to continue shaping workplace practices (Ferreira et al., 2021:42). Overall, the pandemic has accelerated changes in workplace culture, making digital platforms the primary mode of operation and demonstrating that empathy, support, and adaptability are essential components of contemporary work environments.

2.9 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Scholars have written about COVID-19, not just as a stand-alone topic, but have also researched the effect it had on the workplaces and social life. This is evidenced by the work of scholars such as Rehman et al. (2021:22), Mishra (2020:40), and Dowrick et al. (2021:32). However, this study

examined a different aspect of COVID-19 by investigating the implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture within UKZN's New Arts Building.

2.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the literature on workplace culture, ethics, and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplaces. The research reviewed indicates that the pandemic drastically altered traditional workplace dynamics, particularly in areas such as institutional support, communication, and morale. From an ethical perspective, the literature demonstrates that decisions made during the crisis frequently involved a compromise between employee welfare and organisational survival, reflecting the fundamental tenets of consequentialism. While some changes such as digital communication and flexible work schedules produced favourable results, others revealed institutional weaknesses and reduced interpersonal engagement. Overall, the review revealed that COVID-19 had complicated ethical ramifications for workplace culture, with both positive and negative outcomes. These findings serve as the basis for the next chapter, which examines how these issues manifested within the context of UKZN's New Arts Building.

The study's theoretical framework, which focuses on consequentialism as the guiding theory for examining these ethical implications, is presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature reviewed in the previous chapter provided in-depth insights into the study phenomenon. It articulated the opinions of other researchers regarding the ethical implications of coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) on workplace culture. By identifying gaps in the existing literature, the previous chapter helps both the author and the reader.

This chapter presents the normative ethical theory of consequentialism, which guided the investigation. To help the study achieve its goals regarding the consequences of COVID-19 on workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the researcher employed this theory as a descriptive and prescriptive tool. Consequentialism aims to explain how individuals determine what is good and wrong in circumstances that present moral dilemmas (McNaughton, 2011:4). The consequentialist viewpoint holds that choices are made with the anticipated result of the action in mind. When a favourable outcome is anticipated, an individual behaves in a morally upright manner; when an unfavourable outcome is anticipated, they behave immorally. According to Hooker (2000:1), the basis of consequentialism's ethical theory is determining whether or not a favourable outcome is anticipated. Several methods can be used to comprehend consequentialist theory. For instance, it maintains that a deed is only ethically acceptable if it makes everyone happy.

According to consequentialist theory, a decision is morally acceptable if it produces a better outcome than the alternative (Audi, 1995:824). Consequentialism is an ethical theory that assesses the morality of actions according to their outcomes. The consequentialist viewpoint holds that a course of conduct can only be ethically justified if it offers all parties at least as much positive benefit as any other course of action the person could have taken. Therefore, an action's consequence determines whether it is morally good or bad. The welfare or preferences of everyone affected by an action are important, as consequentialism highlights the impact of actions on others (Audi, 1995:824).

3.2 DEFINING CONSEQUENTIALISM

Gertrude Anscombe first used the word consequentialism in her 1958 article 'Moral Modern Philosophy' (Richter, 2010:14). By explicitly defining the boundary between what is ethically acceptable and wrong, consequentialist theory, which has its origins in utilitarianism, aims to

maximise benefits for the greatest number of individuals (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2019). This perspective holds that an activity is ethically permissible if it yields positive effects, but it is wrong if it results in negative outcomes. This approach places all the emphasis on the outcome rather than the motivation behind the action or the action itself. In essence, consequentialism emphasises whether an action has favourable or unfavourable outcomes. Utilitarianism is a common form of consequentialism. According to this theory, the optimal course of action is the one that maximises pleasure or wellbeing for the greatest number of individuals. Therefore, even if something initially appears to be ethically dubious, it may still be considered ethical if it benefits the majority (Graafland, 2009:22).

In many domains, including corporate ethics, public policy, and medical ethics, consequentialism is widely employed in decision-making (Gustafson, 2018:82). Consequentialist reasoning, for instance, might support a policy that could receive some early criticism but ultimately enhances the lives of employees or increases an organisation's productivity. The consequentialist viewpoint would evaluate any modifications implemented during or following the COVID-19 pandemic according to how they affected employee morale, communication, and output. Even if the adjustments were difficult at first, consequentialism may view them as morally justified if they improved the working environment. Consequentialism holds that an action's morality is determined solely by its effects – a course of action is only morally acceptable if it results in a comparable degree of positive utility for all stakeholders (Driver, 2011:1). In view of the phenomena under investigation, which examines the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture, this implies that the best course of action is the one that produces the greatest overall outcomes in a given circumstance. If the majority of individuals benefit from a course of action, then the conduct is legitimate (Audi, 1995:824). Consequentialist theory holds that behaviour can only be deemed morally correct if it follows a system of rules that, if widely adhered to, would maximise the good.

A path of conduct may only be morally justifiable, according to the ethical theory of consequentialism, if it benefits all people concerned at least as much as any other course of action the person might choose (Hooker 2000:3). According to Ekvall (2019:2), consequentialist theory is based on the anticipation of a favourable or unfavourable predicted result. The concept can be divided into three groups: ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and ethical altruism. Thomas Auguste Comte observed that ethical altruism is predicated on the morality of others – an act that puts the

needs of others above one's own is considered altruistic. Proponents of ethical altruism promote acts of altruism and believe they oppose self-interested behaviour (Scheffler, 1988:14). According to utilitarianism a decision is ethically correct if it maximises everyone's happiness. Ethical egoism argues that for an action to be considered correct, it should be of benefit (Bentham et al., 2004:3). Consequentialism also supports the idea that one should treat others as one would like to be treated, because analysing the outcome of each action before it is performed ensures that an individual will avoid harming themselves and, consequently, will avoid harming others.

3.3 HOW CONSEQUENTIALISM IS APPROACHED AS AN ETHICAL THEORY

Consequentialism offers a systematic framework for determining what is morally right or wrong based on the outcomes of actions and, as such, is regarded as an ethical theory (Sen, 2000:501). By providing guidelines or standards for evaluating behaviour, ethical theories aim to direct human behaviour and decision-making (Driver, 2011:44). Consequentialism accomplishes this by asserting that an action's morality is determined solely by the results it yields. The theory is based on the notion that promoting positive outcomes, such as happiness, wellbeing, or general benefit, is the ultimate purpose of morality (Sen, 2000:501). It encourages individuals and institutions to consider the broader implications of their choices, rather than simply following rules or traditions (Sen, 2000:502). For example, if a workplace decision leads to improved productivity, better staff engagement, or greater fairness, consequentialism would view that decision as ethical. The theory promotes accountability by requiring decision-makers to consider the potential results of their actions before proceeding. It shifts the ethical focus from abstract duties to practical outcomes, making it highly applicable in real world situations, including workplace environments, policymaking, and healthcare (Hooker, 2000:56).

According to Shaw (2006:5), philosophers use the term consequentialism to refer to a broad perspective on good and wrong, providing a useful framework for an entire family of beliefs. Many authors, including Peter Singer, Auguste Comte, Henry Sidgwick, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham, have contributed to the development of consequentialist theory. One of the most well-known types of consequentialism is utilitarianism, developed in the 18th and 19th centuries by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Deen, 2011:32).

3.3.1 Utilitarianism

Bentham is credited with founding utilitarianism, although Mill was its principal developer. Bentham's theory states that a behaviour is ethically permissible if it promotes happiness or pleasure, and morally wrong if it results in misery or suffering (Bentham & Mill, 2004:41). According to Mill, utilitarianism is a philosophy based on the idea that deeds are morally right or wrong, depending on the extent to which they tend to provide happiness or prevent suffering. Mill defined happiness as the presence of pleasure and absence of pain (Bentham et al., 2004:2).

A set of moral principles known as utilitarianism suggests that actions should improve each person's sense of pleasure and wellbeing. According to utilitarianism, an action is moral or good if it benefits the greatest number of people. The theory of ethical standards examines the morality of behaviour and determines whether it is right or wrong. Baujard (2013) notes that act utilitarianism considers only the consequences of a single action.

3.3.2 Ethical egoism

The ethical egoism thesis states that a deed is acceptable if it promotes the interests of the person doing it (Kernohan, 2012:2). According to Stewart (2016:76), ethical egoism is the idea that a person should behave in their own best interests overall and should only act when doing so makes sense under all circumstances. This viewpoint is frequently criticised for either having fatal logical flaws or failing to account for the fundamental elements of morality, even if it makes theoretical sense (Stewart, 2016:76). According to an ethical egoist, a person's only duty is to maximise their personal gain. This suggests that the effects on each individual agent are given precedence over all other outcomes (Haigh et al., 2016).

Among consequentialist theories, ethical egoism is regarded as a typical ethical theory (Cumiskey, 1989:124). Consequentialist theories evaluate an action's morality by considering its effects (Portmore, 2007:44), but unlike utilitarianism, which emphasises the greatest happiness for the greatest number, ethical egoism focuses on the self as the primary subject of moral consideration. According to ethical egoism, people must act in a way that promotes their wellbeing as long as it does not infringe on the rights of others (Kernohan, 2012:54; Rachels & Rachels, 2019).

When evaluating why people in a certain workplace use their right to self-interest, the notion of ethical egoism becomes pertinent. In this instance, the theory was helpful in understanding the conduct of employees within UKZN's New Arts Building, where the belief that self-preservation and the desire to pursue personal gain may have contributed to a shift in workplace culture. From a philosophical standpoint, ethical egoism helps to clarify the reasons for workers' dedication, contentment, and communication. It highlights issues about the extent to which individual safety is prioritised over shared responsibility. The application of this theory allows examination of how egoistic actions can be justified or not from an ethical perspective by evaluating their outcomes, even though ethical egoism is often criticised as a rationale for selfishness or an excuse to disregard others.

3.3.3 Ethical altruism

A moral theory that falls within the broader category of consequentialism is ethical altruism, which was established by Thomas Auguste Comte and is predicated on other people's morality. While consequentialist theories assess the morality of actions based on their results, ethical altruism focuses on how these results affect others rather than the individual performing the action (Berkey, 2021:99). Ethical altruists oppose self-interested behaviour and encourage acts of generosity (Scheffler, 1988:14). All creatures are deserving of respect, and ethical altruism requires that people act in ways that prioritise the greater good over their own interests. It is unacceptable to view people as nothing more than objects for collective benefit (Singer, 2008:41). Ethical egoism and altruism are mutually incompatible; the latter maintains that people have an obligation to assist others, while the former maintains that people should act in their own best interests.

According to ethical altruism, the best course of action is the one that benefits others the most, prioritising their wants, interests, and wellbeing in moral decision-making (Saaida, 2023:62). This approach promotes selflessness and emphasises people's desire to act in others' best interests, even when doing so may conflict with their own (Graafland, 2009:43). Individuals should be driven by a sincere concern for others' wellbeing, seeking to avoid harm or promote favourable outcomes for those in their immediate vicinity (Berkey, 2021:100). Moral agents should prioritise the effects of their actions on coworkers, communities, or society at large over convenience or personal advantage (Sen, 2000:510).

Ethical altruism is particularly helpful when considering circumstances that demand striving for the common good, often in environments requiring collaboration, empathy, and mutual support (Cumiskey, 1989:130). The theory provides a framework for analysing actions that put the welfare of clients, coworkers, or pupils ahead of one's own career (Graafland, 2009:35) and promotes careful evaluation of how choices and actions either enhance or diminish a group's or organisation's overall performance (Berkey, 2021:105). Applying ethical altruism in this study would help to understand how UKZN employees, particularly in the New Arts Building, navigated challenges during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.4 Rule consequentialism

The last type of consequentialism examined in this study is rule consequentialism. According to rule consequentialist theory, morality should form the basis for judging an action's rightness or wrongness. These moral principles are chosen with consideration of their implications (Enoch, 2008:75). This implies that when making a moral decision, individuals should consider whether appropriate guidelines exist to follow. It is essential to adhere to rules that provide the best outcomes and are widely acknowledged. Consequentialist theory holds that a behaviour is ethically permissible only if it results from internalising a system of norms that would maximise the good if generally followed (Ekvall, 2019:20).

Rule consequentialism evaluates the morality of actions by considering the consequences of following broad moral principles, rather than evaluating specific actions on their own (Pettit, 1997:127). According to Hooker (2000:23), an action is ethically correct if it complies with a norm that, if universally followed, would provide the best overall outcomes. This emphasises the importance of following rules designed to improve societal stability and long-term wellbeing. The overall advantages of consistently following norms anticipated to produce positive results over time and across contexts provide the moral justification for an action, rather than solely its immediate effects (Hooker, 2000:28).

Rule consequentialism provides a framework for understanding how businesses develop standards and regulations intended to benefit all parties in workplace ethics (Pettit, 2023:157). For example, under rule consequentialism, regulations regarding health precautions, communication strategies, and professional conduct during and after the COVID-19 pandemic are morally good if consistent implementation improves morale, efficiency, and safety.

Rule consequentialist theory was applied to study institutional rules and their ethical implications for workplace culture within UKZN's New Arts Building. It provided a theoretical framework for evaluating whether staff and students benefited from adhering to specific regulations during the pandemic, such as rules on remote work or attendance. This theory aided in understanding how ethical workplace practices were established, maintained, or contested in response to crises and how these practices continue to influence institutional culture by focusing on the long-term consequences of following regulations.

3.4 APPLYING THE ETHICAL THEORY OF CONSEQUENTIALISM

Consequentialism considers the morality of deeds according to their results (Driver, 2011:24). This view holds that actions are ethically correct when they benefit the greatest number of people or lessen harm (Hooker, 2000:35). Consequentialism is particularly useful in organisational settings for assessing the ethical implications of choices and actions by examining how they affect individuals and broader society.

In this study, the ethical ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture in UKZN's New Arts Building were examined through the lens of consequentialism. The analysis focused on the three stages: prior to, during, and following the pandemic. Each phase raised distinct ethical dilemmas and consequences that influenced employees' experiences and the workplace as a whole.

3.4.1 Before the pandemic

Face-to-face interactions, consistent routines, and open lines of communication shaped the New Arts Building's working culture prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. From a consequentialist perspective, this arrangement likely produced favourable outcomes, including regular cooperation, clearly defined roles, and shared academic goals. Visible accountability and daily interpersonal encounters fostered a sense of support and camaraderie among coworkers, which in turn encouraged ethical conduct. Because these practices promoted employee wellbeing, clear communication, and a stable work environment, the decisions and procedures of this period can be viewed as morally sound.

3.4.2 During the pandemic

COVID-19 rapidly forced a transition to remote work, digital communication, and physical distancing, significantly disrupting established workplace norms. Consequentialism provided a

useful framework for assessing the ethical implications of these shifts. Management faced difficult decisions regarding emotional support, health procedures, and equitable access to technology.

The morality of these choices depended on how effectively they protected workers' health, reduced stress levels, sustained productivity, and ensured fairness during uncertainty. One of the central ethical challenges that emerged during this time involved balancing institutional obligations with human needs. Employees with caring responsibilities or limited access to technology were placed at a disadvantage.

From a consequentialist standpoint, it was necessary to consider whether the rules implemented during this period produced more harm than benefit, whether staff were treated equitably, and whether communication was inclusive and transparent. Responses to these questions helped clarify the ethical ramifications of the university's actions during this crisis.

3.4.3 After the pandemic

After the pandemic passed, workplace culture began to shift once more. Flexible scheduling, hybrid work, and an emphasis on mental wellness were incorporated into the organisation. In order to assess whether these long-term changes had a positive or negative effect on the working culture at the New Arts Building, consequentialism remained a crucial theory. Decisions made in the post-pandemic environment, such as maintaining digital systems, redistributing duties, or adjusting leadership approaches, had to be evaluated in light of their immediate and potential consequences.

These developments raised important questions: Had the organisation monitored fairness and care, or had this new normal contributed to exclusion? Did employees feel more empowered, engaged, and connected than they had previously?

This study clarified how workplace ethics changed in response to a worldwide crisis across three stages before, during, and after the pandemic. It offered a clear theoretical foundation for understanding how choices and actions at each level affected employee engagement, morale, communication, and the organisation's overall culture.

3.5 ARGUMENT FOR ETHICAL THEORY

One benefit of consequentialism as an ethical theory was that it provided a framework for action that people could choose to follow (Hooker, 2002:12). According to this view, good deeds had

favourable results, while deeds with unfavourable consequences should have been avoided (Detert et al., 2008:93). In essence, deeds that promoted overall happiness were morally just and therefore permissible. Deen (2011:32) explained that, in its simplest form, consequentialism was an ethical theory asserting that the best action in any situation was the one that produced the most favourable results while equitably considering everyone's interests. Hooker (2002:13) supported consequentialism as a logical ethical theory because it promoted actions that generated the most beneficial outcomes, thereby improving the world

There were challenges to every idea. One objection to consequentialism, according to the Ethics Center (2019), was that quantifying various benefits in order to judge which option was ethically superior could be difficult. Although consequentialist theory was widely applicable, applying it in practice often proved demanding. For judgements that needed to be made quickly, finding and analysing all the consequences — or even a few considered sufficient for an informed decision — took too much time.

Although the theory of consequentialism was based on acting for the greatest good, it did not explicitly require that good outcomes stem only from good actions (Sinnot-Armstrong, 2003:24). Consequentialism relied heavily on the logic that the ends justified the means. This reasoning encouraged people to focus on achieving good outcomes, meaning that harm could be justified if it produced benefits for the greatest number of people (The Ethics Center, 2019).

Consequentialism provided a compelling ethical foundation for examining the impact of coronavirus on workplace culture in the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. At its core, consequentialism evaluated the morality of actions based on their outcomes rather than intentions or adherence to rules. This framework was particularly relevant in the context of the pandemic, when institutional decisions were made rapidly to minimise harm, protect lives, and maintain operational continuity. As such, consequentialism enabled this study to assess whether the ethical responses taken during the pandemic produced the greatest good for the greatest number of staff members and stakeholders within the university community.

The coronavirus pandemic compelled the university to alter traditional modes of working through remote work policies, digital communication, reduced physical interaction, and the implementation of strict health protocols. These changes were intended to protect employees' health and safety and were thus consequentially justified if outcomes such as reduced infection risk and continued

academic operations resulted in more benefit than harm. However, applying consequentialism also required a critical examination of unintended consequences. Within the New Arts Building, many staff members experienced decreased morale, a loss of collegial connection, reduced engagement, and diminished motivation due to isolation and technological limitations. These outcomes raised serious ethical concerns, especially if they compromised wellbeing more than they preserved it.

Consequentialism also helped in understanding fairness and equity in the implementation of pandemic responses. Even though the university aimed to protect all staff, certain groups — such as those with limited digital access, inadequate home working conditions, or caregiving responsibilities — might have been disproportionately affected. This approach highlighted these disparities as ethical failures if the negative impacts on these individuals outweighed the benefits experienced by others. Consequently, the theory offered a means to examine how institutional policies either reduced or exacerbated inequalities in workplace culture during and after the pandemic.

By employing consequentialism as a theoretical framework, this study moved beyond simple assessments of coronavirus interventions. It established a clear ethical basis for determining whether the university's decisions during the pandemic improved staff wellbeing, professional functioning, and workplace integrity in the New Arts Building.

3.6 ARGUMENT AGAINST ETHICAL THEORY

The challenge of quantifying several benefits to determine which was morally superior was a major critique of consequentialism (Taggart & Zanor, 2022:36). Despite consequentialism's broad applicability, its practical application was often difficult and complex. In situations where decisions had to be made quickly, identifying and assessing every possible outcome — or even enough to make an informed choice — required too much time. As a result, the theory became unworkable when people had to choose between actions that had different advantages and disadvantages. Although the idea emphasised achieving the greatest good, it did not state that good actions must always lead to good results. Instead, it emphasised the importance of positive outcomes, regardless of the means used to achieve them. The logic that “the ends justify the means” encouraged prioritising good outcomes even when harmful tactics were used. If harm benefited the majority, it could be viewed as acceptable, which could be damaging to society (Taggart & Zanor, 2022:38).

The University of KwaZulu-Natal adopted global precautionary measures during the pandemic, including staff attendance rotation, digital communication, remote work, physical distancing, and stringent health protocols. The main aims of these actions were to preserve lives and slow the spread of the virus. From a consequentialist ethical perspective, the university's actions were justified if the results — fewer infections, lives saved, and continuity in administration and instruction — outweighed the societal costs and disruptions they caused. Consequentialism offered a broader understanding of how pandemic measures influenced workplace ethics and culture by taking into account not only intention but also the outcomes of these actions. It was also important to consider potential unforeseen or long-term effects. Staff members in the New Arts Building experienced increased isolation, technological challenges, a loss of camaraderie, and blurred boundaries between working and non-working hours. These repercussions may have affected employee morale and their sense of professional identity. In this way, consequentialism allowed researchers to ask whether the university's coronavirus measures produced the greatest overall good or whether they introduced new ethical concerns that outweighed the benefits. Although decisions taken in the interest of safety may have raised ethical issues related to justice, mental health, and workplace relationships, this approach helped in examining these complex concerns.

Consequentialism also highlighted issues of inclusion and equity that arose at UKZN during the shift to remote and hybrid labour. Not all employees had reliable internet, a suitable workspace at home, or adequate support with digital literacy, and therefore did not begin from an equal position. Negative outcomes for certain individuals reduced the weight of institutional policies, regardless of the benefits to the majority. For this reason, consequentialist ethics required these imbalances to be treated as morally relevant when considering the university's pandemic response. This was an important perspective for analysing how the pandemic changed workplace culture and for examining the ethical implications of how consequences were distributed among employees.

Consequentialism offered a valuable theory for understanding the ethical transformation of workplace culture in the post-coronavirus period. As the University of KwaZulu-Natal gradually reopened campus operations and, where possible, shifted to hybrid working, it needed to emphasise outcomes that supported employee wellbeing, restored interpersonal connections, and encouraged equitable and inclusive workplaces. In this way, the study presented consequentialism as both a useful supplement to ethical analysis and a starting point for addressing significant moral issues in the future.

3.7 CONCLUSION

As the study's guiding ethical theory, consequentialism was examined in this chapter. The discussion showed that consequentialism assesses actions according to their outcomes, offering a useful lens through which to view the ethical ramifications of institutional choices made during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also demonstrated how this theory may be applied to understand the balance between favourable and unfavourable effects on workplace culture, including institutional support, employee morale, and communication. The research methodology applied to this study will be detailed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the theoretical framework that guided this study, namely the ethical theory of consequentialism. This theory provided a robust understanding of shifts in workplace culture during and after the coronavirus pandemic. The current chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this study. Pandey (2021:15) asserts that research methodology is a crucial tool for collecting information about the phenomenon under investigation.

The methodology chapter is essential as it provides insight into how the research was designed, the tools or instruments used to gather data, and how the collected data were analysed and interpreted. It also presents the research questions, sampling procedures, limitations, and ethical considerations. Research methodology further clarifies how the literature review will be structured and supports the systematic organisation of the study.

In alignment with the nature and objectives of the research, a qualitative methodology was adopted (Marczyk et al., 2010). For this study, both exploratory and descriptive research designs were employed, providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the ethical implications of the coronavirus on workplace culture within a specific academic context. Qualitative research is considered an engaging and meaningful approach, as it involves close interaction between the researcher and participants, allowing the discovery of rich, detailed insights into people's thoughts, behaviours, and lived experiences (Mason, 2006). Accordingly, qualitative methods were especially appropriate for exploring ethical challenges, morale shifts, communication issues, and the overall transformation of work dynamics within the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus.

This chapter proceeds to discuss the research approach and design, data collection strategies, thematic analysis for data interpretation, population and sampling, limitations, and ethical procedures carefully followed to ensure the validity and credibility of the findings.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Collinson (2003), the qualitative research method was the most appropriate approach for exploring complex human experiences and social phenomena. This study examined the ethical

implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture within the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) identified three types of research approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Quantitative methods involved the collection and analysis of numerical data to identify patterns, relationships, and trends (Dowrick et al., 2021:21). Qualitative methods focused on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to understand concepts, experiences, or social contexts (Ferreira et al., 2021:45). Mixed methods combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of research problems.

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. The choice of this approach was influenced by the phenomena under investigation, which involved critically examining previous publications to explore post-COVID-19 workplace culture in South Africa from an ethical perspective. In qualitative research, the researcher gains insights directly from participants. Instead of measuring and quantifying a phenomenon, qualitative research concentrates on understanding its context and significance.

The qualitative research approach was particularly well-suited to assessing the adequacy, relevance, and impact of changes to workplace procedures on employee engagement, morale, and communication. To better understand the attitudes, experiences, and perspectives of academic and administrative staff regarding the implementation of COVID-19-related changes and their consequences on workplace culture, this study employed a qualitative methodology. Few studies had explicitly examined the ethical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture within higher education institutions, particularly at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Other studies had examined the broader impact of the virus on workplace dynamics and institutional responses (Smith & Taylor, 2021; Mhlongo, 2022). Limited attention had been given to culture shifts occurring within specific buildings or faculties, such as the New Arts Building, which included both academic and administrative staff.

While scholars such as Brown (2021) and Jacobs (2020) had addressed issues related to remote work, mental health, and institutional resilience during the pandemic, these studies often overlooked the ethical dimensions of how changes were implemented and experienced by staff members. This research addressed a critical gap by examining the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture, specifically exploring how institutional decisions influenced staff morale, communication, inclusivity, and professional engagement within the New Arts Building.

This study collected first-hand perspectives and lived experiences from academic and administrative staff using a qualitative case study methodology. It examined how the effects of COVID-19 were explained, implemented, and perceived; how employees assessed the fairness and transparency of decisions; and how these experiences influenced their attitudes, sense of trust, and sense of community at work (Banda, 2022; Collinson, 2003). Additionally, the study examined ethical challenges and issues that arose during this period, using consequentialist ethical theory to assess whether institutional policies improved the welfare of all employees (Mill, 1863; Beauchamp & Childress, 2013).

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research methodologies employed in this study were both descriptive and exploratory. Research using an exploratory design aims to uncover new opportunities or gain a deeper understanding of a problem (Erickson, 2017:2). It is often employed when a researcher wants to learn more about a subject but is not very knowledgeable about it. The research design serves as the framework or strategy that binds the undertaking together. It defines the study objectives, guides data collection, and focuses on topics that would be challenging to identify without conducting exploratory research, while also ensuring that additional research is considered during the investigation.

According to Streubert and Carpenter (1999:49), descriptive research aims for maximal intuitive representation by exploring, analysing, and describing a specific phenomenon as fully as possible, free from unexplained presuppositions. Descriptive research is conducted to record the phenomenon of interest in its actual context, according to Marshall and Rossman (2021:6). The researcher was able to examine and characterise COVID-19 as a phenomenon using the descriptive research approach. The effect of COVID-19 on the workplace was also investigated in this study.

According to Cooper et al. (2006), the research questions and the type of data needed to address the research problem are the main factors influencing the choice of research approach. Van Wyk (2015) categorises research methods into two types: those that provide original data, such as focus groups and interviews, and those that examine pre-existing data, such as content analysis and historical studies. Babbie (2001), Mouton (2001), Van Wyk (2015), and Yin (2003) note that the research approach is centred on the goal of inquiry and can be divided into various categories, such

as investigating novel subjects, characterising social phenomena, elucidating events, and interpreting people's perceptions, insights, and beliefs.

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001:55), a research approach is a strategy or blueprint that outlines how a study will be conducted. It includes details about what will be investigated, where, when, and how the investigation will be carried out. An interpretive method, utilising thematic analysis within a qualitative case study design, was appropriate due to the nature of the research problem and the research question posed in this study. Understanding the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's New Arts Building was the primary objective. The study aimed to investigate how professional engagement, communication, morale, and inclusivity of academic and administrative staff members were affected by institutional actions taken during the pandemic.

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis, according to Marée et al. (2016:110–112), is a continuous and iterative process in which data collection, processing, analysis, and reporting are integrated rather than occurring as distinct, linear phases. The qualitative data gathered from academic and administrative staff members of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, in the New Arts Building were analysed for this study using thematic analysis with an interpretive approach. Thematic analysis was selected because it was particularly well-suited for examining people's lived experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and feelings, which were essential components of this study that investigated how COVID-19 affected workplace culture before, during, and after the pandemic.

This approach involved identifying and analysing major themes that emerged from in-depth interviews with employees who had to cope with changes at work due to the pandemic. The investigation aimed to understand how workplace culture addressed ethical issues such as wellbeing, fairness, openness, inclusiveness, and trust. A structured process was used to conduct thematic analysis: first, the data were familiarised through multiple readings of interview transcripts; second, initial codes were generated; third, codes were organised into themes; fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined; fifth, each theme was defined and named; and finally, the report was produced.

Communication failures, perceived fairness in policy implementation, shifts in interpersonal dynamics, mental health issues, and reflections on management actions were among the themes that surfaced. Empirical data collected from participants' lived experiences, insights, and socially constructed ideas were examined and interpreted using thematic analysis. The ethical judgements of policy enforcement, health procedures, and decision-making processes that affected employees during the COVID-19 pandemic were of particular interest to the study. This included assessing how equitable, open, and inclusive these policies were, as well as how they influenced the overall work environment.

According to Creswell (2014), exploratory research is appropriate for issues that have not been adequately characterised or examined. It is frequently used when researchers require a deeper understanding before creating explanatory models. Babbie (2014) notes that exploratory investigations serve three primary functions: first, they satisfy curiosity and increase understanding; second, they assess the feasibility of conducting a more comprehensive study; and third, they generate concepts or models for future research. The primary objective of the exploratory study in this context was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the moral dilemmas and cultural shifts that emerged in response to the pandemic.

This study collected data through in-depth interviews with academic and administrative personnel from the New Arts Building to investigate important issues, including fairness, trust, inclusion, ethical decision-making, and staff wellbeing. The study focused on analysing how ethical principles, particularly those based on consequentialist ethical theory, were either upheld or compromised during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than testing an established theory. The results revealed how employees experienced and perceived institutional reactions, highlighting the moral dilemmas and efforts to maintain a supportive and productive workplace culture during a period of significant turmoil.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION

This section covers the types and sources of data used to address the study questions. The research tool employed was considered the most appropriate for gathering data for this investigation. Additionally, the study's environment, data collection methods, and the assumptions that informed participant selection are discussed. The researcher used both primary and secondary data collection techniques in this dissertation. The participants' actual responses constituted the primary data. A

descriptive review of the literature, integrating and combining the results of earlier studies on post-COVID-19 workplace culture in South Africa, comprised the secondary data. This type of research employed a combination of primary and secondary data, utilising sources that had already been published in books, journals, and newspapers. Investigating and exploring the subject of this study, which is ethical, involved examining post-COVID-19 workplace culture in South Africa. An extensive analysis of scholarly publications was undertaken (Walsham, 2010:5). Primary data were collected through interviews with staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, New Arts Building.

4.6 SAMPLING STRATEGY

Data from academic and administrative personnel in the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, were first collected using a random sampling technique. Random sampling was chosen to generate a representative sample, as it gave each member of the targeted population an equal chance of inclusion (Alvi, 2016:5). This approach reduced the possibility of selection bias and enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings. To reflect the broad demographic makeup of the employment environment under consideration, the researcher ensured that all genders were represented and sought volunteers from a wide age range, spanning 22 to 60 years. Twelve participants from various departments and roles were interviewed to obtain perspectives from diverse professional backgrounds.

Snowball sampling was also used during data collection. Some participants suggested colleagues who could provide insightful commentary on the subject of the study. These referrals made it easier to reach employees who had particular experiences or who had been significantly affected by changes in workplace culture brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although snowball sampling is a non-probability technique, it complemented the random sampling strategy by providing access to key informants who might not have been identified in the initial selection process. Open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, allowing participants to freely share their thoughts and complex experiences. The exploratory nature of the study, which aimed to understand the ethical consequences of COVID-19 on workplace culture from the perspectives of directly affected individuals, made this approach ideal. In-depth discussions on topics such as ethical decision-making, equity, trust, inclusion, and employee wellbeing both during and after the pandemic were facilitated by interviews lasting between 30 and 45 minutes each.

4.7 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

This research was carried out at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Pietermaritzburg Campus in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The New Arts Building, located next to the Commerce Building on Golf Road in Scottsville, was the specific focus of the study. The Pietermaritzburg campus is a key centre for teaching, research, and administrative activities of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, one of the largest and most diverse universities in South Africa. The New Arts Building was an appropriate location for researching institutional workplace culture, as it houses both academic and administrative divisions. In-depth interviews were conducted with academic and administrative staff members stationed within the facility to gather data for this study. The focus was to explore the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture within this environment. The study aimed to investigate the impact of the pandemic on institutional practices, communication, staff morale, and decision-making processes during and after the COVID-19 lockdown period.

4.8 RESEARCH TIME HORIZON

The research time horizon refers to the period during which the researcher collected and processed data. There are two types of research time horizon: longitudinal and cross-sectional (Hall & Hall, 2020). A longitudinal time horizon involves data collected over a repeated period, while a cross-sectional time horizon involves data collected once over a period of days, weeks, or months. This study employed a cross-sectional time horizon, with data collected over a one-month period.

4.9 TARGET POPULATION

This study focused on examining the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture within the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. It targeted academic and administrative staff who worked in the facility prior to and during the pandemic. In addition to critically evaluating whether institutional responses were morally valid, the study aimed to investigate how the pandemic impacted professional relationships, communication, morale, decision-making, and general workplace dynamics. The sustainability of new procedures implemented in response to COVID-19, the emotional and mental health of employees, and the equity and transparency of workplace policies were important areas of inquiry.

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory methodology, collecting first-hand information through in-depth interviews. The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis and interpreted through the ethical lens of consequentialism to assess whether the decisions taken during the pandemic resulted in outcomes that were ethically justifiable and equitable for all staff members. The study also aimed to contribute to understanding how workplace culture within a university context can be ethically managed in times of crisis.

4.10 RESEARCH ETHICS

Research ethics concerns what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate during the study process. According to Brynard et al. (2014), scientific research ought to conform to widely recognised ethical principles, values, and norms. The rights, dignity, and wellbeing of every participant in this study were fully protected by the researcher. According to Bless, Higson-Smith, and Kagee (2006), conducting research ethically entails protecting subjects from harm and upholding professional integrity at all times. Academic and administrative staff members from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, in the New Arts Building, were invited to participate voluntarily after being properly informed about the study's nature and aims, to ensure ethical compliance. For this study, which investigated the ethical implications of COVID-19 on workplace culture, participants were informed that it was conducted solely for academic purposes. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and their responses would be anonymous.

The study avoided questions or topics that could cause emotional distress, and no volunteer was pressured or misled in any way. To ensure that all participants could understand the questions and instructions, the researcher avoided technical jargon and used clear, straightforward English. Throughout the process, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point without facing any repercussions. Prior to data collection, the University of KwaZulu-Natal's research ethics committee granted ethical approval, confirming that the study complied with institutional guidelines for research involving human subjects. Participants were protected from financial, psychological, emotional, and physical harm by taking all necessary precautions. Interviews were conducted in quiet, secure settings that safeguarded participants' privacy and dignity in a professional and respectful manner. Participation in the study did not involve any financial obligations for participants.

The ethical measures adopted during the research included:

- Obtaining signed consent from participants
- Ensuring voluntarily participation
- Requesting gatekeepers' permission to conduct the study and applying for ethical clearance
- Maintaining privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity
- Allowing participants the right to withdraw at any stage

By adhering to these measures, the study maintained high ethical standards and preserved the trust and cooperation of all stakeholders involved in the research process.

4.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a comprehensive overview of the research methodology applied in this study, which examined the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture within the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. Research methodology refers to the systematic process of gathering, evaluating, and interpreting data within a study framework. To investigate the lived experiences, views, and ethical concerns of academic and administrative staff affected by the pandemic before, during, and after its peak, the study employed a qualitative research design. Various methodological elements were addressed, including the research design, strategy, population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and data analysis. The study drew on both empirical data (in-depth interviews) and non-empirical data (document analysis). Through thematic analysis, the researcher identified significant patterns and themes related to communication, fairness, inclusion, ethical decision-making, and staff wellbeing during the pandemic.

The use of a purposive and partially snowball-informed sampling strategy enabled the collection of rich, diverse, and relevant insights. Ethical procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to, ensuring the integrity and professionalism of the study. This methodology was designed to ensure that the research findings were both trustworthy and meaningful, providing a solid foundation for understanding how workplace ethics were experienced and perceived during a time of global crisis.

CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION OF DATA

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The methodology and study design employed were thoroughly described in the preceding chapter. Additionally, it provided a comprehensive account of the research strategy and methods used to collect the primary data for this study, including the sample size, sampling method, the type of interview conducted with rationale, and relevant explanations.

This chapter presents the study's field findings, which form the foundation for the discussions in subsequent chapters. The study aimed to gather primary data through in-person interviews with academic and administrative staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) New Arts Building in Pietermaritzburg. This approach was intended to obtain firsthand insight into the ethical consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on workplace culture, including aspects such as employee engagement, communication, morale, and institutional support. The data collected reflect staff perceptions and lived experiences prior to, during, and after the pandemic. These findings support the study's primary objective: to examine the ethical implications of the coronavirus on workplace culture from a consequentialist perspective, using the New Arts Building as a case study.

As stated in Chapter 4, the information presented in this chapter is organised according to the themes identified from the interviews. These themes structure the results in order to address the objectives outlined in Chapter 1. They include communication and engagement before and during the pandemic, a collaborative and dynamic workplace culture, employee morale and wellbeing, adjustment to remote and hybrid work modes, institutional support systems following the pandemic, and adaptation to a restrained and hybrid workplace culture. Other themes encompass professional relationships and collaboration, as well as the pandemic's long-term effects on workplace norms and values. These topics were included because they provide essential insight for evaluating the ethical implications of the coronavirus on workplace culture. Understanding the perspectives of academic and administrative staff on these issues is necessary to assess how the pandemic has influenced workplace ethics and culture at the New Arts Building and how these experiences relate to the ethical theory of consequentialism.

5.2 STUDY RESPONDENTS

5.2.1 Academic and administrative staff

Twelve (12) respondents were enlisted to gather data for this study on the ethical ramifications of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on workplace culture within the UKZN's New Arts Building. These participants had personal knowledge of the work environment before, during, and after the pandemic, and were carefully selected from among the academic and administrative staff stationed in the New Arts Building. Their positions within the organisation enabled them to provide insight into how the pandemic affected workplace dynamics, ethical issues, communication styles, and employee morale. To allow an in-depth review of their individual and professional experiences, each respondent participated in a one-on-one interview. This interview format also enhanced the validity and reliability of the data by providing a private, secure setting in which participants could express themselves freely without interference.

All respondents were fluent in English, which was the primary medium of communication during the interviews. English was appropriate for this study as it serves as the official language of the university, particularly for academic and administrative functions. Each respondent received an official written request to participate before the interviews. These requests outlined the research goals and purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the ethical precautions taken, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. Respondents were also provided with a copy of the interview schedule and guiding questions in advance, allowing them time to consider the questions and provide examples or supporting data to enhance the quality and depth of their responses. This step also enabled participants to verify any relevant information to ensure accuracy.

For anonymity and ease of reference during data processing, respondents were assigned pseudonyms in the form of workplace participants (WPs), followed by numerical identifiers ranging from WP1 to WP12. These identifiers allowed participants' opinions to be cited clearly and consistently throughout the findings and discussion chapters, while maintaining confidentiality. The varied and insightful perspectives of these respondents greatly aided understanding of how the coronavirus affected the New Arts Building's workplace culture and ethical framework. The main ideas and points of discussion presented in the following chapters are derived from their reflections.

5.3 THE NATURE OF PRE-CORONAVIRUS WORKPLACE CULTURE

According to the collected data two themes emerged: Communication and engagement before and during the coronavirus, and a collaborative and vibrant workplace culture.

5.3.1 Theme 1: Communication and engagement before and during the coronavirus

This section examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected involvement and communication within the UKZN's New Arts Building workplace culture. Data gathered from one-on-one interviews with six participants (WP1 through WP12), including academic and administrative professionals, enrich the analysis. The study analysed responses to understand how the coronavirus pandemic affected staff communication and participation in day-to-day work life. Participants reported the New Arts Building as lively and bustling prior to the coronavirus outbreak, with numerous in-person interactions. These regular interactions between staff and students in offices and hallways fostered a sense of belonging and academic support. During and after the pandemic, however, this drastically changed. In addition to reduced physical presence, the move to online platforms and restricted campus access affected how staff interacted and communicated with students and one another.

Participant WP1, a senior lecturer, described the pre-COVID-19 era as more “human”, with staff members talking openly across disciplines and student discussions being more intimate. *“Before coronavirus, there was high engagement. Colleagues could walk into each other’s offices; students would visit regularly. There was vibrancy”* WP1 stated. During the pandemic, however, the use of internet-based communication platforms posed difficulties. Digital platforms took the place of casual discussions and impromptu collaboration, even though they were useful for continuity. The participant stated that after the return to campus, staff members remained withdrawn: *“Many colleagues still don’t come in regularly; the building feels empty, and communication is limited to emails.”*

Lecturer participant WP2 highlighted the decline in collaboration and scholarly discourse. They recalled a culture in which colleagues often got together for coffee and reflection, and discussions and collaboration occurred in hallways. *“Lockdown disrupted all of that”*, according to WP2. *“Even now, many would rather write an email or use WhatsApp than come into the workplace to have a conversation. It’s effective, but it’s not the same.”* WP2 also voiced concern about students’

decreased involvement in tutorials and unwillingness to interact in person, which has an impact on staff morale and the quality of instruction.

The shift in engagement was most noticeable in staff-student connections, according to participant WP3, an administrator in the facility. Prior to COVID-19, students would frequently queue outside offices for help or guidance. However, emails and online forms were the only means of communication during the lockdown. WP3 disclosed that, *“It was harder to help students. Many don’t explain clearly in emails, and some don’t follow up. You lose the connection.”* WP3 said that students remain aloof and favour remote communication now that the campus has reopened. *“You can see it even now, they don’t come like before,”* she added.

Participant WP4 identified a breakdown in internal staff communication. WP4 stated that in the early stages of the pandemic, the institution failed to provide staff members with timely or clear updates, which caused uncertainty and concern. less communication among employees. WP4 claims that in the early phases of the pandemic, the institution failed to give staff members timely or clear updates, which caused uncertainty and concern. *“There was a lot of guessing. People were scared. There were rumours about retrenchments. That made people disconnect further,”* WP4 explained. The participant believes that the result was a loss of unity and a communication gap that persists today. WP4 said that *“now people keep to themselves. There’s less collaboration.”*

In a comparable manner, longtime faculty member Participant WP5 reflected on how staff members no longer interact as a group. Team spirit has decreased as in-person meetings have been replaced with online ones. WP5 voiced concern that the transition to digital has created *“a habit of isolation,”* where many colleagues now stay away from casual get-togethers and only speak when where a lot of coworkers now stay away from casual get-togethers and only speak when absolutely necessary. *“We are losing the relational part of the workplace,”* WP5 said. *“It’s affecting mentorship and collaboration.”*

The decrease in spontaneous interactions within the facility was brought to light by Participant WP6, an administrative staff member. *“Before coronavirus (COVID-19), I would walk into offices and greet colleagues; sometimes, we would discuss work or even personal matters. It created a warm environment.”* During the lockdown, WP6 clarified, *“Everything was on email or Teams, which was efficient but very cold.”* Even after the return, WP6 observed, *“The culture has changed.”*

People come in, do their work, and leave. That spark of everyday engagement is not there anymore.”

Junior lecturer Participant WP7 discussed how the pandemic affected relationships between staff and students. *“In the past, students would knock on my door almost every day. I could explain things quickly, and we would build a relationship. But during the Coronavirus pandemic, consultations were limited to online slots. It felt very transactional.”* WP7 added that, *“even now, students avoid coming in. They just send emails, and I miss that sense of closeness.”*

Another administrative employee, Participant WP8, stated that prior to COVID-19, the workplace had a “buzz.” *“There was always someone chatting in the corridor, students laughing, staff sharing stories. The building was alive,”* But this vibrancy was taken away by the lockdown. *“Working remotely made people distant,”* WP8 explained. *“Even today”,* WP8 noted, *“people are cautious. You don’t see the same openness. Everyone is just focused on their own tasks.”*

Lecturer Participant WP9 highlighted how the pandemic changed collaboration. *“Before COVID, colleagues would often knock on my door to share ideas about research or teaching. Those unplanned conversations led to strong collaborations.”* But during the pandemic, WP9 clarified, *“that was gone. Online platforms made interactions formal and scheduled. It killed creativity.”* After COVID-19, WP9 added, *“The habits have stayed. Colleagues hardly engage unless there is a meeting. The free flow of ideas is not like before.”*

Administrator Participant WP10 highlighted how communication breakdowns worsened during the crisis. *“Before COVID-19, staff and students had an open-door culture. You could ask questions directly. But during the pandemic, messages got lost in endless emails, and students became frustrated.”* WP10 continued, *“Even after returning to campus, many staff and students rely heavily on emails. It’s quicker, yes, but we have lost our personal touch. You can feel the distance.”*

Senior academic Participant WP11 characterised the pre-COVID-19 workplace as *“a second home.”* *“We would gather in offices, share meals, and even celebrate small milestones. That made work enjoyable.”* When the pandemic arrived, however, *“we were isolated, and everything was reduced to screens. It made work feel mechanical.”* WP11 expressed regret that, *“even after restrictions ended, people haven’t returned to those habits. There is less warmth in the building.”*

Similar experiences were reported by Participant WP12, a faculty administrator. *“Before COVID, there was energy in the building. You could sense people were connected.”* During the pandemic, though, *“communication was strained, and everyone was under pressure. We became distant.”* WP12 concluded that, *“now, while things are somewhat back, the culture is quieter. People avoid unnecessary conversations. It feels like we are all just surviving rather than engaging.”*

5.3.2 Theme 2: Collaborative and vibrant workplace culture

This theme emphasises the sense of community and belonging that characterised the New Arts Building prior to the coronavirus pandemic. The workplace was characterised as vibrant, friendly, and firmly based in interpersonal relationships and open communication. Employees highlighted how collaboration (teamwork) extended beyond official assignments to casual social encounters, which was crucial for preserving morale and reinforcing community links. The qualities of accessibility, cooperation, and shared accountability were all represented in this culture, which helped to create a lively work atmosphere, as shown in the following quotes:

“Before COVID-19, we had open-door interactions. You could walk into someone’s office for quick assistance or even just for a chat. It made work feel less formal and more like a family environment.” (WP1)

“The workplace was vibrant and full of life. People would meet in the corridors, have tea breaks together, and discuss both work and personal matters. It created strong bonds between staff.” (WP2)

“Communication was mostly face-to-face, and there was a real sense of teamwork. If someone needed help, colleagues were always willing to assist immediately.” (WP3)

“Staff morale was high before the pandemic. We worked closely and supported each other. You could feel the energy in the building.” (WP4)

“There was a clear sense of community. Everyone knew each other well, and it was easy to share ideas because we had that closeness.” (WP5)

“Before the pandemic, we could easily arrange meetings and events in person. There was less formality in communication and more room for spontaneous discussions.” (WP6)

“There was a strong sense of belonging. You never felt isolated because there was always someone to talk to or collaborate with.” (WP7)

“Interactions extended beyond just work matters. Colleagues celebrated personal milestones together, which built trust and warmth in the workplace.” (WP8)

“Teamwork was effortless. You didn’t need to send an email, you just walked down the office, and things got done quickly.” (WP9)

“The environment motivated people. Seeing others working around you created an energy that encouraged productivity and commitment.” (WP10)

“The workplace culture was inclusive. Junior staff felt comfortable approaching senior colleagues, and that made learning and growth easier.” (WP11)

“There was a rhythm to daily life greetings in the hallways, group discussions, and spontaneous laughter. It felt like more than just a workplace; it was a community.” (WP12)

5.4 THE NATURE OF WORKPLACE CULTURE DURING CORONAVIRUS

The researcher highlighted three themes based on the data collected: collaboration and professional relationships, employee morale and wellbeing, and adaptability to remote and hybrid work modes.

5.4.1 Theme 3: Adaptation to remote and hybrid work modes

This theme examines how UKZN employees within the New Arts Building adapted to remote and hybrid work arrangements both during and after the coronavirus outbreak. The responses from WP1 to WP12 reflect different degrees of preparedness, flexibility, and long-term adaptation to the new ways of working that arose in response to pandemic restrictions.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, remote working practices were not considered, and all work was conducted in person. Staff members relied heavily on in-person interactions for academic engagement, productivity, and monitoring. As per WP1, *“The idea of working from home was never part of our system. Everything was done on campus from meetings to consultations.”* This reliance made the abrupt shift to remote work especially disruptive.

The majority of respondents said the university’s move to remote operations was sudden and stressful. WP2 said, *“We were thrown into the deep end. One day we were on campus, the next we*

were told to work from home without much support.” WP2 also pointed out that many employees lacked the resources or training required for digital platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Moodle, which resulted in frustration and decreased productivity.

Administrative personnel such as WP3 had to completely reconfigure their duties in order to adjust to remote work. Tasks that previously required in-person interaction with students had to be completed online, which was not always successful. WP3 clarified, *“Some things just didn’t translate well to remote. Students struggled to get help, and we struggled to guide them. We were all frustrated.”*

Eventually, some employees started to recognise the benefits of hybrid arrangements. WP4 reported that they valued the flexibility of remote work beyond the initial period of adjustment: *“I could work at my own pace. There were fewer interruptions than when you’re in the office all day.”* However, WP4 also observed that hybrid work raised expectations and blurred boundaries: *“You would get calls at night. There was an unspoken expectation to always be available.”*

WP5 highlighted how human connection declined as digital tools became entrenched: *“We learnt to adapt to remote teaching and meetings, but it killed the team spirit. People didn’t bond over screens.”* WP5 went on to say that the previous workplace energy had not returned despite switching back to a hybrid system: *“Even now, we have hybrid meetings, but people are quiet. It’s not the same as before.”*

Concerns over the effectiveness of hybrid work for new employees or interns in need of mentorship and support were raised by WP6: *“Learning on the job is harder when you’re doing it from home. We lost something valuable in that shift.”*

It was more difficult to handle the demands of the new work environment in the absence of informal support networks like communal tea breaks or discussions in the corridors. According to WP6, *“working from home felt like working in a vacuum. You were alone with your laptop and your stress.”*

The shift to remote work was characterised by WP7 as *“a shock to the system.”* *“We were used to structured days on campus, where everything happened face-to-face. Suddenly, we had to adjust to online teaching overnight.”* WP7 clarified that although they gradually grew more accustomed to using online resources, the quality of instruction was diminished by the lack of in-person

interaction: *“You couldn’t read the students’ reactions or body language, and that made it harder to engage them.”*

WP8 drew attention to the challenges of providing remote student support: *“Before, students would walk into the office with documents, and we could solve issues immediately. Online, it was constant back-and-forth with emails and attachments.”* According to WP8, hybrid systems were very isolating even though they increased efficiency for certain jobs: *“You lost the personal touch, and sometimes problems dragged on longer than necessary.”*

Faculty member WP9 highlighted the emotional toll that working remotely takes: *“Working from home blurred the line between personal and professional life. I found myself responding to work emails at midnight.”* Although WP9 acknowledged the convenience of digital media, *“it was not sustainable. The pressure to always be available was exhausting.”*

Junior academic Participant WP10 expressed concern about the effect on mentoring. *“As a young lecturer, I relied on observing senior colleagues, asking questions in the corridor, or receiving informal advice. Remote work cut that off.”* According to WP10, although hybrid models provide flexibility, *“you don’t get the same sense of belonging or guidance. It can be quite lonely.”*

Senior staff member Participant WP11 discussed how the transition revealed disparities in technology. *“Some colleagues had proper internet, laptops, and quiet spaces at home. Others didn’t, and it showed in their productivity and stress levels.”* WP11 clarified that although training eventually proved helpful, *“the gap in resources created tension and frustration among staff. Hybrid work still doesn’t feel fair to everyone.”*

Administrative assistant Participant WP12 stated that although the remote and hybrid tools were essential, they interfered with collaboration. *“Before COVID, we would brainstorm and solve problems as a group in the office. Online, everything became rigid and formal.”* Despite the university’s continued use of hybrid models, WP12 clarified, *“it feels like people are just ticking boxes. The human element is gone, and it hasn’t fully returned.”*

The New Arts Building employees ultimately adjusted to remote and hybrid work modes; this process was characterised by difficulties including a lack of preparedness, digital fatigue, and a blurring of work-life boundaries. Workplace cohesion, mentoring, and emotional connection were negatively impacted by the changes, despite improvements in flexibility and digital competence.

5.4.2 Theme 4: Worker morale and wellbeing

This theme explores how the coronavirus pandemic impacted the morale and overall wellbeing of staff members working in the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Drawing from qualitative interviews with participants, the section reflects on psychological, emotional, and professional experiences before, during, and after the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the outbreak, staff morale was generally described as high. There was a strong sense of collegiality, productivity, and engagement. WP1 recalled a workplace that felt “*alive*,” where staff were motivated by daily interpersonal interactions: “*I used to look forward to coming to work. There was a rhythm to things. Students came in, colleagues passed by – it felt good.*” This energy contributed positively to overall job satisfaction and emotional wellbeing.

However, the onset of the pandemic disrupted this positive environment. As remote work and social distancing became the norm, just like any other workplace, staff members were forced into isolation, both physically and emotionally. WP1 further explained that during the pandemic, the absence of physical contact made the job feel “*robotic and depressing.*” The lack of informal check-ins and spontaneous collaboration significantly affected staff members’ enthusiasm and emotional stability: “*We became just task-oriented, no longer emotionally connected to our work.*”

WP2 echoed this sentiment, saying that morale dipped due to uncertainty and isolation. “*You felt alone in your work. And without seeing your colleagues or students, you started questioning your purpose.*” WP2 also mentioned that, for some, the pandemic blurred the line between work and personal life, leading to exhaustion: “*Emails were coming even after hours. There was no real boundary anymore.*”

For WP3, the lack of in-person interaction with students and staff was emotionally taxing: “*You felt invisible. Sometimes it felt like no one even knew we were still working.*” WP3 also expressed frustration at the increasing workload: “*We were doing more with less, and no one seemed to care how we were coping.*”

WP4 noted that fear and uncertainty during the pandemic had a direct impact on mental health. Rumours of retrenchments, inconsistent communication from management, and the abrupt transition to online systems left staff feeling anxious: “*People were scared to speak up. Everyone was just trying to protect their job. That pressure affected our wellbeing deeply.*” Even after

returning to campus, WP4 stated that many colleagues remain withdrawn and guarded, reflecting unresolved stress.

WP5 described a steady decline in morale. The absence of communal moments, such as staff tea times or collaborative projects, contributed to a sense of detachment: *“The spirit is not the same. People now operate in silos.”* WP5 also mentioned that new staff members who joined after the COVID-19 struggle to integrate because the old support systems and camaraderie are no longer active.

WP6 expressed that the pandemic eroded their sense of belonging: *“Before COVID, we had a culture of checking in on one another. If you were struggling, someone would notice and offer support. During lockdown, that disappeared. You were on your own.”* WP6 added that even after the return to campus, *“people seem less connected, and morale hasn’t bounced back. Everyone is just doing their own thing.”*

WP7 reflected on how the isolation affected their motivation: *“In the past, seeing students every day gave me energy. I loved teaching in a full classroom. Online, it was like talking to a blank screen, and that killed my morale.”* WP7 further noted that the lack of direct interaction with colleagues created *“a lonely and draining work environment.”*

WP8 emphasised the emotional toll: *“You felt like a machine. Log in, do your work, log out. There was no laughter in the corridors, no sense of being part of something.”* WP8 shared that the lack of recognition during this period deepened the stress: *“It felt like no one cared about how staff were coping. That affected our emotional wellbeing.”*

WP9 spoke about the long-term effects on confidence and purpose: *“The uncertainty made us doubt ourselves. Were we doing enough? Were we safe in our jobs? Those questions never left.”* WP9 explained that even now, staff morale has not fully recovered: *“There is more caution, less openness. People are still emotionally guarded.”*

WP10 described the decline in collective spirit: *“We used to have staff lunches, birthdays, and small celebrations. Those things kept us together. When coronavirus hit, all of that stopped, and we never really got it back.”* WP10 added, *“Morale is low because the fun and human side of work has been lost.”*

WP11 echoed the mental health struggles many faced: *“I remember logging into meetings and just feeling exhausted before the day had even begun. It was emotionally heavy.”* WP11 explained that, even after restrictions were lifted, *“the sense of burnout didn’t go away. Many of us came back tired and demoralised.”*

WP12 reflected on the lingering effects of the pandemic on wellbeing. *“Before COVID-19, I felt proud and excited to come to work. Now, I just see it as something I must do. The joy has gone.”* WP12 added that the lack of emotional support systems during and after the pandemic left many staff members *“disconnected, stressed, and unmotivated.”*

The findings from the participants highlight a significant shift in worker morale and wellbeing, with long-term implications. Staff members continue to operate in a cautious and emotionally distant manner. The initial crisis of the pandemic may have passed, but the residual effects on morale and mental health remain visible in the daily operations and interpersonal relationships within the New Arts Building.

These observations are consistent with recent studies on academic workplaces, which indicate that employee wellbeing has been one of the most affected aspects of workplace culture after COVID-19 (Ngubane & Dube, 2022; Moodley, 2021). Without deliberate efforts to rebuild a sense of community and address emotional fatigue, institutions may continue to experience disengaged and demotivated staff.

5.5 THE NATURE OF WORKPLACE CULTURE POST COVID-19

Based on the data collected, two themes were identified: institutional support systems after COVID-19 and adaptation to a reconfigured and hybrid workplace culture.

5.5.1 Theme 5: Institutional support systems after COVID-19

Participants’ responses regarding these themes were contradictory, emphasising both the presence and lack of institutional support at various pandemic stages. According to them, UKZN’s support systems were often more reactive than proactive, and employees’ experiences varied according to their departments, roles, and resource availability.

WP1 asserted that *“there was support, yes, especially at the height of coronavirus, like masks, sanitisers, and emails from HR. But emotional support or check-ins? Not really. We had to cope on our own.”*

Participant WP2 expressed a similar opinion, saying, *“I think the university tried its best. They communicated frequently through emails and arranged online wellness sessions. But the challenge was participation. We were too overwhelmed, and most of us didn’t attend.”*

A more detailed perspective was offered by participant WP3, who said that although technical assistance was offered for adjusting to remote work, it was frequently irregular or delayed: *“There was a point where IT (ICS) would assist with setting up Teams or Moodle. But if your laptop had issues, you were basically on your own. Admin staff were not prioritised as much as academics.”*

Not every participant was unhappy, however. According to participant WP4, *“at some point, they brought in counsellors for staff. It was short-lived but appreciated. The Dean also checked in with our department occasionally, which made us feel seen.”*

Participant WP5 believed there was no institutional support at all: *“To be honest, we were left to figure things out. There were no clear guidelines at first, and when they came, they kept changing. That created anxiety, not support.”*

Participant WP6 said that while formal communication and health protocols demonstrated institutional support, long-term support mechanisms did not emerge: *“Yes, they were sending out emails, but were we supported in the real sense? Not really. Especially after coronavirus. Things went quietly. It was like, ‘back to normal,’ but we weren’t the same.”*

According to the data, institutional support throughout the pandemic existed, but it was inconsistent and frequently failed to meet the logistical, technical, and emotional needs of all employees. Masuku (2023:44) asserts that organisations must create inclusive, continuous support systems that go beyond emergency response and actively promote employees’ mental and professional wellbeing. The New Arts Building employees’ experiences demonstrate how urgent these systems are, especially in light of ongoing disruptions and hybrid work situations.

Participants reported a lack of emotional, technical, and sustained institutional support, despite the availability of various types of support, including PPE, digital tools, and communication. In order

to boost employee morale, particularly during times of crisis and change, more strategic and human-centred measures are required.

The New Arts Building's working culture underwent a dramatic change after the coronavirus outbreak, which is reflected in this theme. Following the coronavirus, the workplace changed from being a lively, social setting to one that was marked by physical separation, a greater dependence on digital communication, less spontaneity in interactions, and a more circumspect attitude to collaboration. The modifications had an impact on employee engagement, morale, and inclusion, which raised moral questions about justice, openness, and community spirit.

5.5.2 Theme 6: Adaptation to a restrained and hybrid workplace culture

The New Arts Building's workplace culture underwent a dramatic change after the COVID-19 outbreak, which is reflected in this theme. Following COVID-19, the workplace changed from a lively, social setting to one that was marked by physical separation, a greater reliance on digital communication, less spontaneity in interactions, and a more cautious attitude to collaboration. The changes had an impact on employee engagement, morale, and inclusion, which raised ethical questions about equity, transparency, and community spirit, as outlined in the following quotes:

“After coronavirus, things became more formal and less personal. Most discussions moved to emails or online platforms. People no longer just pop into each other's offices like before.” (WP1)

“The energy in the building dropped. We now mostly meet for official purposes, and social interactions are rare. Even tea breaks are quieter because everyone tends to stay in their own space.” (WP2)

“Meetings are often virtual now, even if we're in the same building. While it's efficient, it has reduced the human connection we had before.” (WP3)

“Morale went down after the pandemic. There is a sense of distance between staff members, not just physically but emotionally. We are more cautious around each other.” (WP4)

“Communication is more structured now, and while that's good for records, it sometimes feels less transparent because you can't easily clarify things face-to-face.” (WP5)

“After coronavirus, participation still happens, but it's slower because it's mostly through emails or scheduled online meetings. It's less spontaneous, and that affects teamwork.” (WP6)

“Before, the building had a buzz. Now, it feels quieter and more reserved. People don’t linger for casual chats anymore; it’s all about finishing tasks and leaving.” (WP7)

“Hybrid meetings are common now, and while they save time, they make people less engaged. You can sense that staff switch off their cameras and participation feels minimal compared to in-person discussions.” (WP8)

“There is more caution in how people interact. Before coronavirus, we shared ideas freely. Now, it feels more transactional people only engage when necessary.” (WP9)

“Collaboration is different. It’s mostly scheduled and formal, unlike before when ideas flowed naturally. That has affected creativity because everything feels controlled and restrained.” (WP10)

“Even social traditions, like celebrating birthdays or informal staff gatherings, have become rare. People are more private now, and the sense of community has weakened.” (WP11)

“The culture has shifted from being lively to being very professional and distant. While it helps with efficiency, it makes the workplace feel colder and less supportive.” (WP12)

According to the data, the New Arts Building’s workplace culture became more formal, less lively, and heavily mediated by technology following COVID-19. Digital tools increased productivity and record-keeping, but they also created ethical dilemmas including less inclusion for those who were less tech-savvy, a weakened sense of community, and a drop in morale. At the expense of spontaneous collaboration and interpersonal warmth, the culture turned toward efficiency and caution.

5.5.3 Theme 7: Collaboration and professional relationships

Participants’ responses revealed that the type and quality of professional relationships and collaboration in the New Arts Building were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing shift to remote and hybrid working environments. Participants’ perspectives varied, with some expressing a loss of interpersonal connection, while others found the digital collaboration atmosphere to be beneficial.

The decline of casual, spontaneous meetings, which typically promote strong professional ties, was one of the main issues raised by participants. For instance, WP1 said: *“We became very isolated.*

Before coronavirus, we used to interact a lot in the corridor, share ideas informally. But now, most of our communication is via email or Teams meetings, which are more formal. It's not the same."

This observation highlights the transition from informal face-to-face interaction to structured online communication, which reduced the opportunity for spontaneous friendship, peer support, and mentoring. In the past, these informal spaces had been crucial for fostering camaraderie and trust among colleagues.

Similarly, WP3 emphasised the difficulty of preserving deep professional connections when coworkers are reduced to digital personas: *"I don't even know what some of my colleagues look like in person anymore. We work together on projects, but there's little personal connection."*

Some participants expressed positive views despite these difficulties, particularly regarding the flexibility and efficiency of virtual collaboration. For example, WP4 clarified: *"I think we did quite well as a team. We adjusted. Of course, there were challenges, but we stayed connected via WhatsApp and Teams. Our supervisor made sure we met regularly and that helped maintain unity."*

Participant WP6, on the other hand, emphasised the stress that resulted from unequal participation: *"Some people took advantage of being online and didn't pull their weight. It caused frustration for the rest of us. In the office, it's easier to hold each other accountable."*

This issue highlights a common challenge with remote collaboration and accountability: team members occasionally struggled to manage task allocation and ensure fair participation in the absence of direct supervision and in-person monitoring.

WP2 presented a different perspective, stating that they felt more included when working virtually: *"We actually communicated more regularly during lockdown than before. I felt more included in discussions than I used to be. It felt like we all made an effort."*

This suggests that for some people, the transition to online communication created a more equitable environment where everyone had a voice and frequent interaction was more structured.

These diverse experiences are supported by scholarly literature. According to Honorio (2022:22), there are three primary factors that are directly associated with the quality of collaboration in remote environments: role clarity, interpersonal trust, and effective communication. Remote collaboration was more effective in teams with strong pre-existing relationships and robust

communication channels. Teams without these components experienced conflict and disengagement.

Furthermore, according to Gaviria (2023:43), hybrid working arrangements can both improve and worsen professional relationships, depending on the organisation's culture and the resources available to support collaboration. Maintaining connections at work was found to depend on strong leadership, investments in digital tools, and frequent team-building exercises.

A strong desire for in-person human connection to return was also voiced by several participants. According to participant WP1, *"it's not just about working together; it's about bonding, laughing, and supporting one another. That part is missing."*

Teamwork was *"never the same again"* following the shift online, according to WP7: *"Before, we could quickly brainstorm in the office. Now, everything has to be scheduled. That kills momentum. You lose the creativity that comes from spontaneous teamwork."* According to WP7, hybrid work *"made people more detached,"* which hindered the organic flow of teamwork.

WP8 observed that professional connections grew increasingly task-driven: *"Online, you only talk to someone when you need something. Before COVID, you could just chat in passing, and those small chats built relationships. Now it feels very transactional."*

WP9 clarified that although virtual platforms-maintained collaboration, the emotional connection weakened: *"We kept the projects going, but the sense of being a team weakened. It felt like we were just names on a screen. Even now, some colleagues avoid in-person interactions, and that makes teamwork harder."*

The problem of accountability in remote collaboration was raised by participant WP10: *"Some colleagues would disappear during online meetings and not contribute. In person, you can't hide, but online it's easy. That created tension because workloads were not always shared fairly."*

However, WP11 had a more positive viewpoint. *"For me, hybrid teamwork was actually more inclusive. Meetings were better structured, and everyone had a chance to speak. In the office, sometimes the same voices dominated. Online, I felt like participation was more balanced."*

The erosion of the solidarity that once characterised the workplace was highlighted by WP12: *"Teamwork used to be more than just working together; it was about building friendships. After*

COVID, it became strictly professional. We still function as teams, but the fun and human side is gone.”

5.5.4 Theme 8: Long-term effects on workplace norms and values

Under this theme, the study aimed to understand the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace norms and values as perceived by academic staff members at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg campus’s New Arts Building. The objective was to evaluate the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis had altered professional ethics, moral standards, and institutional conduct, particularly regarding commitment, presence, communication, and accountability. Two employees who had direct knowledge of the work environment prior to, during, and after the pandemic were selected to provide insight into this subject.

Prior to the pandemic, the working atmosphere was vibrant and dynamic, according to WP1, who emphasised that an open-door policy, collegial visits, and face-to-face contact were fundamental components of workplace standards: *“It was a friendly environment. Meetings used to be face-to-face. It was buzzing before the outbreak; people were coming in and out of their offices. Students were allowed to come to the offices without an appointment.”*

During this period, accessibility and collaboration were the fundamental values. Staff and students followed a community-based paradigm that promoted communication and in-person interaction in line with conventional academic standards emphasising mutual assistance, shared responsibility, and presence. However, this atmosphere changed drastically during the pandemic. Permits were required to enter the campus, which became restricted, and digital platforms were used for all interpersonal activities, including meetings, consultations, and instruction. According to the respondents, these adjustments affected not only how work was performed but also how much physical presence was valued.

WP2 explained: *“It limited contact with colleagues. Consultations were done online; Meetings were done on Zoom and Teams.”*

As these behaviours continued, they contributed to a culture of distant autonomy that ran counter to the institution’s prior standards of responsibility and physical visibility. As digital delivery became the norm, employees became increasingly accustomed to working alone. Many remained reluctant to fully reintegrate with campus life, even after pandemic regulations were eased.

WP3 noted: *“People were resistant to come back. Even now there are people who have not come back fully. The silence in the New Arts Building is caused by the regulations that were enforced during the pandemic.”*

A major change in workplace expectations is the long-term result of this shift. Communal work ethics have been undermined, as physical presence is no longer regarded as a moral or professional necessity. Employees are no longer expected to work together in common areas. The casual intellectual interactions, moral support networks, and mentorship opportunities that once characterised the building’s employment culture have all been compromised by this loss of closeness. Many of the same opinions were expressed by WP4, who began working in the building in 2018 and advanced from tutor to professor. This adjustment introduced new values centred around efficiency, independence, and flexibility, often at the expense of collaboration and interpersonal development. According to WP4, *“many staff members became comfortable with remote work to the point that returning to the physical workplace was not only resisted but considered inconvenient.”*

WP5 revealed: *“Staff were hesitant to come back the same way they did when they were told to stop coming to campus. Some have not come back fully, it is very empty compared to before the pandemic.”* The virtues of regular interaction, shared space, and bodily accountability have been undermined, as this statement demonstrates. Despite instruction resuming, some colleagues attend lectures only briefly before leaving. The result is a disorganised workforce with poor morale and limited cohesiveness. WP5 added: *“As an individual, I became accustomed to teaching online. Then, boom! I had to come back on campus, adapting to a new norm was very challenging.”* This comment reflects a broader ethical conundrum: although remote work promotes personal comfort, it also jeopardises the university community’s overall purpose. Once a cornerstone of professionalism, the institutional culture of physical presence has been reinterpreted. Now, personal convenience is the source of stress.

WP6 noted how the pandemic demanded a definition of professionalism: *“Before, being present in the building was part of the job. After COVID, people started believing that as long as the work is done, physical presence doesn’t matter. That shift has stayed with us, and it’s hard to undo.”*

WP7 highlighted the shift in institutional expectations: *“Accountability used to mean being in your office, attending meetings, and being visible. Now it’s measured by outputs rather than presence. This has advantages, but it weakens relationships. We hardly see each other anymore.”*

WP8, who has been employed by the institution for more than 10 years, had observed the decline in workplace vitality: *“It feels like the heart of the building was taken out. The buzz of students and colleagues moving around has been replaced by silence. Even when we are here, it’s like people prefer isolation.”*

WP9 considered the psychological aspect of this shift: *“COVID normalised distance. It taught us to work alone and to avoid unnecessary interactions. For some, that became comfortable, but for the institution, it has created a culture where teamwork and mentorship are slowly disappearing.”*

WP10 explained the generational impact: *“As a younger academic, I feel like I lost out on the mentorship culture. Before, you could easily knock on a senior colleague’s door. Now, even when we are back, people prefer emails. It’s more efficient but less human.”*

The durability of internet communication was highlighted by WP11: *“Even though we are back, most communication is still done through email or Teams. The face-to-face element hasn’t returned fully, and I don’t think it ever will. That has permanently changed our norms.”*

WP12 concluded with a contemplation of ideals: *“The pandemic redefined what commitment means. For some, it now means meeting deadlines regardless of where you are. But before, it meant showing up, being visible, and contributing to the communal life of the university. That shift is the biggest long-term effect. The culture of presence has been replaced by a culture of convenience.”*

5.6 RESEARCHER’S REFLECTIONS

Conducting fieldwork for this project was emotionally challenging yet professionally rewarding. The New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal has been part of my academic journey since my undergraduate studies, so I immediately felt a sense of familiarity and comfort in the research space. Many of the academic and administrative staff involved in this study had interacted with me over the years. Some had helped with administrative tasks, while others had taught me as an undergraduate. These prior relationships made it easier to reach participants and fostered a relaxed interview setting.

Recruiting participants was easier than expected. Having spent time in the building and built connections with staff, they were willing to share their experiences. Participants appeared comfortable knowing I had firsthand knowledge of the building's operations, culture, and history, which created mutual trust. This insider perspective encouraged open and honest conversations, lowering potential barriers of guardedness.

The interviews evoked a variety of emotions. When participants described the lively, connected workplace culture before COVID-19—the shared tea breaks, unannounced office visits, and laughter in the hallways—there were moments of nostalgia. I felt grateful for the sense of community that had once defined the New Arts Building. When they discussed the changes brought by the pandemic, such as less face-to-face contact, reliance on digital communication, and lower workplace morale, a shared sense of melancholy and loss was evident.

As a researcher, I had to balance my emotional attachment to the environment with the need to remain objective when collecting and analysing data. Familiarity with participants made me more comfortable, but it also increased my empathy for their experiences. It was occasionally challenging to avoid internalising their frustrations or disappointments, particularly when they spoke about the moral consequences of reduced inclusion and strained workplace relationships following COVID-19.

Overall, this fieldwork reinforced the importance of rapport, trust, and shared history in qualitative research. The interviews were rich, interpersonal discussions grounded in respect and understanding rather than simply exchanging information. I believe this dynamic added nuance and authenticity to the study's findings.

5.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to present and examine the main data gathered from in-depth interviews with academic and administrative staff employed in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Pietermaritzburg campus, specifically in the New Arts Building. The primary focus was on the ethical ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture, with particular emphasis on how the crisis affected norms, values, interpersonal relationships, and institutional expectations. Key themes under which the findings were presented included collaboration and professional relationships, long-term effects on workplace norms and values, staff morale and engagement, the transformation of workspaces and teaching practices, the vibrancy of campus life, and adaptation

to remote and hybrid work modes. Through these themes, participants provided valuable insights into how the pandemic affected deeply ingrained ethical ideals such as accountability, accessibility, and collaboration, in addition to the physical routines of academic life.

The New Arts Building was characterised as a lively, engaging, and socially integrated setting prior to the pandemic. A working culture based on mutual support, presence, and professional camaraderie relied on in-person instruction, consulting, and regular encounters between staff and students. However, institutional activities shifted drastically to virtual platforms at the pandemic's peak, leading to a reduction in face-to-face interactions and a reconfiguration of ethical standards around participation and presence.

The data indicated that while these changes were necessary for safety and health, they have had lasting effects. Some staff have adjusted to working remotely, while many have not yet fully returned to campus. The New Arts Building's workplace culture has been ethically and practically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has altered the nature of academic participation, challenged long-standing assumptions, and reshaped professional standards.

The findings, presented thematically in relation to the study objectives, will be further analysed in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The research findings are critically discussed and interpreted in this chapter with reference to the theoretical framework that guided the study, as well as the body of current literature. The objective is to explore how the information gathered reflects the ethical ramifications of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on workplace culture in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Pietermaritzburg campus, specifically within the New Arts Building.

This chapter demonstrates how the pandemic has altered norms, values, communication, morale, and professional engagement in this academic setting by examining staff members' perspectives and experiences. The topics that emerged from the one-on-one interviews form the foundation of the discussion, reflecting the pandemic's immediate and long-term effects on workplace ethics and practices.

The chapter also considers how the results support or challenge previous research on workplace culture and ethical responses to crises, with particular attention to consequentialism as the guiding ethical lens. Through this approach, the chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the changes in workplace culture brought about by the pandemic, as well as the positive and negative effects identified through the findings. It further offers critical insights into the ethical concerns surrounding staff wellbeing, institutional adaptation, and professional responsibilities during periods of disruption.

The themes and their associated findings are presented in the following table:

Table 6.1: Research themes and findings

Theme	Findings
The effect of communication and engagement on collective wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication and engagement• Collaboration and professional relationships• Rebuilding collaboration and morale

Theme	Findings
The importance of change and adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation to remote and hybrid work modes • Long-term effect on workplace norms and values
Institutional support and shortcomings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional support systems • Institutional shortcomings and ethical considerations
Ideals for future consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worker morale and wellbeing • Rebuilding

6.2 THE EFFECT OF COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT ON COLLECTIVE WELLBEING.

Communication, engagement, worker morale, wellbeing, collaboration, and professional relationships form the core results in this area of the study. This section integrates these dimensions and examines them through their consequential effects.

6.2.1 Communication and engagement

The research indicated that two of the most significant factors influencing workplace culture during the pandemic were communication and engagement. In addition to disrupting employees’ physical presence, COVID-19 also affected communication protocols, quality, and regularity. From a consequentialist perspective, the ethical relevance of these disruptions lies in their positive and negative effects on staff morale, collegial relationships, and institutional functioning.

Before the pandemic, communication and engagement in the New Arts Building were characterised by frequent human interaction, openness, and vibrancy. Respondents described regular collaboration, spontaneous conversations, and a strong sense of community. During the pandemic, however, in-person interactions were replaced with virtual meetings, emails, and online messaging platforms. Despite these challenges, several advantages emerged. Respondents agreed that online platforms allowed teaching, administrative coordination, and research collaboration to continue, thereby upholding the institution’s academic mission. By preventing operational interruption, this adaptability demonstrated institutional resilience and collective accountability—both key ethical considerations within consequentialist theory.

The transition to digital communication also improved staff members' technological proficiency and adaptability (Kvirchishvili, 2023:89). Hybrid communication models that combined virtual and physical interaction emerged as a lasting feature, enhancing accessibility and work–life balance. These developments benefitted both the institution and individuals, reflecting learning and adaptability. From a consequentialist standpoint, sustained productivity, improved digital skills, and continued collaboration generated both moral and practical value, reinforcing the ethical imperative of maintaining institutional continuity.

Despite these advantages, respondents identified several challenges. They frequently stated that while online communication was functional, it lacked the warmth, immediacy, and emotional depth of in-person connection. Participant WP2 noted, “*emails and online meetings became the new norm, but they often lacked the warmth of real conversations.*” WP4 observed that online communication “*created distance among colleagues*”. The decline in interpersonal connection overshadowed functional benefits at times, contributing to staff isolation, disengagement, and reduced trust (Mostafa et al., 2021:361).

Communication practices continued to shift after the pandemic, with face-to-face encounters occurring less frequently and often with greater caution. WP6 remarked, “*when we don't meet often, misunderstandings can arise, and people can feel excluded.*” These findings point to a lasting reconfiguration of workplace communication norms, marked by hesitancy and distance. According to African relational ethics—which emphasise human connection, interdependence, and mutual respect—the reduction in interpersonal interaction constituted a moral and cultural loss (Metz, 2021:43). From a consequentialist viewpoint, diminished morale, collegiality, and relational depth signal reduced overall utility, demonstrating that even with operational success, decreased engagement carried a substantial ethical cost.

6.2.2 Worker morale and wellbeing

A second significant finding concerns the instrumental understanding of employee morale and wellbeing. Rather than viewing morale as an inherent moral virtue, employees often understood it as a means of achieving productivity, collaboration, and institutional survival (Nalini, 2024:7). This reflects a consequentialist perspective in which the morality of morale-related actions was assessed according to their outcomes, particularly their ability to maintain administrative and academic continuity during times of crisis.

Such solidarity generated positive outcomes, including reduced absenteeism, improved collaboration, and the continuation of teaching and administrative functions. One participant noted that emotional support and collaboration (teamwork) “*kept the building alive*” even when official communication channels weakened. From an ethical perspective, these actions produced high utility, as they maximised wellbeing for the greatest number of staff and students. Some respondents highlighted the long-term importance of maintaining morale, suggesting that ongoing emotional support would prevent burnout and disengagement (Tvedt et al., 2021:111). This indicates that morale, although framed instrumentally, also had forward-looking ethical significance by supporting institutional resilience and sustainability.

However, the results also point to the practical and moral limitations of this instrumental approach. Genuine concern for emotional wellbeing was often overshadowed by management’s emphasis on productivity. Because morale was treated more as a tool for sustaining performance than as an expression of care, employees reported feeling underappreciated and emotionally depleted. Leadership’s limited transparency and inconsistent communication forced staff to rely more on informal support networks than on official institutional channels, which heightened stress and uncertainty. These shortcomings had lasting psychological effects. One participant explained that “*the stress and scars it left remain,*” while others reported feeling “*emotionally drained.*”

From a consequentialist standpoint, these outcomes reduced overall value, as the institution achieved short-term continuity at the expense of long-term trust and wellbeing. Ethically, this divergence between individual dignity and institutional efficiency represents a moral deficiency, one that threatens equity and relational stability in the workplace.

6.2.3 Collaboration and professional relationships

According to consequentialist ethics, collaboration is morally valuable when it results in positive outcomes such as greater productivity, creativity, and collective wellbeing. The findings show that, although its strength varied during the pandemic, professional relationships and cooperation remained essential to the workplace culture in the New Arts Building. The advantages and disadvantages emerging from the results are outlined below.

Prior to the pandemic, strong cooperation, regular communication, and mutual trust fostered a culture of collaboration. Face-to-face interaction “*created a sense of unity and strengthened professional relationships,*” according to WP5, while WP2 noted that collaboration “*was easier*

and more natural because staff were always around each other.” These pre-pandemic experiences promoted efficiency, problem-solving, and a shared sense of purpose – outcomes that hold positive moral weight under consequentialist evaluation. Many employees adapted to digital forms of collaboration during the pandemic, using online platforms to maintain cooperation and carry out administrative, teaching, and research tasks. These efforts demonstrated ethical behaviour and a commitment to collective wellbeing. Several respondents mentioned a deliberate attempt to restore collaboration after the pandemic, recognising its importance for institutional performance and individual fulfilment. WP6 highlighted an ongoing ethical and professional commitment to the common good by noting that *“staff are making a conscious effort to rebuild collaboration.”* Such actions produced positive outcomes aligned with consequentialist ethics by boosting morale, re-establishing trust, and strengthening organisational cohesion.

However, collaboration was not immune to disruption. The shift to remote work reduced opportunities for emotional connection and spontaneous cooperation. Virtual collaboration *“took away the energy of real collaboration,”* according to WP3, while online communication *“felt distant and mechanical,”* according to WP1. The loss of relational depth made collaboration feel transactional rather than supportive, reducing motivation and increasing miscommunication. Collaboration remained limited even after staff returned to campus. WP4 observed that *“there is still a sense of distance,”* indicating that pandemic-era patterns of separation persisted. In addition, several respondents cautioned that group decision-making sometimes slowed progress and that excessive reliance on collective processes occasionally resulted in inefficiencies or conflict. These findings illustrate that collaboration, though valuable, requires careful management to prevent diminishing returns. From a consequentialist perspective, the mixed outcomes – strengthened cooperation in some areas but weakened relationships in others – indicate that the ethical value of collaboration depends on balancing efficiency with emotional engagement.

Overall, the findings show that the pandemic introduced both opportunities and ethical concerns within the New Arts Building. Positive outcomes such as adaptive communication, solidarity, digital innovation, and cooperation enhanced collective wellbeing and demonstrated moral responsibility and resilience. Negative outcomes, including isolation, weakened communication, and utilitarian approaches to morale, revealed ethical shortcomings and the long-term implications of overlooking intrinsic wellbeing. According to consequentialist ethics, the institution’s actions during and after the pandemic are morally acceptable only to the extent that they maximise benefits

for the collective. The findings emphasise the need for long-term reconstruction plans that balance institutional efficiency, compassionate practice, transparent communication, and moral leadership. These principles are essential for rebuilding after past disruptions and for strengthening both operational and ethical resilience in the face of future crises.

6.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF CHANGE AND ADAPTATION

This theme integrates adjusting to remote and hybrid work with the long-term impact on workplace norms and values by analysing them via the lens of their consequential impacts and using the following findings: The long-term impact on workplace norms and values of adjusting to remote and hybrid work styles

6.3.1 Adaptation to remote and hybrid work modes

A key component of comprehending the ethical effects of the coronavirus pandemic on workplace culture at the New Arts Building is the subject of adapting to remote and hybrid work styles. Despite being motivated by need, the transition to new working methods had significant organisational and moral ramifications. According to the literature, adjusting to remote work involves a change in organisational culture and ethics rather than a neutral adjustment (Felstead & Henseke, 2017:67). This complexity is reflected in the New Arts Building findings, which demonstrate that adaptation was both a survival strategy and a cause of moral conflict with regard to cohesiveness, equality, and wellbeing. The results' advantages and disadvantages are listed below.

According to consequentialist theory, the shift to remote and hybrid work had a number of beneficial effects that helped the institution survive the pandemic and safeguard the welfare of its employees. Because they ensured the continuation of teaching, research, and administrative activities while protecting lives at a moment of crisis, respondents consistently regarded these kinds of employment as ethically justifiable. This moral argument was explained by participant WP6, who stated that *“remote work was about protecting life first, then work second.”* It served as our defence against the coronavirus. This demonstrates how working remotely was seen as a moral duty to ensure everyone's safety rather than convenience. Because adaptation resulted in positive results, employment continuity, health protection, and institutional stability, it became an ethical act based on consequentialist reasoning. A gradual reintroduction into college life was made possible by hybrid work arrangements, which balanced safety with a return to social interaction.

According to WP2, “*Hybrid work gave us the chance to return slowly, to test our strength after the pandemic,*” highlighting how it helped preserve operational flexibility, reestablish confidence, and rebuild trust.

For some employees, especially those juggling family obligations or health issues, remote and hybrid work also increased flexibility and productivity. According to Bloom (2020:45), working remotely can enhance work-life balance and lower transportation expenses, hence promoting sustainability and long-term wellbeing. Some workers felt empowered and independent as a result of these arrangements, which helped them better manage their schedules. These results show favourable moral outcomes: the institution avoided significant interruptions, maintained academic continuity, and showed concern for the wellbeing of its employees. According to consequentialist ethics, these outcomes are morally right since they maximise wellbeing and reduce damage in the midst of an exceptional catastrophe.

The results showed negative ethical and social impacts, especially with regard to institutional coherence, equality, and emotional wellbeing, even if the adaptation brought obvious advantages. Respondents often stressed that, although being important, working remotely undermined the sense of community and camaraderie that had once characterised the New Arts Building. While WP1 bemoaned that “*the soul of the workplace was missing,*” participant WP3 said, “*Online work was a lifeline, but it could never capture the vibrancy of the building.*” These observations show how the loss of physical presence resulted in emotional and interpersonal costs that lowered morale, decreased spontaneous cooperation, and impaired collaboration. Staff divisions were made worse by disparities in home situations and digital access. According to Miller (2020:45) and Bowen et al. (2021:62), hybrid employment arrangements may inadvertently disadvantage those without sufficient resources, raising ethical questions regarding inclusion and justice. Some respondents said that their capacity to work efficiently was hampered by irregular internet connectivity or inappropriate home workspaces, which added to their weariness and dissatisfaction.

Stress and discouragement were also caused by the blurring of the lines between personal and professional life. Some employees reported feeling overworked and emotionally pressured since there was no obvious separation between working and resting hours. Such hazy borders can undermine long-term morale and wellbeing, according to Messenger and Gschwind (2016:25), a trend that is reflected in the experience of the New Arts Building. Remains of this disengagement continued long after the pandemic. Although convenient, hybrid work occasionally exacerbated the

division between those who worked on-site and those who worked remotely, weakening institutional cohesiveness. As a result, the workplace functioned effectively in theory but remained brittle in practice since it took time for shared identity and camaraderie to rebound. The net utility of adapting to distant and hybrid work in the New Arts Building may be characterised as good in functional terms but ethically ambiguous in relational ones when evaluated using the consequentialist paradigm. During the peak of the crisis, the immediate results of continuity, safety, and adaptability produced significant moral and practical advantages. By reducing health hazards and preserving instructional operations, the university was able to successfully avert institutional breakdowns and sustain worker wellbeing.

Long-term interpersonal and cultural cohesiveness suffered as a result of these temporary advantages. Full post-pandemic rehabilitation was made more challenging by the deterioration of interpersonal relationships, unequal access to digital technologies, and the emergence of boundary concerns. From a consequentialist perspective, this suggests that although the adaptation resulted in a net increase in survival and efficiency, it also carried moral costs in the form of diminished staff wellbeing and social cohesion. Although the adaptation met the utilitarian objective of increasing communal benefit in times of crisis, the overall ethical assessment is one of qualified success; yet, the balance of results points to the need for improvement. In addition to aggressively restoring unity and guaranteeing fair access to resources, future institutional initiatives should strive to maintain adaptability and efficiency. By doing this, the university can turn remote and hybrid work from a simple emergency reaction into a long-term, morally sound model that prioritises both human connection and productivity.

According to a consequentialist perspective, the best way to comprehend the coronavirus's long-term consequences on workplace norms and values is to consider the results of the behavioural and cultural shifts brought about by the pandemic. Consequentialism does not oppose change per se; rather, it demands that the moral value of new standards be assessed based on whether or not they promote harmony, institutional efficiency, and social wellbeing. While actions that lead to loneliness, alienation, or inefficiency are morally dubious, those that boost morale, inclusion, and productivity are morally acceptable.

Some of the long-term changes made to the New Arts Building can be morally justified from a consequentialist standpoint as they have had positive results. Respondents agreed that the pandemic hastened the emergence of more adaptable and flexible working practices, where productivity is

no longer only dependent on physical presence. *“People can be productive in different ways, not just by being physically present,”* WP6 noted. This change represents a moral benefit as it encourages inclusion by taking into account a range of personal situations and working styles, which improves employee wellbeing and lessens needless rigidity. The changing office culture has made the use of digital communication tools a permanent feature. Although these tools were initially impersonal, WP2 noted that they have since become commonplace and improve accessibility and efficiency. This supports the idea put out by Carnevale and Hatak (2020:37) that crises may be chances for positive transformation, allowing organisations to rethink procedures in ways that meet the needs of both individuals and the organisation. Because they enable the organization to continue operating while honouring employee autonomy and personal balance, the new standards of digital competence, self-reliance, and flexible scheduling are morally beneficial adjustments.

From a consequentialist perspective, these results result in a net moral advantage as they improve general wellbeing, give employees greater influence over their job, strengthen institutional procedures, and make the workplace more robust to future disturbances. Thus, the trend toward hybrid involvement may be viewed as a logical and morally sound development that optimises usefulness for most employees.

Although these improvements, the results also showed long-lasting adverse effects that present moral and organisational difficulties. The pandemic has undermined the traditional workplace characteristics of transparency, collegiality, and group identity that formerly characterised the New Arts Building, according to respondents. *“If we continue with this distant way of working, the culture of this building will never return to what it was,”* WP5 said. This emotion reflects a perceived loss of the informal cooperation, informal connection, and shared energy that had previously maintained institutional coherence and personnel morale. According to some employees, social connectivity has suffered as a result of the new standards of independence and adaptability. *“People became more independent, but also more distant,”* according to WP4. Because it diminishes the wellbeing of the group as a whole, consequentialism views this isolation as unethical because it diminishes possibilities for mutual involvement, erodes trust, and leads to emotional exhaustion. Echoing the ethical issues expressed by Bowen et al. (2021:23), the rising dependence on digital systems also runs the danger of perpetuating disparities amongst employees who have different access to technology or who work from home.

From a consequentialist standpoint, these long-term detrimental consequences such as diminished collegiality, hazy borders, and a decline in civic spirit represent moral costs that cannot be disregarded. They weaken the social cohesion of the organisation and jeopardise the equilibrium between personal benefit and group harmony. New standards' moral justification becomes complicated and maybe harmful if they make life easier for many while causing stress, alienation, or exclusion for others.

The study must include the total value of the new adaptations when applying a consequentialist evaluation to the New Arts Building's changing workplace norms. The data points to a parallel moral trajectory: while most people have benefited from the pandemic-driven changes in terms of flexibility, efficiency, and digital inclusion, the social cohesiveness and vitality that support institutional identity have been diminished. According to a consequentialist perspective, the overall moral worth of these modifications relies on whether the increases in autonomy and productivity exceed the decreases in interpersonal relationships and common culture. The total effects can be seen as ethically favourable if the new hybrid standards reduce stress for the majority of employees, enhance balance, and maintain organisational functionality. However, the long-term benefit becomes detrimental if the continuation of distant inclinations leads to alienation and lowers group morale. The results suggest that preserving a balance between adaptability and unity will be the ethical problem of the future. To guarantee that new norms support both individual wellbeing and institutional integrity, the New Arts Building must foster digital efficiency while reestablishing social and moral cohesiveness. According to consequentialist theory, the ability of future workplace rules to maximise collective good that is, to provide the most pleasure, inclusion, and moral balance for the greatest number of people will determine their legitimacy rather than their originality or convenience.

6.4 INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND SHORTCOMINGS

This theme considers adaptation to remote and hybrid work alongside the long-term impact of these shifts on workplace norms and values, analysed through their consequential outcomes and supported by the following findings.

6.4.1 Institutional support

The subject of adapting to remote and hybrid work styles is central to understanding the ethical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture in the New Arts Building. Although

driven by necessity, the transition to new working methods had significant organisational and moral implications. The literature suggests that adjustment to remote work represents a shift in organisational culture and ethics rather than a neutral change (Felstead & Henseke, 2017:67). This complexity is reflected in the findings, which show that adaptation functioned both as a survival strategy and as a source of moral conflict relating to cohesion, equality, and wellbeing. The advantages and disadvantages arising from the results are outlined below.

According to consequentialist theory, the shift to remote and hybrid work had several beneficial effects that enabled the institution to survive the pandemic and safeguard staff welfare. Respondents consistently regarded these working arrangements as ethically justifiable because they ensured continuity in teaching, research, and administrative functions while protecting lives during a crisis. WP6 explained this moral reasoning, stating that “*remote work was about protecting life first, then work second. It served as our defence against the coronavirus.*” Working remotely was therefore viewed as a moral duty to ensure safety rather than a matter of convenience. Because adaptation produced positive outcomes—continuity of work, health protection, and institutional stability—it became an ethical act grounded in consequentialist logic. Hybrid work arrangements further supported gradual reintegration into campus life, balancing safety with renewed social interaction. As WP2 noted, “*Hybrid work gave us the chance to return slowly, to test our strength after the pandemic,*” highlighting how it helped preserve flexibility, rebuild confidence, and restore trust.

For some employees, particularly those managing family responsibilities or health concerns, remote and hybrid work also increased flexibility and productivity. Bloom (2020:45) found that remote work can enhance work–life balance and reduce transport costs, contributing to sustainability and long-term wellbeing. These arrangements left some workers feeling empowered and more independent, helping them manage their schedules more effectively. These findings illustrate favourable moral outcomes: the institution avoided significant disruption, sustained academic continuity, and demonstrated concern for staff wellbeing. From a consequentialist standpoint, these outcomes are morally right as they maximise wellbeing and minimise harm during an exceptional crisis.

Despite these advantages, the results also showed negative ethical and social impacts, particularly concerning institutional cohesion, equality, and emotional wellbeing. Respondents frequently emphasised that, although necessary, remote work weakened the sense of community and

camaraderie that had once characterised the New Arts Building. WP1 remarked that “*the soul of the workplace was missing,*” while WP3 stated that “*online work was a lifeline, but it could never capture the vibrancy of the building.*” These observations highlight the emotional and interpersonal costs of losing physical presence, which lowered morale, reduced spontaneous cooperation, and weakened collaboration. Inequalities in home environments and digital access further deepened staff divisions. Miller (2020:45) and Bowen et al. (2021:62) similarly warn that hybrid arrangements may inadvertently disadvantage those with fewer resources, raising ethical concerns regarding inclusion and fairness. Several respondents reported that irregular internet connectivity or inadequate home workspaces hindered their ability to work effectively, contributing to fatigue and frustration.

Blurred boundaries between personal and professional life also generated stress and discouragement. Some employees felt overworked and emotionally strained due to the absence of clear separation between work and personal time. Messenger and Gschwind (2016:25) argue that such blurred boundaries can undermine long-term morale and wellbeing, a trend mirrored in the New Arts Building. Traces of this disengagement persisted well beyond the pandemic. Although convenient, hybrid work at times reinforced divisions between on-site and remote staff, weakening institutional cohesion. The workplace thus appeared functional in theory but remained fragile in practice, as shared identity and camaraderie took time to recover.

When evaluated through a consequentialist lens, the net utility of adapting to remote and hybrid work in the New Arts Building appears positive in functional terms but ethically ambiguous in relational ones. During the height of the crisis, immediate outcomes—continuity, safety, and adaptability—produced substantial moral and practical benefits. By reducing health risks and maintaining operations, the university successfully avoided institutional breakdown and protected staff wellbeing. However, these short-term gains came at the cost of long-term interpersonal and cultural cohesion. Strained relationships, unequal digital access, and boundary challenges hindered full post-pandemic recovery. From a consequentialist perspective, this suggests that although adaptation yielded a net increase in survival and efficiency, it also carried moral costs through diminished wellbeing and weakened social cohesion. The adaptation met utilitarian goals during the crisis, yet the overall ethical assessment remains one of qualified success, pointing to areas requiring improvement. Future institutional initiatives should aim to maintain flexibility and efficiency while actively restoring unity and ensuring equitable access to resources. By doing so,

the university can transform remote and hybrid work from an emergency response into a sustainable and ethically sound model that both human connection and productivity.

From a consequentialist perspective, the most effective way to understand the coronavirus pandemic's long-term effects on workplace norms and values is to consider the outcomes of the behavioural and cultural changes it introduced. Consequentialism does not resist change; rather, it evaluates the moral worth of new norms based on whether they promote harmony, institutional efficiency, and social wellbeing. Actions that enhance morale, inclusion, and productivity are morally acceptable, while those that contribute to loneliness, alienation, or inefficiency are ethically questionable.

Some long-term changes in the New Arts Building can be morally justified because they have yielded positive results. Respondents noted that the pandemic accelerated the adoption of more adaptable and flexible working practices, where productivity is no longer tied solely to physical presence. As WP6 stated, "*People can be productive in different ways, not just by being physically present.*" This shift represents a moral gain, encouraging inclusion by recognising diverse personal circumstances and working styles, thereby improving wellbeing and reducing unnecessary rigidity. The use of digital communication tools has also become a permanent feature of workplace culture. Although initially perceived as impersonal, WP2 noted that these tools have become commonplace and enhance accessibility and efficiency. Carnevale and Hatak (2020:37) similarly contend that crises can create opportunities for positive change, enabling organisations to rethink processes in ways that support both staff and institutional needs. Because the new norms of digital competence, autonomy, and flexible scheduling support continued operations while respecting personal balance, they can be seen as morally beneficial adjustments.

Viewed through a consequentialist lens, these outcomes yield a net moral benefit by enhancing general wellbeing, increasing staff autonomy, strengthening institutional procedures, and making the workplace more resilient to future disruptions. The shift toward hybrid participation may therefore be seen as a morally sound development that maximises usefulness for most employees.

However, the results also show enduring negative effects that present moral and organisational challenges. Respondents reported that the pandemic weakened the customary workplace characteristics of transparency, collegiality, and shared identity that defined the New Arts Building. WP5 expressed concern that "*If we continue with this distant way of working, the culture of this*

building will never return to what it was.” This reflects a perceived loss of informal cooperation, casual interaction, and shared energy that previously supported cohesion and morale. Some employees suggested that the new norms of independence and flexibility have reduced social connectedness. As WP4 observed, *“People became more independent, but also more distant.”* From a consequentialist viewpoint, this isolation is ethically problematic because it reduces group wellbeing, limits opportunities for mutual engagement, erodes trust, and increases emotional strain. Echoing Bowen et al. (2021:23), the increased reliance on digital systems also risks perpetuating disparities among employees with differing levels of technological access or home-working capacity.

From a consequentialist perspective, these negative long-term consequences—diminished collegiality, blurred boundaries, and reduced collective spirit—constitute moral costs that cannot be overlooked. They weaken organisational cohesion and disrupt the balance between individual benefit and collective harmony. The moral justification of new norms therefore becomes complex and potentially unfavourable if they ease life for many while causing distress, alienation, or exclusion for others.

A consequentialist evaluation of the New Arts Building’s evolving workplace norms must therefore take into account the total value of these adaptations. The findings reveal a dual moral trajectory: while many staff members have benefited from flexibility, efficiency, and digital inclusion, the social cohesion and shared vitality that support institutional identity have been diminished. According to consequentialist reasoning, the moral worth of these changes depends on whether the gains in autonomy and productivity outweigh the losses in interpersonal relationships and shared culture. If the new hybrid norms reduce stress, support balance, and maintain organisational functionality, the total effects may be considered ethically favourable. If, however, the persistence of remote-leaning practices leads to alienation and erodes group morale, the long-term value becomes ethically concerning.

The findings indicate that the key ethical challenge ahead lies in balancing adaptability and unity. To ensure that new norms support both individual wellbeing and institutional integrity, the New Arts Building must foster digital efficiency while rebuilding social and moral cohesion. From a consequentialist standpoint, the legitimacy of future workplace policies will rest on their ability to maximise collective good—that is, to advance wellbeing, inclusion, and moral balance for the greatest number of people.

6.4.2 Institutional shortcomings

The study identified several institutional shortcomings that produced negative and avoidable ethical consequences. Respondents repeatedly highlighted inconsistent support, unclear communication, and a lack of psychological assistance. WP1 explained that “during coronavirus, there was little clarity from management; we often did not know what was expected,” while WP3 emphasised that poor transparency led to “feelings of abandonment.” These experiences eroded staff morale and trust, weakened professional relationships, and contributed to a fragmented workplace culture. One of the most significant ethical failures identified was the neglect of mental health support. WP6 noted that “there was no proper mental health support, and even now, we don’t see enough change.” The absence of emotional care during a health crisis generated tangible harm in the form of burnout, stress, and disengagement—outcomes that consequentialism regards as ethically impermissible because they diminish overall wellbeing (Hlubocky et al., 2021:101).

Inadequate training for digital transitions disproportionately affected older staff, creating inequities between those who adapted easily and those who struggled. WP2 observed that “some staff were left behind,” demonstrating how policies that benefited certain groups inadvertently disadvantaged others. From a consequentialist perspective, this imbalance violates the principle of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number, as operational efficiency was prioritised over collective welfare. The absence of transparency and accountability further undermined trust in leadership. Respondents reported that management failed to communicate decisions openly or involve staff in planning. This lack of fairness and inclusivity caused emotional harm and ethical dissatisfaction, resulting in low morale and declining institutional loyalty.

Institutional actions must be assessed through their net moral outcome—that is, whether the total benefits outweigh the harms. In the New Arts Building, positive outcomes included continuity of work through online systems, maintenance of academic operations, and reduced health risks via remote engagement. These measures benefited the majority and contributed to institutional survival during an unprecedented crisis. However, the negative impacts—including mental exhaustion, communication breakdowns, inequitable access to resources, and declining morale—were substantial and directly affected staff. While some decisions were necessary to sustain operations, they failed to uphold the collective wellbeing of all employees. Consequently, the overall ethical balance leans toward a net negative outcome, as the harm experienced by staff undermined long-term stability and trust, which are essential for a healthy workplace culture. From a consequentialist

standpoint, temporary shortcomings are acceptable only if they produce substantial long-term benefits for the majority. Yet, the findings indicate that many harms persisted beyond the crisis, suggesting that the university's response did not fully achieve the greatest good for the greatest number. Policies prioritising institutional continuity and efficiency inadvertently caused harm to vulnerable groups, particularly older staff and those lacking emotional or technological support.

6.4.3 Ethical considerations

These findings highlight the university's moral obligation to ensure that future crisis responses are guided by ethical foresight and sensitivity to collective needs. Institutional shortcomings are only ethically permissible if they result in learning and the prevention of future harm. The New Arts Building's experience demonstrates that a purely operational focus, without equal attention to emotional and ethical wellbeing, can yield short-term success but incur long-term moral costs. From a consequentialist perspective, ethical leadership requires balancing outcomes across all staff categories, ensuring that every policy – whether related to digital tools, communication, or support systems – maximises benefits for the largest possible number while minimising harm. Only through such a balanced approach can institutional practices align with ethical responsibility and uphold the principles of collective welfare.

6.5 IDEALS FOR FUTURE CONSEQUENCES

6.5.1 Rebuilding

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath had both positive and negative effects on workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's New Arts Building, according to the results from Themes 1–3. These results illustrate the moral ramifications of institutional decisions and their impact on employee engagement, morale, and collaboration when viewed through a consequentialist lens. Institutional initiatives that maintained academic continuity during the pandemic—such as remote participation and online instruction—successfully upheld the university's educational mandate and protected staff and student health. These actions were ethically sound in the short term, as they prioritised collective welfare in accordance with public health regulations. Post-pandemic activities, such as social and cultural events—including the participation of the music group Amabhinca and the Redbull campus activation—created moments of shared enjoyment and temporarily revived the social atmosphere. These events fostered a sense of community, encouraged inclusion, and momentarily restored the energy that had defined

workplace culture before the pandemic. From a consequentialist standpoint, such acts are morally acceptable because they immediately benefited the greatest number by boosting morale and reinstating aspects of human connection.

However, many institutional initiatives were unsuccessful in achieving long-term cultural regeneration. Even after restrictions were eased, continued reliance on online consultations and remote instruction contributed to persistent disengagement and strained relationships between staff and students. Panelists highlighted the building's ongoing "silence" and "emptiness," suggesting a decline in professional engagement and a loss of collective identity. The lack of systematic commitment to cultural restoration is evident in the absence of long-term strategies to maintain collaboration and morale following one-off events. Structural issues affecting morale and trust were not addressed by isolated social initiatives that temporarily lifted spirits. From an ethical perspective, these practices caused more harm than benefit, producing outcomes that consequentialist ethics would regard as undesirable—such as feelings of loneliness, low motivation, and weakened collegiality.

The findings indicate that institutional actions prioritising short-term continuity over long-term relationship building inadvertently undermined the moral and social fabric of the academic environment. The institution's ability to promote sustained wellbeing and rebuild a cohesive workplace culture was limited by the absence of a consistent ethical framework guiding decision-making during and after the pandemic.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal thus has both an ethical and strategic obligation to rebuild. In this context, rebuilding involves the deliberate restoration of professional unity, communication, and trust between staff and students through long-term institutional processes. From a consequentialist perspective, organisational practices should minimise the recurrence of poor morale and disengagement while maximising long-term benefits such as productivity, ethical integrity, and collective wellbeing.

The must implement hybrid work practices that balance flexibility with interpersonal engagement to ensure future resilience. Structured in-person collaboration days and shared workspaces should be institutionalised to prevent further deterioration of social cohesion, even while remote teaching remains essential for accessibility. Explicit frameworks for ethical communication should be established to encourage openness and inclusivity among staff, administration, and students. Such

frameworks would promote mutual trust, accountability, and participatory decision-making—key components of morally responsible organisational practice.

Intentional investment in social and human capital is necessary for the rebuilding process. The institution should allocate resources to ongoing engagement and wellbeing initiatives, including regular, well-planned academic-social integration activities, seminars, and Open Days. Beyond providing entertainment, these programmes should reestablish mentorship and collegial networks that foster both academic and personal development. Mental health support mechanisms, such as peer support groups and counselling, should be strengthened to ensure staff and students have access to psychological assistance during and after crises. Institutional resources should also be used to enhance digital infrastructure that promotes engagement rather than isolation, including systems that support hybrid collaboration and virtual community-building.

The institution should develop a Crisis-Response and Ethical Preparedness Plan for future pandemics or public health emergencies. This strategy should clearly outline the ethical obligations of management and employees in balancing academic continuity with social and psychological wellbeing. Training programmes for ethical and adaptable leadership would ensure that future responses are guided by justice, transparency, and inclusivity, mitigating negative impacts on staff morale. Mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and evaluation should be implemented to regularly assess engagement, morale, and workplace culture, enabling timely remedial action and early identification of institutional shortcomings.

Although the University of KwaZulu-Natal successfully maintained academic continuity during COVID-19, the interpersonal vitality and ethical connectivity of the New Arts Building have not fully returned. Short-term interventions, while immediately uplifting, were insufficient to achieve lasting transformation. Rebuilding must therefore go beyond symbolic gestures and focus on creating enduring institutional frameworks that value interpersonal relationships, collaboration, and moral wellbeing. Future organisational plans must be designed to maximise long-term benefits for all members of the academic community. By institutionalising engagement initiatives, strengthening ethical leadership, and ensuring crisis preparedness, the university can reestablish a resilient, inclusive, and morally grounded workplace culture capable of withstanding present and future disruptions.

6.5.2 Worker morale and wellbeing (as a goal state)

The study's main conclusion is that employees' perceptions of morale and wellbeing were largely instrumental. Rather than being an inherent good, morale was valued for its role in maintaining productivity, ensuring service delivery, and supporting institutional survival throughout the pandemic. In an atmosphere of uncertainty, staff often regarded their emotional stability and motivation as *"crucial for maintaining teaching, administrative support, and student engagement."* This instrumental framing aligns with consequentialist ethics, which evaluates the moral significance of actions according to their outcomes. Measures to boost morale were seen as beneficial primarily because they produced positive results, such as reduced absenteeism, sustained collaboration, and uninterrupted academic operations. Management often treated employee wellbeing as a functional concern, rather than recognising its intrinsic moral value, even when they acknowledged its importance.

During the pandemic, a number of formal and informal practices successfully maintained operational continuity and morale. Informal support networks and collegial solidarity became essential resilience strategies. Participants emphasised how coworkers "kept the building alive" when formal communication failed, supporting one another during illness, sharing scarce resources, and offering emotional assistance. These activities fostered cooperation and shared accountability, ensuring that work continued despite the crisis. Positive outcomes also arose from the rapid adaptation to online learning environments and remote work, allowing employees to maintain academic continuity while protecting health. Staff and student engagement was further revitalised by short-term morale-boosting efforts, such as musical performances by Amabhinca and social events like the Redbull campus activation, which temporarily alleviated isolation and brought energy back to the office. Taken together, these measures helped reduce stress, maintain productivity, and improve collaboration, demonstrating that community- and outcome-oriented approaches can be both practically and ethically effective during crises.

Despite these achievements, some practices had negative effects that eroded morale over time. The instrumentalisation of morale—valuing wellbeing primarily for its impact on productivity rather than as an intrinsic good—was a recurring issue. While this approach supported short-term survival, it contributed to long-term stress and mental exhaustion, especially when employees faced heavy workloads and post-pandemic uncertainty. These problems were compounded by inconsistent institutional support. One-off morale-boosting activities, while momentarily uplifting,

failed to address structural issues such as fatigue, unequal workload distribution, and limited opportunities for interpersonal interaction. Inadequate coordination and communication during the crisis further weakened collaboration, exacerbating loneliness and reducing trust. From a consequentialist perspective, these shortcomings are morally significant, as they led to negative outcomes that jeopardised both long-term productivity and overall wellbeing.

To restore workplace culture at the New Arts Building, rebuilding is essential. Rebuilding entails establishing durable institutional processes that promote morale, collaboration, and ethical practices, thereby enhancing resilience in future crises. Policy initiatives play a central role in this process. Employee wellbeing should be recognised as both an intrinsic and instrumental good through a comprehensive workplace wellbeing policy. Similarly, hybrid work arrangements can help restore interpersonal relationships and professional engagement by balancing structured in-person collaboration with remote flexibility. Ethical communication frameworks that foster openness, inclusivity, and participatory decision-making would further strengthen trust and shared accountability.

Allocating resources is equally crucial. Long-term morale and protection against burnout require peer-support programmes, counselling services, and ongoing professional development. Institutionalised community-building activities, such as seminars, cultural events, and wellness programmes, can help recover the vitality and togetherness lost during the pandemic. Investments in digital infrastructure should prioritise collaboration and engagement, ensuring that hybrid systems foster connection rather than isolation. Preparedness for future crises is also essential. Leadership training, equitable workload policies, and ethical crisis-response strategies can help managers make sound decisions under uncertainty. Continuous review procedures should monitor both productivity and the moral health of the workplace to prevent long-term decline.

The analysis shows that while successful strategies—such as immediate engagement programmes, adaptability to remote work, and collegial solidarity—helped maintain operations and workplace cohesion, ineffective approaches—such as the instrumentalisation of morale, lack of ongoing support, and poor communication—had detrimental long-term effects. Rebuilding therefore requires comprehensive, ethically grounded initiatives that integrate policy, resources, and crisis preparedness. From a consequentialist perspective, these actions are morally defensible because they enhance wellbeing, preserve institutional integrity, and ensure resilience in future crises.

6.6 CONCLUSION

The ethical consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's New Arts Building have been critically examined in this chapter. The research showed that, although the pandemic disrupted established social norms, it also raised deeper ethical questions about how organisations prioritise employee wellbeing and morale. Using a consequentialist perspective, the chapter highlighted that many institutional actions during the pandemic were motivated less by a genuine commitment to the intrinsic value of employee wellbeing and more by goals such as maintaining productivity and ensuring operational continuity. The results demonstrated that several measures successfully preserved workplace functioning. These included temporary engagement activities that promoted resilience and collaboration, the rapid transition to online teaching and administrative systems, and collegial solidarity.

Nevertheless, the investigation also revealed shortcomings in the institution's response. Staff trust and long-term wellbeing were undermined by the instrumental management of morale, poor communication, and the absence of sustained support structures. The chapter argues that while short-term survival was achieved, operational and ethical vulnerabilities persisted after the pandemic due to the lack of long-term morale-boosting strategies.

Rebuilding has emerged as a key strategic priority for the future. Institutional change that emphasises group wellbeing, moral leadership, open communication, and long-term support networks is necessary. This includes crisis-preparedness measures that safeguard employees' physical and mental health, alongside policies that balance care with productivity. By implementing such steps, the university can strengthen institutional resilience, enhance ethical practices, and ensure that future challenges, like COVID-19, are addressed fairly, compassionately, and with integrity.

A summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations will be presented in Chapter 7. This will consolidate the findings and outline practical strategies for fostering a moral and sustainable workplace culture in the post-pandemic university setting.

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH, MAIN FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter focused on the discussion and interpretation of findings. The study examined how the coronavirus pandemic affected workplace culture within the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, using consequentialist theory as the guiding framework. The current chapter provides a summary of the main findings, identifies further study delimitations and challenges, offers recommendations for further research, and provides practical and ethical suggestions aimed at improving workplace culture, promoting staff wellbeing, and strengthening institutional ethical practices in the post-COVID-19 era. Lastly, it presents the conclusion.

7.2 SUMMARY OF THIS STUDY

Chapter 1 presented the study's background and motivation. It examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the University of KwaZulu-Natal's workplace culture, particularly in the New Arts Building. Understanding the ethical consequences of the pandemic on staff morale, communication, and institutional support was the main focus of the chapter's research topic, aim, objectives, and key research questions. Additionally, it provided an overview of the study's significance and scope, its ethical issues, the theoretical framework of consequentialism, and the research methods employed. The organisation of the full study was also outlined.

Chapter 2 examined previous research on institutional culture, workplace ethics, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on organisational settings. It covered topics such as institutional responses in times of crisis, engagement, communication, and morale. The review also explored the application of consequentialist ethics to institutional behaviour and decision-making during the pandemic. The chapter identified knowledge gaps that supported the need for this case study, highlighting both local and international perspectives.

Chapter 3 presented the study's theoretical framework, grounded in consequentialist theory. Using this ethical lens, the chapter assessed whether institutional actions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic had positive or negative effects on employees and workplace culture. It explored how consequentialism informs the moral justification of university policies and management decisions,

particularly regarding communication, equity, and employee welfare, serving as a prism through which to view the ethical implications uncovered during the study.

Chapter 4 described the data collection and analysis techniques, as well as the research strategy. Twelve individuals (WP1–WP12) from the New Arts Building participated in semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative methodology. To ensure ethical principles, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were followed, the chapter outlined the sampling strategy, data collection methods, and analytical process. The qualitative design provided deep insights into individual experiences, professional relationships, and ethical issues that arose during the pandemic.

Chapter 5 presented the results of the interviews, organised under major themes, including communication, institutional support, institutional shortcomings, and ethical considerations. While some participants reported advances in digital communication and flexibility, others felt isolated, uninspired, and unsupported when working remotely. The findings showed that the pandemic had both positive and negative effects on workplace culture, highlighting the moral tension between institutional decisions and employee welfare.

Chapter 6 analysed the results in light of the literature and consequentialist theory. It examined how the university's responses and workplace adjustments either strengthened or weakened moral values such as justice, responsibility, and compassion. The chapter highlighted how, although some COVID-19 measures were necessary, they also revealed institutional flaws affecting employee engagement and morale. Ultimately, it argued that moral leadership and effective communication are essential for maintaining a supportive and inclusive workplace culture during crises.

Chapter 7 outlines the study's key conclusions and discusses how the coronavirus pandemic affected workplace practices at the New Arts Building in terms of ethics and culture. It emphasizes that maintaining employee morale and engagement requires institutional support, transparent communication, and ethical decision-making. The chapter provides suggestions for improving mental health, promoting workplace diversity, and fostering ethical awareness. It also recommends that future research focus on long-term post-pandemic changes in higher education institutions. Overall, it concludes that fostering resilience and unity in the post-COVID-19 period requires an ethical and compassionate workplace.

7.3 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

As described in Chapter 5 (see Section 5.1), the study employed a qualitative approach. Using a case study design, the researcher thoroughly examined the ethical ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) New Arts Building. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with twelve participants (WP1–WP12). Purposive (non-probability) sampling was used to select participants who were actively involved in the New Arts Building’s activities and had firsthand knowledge of workplace changes before, during, and after the pandemic. Participants openly discussed their experiences, perspectives, and moral considerations regarding communication, workplace morale, and institutional support.

Research Question 1: *How is workplace culture described?*

The results indicated that interpersonal interactions, communication practices, leadership approaches, and institutional principles all influence workplace culture in the New Arts Building. Participants described it as a dynamic and evolving environment shaped by shared norms, social interactions, and administrative decisions. They noted that poor communication and insufficient institutional support could lead to low morale and disengagement, whereas ethical behaviour, fairness, and respect were essential for maintaining a positive workplace environment.

Research Question 2: *What is the nature of pre-COVID-19 workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the New Arts Building?*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the workplace culture was lively, engaged, and collaborative, with frequent in-person interactions and strong interpersonal connections among employees. Solidarity, cooperation, and mutual support enhanced productivity and morale. Participants also acknowledged pre-existing issues, such as inconsistent workloads and occasional poor responsiveness from management. Nevertheless, the workplace was generally perceived as ethical and cohesive, with high overall staff morale.

Research Question 3: *What is the nature of the workplace culture during COVID-19 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the New Arts Building?*

During the pandemic, workplace culture changed significantly, marked by emotional strain, limited communication, and physical isolation. Connections between colleagues weakened, and routine interactions were disrupted by remote work, health protocols, and uncertainty. Many participants

cited inadequate institutional support and inconsistent communication as contributing to loneliness, anxiety, and reduced motivation. Digital platforms were implemented to maintain work processes, but these often failed to sustain morale and collaboration. Management decisions also had ethical implications, particularly regarding equity, inclusion, and employee wellbeing.

Research Question 4: *What is the nature of the workplace culture post-COVID-19 at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the New Arts Building?*

Results indicated a gradual but favourable recovery in workplace culture after COVID-19. Greater flexibility and hybrid work arrangements helped restore communication and some sense of normalcy. While some employees still experienced exhaustion, uncertainty, and disengagement, others noted improvements in digital skills and institutional adaptation. The post-pandemic workplace was characterised as transitional, combining resilience and adaptability with ongoing challenges that require moral leadership and continued institutional support.

Research Question 5: *How can the theory of consequentialism inform the current workplace culture?*

7.4 FURTHER STUDY DELIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

This study does not claim to cover every aspect of the ethical implications of the coronavirus pandemic on workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), specifically within the New Arts Building. The university comprises various departments and campuses, each with its own culture, management style, and working environment. Consequently, this research was delimited to the New Arts Building on the Pietermaritzburg campus, and its findings may not necessarily be generalised to other buildings or campuses within the University.

As an exploratory, qualitative case study, the research faced certain challenges. Scheduling and conducting participant interviews proved difficult, as staff members often had heavy workloads and inconsistent availability. Some participants were initially reluctant to express candid opinions about institutional shortcomings due to concerns over potential repercussions for their reputations or careers. Confidentiality assurances and ethical approval helped to allay these concerns.

Accurately recalling experiences before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic presented another challenge. Some participants struggled to identify distinct events that shaped workplace culture or to distinguish between different phases of the pandemic. Despite these difficulties, the

researcher gained deeper insights into participants' perspectives and obtained clarification through the use of open-ended questions during one-on-one interviews.

In summary, this study represents a preliminary investigation of UKZN's workplace culture during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that this research, alongside studies conducted in comparable settings, will advance understanding of the moral implications of pandemics on institutional culture and provide guidance for strategies aimed at enhancing employee engagement, morale, and ethical workplace behaviour in higher education institutions.

7.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, the researcher offers specific recommendations based on the study's results, consequentialism's theoretical framework, and the evaluated literature. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) workplace culture, particularly in the New Arts Building. The results showed that the pandemic affected staff engagement, morale, and institutional communication. Additionally, ethical issues such as a lack of transparency, unequal allocation of institutional support, and staff members' emotional discomfort became urgent concerns. Although it may not be feasible to completely reverse the pandemic's effects, the institution must implement policies that foster moral consciousness, empathy, and collective responsibility within its workplace culture.

The study advises UKZN management to establish regular and open lines of communication regarding institutional participation and engagement. Confusion, uncertainty, and a breakdown of confidence between management and employees resulted from poor communication during the pandemic. Regular staff meetings, publications, and online forums should be used to keep staff informed about departmental decisions, health procedures, and university developments. To ensure that employee opinions are respected and heard during institutional decision-making processes, two-way communication should also be promoted. Staff will feel more included, as if they belong, and share a common goal.

It is recommended that the institution expand its employee wellness initiatives to improve staff morale and psychological health. The pandemic revealed the mental and emotional stress that many employees experienced due to uncertainty, workload pressure, and isolation. Therefore, mental health support services, counselling, stress management classes, and regular wellness days that encourage rest and social cohesion should all be part of wellness initiatives. To restore employee

enthusiasm and support long-term productivity, such programmes should be formalised as part of the university's post-COVID-19 recovery strategy.

The study suggests that ethical leadership and decision-making be promoted at all academic levels. Consequentialist ethics emphasises the significance of outcomes and the moral obligation of institutions to consider the effects of their actions. Leadership should ensure that institutional decisions and policies maximise benefits for most employees while minimising risks. This requires equitable treatment, transparent governance, and open consultation. Managers and department heads who receive ethical leadership training will be better equipped to develop moral awareness and make decisions that prioritise the welfare of academic and support personnel.

Another recommendation is to provide institutional flexibility and support. The pandemic highlighted significant disparities in resource allocation and technological preparedness. To accommodate both in-person and remote work, the institution should invest in modernising digital infrastructure. Training sessions should be offered to improve staff digital literacy and provide equitable access to institutional resources. Flexible working practices could also be maintained post-pandemic to support inclusivity, work-life balance, and employees with specific needs, health concerns, or family responsibilities.

Additionally, the study recommends integrating reflective practice and ethical instruction throughout the university community. Staff development workshops should include lessons on moral responsibility, interpersonal respect, and workplace ethics. Consistent with the consequentialist viewpoint, moral behaviour should produce favourable institutional outcomes. Employees are more likely to act in ways that promote cooperation, empathy, and accountability when they understand the ethical implications of their actions.

It is advised that UKZN ensure workplace regulations are applied fairly, transparently, and consistently to address institutional weaknesses and improve policy enforcement. Results showed that some employees perceived institutional responses during the COVID-19 pandemic as inconsistent or unfair. Clear accountability frameworks are essential to ensure fair treatment for all employees and that moral principles are upheld across all divisions. To establish trust within the organisation, leaders should model ethical behaviour and make decisions with integrity.

Finally, the researcher recommends that the university community undergo a cultural and ethical revitalisation. The pandemic offers an opportunity to rebuild a workplace culture based on empathy,

collaboration, and ethical reflection. This revitalisation should prioritise long-term change alongside pandemic recovery. To ensure that all employees feel supported, valued, and motivated to contribute meaningfully to the institution's mission, the university should encourage initiatives that foster unity, moral awareness, and professional ethics.

The study emphasises that UKZN can only develop a sustainable and ethical workplace culture through collaboration, ongoing self-reflection, and institutional commitment to employees' morale and emotional wellbeing. Creating a post-COVID-19 workplace that is resilient, inclusive, and ethically sound requires ethical leadership, open communication, and continuous wellness support.

7.6 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could include the following:

1. A more thorough investigation of workplace culture across various university campuses and departments. Future studies should broaden the scope to include additional faculties and campuses, as this study was restricted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's New Arts Building. This would enable a more comprehensive understanding of how workplace culture changed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether departments share similar ethical challenges and strengths.
2. An examination of the COVID-19 pandemic's long-term ethical and psychological impact on employee morale and productivity. This might include research on the ongoing effects of isolation, remote work, and post-pandemic adaptability on employee motivation, wellbeing, and moral judgement. Higher education institutions could benefit from such research by developing wellness and support programmes that are both ethically sound and responsive to staff needs.
3. A comparison of institutional leadership strategies in times of crisis in higher education. To identify optimal practices for upholding moral leadership, openness, and fairness during organisational or health crises, future researchers could compare UKZN's approach with that of other South African or international universities. This would enhance understanding of the role moral leadership plays in maintaining trust and morale in uncertain times.
4. An investigation of how consequentialist ethics influence university governance and policy. Although consequentialism was used as the theoretical lens in this study, further research

could examine how this ethical theory might be applied practically in management training, institutional rules, and decision-making processes to encourage ethical behaviour and accountability.

5. A quantitative or mixed-methods study on employee perceptions of workplace satisfaction and institutional support after COVID-19. In addition to the qualitative findings of this study, such research would enable the scientific measurement of the pandemic's long-term effects on workplace morale and ethics.
6. The experiences of support personnel in university workplaces. To gain a comprehensive understanding of post-pandemic institutional culture, future research could include students working in campus operations or internships, as this study primarily focused on academic and administrative staff.

By exploring these additional research topics, scholars can continue to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on ethical workplace culture in higher education. Such research will help universities like UKZN establish robust and ethically sound academic environments, improve staff wellbeing, and reinforce institutional ethics.

7.7 CONCLUSION

The study was based on a thorough analysis of the literature and field data gathered from twelve participants (WP1–WP12) in the New Arts Building at the University of KwaZulu-Natal through qualitative interviews. Consequentialist ethics, which provided a theoretical framework for examining and evaluating the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture, guided the study. The central research question that directed this study was: *What are the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, with particular reference to the New Arts Building?*

The study found that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected workplace culture, communication, and morale in the university setting. Strong collegiality, in-person interactions, and a sense of community had characterised the working culture prior to the pandemic. However, isolation, remote work, and a lack of institutional support led to lower morale and decreased engagement during the pandemic. Rebuilding communication, trust, and ethical awareness has become crucial in the post-pandemic era to re-establish a healthy and productive workplace.

Consequentialist ethics emphasised assessing institutional actions and decisions based on their outcomes; it was essential to understand these changes. The framework highlighted that, although certain institutional measures during the pandemic were necessary for health and safety, they also had unforeseen consequences, including staff alienation, stress, and ethical uncertainty. Consequently, making ethical decisions at work required balancing the long-term welfare of employees with the short-term objectives of the organisation.

The study concludes that fostering an ethical, supportive, and communicative workplace culture requires a sustained commitment to openness, empathy, and institutional accountability. Through the application of consequentialist principles, UKZN can cultivate a culture that places equal emphasis on efficiency and ethical care, ensuring that employee engagement, morale, and wellbeing are recognised as essential to the university's success.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER



Date:

Dear Participant,

My name is Siphokazi Vezi from the School of Philosophy, Religion, and Classics in the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg Campus.

You are invited to consider participating in a study titled The Ethical Implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the Workplace Culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: A Case Study of the New Arts Building. The aim and purpose of this research is to investigate the implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the workplace culture of administrators and academic workers. The study is expected to have participants. It will involve face-to-face interviews. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study, is expected to be 30-45 minutes. The study is currently self-funded.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the ethical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace culture within the schools in the College of Humanities. The study will examine changes in work practices, staff morale, engagement, communication, ethical challenges faced by staff, and the overall effect on the academic environment. The target population includes academic staff and administrators from the Schools within the College of Humanities. Their insights and experiences are crucial for understanding the changes and challenges that have arisen post-pandemic.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee 220005448.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the researcher at the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: +27 31 2604557- Fax: +27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



Informed Consent Form

Title: The Ethical Implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the workplace Culture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: A case of the New Arts Building.

Name of Researcher: Siphokazi Vezi

Email: [REDACTED]

For the participant:

- I agree to participate in the above research that the researcher has informed me about. The researcher has explained the research and I understand what I will be partaking in.
- I am partaking because I have freely decided to partake.
- I am aware that the researcher will interview me and record the interview/make notes as I talk.
- I agree that the researchers informed me about this research before the interview schedule I have with him
- I have been informed by the researcher that my identity will remain anonymous
- I understand that the information I will give the researcher is strictly for research purposes and will be used in a moral way
- I understand that if I feel uncomfortable to continue with the interview I can stop at any time and the information gathered at the time of my withdrawal will not be used.
- I understand that there will be no monetary implications in agreeing to be interviewed

I understand that I can call/email the researcher at any time after the interview

I understand that I can keep this consent form

I understand the above information and agree to participate in this research

Signature of interviewee: Date:

For the researcher:

I have explained the content of this consent form to the interviewee and ensured that the interviewee understands the content of this form.

Signature of interviewer: Date:

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Questions for academic staff and administrators from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg Campus New Arts Building.

1. When did you start working in the New Arts Building at the University of Kwazulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg campus?
2. What type of job are you doing within this school?
3. How would you describe the workplace environment before the outbreak of COVID-19?
4. In what ways did the workplace environment transform during the pandemic?
5. What changes have been observed in the workplace setting after the pandemic?
6. What factors do you think contributed to the change after COVID-19?
7. How has the morale among academic staff and administrators changed since the return to campus? Do you think this has influenced how people interact on campus?
8. How would you describe the changes in vibrancy since returning to face-to-face contact teaching?
9. What do you think can be done to visualize the campus atmosphere and to make it more vibrant again?
10. Are there any changes you believe can enhance student and staff engagement on campus?