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Understanding Work-Life Balance Challenges among Academic Professionals in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. The work-life balance of academic professionals in higher education is crucial as their performance impacts both institutional goals and individual well-being. This qualitative study examines the work-life balance challenges experienced by academicians in Malaysian higher educational institutions. Using a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with six academicians and data were analyzed thematically to identify the challenges. Three main themes were formulated: excessive workload, mental health issues, and time management. The findings contribute empirical insights into the lived experiences of academicians, highlighting the unique pressures within academic settings. This study also highlights the relevance of phenomenological approaches in uncovering the nuances of these challenges and emphasizes the importance of institutional policies supporting resilience and mental health and fostering a work-life balance and well-being culture. Practical recommendations include the development of support systems, workload management strategies, and proactive health initiatives to address the challenges in higher education. By providing insights into the challenges to work-life balance, this study aims to inform policymaking within higher education institutions and promote sustainable working environments that benefit academic professionals, and institutions.

Keywords: work-life balance; academic staff; challenges; mental health; higher education

1. Introduction

Work-life balance is the equilibrium between professional responsibilities and personal life and is a concept crucial for maintaining physical and mental health. This balance is usually challenging for academicians, who often face unique pressures from their dual teaching and research roles. The academic environment demands high levels of commitment to scholarly excellence, leading to long hours spent on research, and engaging with students (Shah et al.,

2024). Additionally, the pursuit of funding, publication pressures, and the drive for tenure create a competitive environment that can encroach on personal time and well-being (Mhaidli & Roemmich, 2024).

Existing literature shows that professions related to academics are related to high levels of stress and burnout, attributed to heavy workloads, unrealistic expectations, and lack of support (Boamah et al., 2022; Li et al., 2021). Moreover, research has shown that the increasing demands placed on academicians driven by the perception of students in private higher education institutions exacerbate these challenges (Kotera et al., 2020). As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the work environment, forcing many academicians to manage new challenges in the work-life balance due to remote teaching and increased family responsibilities (Kori et al., 2022). A study by Wan and Salahudin (2023) mentioned that when families are happy, there are fewer problems and a more pleasurable work environment, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal satisfaction and professional performance.

However, despite the literature addressing work-life balance, a notable gap remains in understanding the specific challenges that Malaysian academicians face in achieving this balance. Previous studies focused on the general issues in work-life balance across various professions with limited attention paid to the unique challenges faced by academicians in Malaysia (Amzat et al., 2021). Furthermore, the impact of institutional policies on work-life balance has not been adequately explored, creating a substantial gap in the previous literature.

This qualitative study aims to analyze the main challenges influencing work-life balance among academicians in Malaysia, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of this issue within the specific context of Malaysian higher education institutions. The main research question is, "What are the key challenges influencing work-life balance among academicians in Malaysia?" The findings will serve as a comprehensive guide for building a supportive work-life balance culture, ultimately contributing to policy development within higher education institutions. The achievement of a healthy work-life balance increases job satisfaction and the performance of the academic staff, leading to positive results for both the individuals and the institutions they work at (Budiharso & Tarman, 2020).

2. Literature review

2.1 Underpinning theory

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker et al., 2007) has been utilized for this study to analyze the influence of resourceful factors and demanding factors on job satisfaction. Demands are structural or psychological and are associated with the role expectations or norms which individuals are required to fulfill by employing physical and mental resources. As described by Bakker et al. (2007) and Voydanoff (2005) resources are structural or psychological assets that can be applied to enhance performance, decrease expectancy, or produce a complementary resources model indicating that all the aspects of a job can be labeled as either resources or demands. The two dimensions in which JD-R

influences employees' well-being or performance results are motivation and health enhancement. From the health enhancement perspective, higher demands of a job could result in mental and physical exhaustion, leading to health problems, low spirits and satisfaction, and diminished performance. As for the motivation phase, job resources enhance the worker's mental and physical momentum which consequently leads to better job participation, satisfaction, and results. These two dimensions of the psychological processes simultaneously affect the well-being outcomes.

From the perspective of a phenomenological study, which is intended to interpret the lived experience of academicians towards balancing their work and personal lives, the JD-R Model provides numerous benefits. The model presents a structured way of examining the diverse demands imposed on academics in higher educational settings. Through qualitative interviews, the study examines and evaluates the job demands which academicians recognized as most influential in achieving work-life balance. The JD-R model also permits a comprehensive analysis of the job resources function and its relationship with the impacts of job demands on work-life balance (Kohnen et al., 2024). The study could explore the extent to which resources such as flexible work, autonomy, and social support assist academicians in dealing with work-related stressors and accomplishing a better balance between professional and personal lives. The JD-R theory, in addition, guides the evaluation of individual differences in how academicians perceive and respond to work-life balance obstacles (Kovács et al., 2024). Understanding factors such as individual personality, coping methods and personal beliefs in the JD-R framework enlightened the insights into understanding the reason why some academicians are more resilient in the face of demanding tasks, whereas others battle to sustain balance.

In a nutshell, assimilating the Job Demand-Resources Model into the phenomenological study of work-life balance challenges among academicians in higher educational institutions supports a comprehensive theoretical foundation in identifying the intricacies of their experiences. Clarification of the relationship between job demands and resources promotes organizational intervention and policies development targeted at promoting employee well-being and heightening work-life balance in higher educational settings.

2.1 Challenges Influencing Work-Life Balance among Academicians

Several challenges can influence the work-life balance of an academician, among them, organizational factors and personal factors. Organizational factors include a demanding workload, lack of flexibility, and lack of social support. The academic staff's dedication to the organization goes beyond the academic mandate but includes full participation in the activities of study that often present an imbalance between personal and organizational responsibility. This imbalance is critical for academic staff, in which family time and study time must be balanced, lest one becomes emotionally exhausted and reduces commitment to work-life balance. Research has shown that balancing work and family life does have an impact on organizational commitment and job satisfaction among employees (Dube & Ndofirepi, 2024). In general, workplace stress, also defined as stressful situations, can emanate from the pressure exerted

by deadlines, health issues, or even family pressure. In essence, it would be difficult to maintain proper mental health, leading to behavioral or physical problems (Hong et al., 2021). Thus, it is not a surprise that heavy job demands, and perceived job-threat-related stress are salient predictors of work-life balance problems and conflicts. The probable modern work environments of today exhibit a more negative or positive "spillover" effect between personal and professional lives, and that unhealthy work conditions negatively influence the physical and mental health of employees.

With regard to the workload, academic staff are engaged in higher education in teaching, research, and extracurricular activity management; all this adds up and overloads staff, which, in turn, reflects on performance and timely reaction to tasks. Heavy job demands are often stressful, irrespective of the volume or complexity of the job demand (Satoh et al., 2020). Heavy workloads, therefore, are related to many challenges for academicians in maintaining a balance between work and life (Janib et al., 2021).

In the context of the real-world, the academician today faces many challenges in striking the balance between professional and personal life, in meeting technology- and globalization-driven working hours and places. If not met, these increased expectations of the professors' continuous connectivity and presence may affect their work, health, and well-being in a detrimental manner (Shaari & Amirul, 2023). Continuous connectivity might lead to a state of stress, depression, anxiety, and even burnout (Coman et al., 2020). The idea of telecommuting has been taken up to a greater extent in flexible work schedules and has shown potential benefits, allowing academics to merge their professional lives with their personal lives better. Research has indicated that flexible work increases job productivity and allows one to experience a favorable work-life balance (Lonska et al., 2021). However, with the onset of COVID-19, this approach was poorly understood; some institutions implemented flexible work arrangements as a cost-saving measure rather than as a support for their academic staff, thus reducing job insecurity and compromised financial stability for the academicians (Upadhyaya, 2020). Handled properly, flexible schedules may lead to increased job satisfaction, allowing academics to manage their multiple responsibilities better and emphasizing the need for balanced, flexible work policies (Ukwoma & Ngulube, 2023; Ahmad Saufi et al., 2023).

Social support is imperative in achieving a balance of work-life among academicians, and includes perceived help from peers, supervisors, and the family. This support can take different forms, from friendship to real support, significantly reducing work-family conflict and increasing job satisfaction as well as general health. The role of supervisory encouragement of academicians' work integration with other life duties must certainly contribute to job satisfaction and overall work effectiveness. Emotional and practical family support were also identified as two vital components that contribute critically to reduce stress and contribute positively toward life satisfaction and well-being in work-family balance (Basak & Akter, 2022). Extended social support from workplace colleagues to family was a paramount source of help to academicians

in the management of dual role conflicts within collectivist cultures. In essence, evidence has shown that social support generally reduces stress and depressive symptoms, especially in improving the mental health and psychological well-being of academicians (Casanova et al., 2023).

Common personal factors that influence work-life balance among academicians are personal obligations, and health and well-being. Studies have shown that effective time management by lecturers in universities is crucial to ensure that academicians have a good work-life balance (WLB) which may include balancing personal responsibilities and professional duties by identifying the things that need to be done first, avoiding distractors, taking the right breaks, and getting enough sleep. This approach sustains a work-life balance and enables academicians to distribute time to family and personal interests (Saad et al., 2022). Work-family conflict (WFC) also needs to be taken care of, as many family-related factors—such as marital support and family needs—are great determinants of WLB. Top academic improvement in time management derives from identifying peak productive times, avoiding procrastination, and efficiently delegating tasks while aligning with goals (Obrenovic et al., 2020). Academicians are, at times, parents, husbands, and researchers concurrently.

These are very stressful positions for these professionals in general health and well-being, especially amidst such serious crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Academicians are the most affected in that they need to strike a balance between work and life even under normal circumstances, let alone attain satisfaction from it (Wei & Ye, 2022). Work-life balance is an important debate around the globe. Many organizations that aim at improving their productivity usually do so at the expense of their employees. Work-life balance is an attempt to create an environment where professional responsibilities are equal to the time spent with family and in personal activities (Adekoya et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic also brought to the fore discrepancies in the distribution of family duties, most of which are disproportionately shared by women in an academic setup. This distribution of duties further upsets the balance between teaching, research, and service duties, already stretched by domestic responsibilities and considerations about family planning (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020).

Academicians should pay particular attention to the relationship between WLB and health because poor health can damage their capacity to attain WLB. If one's health is poor, then the realization of WLB may be increasingly difficult. Academic life is the law and the guide of schedules and could not be an aid to the health of educators and their families. Proper WLB plays a critical role in ensuring academicians can optimally improve their health and wellness (Carroll et al., 2021). The relationship between WLB and health may further include provisions for both freedom and flexibility while deciding on work conditions: reducing the number of work hours, fatigue from commuting, and the stresses emanating from family dynamics that are always changing. These were several academic challenges that emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The transition into online learning was sudden, and the educators adapted very quickly, without proper prior preparation, thus further impacting their workload and anxiety in managing personal health and family responsibilities (Kotowski et al., 2022). A healthy WLB also realizes benefits in the academicians' mental health and subsequently enhances working with increased productivity, loyalty, and high-quality output. A good WLB supports job satisfaction, which is critical for happiness and personal fulfillment and which translates to psychosocial well-being. Maintaining balance in personal and academic responsibilities has been shown to contribute to increasing mental and physical health and, eventually, to quality of life (Muhammad, 2023).

Academicians are involved in the development of the students, their research, and community needs. On the other hand, faculty members face routine, stressful challenges such as long hours of work, high expectations of performance, and large administrative loads that can markedly affect mental health.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Qualitative research methodologies were considered suitable for this study because they allow for a detailed examination and description of academicians' experiences and viewpoints on work-life balance. Investigating intricate and arbitrary phenomena, including human experiences, attitudes, and perceptions was a good fit for these methodologies. The phenomenological approach enabled the study to explore deeply how academicians perceive, experience, and interpret these challenges in the context of their personal and professional lives. Researchers obtained rich and extensive data to guide the creation of theories and strategies by using methods like in-depth interviews. Common themes and patterns in the experiences and perceptions of the participants were found by using a phenomenological approach to data analysis which can provide important insights into how academicians view and manage their work-life balance (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

The aim of employing a phenomenological approach in this research was to delve into and depict the essence and significance of human experiences as perceived and comprehended by individuals (Amzat et al., 2021). Utilizing the phenomenological method within the scope of the study entails investigating the experiences of academicians within Malaysian educational institutions. Through the application of a phenomenological approach, the study gained a deeper insight into the experiences of academicians regarding work-life balance, and this insight served as a foundation for devising potential strategies aimed at enhancing work-life balance within the Malaysian academic sphere.

3.2 Research participants and sampling procedure

Purposive sampling is a technique frequently used in qualitative research, and it is used in this study. Purposive sampling chooses participants according to standards pertinent to the study issue, in contrast to probability sampling, which strives for generalizability. This method works well for qualitative studies when the objective is to examine and comprehend the experiences and views of a

specific group rather than extrapolating findings to a broader population on work-life balance among academicians in Malaysia. Participants who can offer comprehensive and in-depth insights into the phenomenon being studied can be chosen using purposive sampling, and therefore, purposive sampling was used in this study to collect detailed information from Malaysian academicians and illuminate their perspectives on work-life balance.

Snowballing sampling measures also were used in this study. Snowballing sampling requests original participants to suggest further respondents, and it is a popular method used to find research study participants. Following this recommendation, suggested individuals received an email explaining the study and asking them to take part. Consent letters were delivered via email after participation was confirmed, and were gathered during the interview process (Chan, 2020).

Six academicians from a select group of private universities in Malaysia were selected using purposive sampling. Although the sample size may appear modest, Kumar et al. (2020) suggest that three to ten individuals is an appropriate sample size for phenomenological studies. Lynos et al. (2024) underline that the ability of the participants to provide insightful commentary ought to be the primary consideration, not the overall quantity of participants. To guarantee that each participant made a significant contribution to the investigation of work-life balance among academicians, the selection criteria for participants were carefully appraised.

Because the goal of this study was to explore work-life balance among academicians, the selection criteria of the academicians was focused on academicians specifically working in private higher education institutions. The second criterion was explored with academicians who have higher family commitments. The higher commitment could be taking care of children, parents, or spouses.

3.3 Research Instruments

In this study, the semi-structured interview guide served as the main research instrument to gather in-depth information into academicians' experiences with work-life balance at Malaysian private higher education institutions. The interview guide included open-ended questions created to explore key themes aligned with the JD-R theory and their effects on work-life balance.

To guarantee the validity of the instrument, an expert review was conducted where selected trusted academicians evaluated the relevance and clarity of the questions. A pilot interview was also conducted to refine the interview guide further, amending the words and questions to enhance clarity and responsiveness. This process enhanced the instrument's credibility and ensured it effectively captured the nuances of work-life balance in academic settings.

3.4 Data Collection

Interviews were scheduled with six academicians who met the requirements for eligibility. Once the above criteria had been identified, it was necessary for researchers to gain access to the information to which academicians were prepared to subject themselves in in-depth interviews. Initially, emails were sent

to six academicians from private universities in Malaysia, after which the researcher followed up with phone calls to schedule appointments that suited both parties.

Upon receiving their replies, an appointment was arranged with each of the six academicians who agreed to be interviewed virtually at a given date and time. Depending on the participants' choices, these interviews took place through face-to-face interviews or via video conferencing services like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The participants were interviewed over the course of three weeks. Each participant was given a set of instructions before the interview explaining the goals and methodology of the study as well as the subjects they would be questioned about. Participants were thus better prepared for the interview and knew what to expect (Taherdoost, 2021). The interviews followed in a semi-structured manner with open-ended questions to allow for further exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences with reference to work-life balance among Malaysian academics. All interviews were recorded.

Phenomenological research methodology aimed to capture the essence of experiences as seen by the people who experienced them, and the interviews gave researchers an in-depth look at the individuals' actual experiences. Interviews were viewed to unearth and compile narrative information that could deepen our comprehension of the human phenomenon under study (Becker et al., 2022).

3.5 Data Analysis

Multiple processes are involved in analyzing qualitative data: data reduction, data display, and conclusion-making (Mezmir, 2020). In the data reduction phase, the gathered information from interviews was examined, coded, and transcribed to reveal important themes and patterns. The coding process began with open coding, where each script of the interview was reviewed line-by-line to capture important ideas about work-life balance (WLB) without predefined categories. Through open coding, initial codes such as “workload pressures”, “support” and “personal boundaries” began to emerge. These codes were then grouped through axial coding, where related codes were combined under broader themes to form cohesive categories.

The coded data was categorized during the data display phase and presented in a way that made comparison and analysis easier. To assist with this procedure, visual tools such as tables, charts, and diagrams were used. For instance, a chart could be used to compare the many aspects that academicians face when it comes to WLB, or it could be used to show the various approaches taken to address WLB challenges.

The final phase was drawing conclusions. The data was analyzed and interpreted to draw conclusions about the study questions. Part of this process was finding new themes and patterns in the data and comprehending their significance for WLB among Malaysian academics. For example, the data might show that although workload and organizational support have a large impact on WLB, these issues could be resolved by putting into practice measures like flexible scheduling and social support networks.

The saturation point denotes the optimal participant count needed for the study, at which time the reported data becomes exhaustive and repetitious (Mwita, 2022). When the common themes that emerged from every interpretation of the event were identified, it was determined that academicians had a clear knowledge of work-life balance. Because the overall number of participants fluctuates based on the research inquiry, existential-phenomenological researchers do not adhere to a predetermined quantity required for saturation in a study. As few as five individuals have been reported in some research, while more than 300 have been involved in others (Stahl & King, 2020).

In this study, six participants took part in semi-structured online interviews to narrate their personal experiences. After the fifth participant, a sense of saturation was reached, in which frequent familiar elements of the description and related feelings, as well as meanings, were given to the work-life balance experience. The repetitive nature of the data obtained confirmed that data saturation had been reached. Hence, it was decided that saturation occurred with the sixth interview.

3.6 Ethics

The ethical guidelines for research involving human beings were adhered to in this investigation. Before any data collection, participants' consent was obtained, and they were provided with clear information about the study's goals. To maintain confidentiality, all data collected were anonymized by assigning unique identifiers to participants instead of using their real names. Any identifying information was securely kept in password-protected files, separate from the primary data and only accessible by the main researcher. Throughout the study, participants' privacy was prioritized by conducting private interviews, ensuring no unauthorized third parties had access. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation, giving participants the freedom to make their own decisions. By implementing these measures, this study ensured ethical integrity, upholding participants' trust, and promoting the reliability of the research findings.

4. Results and Discussion

The collected data revealed various challenges influencing work-life balance among academicians in Malaysia. Based on the thematic analysis, three themes emerged to describe the key challenges: 1) heavy workload, 2) mental health issues, and 3) time management.

Theme 1: Heavy workload

Subtheme: Teaching load, administrative duties, research responsibilities

Based on the interviews, most respondents said that, as an academician, they are assigned duties that include teaching, research, and community service in many academic institutions. Administrative responsibilities like recording and defending teaching, research, and publication activities, as well as participating in assessments are frequently a part of this increased workload. They find it difficult to have a balance because of the variety of responsibilities that need to be met. The increasing demands of different higher education stakeholders such

as students, parents, employers, government agencies, and administrators who anticipate top-notch performance from academicians, especially when it comes to using technology and sharing knowledge, are the driving force behind the increased workload (Awang et al., 2021). The challenges of the heavy workload among academicians, as highlighted by participants, align with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory which emphasizes that excessive job demands, such as teaching load, administrative duties, and research responsibilities, can lead to burnout and reduced well-being.

Participants also pointed out that academicians need to meet certain key performance indicators (KPIs) established by the institutions. If the institutions set higher KPIs for academicians, they believe that the workload will become more challenging. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, academicians felt they had a heavy workload because the new normal in education had changed the way they worked. Previous studies by various writers defined "workload" as the equilibrium between an employee's talents and the demands of their work, and included both mentally and physically taxing duties of varying degrees of difficulty. Although there is general agreement that employee performance is impacted by workload, there is still disagreement on the optimal workload level necessary to achieve maximum performance. This discrepancy shows how crucial it is to comprehend the dynamics of a workload in particular settings, like academia, to maximize worker productivity and well-being (Osita et al., 2020).

Below are some responses from the participants' interviews:

"For me workload is crucial." – Participant 5

"The main biggest challenges are heavy workload." – Participant 1

"The most challenging part is the heavy workload, which is assigned to us." – Participant 2

"That workload to me I deviated to workload captured on paper and there is workload that are not captured, not capture on black and white." – Participant 6

Theme 2: Mental health issues

Subtheme: Stress, burnout, family-work conflict, coping mechanisms

The responses from the academicians mentioned that among the challenges that influence work-life balance are mental health issues. Work-life balance issues are frequently the consequence of attempts to strike a balance between professional and personal responsibilities, and these issues can be harmful to one's physical and mental health. Stress and other psychological illnesses can dramatically raise one's risk of heart disease and stroke, among other health problems. According to research, academicians who have a poor work-life balance frequently experience depression and distress, which can result in decreased output, worse work, higher absenteeism, and higher staff turnover (Muhammad, 2023). For example, one respondent mentioned that the period after the final examination week is stressful because academicians need to do a lot of marking and the stress academicians face drains their mental energy. Participants' responses reveal their sources of stress:

"The challenges for me like mental health, it is like the combination the pressure that you get, the long hour[s] that you get, the limited of your life you spent with your family and mental health will contribute to stress, you know, and then burn out." – Participant 2

"I would say to a certain extent that WLB could relate to mental health problems." – Participant 3

"The relentless pressure to meet targets and perform efficiently can trigger feelings of stress and burnout. I will like I was struggling to manage my workload which will affect my overall mental health as well as my temper" – Participant 4

Theme 3: Time management

Subtheme: Prioritization, allocation between tasks, external commitments

Another considerable challenge is time management. The challenges in time management, such as prioritizing multiple roles and external commitments further strengthen the JD-R model, specifically the importance of the role of resources in mitigating job demands. According to the participants, they feel they have limited time to spend with the students because they have administrative work to be done in the office. Some academicians have multiple roles in institutions, such as Head of Programme, so respondents felt they have many things to do at the same time, but the time is very limited. As academicians, they also have outstation work, and during this time, academicians feel that time management is crucial; for example, academicians might need to schedule every appointment early with the students before they depart.

Effective time management is essential to strike a healthy balance between personal and work responsibilities. Good time management and prioritization are associated with lower burnout and higher satisfaction levels in both personal and academic endeavors. Academicians who achieve this balance are better able to fulfill their responsibilities for research, teaching, and administration while still making time for their hobbies, interpersonal connections, and self-care. Academicians can reduce stress, avoid burnout, and optimize their daily schedules to preserve a healthy work-life balance by putting proven time management techniques into practice (Bella, 2023).

Academicians may experience severe consequences from an unbalanced work-life schedule, including job unhappiness and possibly even leaving their institutions. Academic staff members risk missing important time with their families and social networks when they are overworked, especially if overtime is required. One unspoken element influencing professors' turnover may be this disparity. It is crucial to address the issue of work-life balance among academic staff members at educational institutions, as evidenced by symptoms like high turnover rates and frequent absences (Herliana et al., 2021). Comments from the respondents voice their concerns in this respect:

"Holding a position at the same time, so as an academician I can admit that time is very crucial. That is my main challenge currently because I have very limited time with my students. So even though I'm supervising my Masters' and PhD student[s] right by research and so forth, I'm not able to schedule them a permanent upper routine meeting every week." – Participant 5

“Being a head of the department, I have several admin tasks to complete which will consume a large portion of my time. So, balancing the commitment with other things such as teaching and research commitments will need proper planning and prioritization.” – Participant 3

Implications of Findings

The results contribute to existing knowledge by offering a regional perspective on the challenges faced by academicians in Malaysia, specifically:

1. **Theoretical implications:** The findings emphasize the application of JD-R theory in academic settings, noting the importance of resources, such as flexible KPIs and support systems to balance job demands.
2. **Practical implications:** Institutions can adopt flexible work policies and provide a mental health support system to overcome stress and improve work-life balance.

Recommendations based on Results and Discussion

1. Redistribution of Workload

Private higher education institutions could organize workload allocation frameworks that ensure the fair distribution of teaching, research, and administrative duties. Assigning part-time academic staff during peak periods, such as examination weeks, may reduce the strain on full-time academicians. Plus, using automated tools for administrative duties, such as attendance tracking, could alleviate time-intensive duties and enhance overall efficiency.

2. Mental Health Support System

Building institutional programs focused on mental well-being is important. Private higher education institutions could organize regular stress management workshops, mindfulness sessions, and accessible counseling services to overcome mental health challenges reported by academicians. Additionally, adapting peer support networks within the department can provide a safe space for academicians to share experiences and coping strategies, creating a sense of community and reducing feelings of isolation.

3. Flexibility in Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Institutions could consider revising their performance evaluation metrics to allow for better flexibility. Setting realistic and achievable goals that are related to the various roles of academicians can prevent excessive stress and burnout.

4. Enhanced Work-life Integration Policies

Introducing flexible working arrangements, such as hybrid teaching models, could provide academicians with greater control over their personal and professional lives. Also, institutions might consider looking at policies like periodic workload reviews to highlight evolving demands to ensure academicians maintain a sustainable balance over time.

By implementing these strategies, higher education institutions can highlight the challenges identified in this study while building a supportive environment that prioritizes the well-being of the academicians. The recommendations would not

only enhance individual satisfaction and productivity but also contribute to the long-term success and reputation of the institutions.

5. Conclusion

Based on the study, work-life balance challenges among academicians within the higher educational institutions form a complicated influence into their lifestyle. The three main themes identified through the study included the heavy workload, mental and health concerns, and challenges of time management. These findings provide novel qualitative insights into the lived experiences of academicians, together with a deeper understanding of their personal and professional challenges.

Heavy workloads which consist of numerous responsibilities that have been assigned to academicians such as teaching, research, administrative work, and fulfilling the institution's key performance indicators are some of the leading challenges for most academicians. Increasing demands from stakeholders provided with the shift to remote work during COVID-19 also triggered the workload pressure. Throughout the interviews, the respondents expressed their concerns about balancing their actual tasks with unfamiliar tasks and their workload.

Most of the respondents also stressed the challenges of mental health issues which affect their work-life balance. The higher demand for the work is deemed to increase stress and burnout in academicians, with other psychological impacts due to the higher demands of their tasks. This study emphasizes the importance of highlighting mental health and well-being issues to enhance faculty resilience and institutional efficiency.

Struggling between their personal and professional responsibilities contributed to the extreme feelings of stress and decreasing well-being among those respondents and communicated the importance of adopting mental health and well-being for academicians in addressing overall faculty resilience and efficiency.

Time management appears to be another critical aspect of work-life balance for academicians who expressed the struggles they experience in distributing their limited time between numerous responsibilities. Their desire to give more time to core academic activities is hampered by several factors, including publications, multiple roles, administrative work, and student consultation. Academicians emphasized that maintaining a healthy work-life balance and reducing academic stress and burnout depend heavily on effective time management which, as the findings demonstrate, is important in overcoming academic stress and burnout, and it significantly influences the overall work-life balance.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable qualitative insights into the personal and professional lives of the academicians within the Malaysian higher education context. The findings contribute to a wider understanding of how work-life balance is impacted by workload, mental health, and time management.

6. Limitations of the study

The authors recognize several limitations to this study. The first limitation is the difficulty of making time with the respondents. Since the methodology used respondents who are academicians from private universities, they might be unavailable for the interview due to their work. The other limitation was the sample size which was limited to academicians in private universities located in a few areas nearby, thus limiting the applicability of these findings because the study did not account for conditions in different states and colleges (Dilou, 2022).

The second limitation of the study is generalizability. The results of the research might not be relevant to different settings or nations beyond Malaysia, given that experiences of work-life balance can differ owing to cultural, societal, and institutional influences (Jayasingam et al., 2023).

The duration of the data collection period may have an impact on the study's findings. Experiences with work-life balance may change over time, and if data collection is limited to a specific period, the study may not account for these changes (Khalid, 2023).

However, by illuminating how Malaysian academicians feel, and incorporating work-life balance into their professional lives, the study's findings will improve knowledge of this concept among this population. When investigating the phenomenon of work-life balance through qualitative approaches, it is crucial to remember that the results should not be applied too broadly. Qualitative research attempts to avoid generalizing too much and, instead, attempts to interpret each experience as unique (Alhazmi & Kaufman, 2022).

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