



WORKPLACES ON CAMPUS

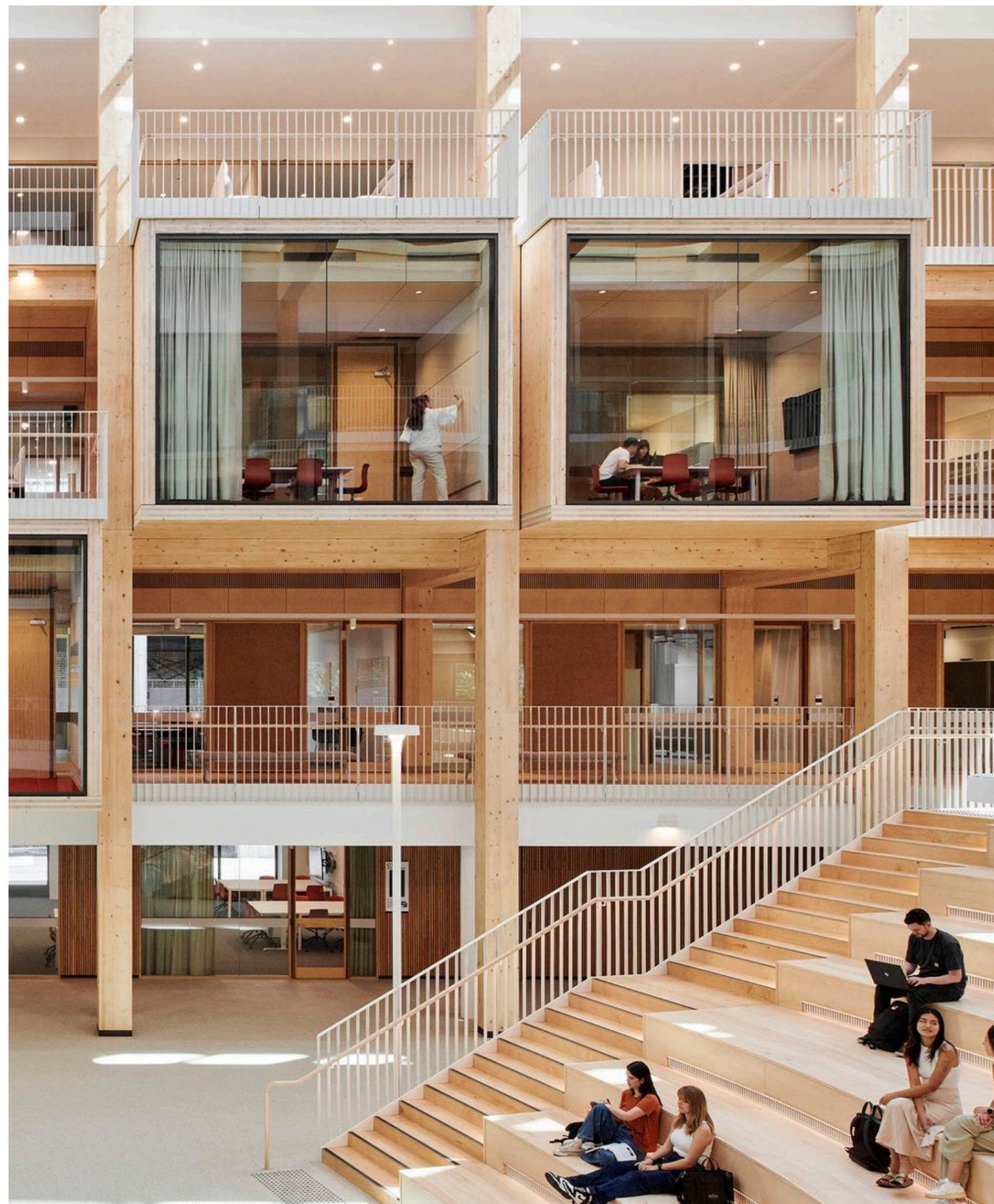
UNIVERSITIES ARE WORKPLACES TOO

We've been exploring how place-based universities can create a vibrant and viable campus, supporting student socialisation and collaboration and driving engagement. But what do academics and university staff need to thrive on campus?

University campuses have their own workplace culture, distinct from what you find in most corporations. They are future-focused while also maintaining a strong sense of tradition and heritage. They are often unionised, hierarchical, and more reliant on casual labour. This environment attracts a distinct type of employee – highly educated, mission-oriented, and independent.

To better understand university staff and their workplace needs, we surveyed 300 university employees and a comparison group of 500 office workers in Australia. We asked them where they were working, what they thought of those places, why they were working this way, and what they want from their workplace in the future.

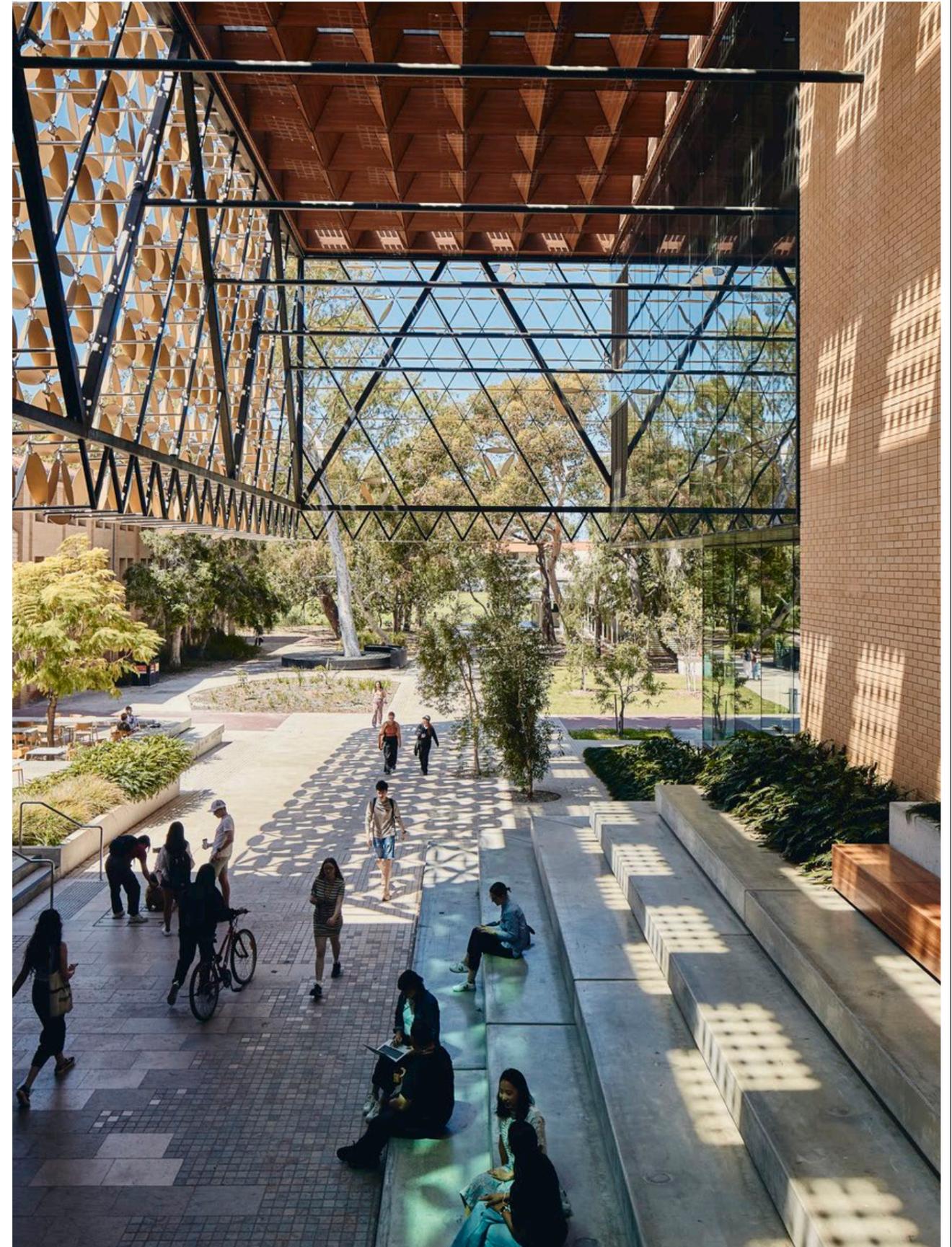
This is what we discovered.



Michael Kirby Building, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Photography by Nicole England.

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EZONE, The University of Western Australia, Crawley, Australia. Photography by Peter Bennetts.

WHO WE SURVEYED

This report is based on two surveys. The first is a survey of 300 university employees in Australia, including both academic and professional staff. The second is a survey of 500 regular office workers in Australia, which serves as a benchmark for comparison.

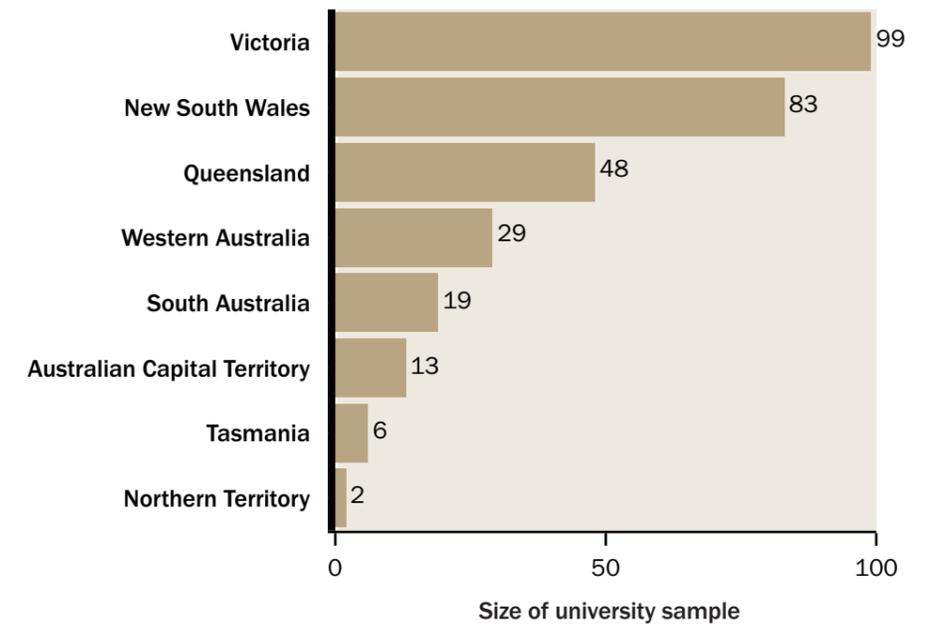
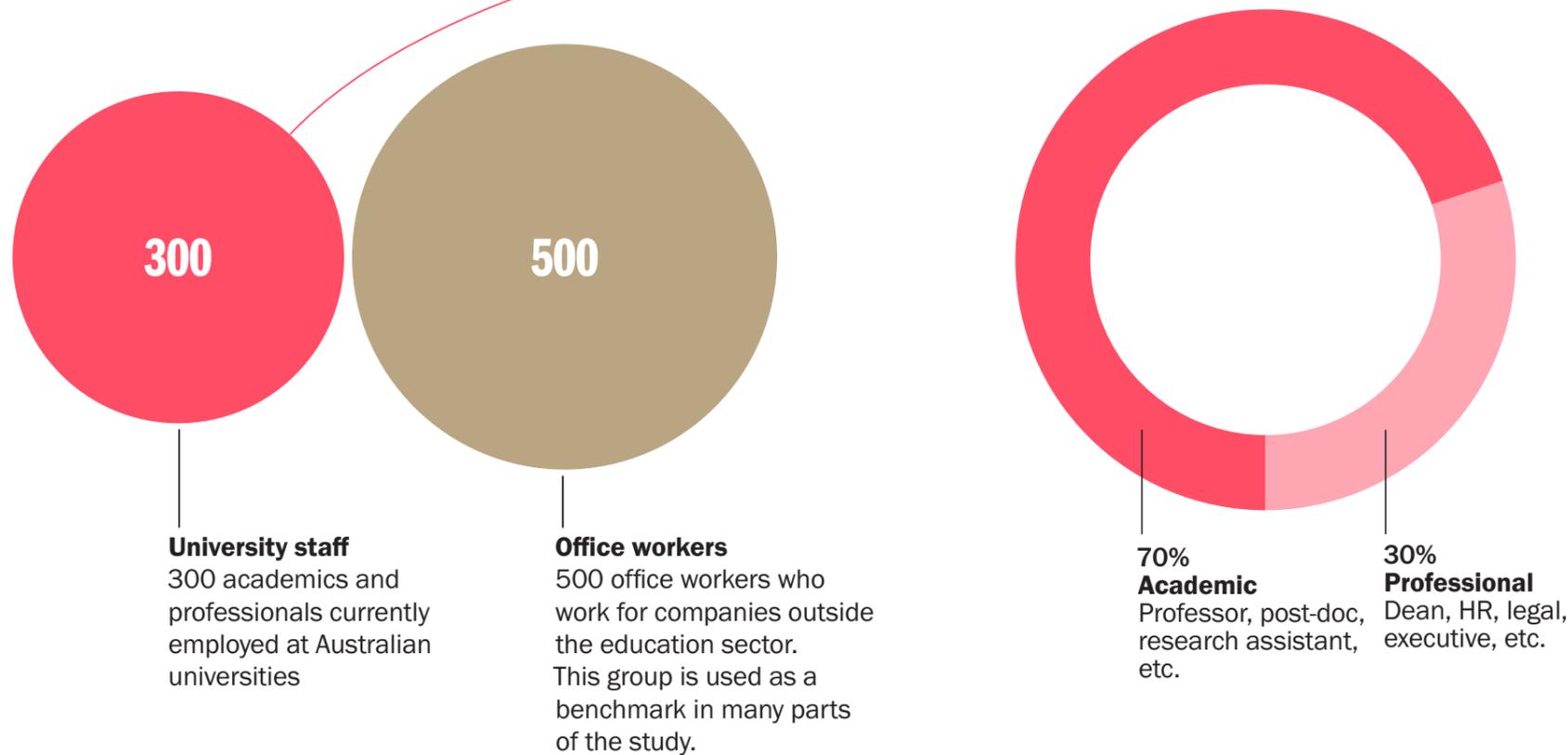
Both surveys were fielded by a third-party research firm, and participants were financially compensated for completing them.

We deployed the university survey between the 15th of April and the 20th of May, 2024 – one of the busiest periods for Australian universities, with first-semester classes in full swing. The survey of office workers was collected around the same time, from the 10th of April to the 16th of April, 2024.

University staff and office workers

Both professional and academic staff

From all over Australia





WORK PATTERNS ON AND OFF CAMPUS

HYBRID IS THE DOMINANT PATTERN

Even before the pandemic, academics worked from multiple locations. This pattern of work was exaggerated by Covid and extended to professional staff.

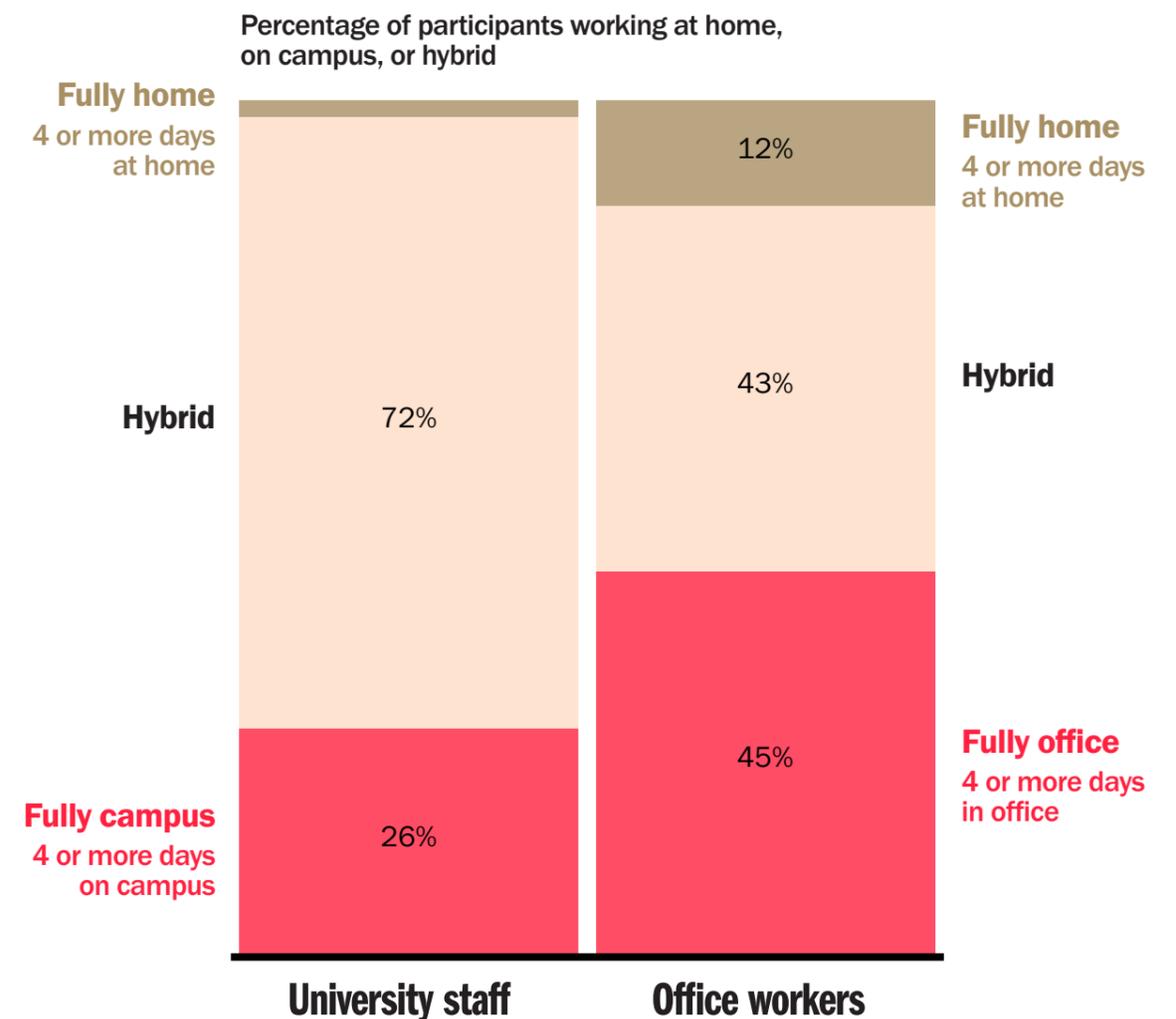
We asked university employees to list the places they had worked in the past week and how much time they spent in each location. Most (72%) were working in a hybrid manner – splitting their work hours between home and campus.

Compared to their commercial counterparts, university employees were much more likely to work in a hybrid manner (72% vs 43%). In some ways, this isn't surprising. Corporations tend to have stricter workplace policies, often requiring attendance, whereas academics have traditionally enjoyed more flexibility, with many embracing hybrid work even before the pandemic.

It's also worth noting the university staff were less likely to be working fully from home compared to the typical office worker. So they are more likely to have visited their office on campus, even if they don't spend as much time there every week.

All of this serves to underline the differences between the workplaces of universities and corporate companies. Sometimes there's a tendency to group these two types of workplaces together, to assume that strategies employed by one will translate to the other, but we shouldn't expect this to be the case as there are fundamental differences in the work patterns of people in these two groups.

In the past week, where did you work?



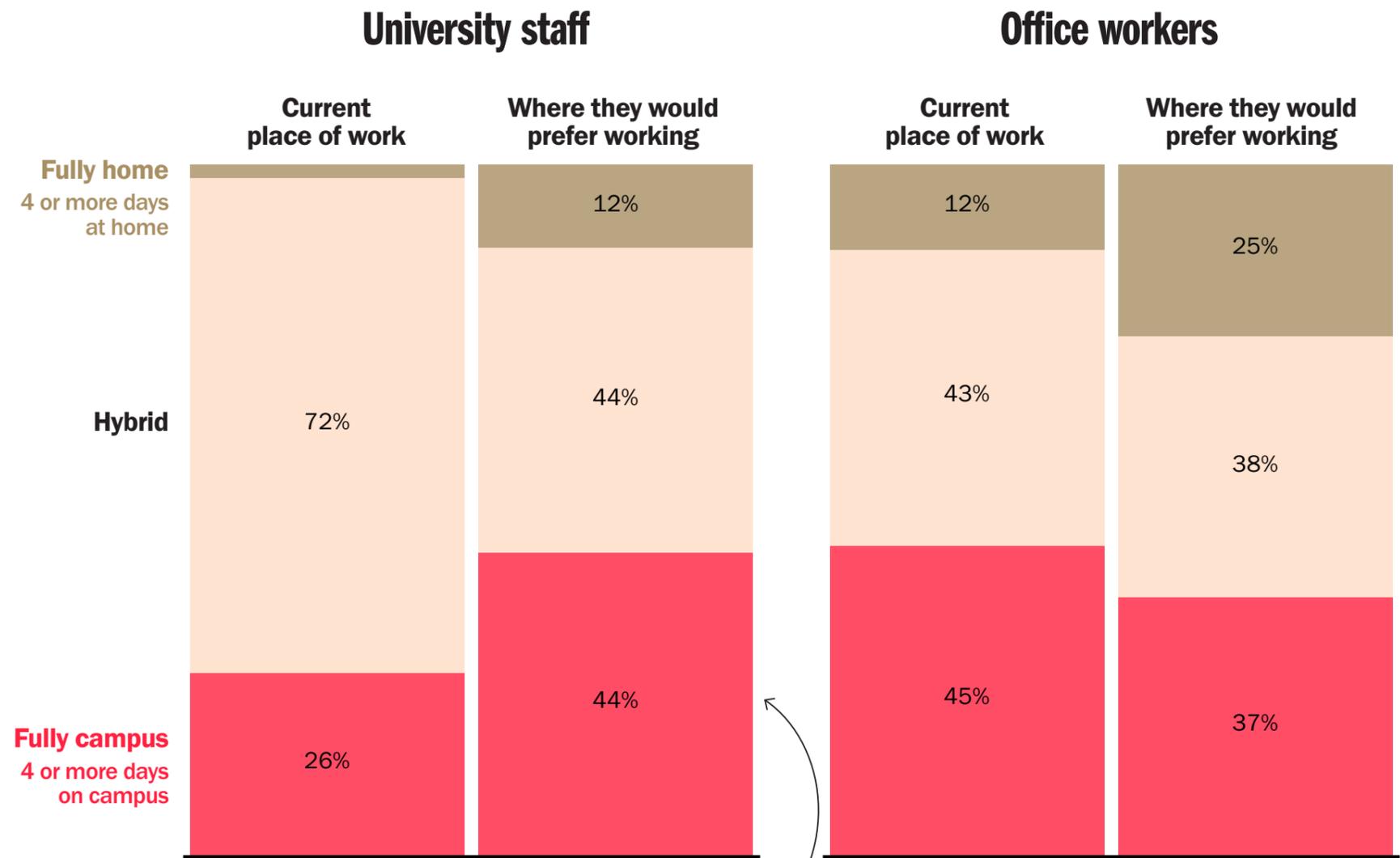
STAFF WANT MORE TIME ON CAMPUS

Most university employees say they want to spend more time on campus. Given that they're not required to work from home, what's stopping them?

When we ask corporate office workers where they'd like to work, most say they'd prefer to spend more time working from home. Typically, they dislike policies requiring attendance in an office and they value being able to choose where they work.

University employees respond differently. Many say they want to spend more time on campus. Which begs the question: Why don't they?

It could be that their campus isn't living up to expectations. That in their ideal world, they'd work from a vibrant, lively, enriching campus, but instead they work from home because this isn't a reality. Or it could be an indication that university employees are overworked, that they spend time working from home in the evenings and weekends and wish they didn't have to. Or it could be a response to the pandemic and new modes of hybrid teaching that some find less satisfying.



26% of university staff work fully on campus, but 44% said that they'd prefer to be working mainly on campus.

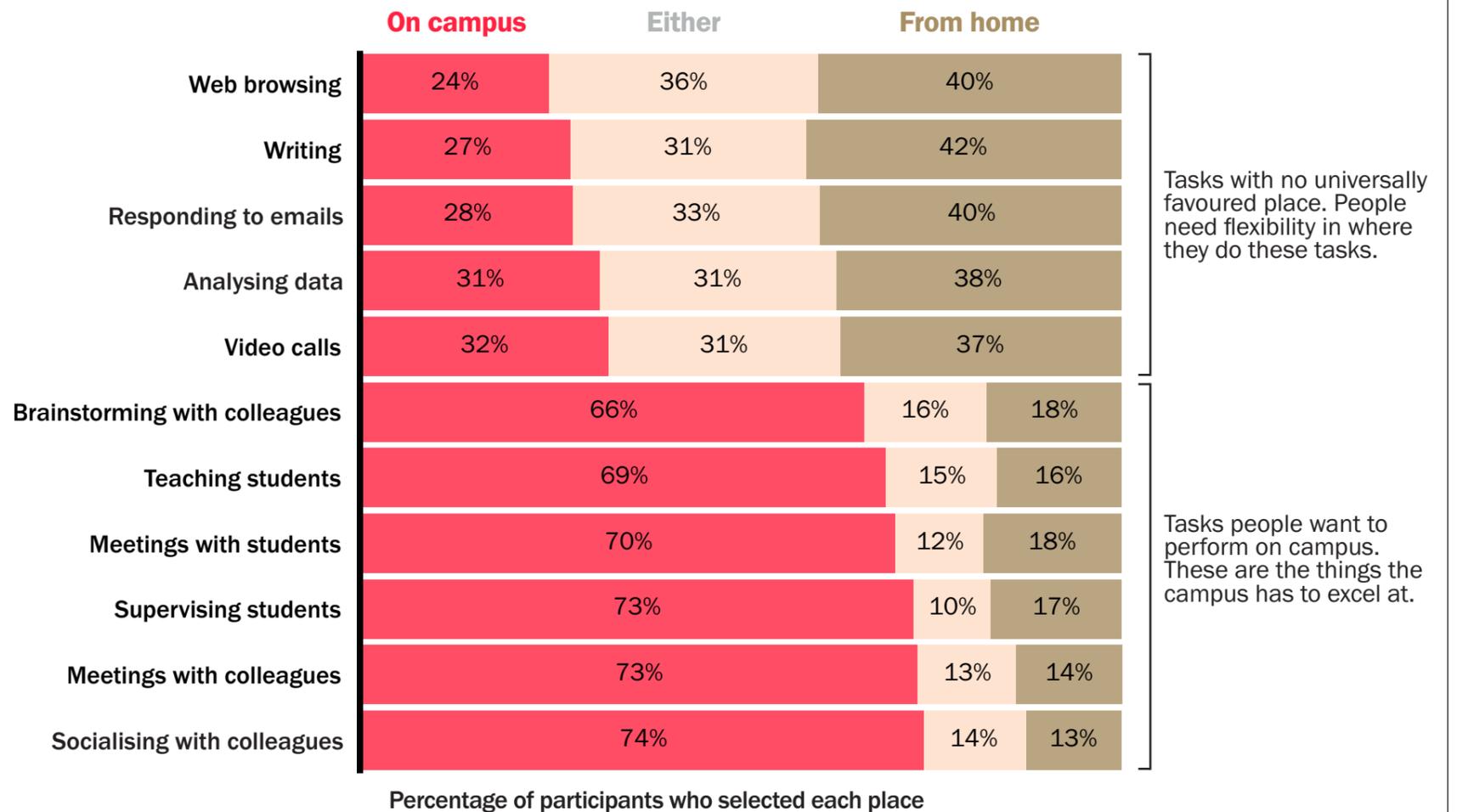
THE CAMPUS IS A PLACE TO CONNECT

There is a clear dividing line regarding where people like to perform tasks. For social activities, the campus is the preferred choice, while for individual work, it depends on personal preference.

We asked people where they best perform certain tasks. There's a clear separation. For any tasks involving collaboration, such as meeting colleagues, teaching, or supervising students, people tend to want to do these on campus. For tasks involving individual, focused work, such as writing, responding to emails, or analysing data, people have their own unique preferences, with some preferring doing these at home and others preferring campus.

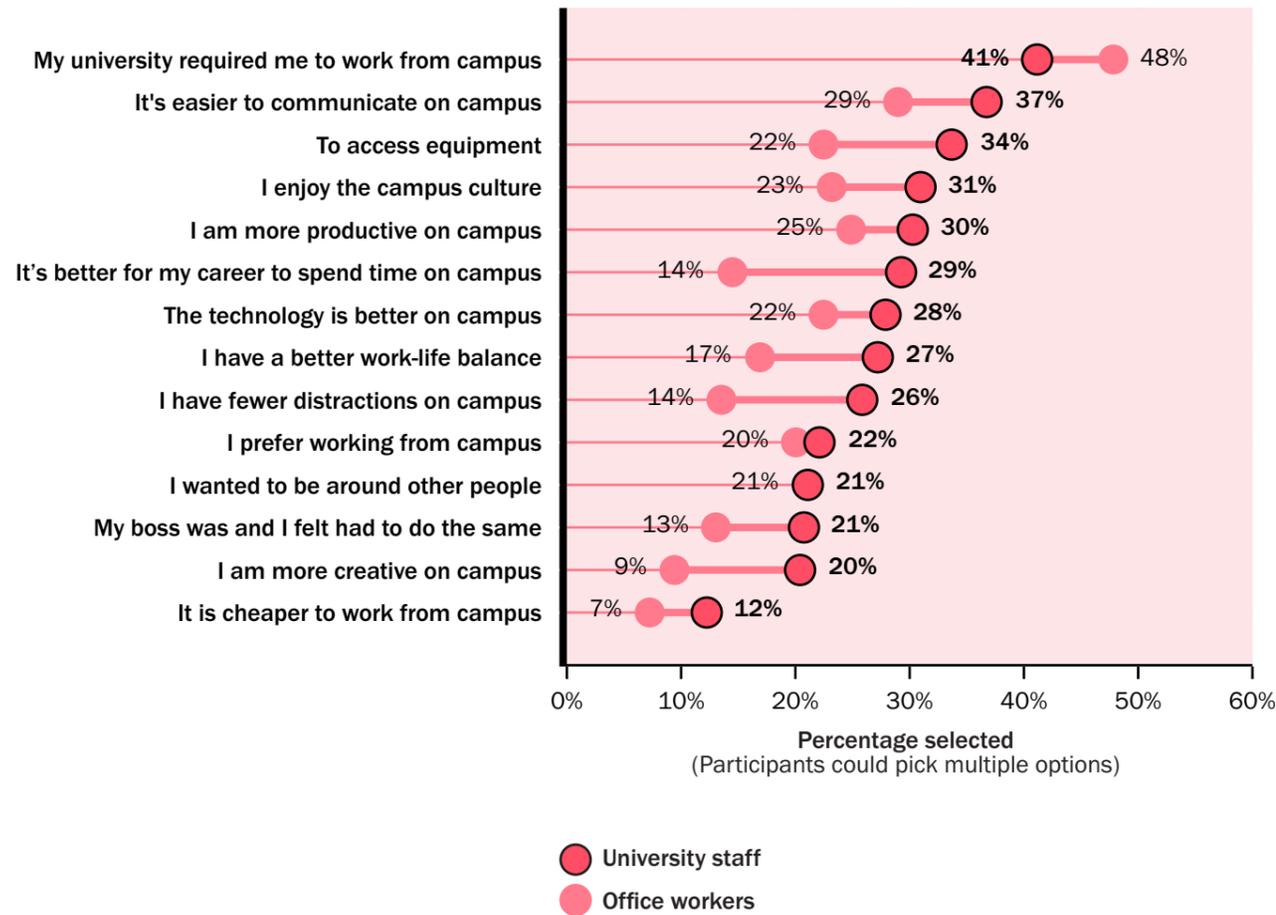
These results are key to understanding the purpose of the campus. In a world where staff can work from anywhere, the campus's unique value is that it is a place of connection – a place to connect with colleagues and students. More than anything, a successful campus needs to focus on these social aspects of work.

Where can you perform these activities most effectively in the long term?

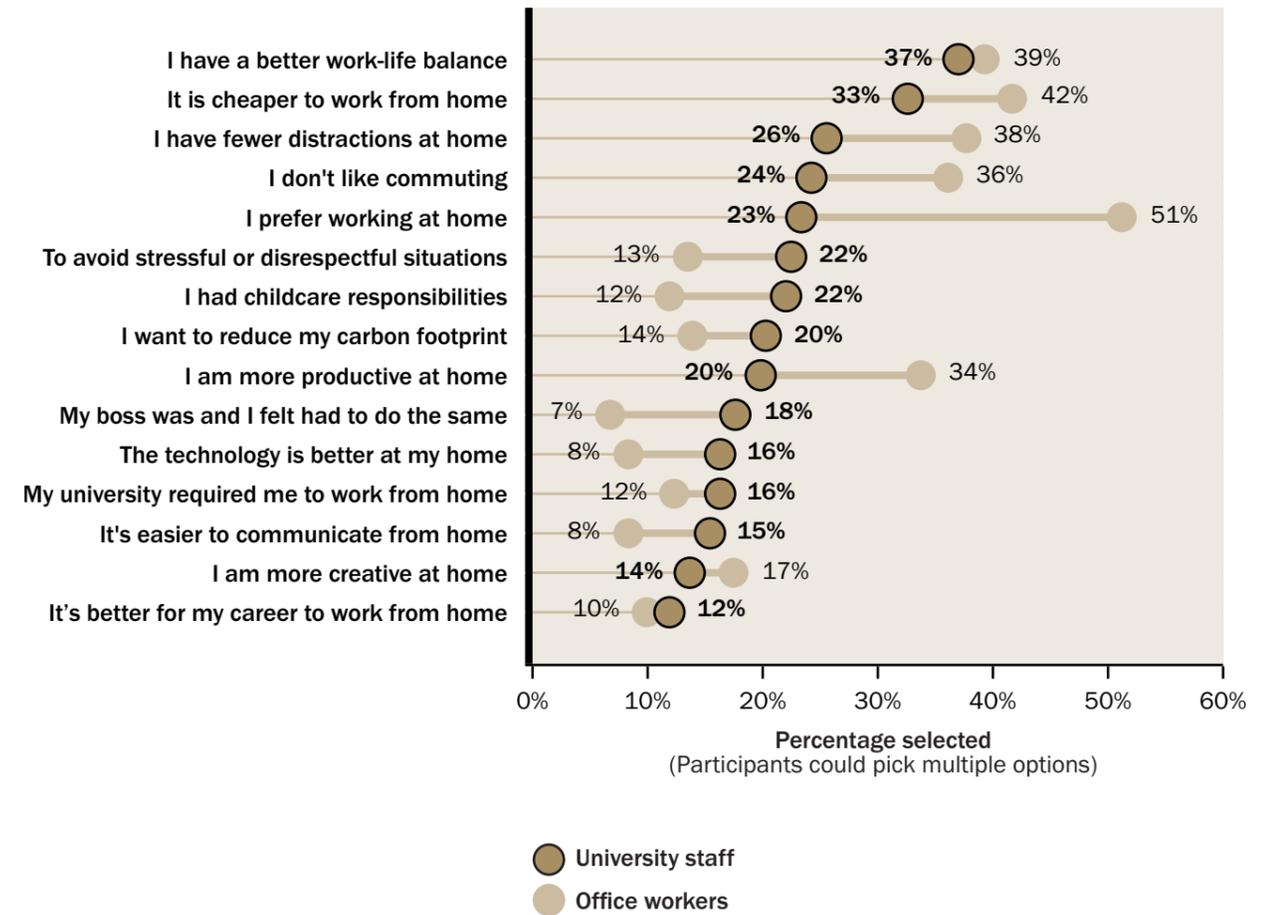


THE CAMPUS IS A PLACE TO CONNECT

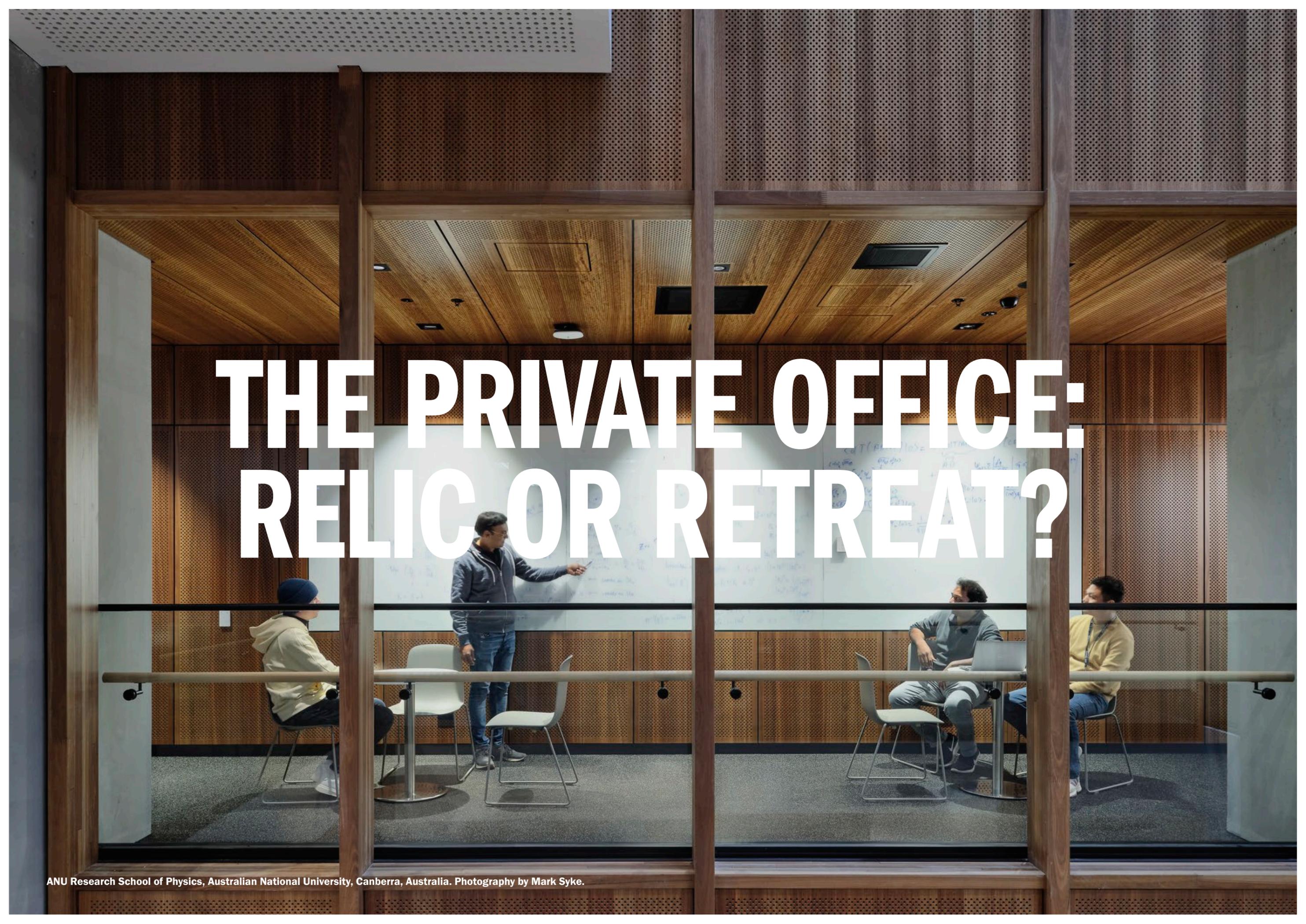
In the past week, why did you work from your university's campus?



In the past week, why did you work from your home?



THE PRIVATE OFFICE: RELIC OR RETREAT?



ON CAMPUS, PRIVATE OFFICES ARE PROLIFIC AND TIGHTLY HELD

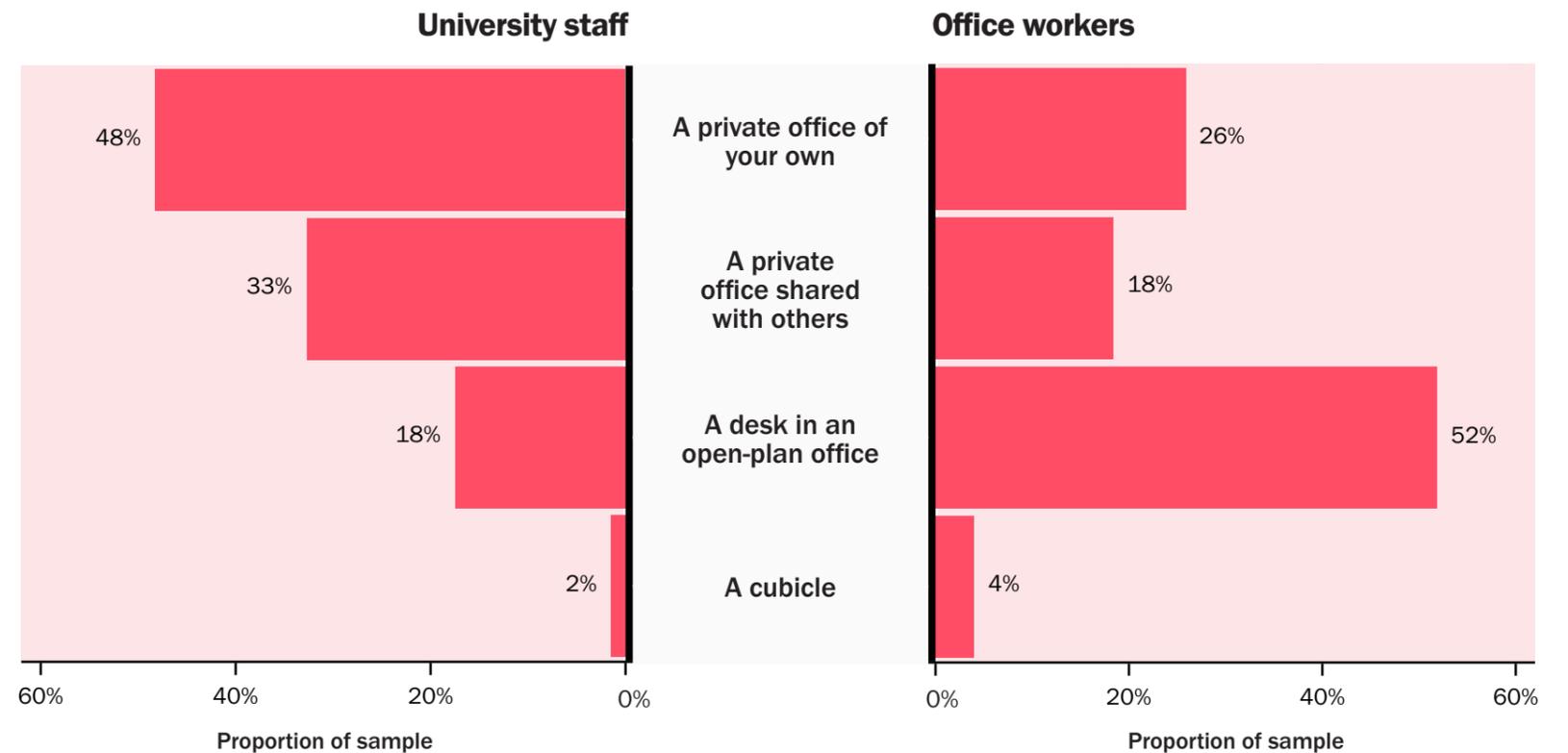
Universities have an abundance of private offices. Compared to corporate environments, where open spaces dominate, these enclosed spaces are a defining feature of the academic workplace.

The academic workplace looks nothing like its corporate counterparts. In our survey, half the university employees had their own enclosed, private office. And another third worked from an office shared with others. In the corporate world, it looks completely different, with the majority of people working from desks in open-plan offices.

Academics value these offices. When asked about why these spaces were important, some described their offices as a necessary tool, especially in a job that requires long stretches of uninterrupted concentration. Others saw them as a signifier of status – a sign that they’d reached a certain rank and had a literal place in the university.

Coming out of the pandemic, some have questioned whether private offices are still necessary. Universities dedicate a huge amount of real estate to these spaces, and most are poorly utilised, sitting unoccupied when staff work from home. But resolving this tension isn’t easily done.

Which of the following best describes your assigned desk?



WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO SHIFT CAMPUS OFFICE CULTURE?

Private offices are so valued by staff that many wouldn't trade them, even for a pay increase. But there are some things that might shift the needle.

In the survey, we used a preference test to gauge whether someone would ever trade their private office for an open-plan one. Participants were shown descriptions of different workplaces and asked to pick which one they'd prefer.

In general, people placed a lot of value on their private offices. Asked whether they'd prefer to stay in a private office with their current salary or move to an open-plan office with a 5% salary increase, only a few said they'd switch. Similarly, offering to make their workplace carbon-neutral didn't sway many people.

But some things proved persuasive. Around two-thirds of the participants said they'd make the switch if they were given new equipment for their research (underlining how mission-driven many university staff are). And a comparable number said they'd make the switch if their office was modern and full of new workplace amenities (demonstrating a need to feel valued). This may indicate that to create a vibrant workplace experience, less focus should be spent on offices, and more on activities workspaces support.

Which of these two places would you prefer to work in?



ALIGNING VALUES WITH ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

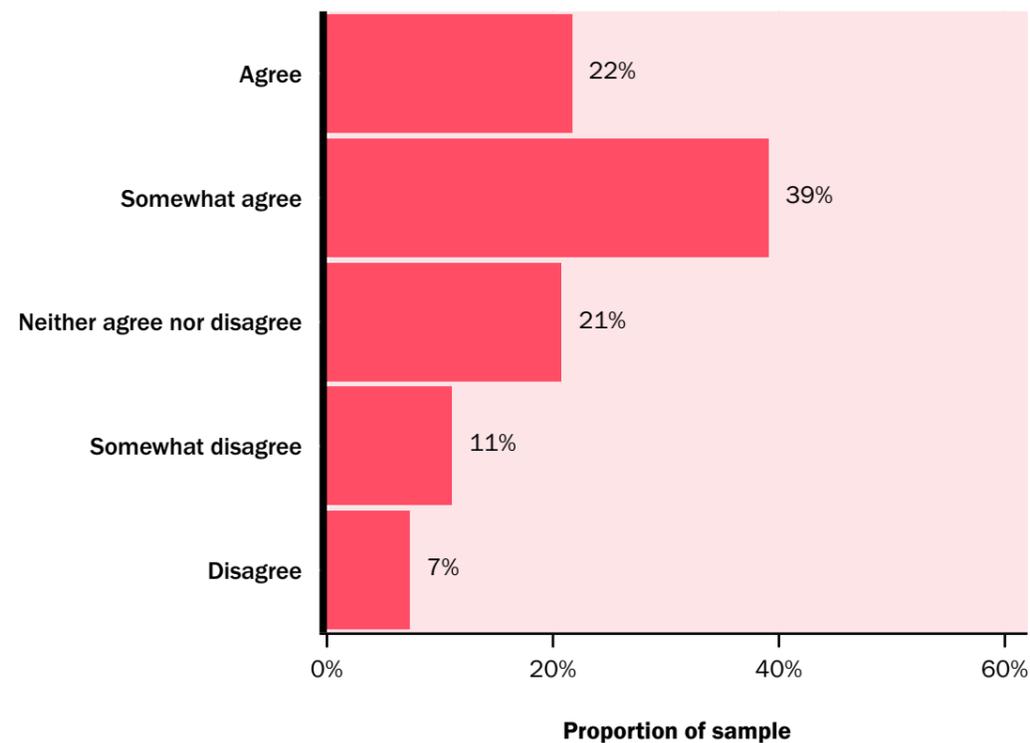
Most university staff are deeply concerned about climate change, yet they often overlook the environmental impact of underutilised workspaces.

Compared to other professionals, university employees are much more concerned about climate change. Half of them say they are either very worried or extremely worried about climate change. While many are conscious of the environmental impact of commuting, flying, and single-use plastic, they appear less concerned about the impact of office space.

Offices require an incredible amount of resources to construct and even more to maintain and operate. Clearly it's not efficient to heat and cool an empty office, but when you ask people about this, many seem unconcerned. In the survey, people weren't inclined to give up their private offices even if it meant the space was carbon neutral. Only 22% said they were concerned about the environmental impact of empty office spaces – the same number said they were concerned about the financial impact.

While academics say they are concerned about climate change, their values don't always align with their actions when it comes to the workplace. This could indicate a gap in awareness. People are often acutely aware of how petrol, plastics, and other materials impact the environment but may not see their office in the same light. This represents an opportunity for everyone creating these spaces to better explain the environmental impact.

I am concerned about the environmental impact of empty office space at my university





PRIORITISING WELLNESS

WANTED IN THE BUILDING

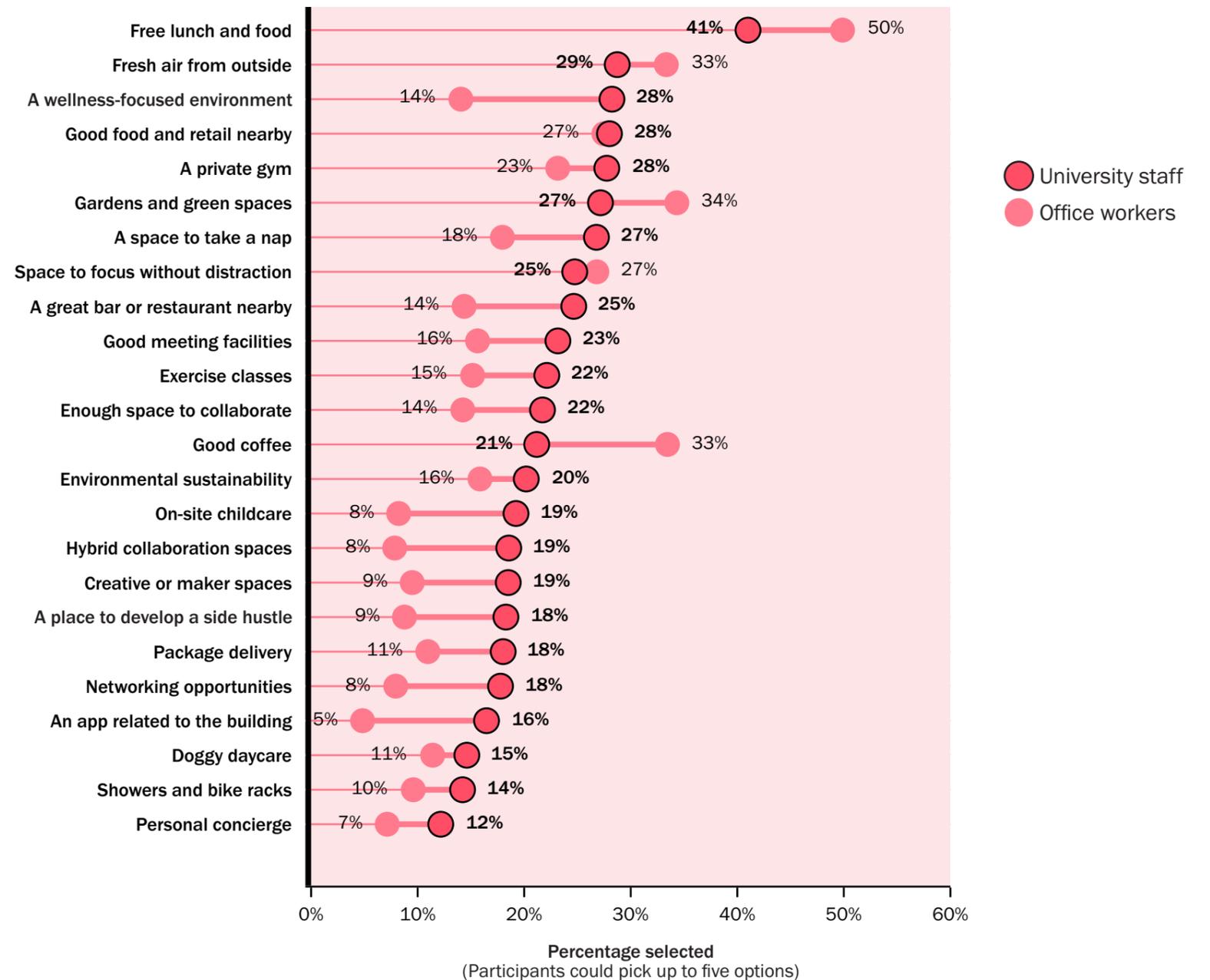
People are asking for workplace amenities that are less gimmicky and more pragmatic, domestic, and wellness-focused.

When we asked people which amenities they'd like in their office, the amenities they picked typically weren't extravagant ones (doggy daycare, maker spaces, personal concierge). Instead, they often choose pragmatic additions (fresh air, green spaces, good food and retail).

A similar shift is happening in commercial offices. During the pandemic, people got accustomed to working at home, where things like fresh air and green spaces were commonplace. When they returned to the office, they brought back new expectations and asked why their workplace couldn't do the same.

This isn't to say that they want their office to look like home. But people are now comparing their home work environment to their work environment on campus, and they want some of the same simple, domestic, wellness-focused conveniences.

Which features would you most want to see in your office on campus?



WANTED IN THE PRECINCT

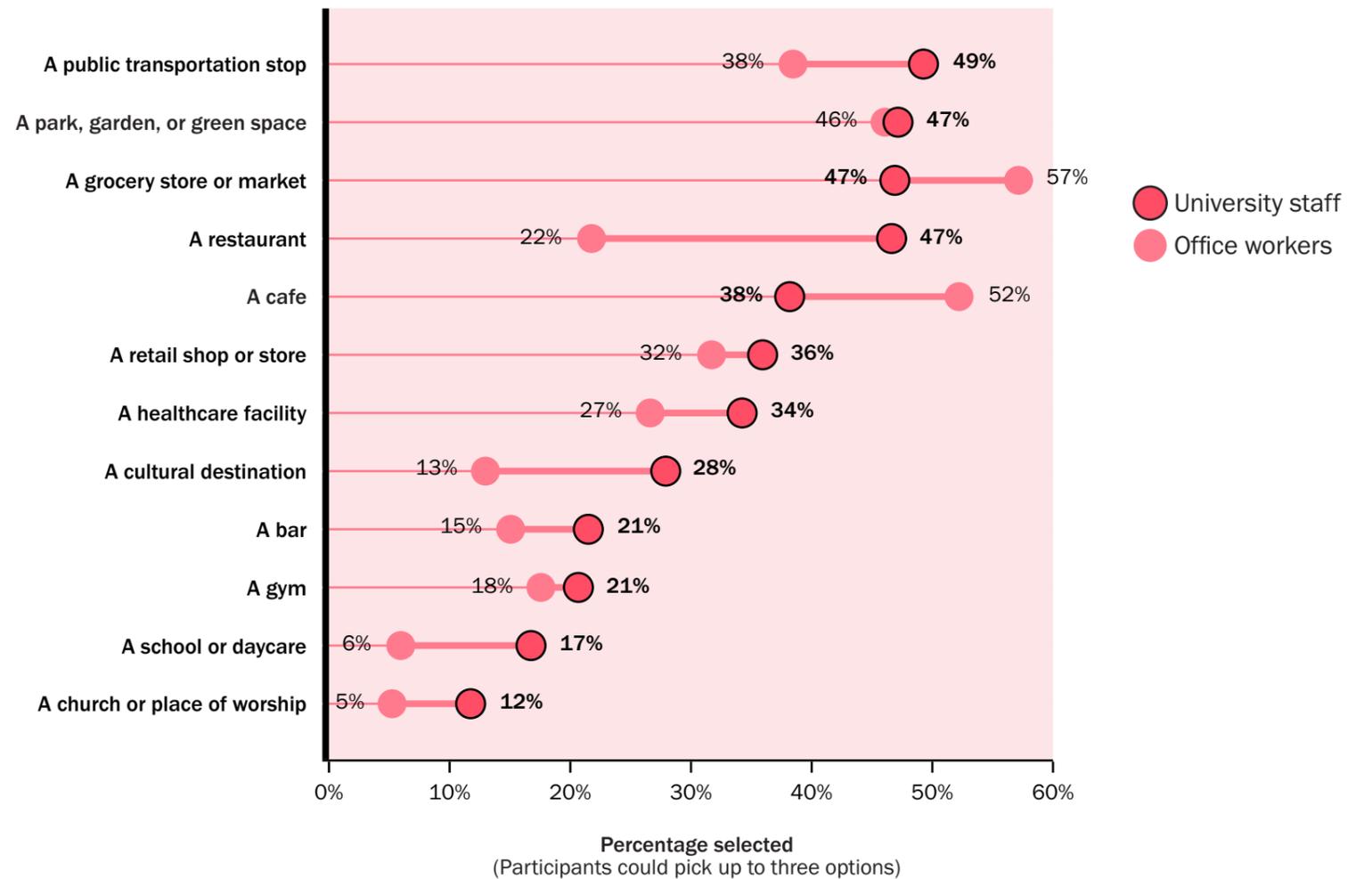
In the urban realm, people are also seeking pragmatic necessities, like public transportation, green space, and grocery stores.

When it comes to urban planning, universities can sometimes prioritise grand gestures. While these big moves are important, it's sometimes equally important to focus on smaller improvements.

When we ask university staff which amenities they'd like in the precinct near their workplace, practical conveniences like public transportation, green space, and grocery stores topped the wishlist.

Many of these amenities already exist in the wider community. So the question for universities becomes, how can you better integrate into the surrounding urban fabric? How can you leverage the richness of the local community to enhance the experience on campus?

Which places would you most want to have within a 5-minute walk of your office on campus?



NEXT STEPS

WHAT SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITIES ARE DOING RIGHT NOW



Accepting the current reality that hybrid is here to stay for staff.



Doubling down on the campus's unique value: culture, connection, collaboration.



Saving capital and carbon by reconsidering the need for private offices and possibly adopting space-sharing models.

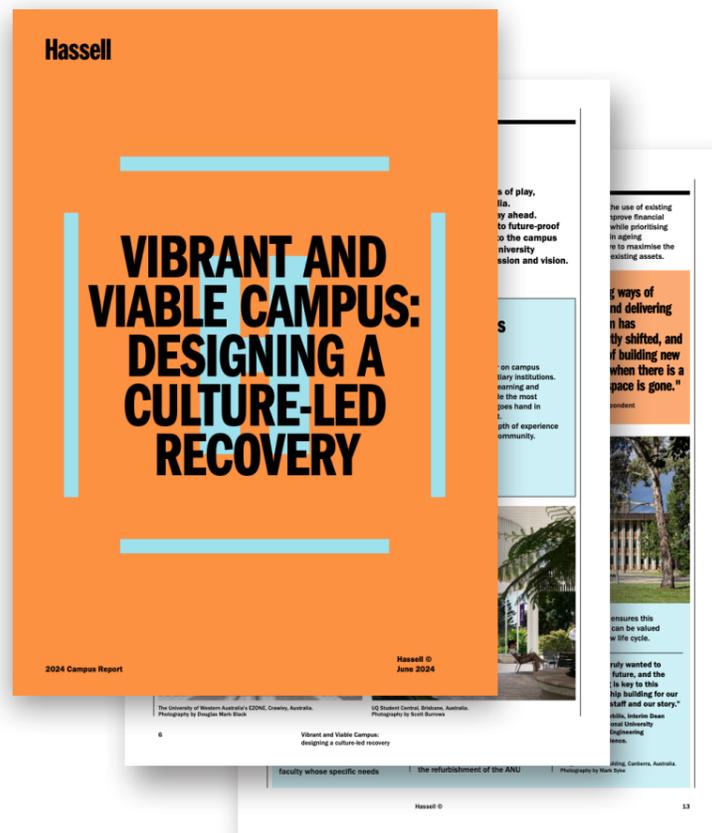


Taking real actions that address climate change through their workspaces, and communicating these decisions.



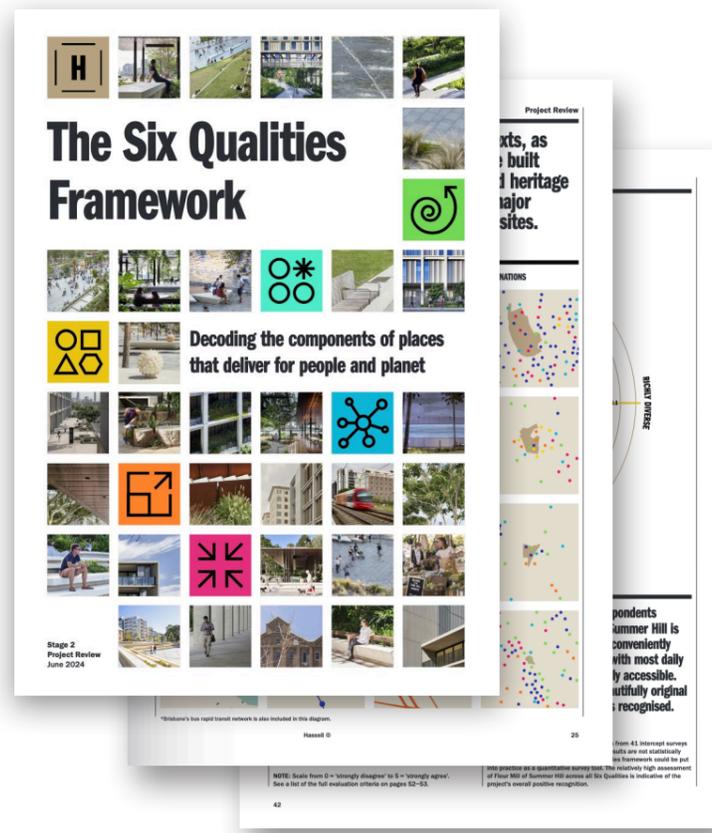
Connecting their campus to the community to provide practical amenities staff want.

FURTHER READING



Vibrant and Viable Campus

Campus culture is a big reason people want to be on campus. This study shines a spotlight on how campus culture has changed after Covid. In a world of hybrid work, it offers practical steps universities can take to add vibrancy, viability, and value to their campus.



The Six Qualities Framework

Academic workplaces are more than an interior space, they connect to a larger precinct. This study looks at the qualities of successful urban spaces and suggests how to design better precincts.



The Big Calm: Workplace Futures Survey

This report, a companion to our Education Futures Study, explores the state of commercial workplaces. The study draws on data from 2,500 office workers in Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

AUSTRALIA

BRISBANE

Yuggera and Turrbal Country
Level 2, The Ice Cream Factory
45 Mollison Street
West End QLD
Australia 4101
T +61 7 3914 4000
E brisbane@hassellstudio.com

MELBOURNE

Wurundjeri Country
61 Little Collins Street
Melbourne VIC
Australia 3000
T +61 3 8102 3000
E melbourne@hassellstudio.com

PERTH

Whadjuk Country
Level 1
Commonwealth Bank Building
242 Murray Street
Perth WA
Australia 6000
T +61 8 6477 6000
E perth@hassellstudio.com

SYDNEY

Gadigal Country
Level 2
Pier 8/9, 23 Hickson Road
Sydney NSW
Australia 2000
T +61 2 9101 2000
E sydney@hassellstudio.com

ASIA

HONG KONG

22F, 169 Electric Road
North Point Hong Kong
T +852 2552 9098
E hongkong@hassellstudio.com

SHANGHAI

12F, 45 Caoxi North Road
Xuhui District
Shanghai 200030 China
T+8621 5456 3666
E shanghai@hassellstudio.com

SINGAPORE

115 Amoy Street
#03-03 Singapore 069935
T +65 6224 4688
E singapore@hassellstudio.com

UNITED KINGDOM

LONDON

Level 1
6-14 Underwood Street
London N1 7JQ
United Kingdom
T +44 20 7490 7669
E london@hassellstudio.com

UNITED STATES

SAN FRANCISCO

650 California Street
Level 7
San Francisco CA 94108
United States of America
T +1 415 860 7067
E sanfrancisco@hassellstudio.com