

Navigating the Nexus: Challenges Faced by Part-Time Postgraduate Government Employees in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing importance of advanced education for career progression, part-time postgraduate students often face numerous obstacles that impact their academic and professional lives. These challenges encompass social, economic, political, and psychological dimensions, reflecting a complex interplay of challenges within and outside the workplace. The primary objective of this research is to explore the challenges experienced by part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia. Utilizing a qualitative approach and case study design, data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five informants, and thematic analysis was employed to identify prominent themes. The findings reveal four key themes, i.e., social, political, economic, and psychological challenges. Social challenges emerge in the form of people's expectations, work overload, work-life balance issues, and age-related factors. Inequitable access to government financial support is identified as the primary political challenge. Economic challenges include budget prioritization and sacrifices, as well as economic instability and the need for supplemental income. Lastly, psychological challenges encompass stress, burnout, and cognitive strain. This study recommends the development of flexible scholarship schemes targeted at part-time government employees, the enhancement of psychological support services, and the implementation of institutional policies that promote a work-study balance.

Keywords- part-time postgraduate students, government employees, challenges, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Multiple issues encourage government employees to pursue postgraduate qualifications. Problems such as relatively low public sector salaries prompt many employees to pursue further studies to enhance their qualifications and career prospects. In addition to this, a growing number of government employees are pursuing part-time postgraduate studies to enhance their qualifications, skills, knowledge, and personal development. The pursuit of postgraduate education among Malaysian government employees is a commendable endeavor that reflects a commitment to personal growth and excellence in public service. However, the journey is often marked by significant sacrifices and challenges across social, political, economic, and psychological domains. These challenges are similar to global trends among working postgraduate students, who often struggle with academic matters, work pressures, financial difficulties, and time management (Kadoke & Atieno, 2022; Rockman et al., 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Over the past few years, there has been a notable rise in the number of Malaysian government employees in Johor seeking part-time postgraduate education. This trend indicates a growing awareness of the need for

advanced academic qualifications to meet career advancement and promotion requirements, as well as broader human capital development goals within the public sector. However, pursuing part-time postgraduate studies while working as a civil servant comes with a range of complex challenges. These challenges include not only work-related and family commitments but also social, psychological, financial, and institutional pressures.

Many government employees face a conflict between their core responsibilities in public service and the academic demands of their postgraduate programs. The limited time available often leads to stress, exhaustion, and a disruption of the balance between work, study, and family life (Baqtayan et al., 2017; Sahdan & Hussain, 2022). Additionally, these employees experience significant mental strain due to their dual responsibilities and often feel isolated, with limited social support from colleagues or employers (Hassim et al., 2022; Shetty et al., 2015). Maintaining academic consistency becomes increasingly complex, especially when facing the pressures of work and family (Rockman et al., 2022). Financially, the cost of tuition and living expenses places a considerable burden on lower- and mid-ranking government employees, who often receive limited financial support from their employers or relevant agencies (Ardissone et al., 2021; Baharudin et al., 2013). Institutional challenges further complicate the situation, as inconsistent policies regarding study leave, academic support, and training opportunities leave part-time postgraduate students without adequate mechanisms to balance work and study effectively.

While international literature has highlighted similar challenges faced by adult learners juggling work and study, particularly role conflict, stress, and financial strain, there is a noticeable gap in research focused on part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia. Most studies have focused on full-time students or private sector workers, leaving a significant knowledge gap regarding the unique experiences of civil servants in the public sector who pursue part-time postgraduate education. Given this gap, it is crucial to examine the challenges faced by government employees in Malaysia as they navigate the demands of part-time postgraduate education, to inform policy development and enhance human resource management within the public sector.

Research Objective

The study aims to achieve the following objective:

To explore the challenges faced by the part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia.

Significance of the Research

This study is significant for part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia, as it sheds light on the real challenges they encounter in managing the demands of work, study, and personal life. Key issues, including financial constraints, heavy workload, and time management difficulties, are explored, offering valuable insights into practical coping strategies that can enhance both academic achievement and overall well-being. These findings hold direct relevance for individuals balancing employment with postgraduate education, helping to address the pressures they face.

For policymakers and higher education institutions, the study provides evidence to guide the formulation of supportive measures, including flexible study arrangements, financial aid, and workplace support systems, which can promote employee development and strengthen Malaysia's human capital framework.

Additionally, this research contributes to the body of knowledge in sociology within the Southeast Asian context, providing a foundation for future investigations into related areas such as resilience, adult learning, and institutional support. By filling existing gaps, it supports comparative and theoretical advancements in understanding the experiences of part-time postgraduate students on both national and global scales, specifically in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

People's Expectations

Part-time postgraduate government employees often face high societal and institutional expectations to excel

simultaneously in their job roles and academic pursuits. Rockman et al. (2022) highlights that these employees experience role strain due to pressures from employers, academic institutions, and personal aspirations. Society tends to view working and studying as voluntary choices, neglecting the interconnectedness and inherent difficulties of managing both. For example, external expectations can increase internal conflict, leading to emotional exhaustion and an increased risk of attrition. It further explains how conflicting demands reduce an individual's capacity to perform optimally.

Work Overload

Work overload is a significant challenge faced by part-time postgraduate government employees who must balance demanding job duties during official working hours with rigorous academic commitments outside of work. Tumin et al. (2020) found that working students face challenges in managing work and academic duties due to time limitations and conflicting obligations. The research emphasized that these students view employment as both a financial necessity and an opportunity for personal growth. However, they encounter significant barriers, such as restricted time, fatigue, and the prioritization of work responsibilities over academic engagement. Priyadharshini (2025) highlights that this dual pressure often leads to role conflicts, which in turn reduce academic focus and increase stress levels. In the Malaysian public sector context, research indicates that although standard working hours are eight hours per day, employees often encounter additional administrative tasks and workloads that extend into their personal time (Sahdan & Hussain, 2022). This excessive workload contributes to fatigue, burnout, and decreased productivity, hampering both job performance and academic success.

Work-Life Imbalance

Work-life imbalance arises as a direct consequence of work overload. According to Rockman et al. (2022), the stress of meeting professional responsibilities while pursuing academic goals severely diminishes the quality time available for family and personal well-being. In Malaysia's public sector, additional pressures, such as overtime work, bureaucratic demands, and ancillary duties, intensify this imbalance, disrupting employees' personal lives and psychological well-being (Sahdan & Hussain, 2022). This imbalance often results in burnout, reduced motivation, and lower overall performance, creating a substantial barrier to the academic and professional success of part-time postgraduate government workers.

Age Factors

Age represents a critical factor influencing the academic challenges faced by part-time postgraduate students, particularly in terms of memorization and energy sustainability, as older learners navigate the dual demands of professional commitments and advanced study. Empirical evidence demonstrates that advancing age is associated with declines in working memory capacity, which hinders the active manipulation and retention of complex information essential for postgraduate coursework. Specifically, older adults exhibit greater difficulties in volitional inhibition and working memory tasks compared to their younger counterparts, which may disrupt the cognitive integration required for deep learning in time-constrained part-time programs. These memorization challenges are further compounded by age-related alterations in cognitive processing, which impair attention, perception, and the ability to memorize and comprehend intricate concepts, often necessitating compensatory strategies in higher education settings (Schiller et al., 2020). Concurrently, energy depletion and cognitive fatigue pose substantial barriers, with mature part-time students reporting elevated exhaustion from prolonged mental effort, which diminishes their persistence and engagement in online or flexible learning environments (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Inequitable Access to Government Financial Support

Inequitable access to financial support and scholarships from government sources poses a significant challenge for part-time postgraduate students, who often face eligibility restrictions tied to full-time enrollment requirements, thereby intensifying the economic pressures of concurrent work and study obligations. Such criteria disproportionately exclude part-time learners from federal or institutional aid, resulting in reduced

average financial assistance (often less than half that received by their full-time peers) and forcing them to rely on high-interest loans or out-of-pocket expenses for tuition, books, and living costs. Ardisson et al. (2021) indicate that over 40% of eligible transfer students in a 2+2 STEM undergraduate program, particularly those in hybrid online tracks, are excluded from scholarships due to their part-time status, which disproportionately impacts women and underrepresented minorities. Similarly, Baharudin et al. (2013) also found that Malaysian postgraduate students face significant financial challenges in funding their studies, as most must pay high tuition fees themselves; only a small percentage of art students receive government sponsorship from the Ministry of Education. The fees must be paid in full at the start of each semester, as no instalment payment options are available. This misalignment between scholarship eligibility criteria and the realities of nontraditional students' lives highlights the need for more inclusive financial support policies to address the unique challenges faced by part-time learners and promote equitable academic outcomes.

Budget Prioritization and Sacrifices

Budget prioritization among part-time postgraduate students often involves complex decisions as they balance education costs with basic living expenses. Baharudin et al. (2013) found that students face significant financial challenges in funding their studies and personal expenditure. For working students, this requires saving 15-20% of their monthly income, which can be particularly burdensome for those with low incomes or family responsibilities. Many students make sacrifices, such as cutting back on personal interests like shopping and travelling, or taking on part-time jobs to cover their costs. Balancing full-time work, studies, and additional jobs adds further strain, highlighting the financial toll of funding higher education. Similarly, Havenga and Sengane's (2018) study found that students face significant financial challenges, including high tuition fees perceived as unjustifiably expensive, as well as costly purchases of printing and data bundles, photocopying, and travel expenses for research and supervision, while making sacrifices for meals and personal expenses.

Economic Stability and Supplemental Income

Economic instability among university students is a significant issue, as limited financial resources often force reliance on supplemental income from part-time or informal work to cover basic needs and academic expenses. Hordósy et al. (2018) note that at English Red Brick University, students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds engage in term-time employment primarily for survival, which restricts time for self-directed learning and diminishes their overall university experience. Similarly, Abraham and Houseman (2019) highlight that over a quarter of economically vulnerable young adults, including students, participate in informal work to offset irregular incomes and unexpected costs; yet, the lack of benefits, such as health coverage, perpetuates long-term financial instability. Douglas and Attewell (2019) further emphasize that low-skill part-time jobs, often taken to bridge financial gaps, fail to enhance employability, adding stress and limiting academic engagement.

Stress

The intense demand to balance personal matters and study generates substantial psychological stress. For instance, Baqutayan et al. (2017) found that postgraduate students at Perdana School experience academic stress due to excessive academic workload, performance pressure, low self-esteem, inadequate time management skills, and difficulties in balancing their studies and personal life. Similarly, a study by Ramli et al. (2022) found that five types of stress, i.e., family, work, academic, financial, and self-efficacy, are linked to psychological well-being. The results indicate that higher levels of these stresses and self-efficacy have a greater impact on the psychological well-being of part-time students.

Burnout

Burnout occurs when a person's emotional state becomes unstable, characterized by symptoms such as irritability, despair, and cynicism (Fitriyani & Oktaviani, 2022). Research on postgraduate dental students revealed moderate to high stress levels, with 21% experiencing emotional exhaustion burnout, 29% experiencing depersonalization burnout, and 54% dealing with personal accomplishment burnout; female students had notably

higher stress levels (Shetty et al., 2015). In addition, Andrade et al. (2023) stated that burnout is linked with drinking too much alcohol, using antidepressants, being single, and considering dropping out.

Cognitive Strain

Part-time postgraduate government employees face substantial cognitive strain due to balancing demanding work roles with academic responsibilities. The dual pressures lead to high levels of mental fatigue, impaired

attention, reduced memory capacity, and decision-making difficulties, all of which significantly hinder academic success and work performance (Ramli et al., 2022). Prolonged cognitive load is exacerbated by stressors such as tight deadlines, workload overload, and family commitments, leading to emotional exhaustion and a decline in psychological well-being (Ramli et al., 2022). Malaysia-specific studies corroborate that cognitive strain not only affects concentration and learning efficiency but also increases vulnerability to burnout, undermining both career development and educational progress (Hassim et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach, which is the most suitable method because it enables researchers to explore and analyze the problems faced by participants (Taylor et al., 2016). This approach provides an in-depth understanding of the various issues and challenges faced by part-time postgraduate students among government employees in Johor, Malaysia, including their experiences and the meanings they go through. Additionally, this study employs a case study design, allowing researchers to gain insight into the complex issues informants encounter in different contexts.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Sampling is a method that involves setting specific criteria (Etikan et al., 2016). It helps researchers pinpoint and select cases with extensive information, maximizing the use of limited study resources (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is a popular technique in qualitative research. It has been used intentionally to select individuals involved in the study, allowing researchers to identify and choose cases with the most information and make the most of limited resources. This study employed the snowball sampling technique to select the sample, which involves gathering informants after the study has begun by asking informants to recommend others who may be eligible to participate (Creswell, 2013). This study features five informants, whose number was determined by the saturation principle, which means that no new themes or sub-themes emerged after the data were collected (Taylor et al., 2016).

Table I Demographic Profile of the Informants

Informant's Demography	Tina	Nor	Ahmad	Herman	Dan
Age	41 years old	43 years old	33 years old	50 years old	25 years old
Religion	Christianity	Islam	Islam	Islam	Islam
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male
Ethnic Group	Iban	Malay	Malay	Malay	Malay
Postgraduate	Master in Land	Master of	Master in Land	Master in Land	Master of

Program	Administration and Development	Architecture	Administration and Development	Administration and Development	Science (Safety, Health and Environment)
Current Occupation	Administrative officer, Sarawak Land and Survey Department	Architect, Johor Bahru City Council	Administrative officer, Mersing District Officer	Administrative officer, Mersing District Officer	Health inspector, Iskandar Puteri City Council
Marital Status	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married

The study involved five informants from different professional and personal backgrounds. In terms of age, the informants ranged from 25 to 50 years old, with the youngest being Dan and the oldest being Herman. This age range reflects a combination of younger, mid-career, and senior professionals. Regarding religion and ethnicity, four of the informants (Nor, Ahmad, Herman, and Dan) are Malay Muslims, while one informant, Tina, is an Iban Christian. This diversity offers perspectives from both Malay and non-Malay ethnic groups, as well as from two different religious affiliations. In terms of gender, three of the informants are males (Ahmad, Herman, and Dan), while two are females (Tina and Nor). This balance provides a reasonable mix of male and female perspectives. For occupational backgrounds, the informants are mainly professionals in administrative and technical fields within government agencies. Tina works as an administrative officer in the Sarawak Land and Survey Department, Nor is an architect with the Johor Bahru City Council, Ahmad and Herman are administrative officers at the Mersing district office, and Dan is a health inspector with the Iskandar Puteri City Council. Their marital status is consistent across the group, as all five informants are married, which may influence their viewpoints regarding family and career balance.

Data Collection Procedure

Informants were given the flexibility to choose the location, date, and time of the interviews based on their available schedule. The researchers conducted the interviews in a relaxed setting, such as a cozy café or a comfortable lounge, which created a welcoming atmosphere for open conversation. Before each interview, the researchers provided the informants with an information sheet and informed consent form to ensure they fully understood the research's purpose, goals, and scope. This also helped them prepare topics to discuss during the interviews. The researchers assured the informants that the information collected would be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time.

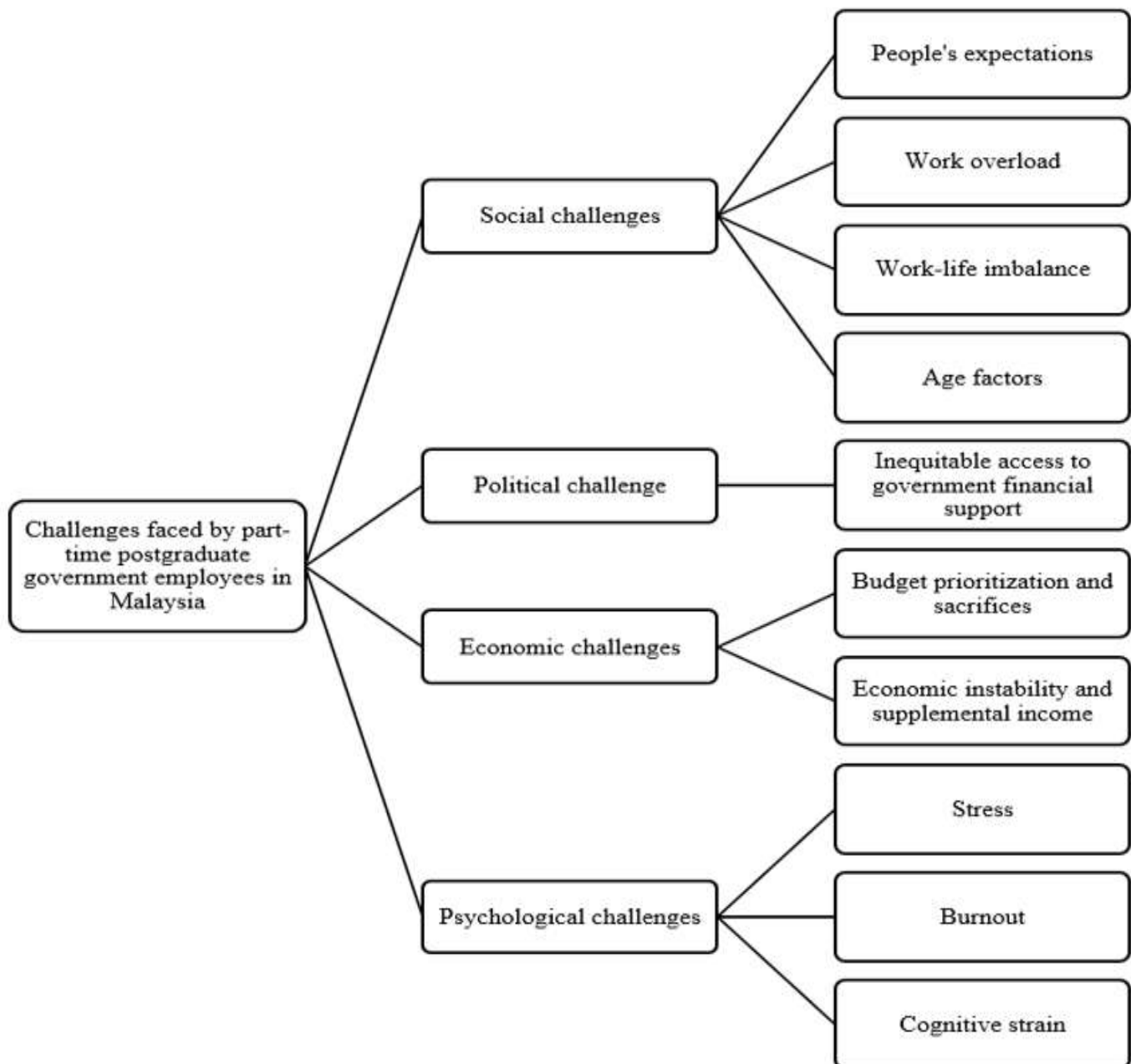
The interview protocol focused on the topic under study, using both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The demographic information of the informants, including their gender, age, ethnic group, religion, marital status, and current occupation, was gathered through closed-ended questions. On the other hand, the open-ended questions aimed to explore the challenges faced by part-time postgraduate students who are also government employees in Malaysia. The researchers used audio recorders to capture the informants' responses, with their consent, which was obtained from all of them. The interviews were conducted in English and the informants' native languages to encourage storytelling and gather research findings. All interviews lasted an hour.

Data Analysis

After completing the data collection process, the researchers transcribed all raw audio recordings into written transcripts for each of the five informants. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic process that involved coding, categorizing, and identifying recurring patterns. Through this approach, themes were generated inductively to capture the key issues under investigation (Creswell, 2013). This method enabled the researchers to organize and interpret the data in a meaningful way, providing insights into the challenges faced by the informants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Fig 1 Challenges faced by part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia



This study revealed four themes, as illustrated in Figure 1, representing the challenges faced by part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia. The four overarching themes are social, political, economic, and psychological challenges. Under the social challenges, the identified sub-themes include people's expectations, work overload, work-life imbalance, and age factors. The political challenge theme encompasses inequitable access to government financial support. The economic challenges include budget prioritization and sacrifices, as well as economic instability and the need for supplemental income. Lastly, the psychological challenges comprise stress, burnout, and cognitive strain. These themes highlight the multifaceted barriers that informants encounter in balancing their professional duties with postgraduate studies.

Social Challenges

The findings reveal that people's expectations, work overload, work-life imbalance, and age-related factors are vital social challenges faced by the informants. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

People's expectations: People's expectations highlight how societal perceptions and familial or communal

assumptions impose additional stress on part-time postgraduate students, particularly government employees who are expected to fulfil multiple roles without adequate recognition of their constraints. As evidenced by the informants' accounts, there is a pervasive lack of empathy from society, which views both employment and further education as voluntary choices rather than intertwined necessities, thereby overlooking the inherent trials involved. This aligns with social role theory, which posits that individuals experience role strain when societal expectations conflict with personal capacities, leading to diminished performance and emotional fatigue. One of the informants, Dan (pseudonym), aged 25 years old, who has gone through such a circumstance, narrated the following:

“Okay, actually, it is quite difficult for society to understand the situation of working while studying because they do not know the conditions we face ourselves. The trials we encounter and the challenges we have to go through, because they assume that studying is our choice and working is also our choice.”

The findings align with a study by Rockman et al. (2022), which suggests that employees who work and study simultaneously face role strain due to pressures from employers, schools, and personal goals. Society sees these roles as voluntary, ignoring their challenges and connections. This can lead to internal conflict, emotional exhaustion, and an increased likelihood of quitting.

Work overload: Work overload emerged as a key challenge for part-time postgraduate government employees. In relation to this issue, one of the informants, Ahmad (pseudonym), aged 33 years old, narrated the following:

“As a state administrative officer in Johor, it is my duty to attend all official department programs held in the districts. Usually, these are scheduled on the weekends. This becomes a challenge, especially when there are official programs, where I must prioritize official duties over my studies on weekends. Furthermore, when I miss a class, I then have to do extra work or additional assignments to catch up on what was covered during that weekend class.”

Another informant, Herman (pseudonym), aged 50 years old, narrated as follows:

“As a department head, not all tasks can be delegated to subordinates. Even though I get one day off per week, the tasks still need to be completed either at night or on Mondays, times that I consider relatively free. These tasks must be completed according to schedule, which often leaves me with a sense of work overload and very little personal time to rest.”

These narratives reflect the dual pressures of professional and academic responsibilities, supporting Tumin et al.'s (2020) findings, which have shown that working students struggle to balance work and academic responsibilities due to time constraints and competing commitments. The study highlighted that working students often perceive employment as both a financial necessity and a means of personal growth and self-improvement. However, they face significant obstacles, including limited time, exhaustion, and the need to prioritize official tasks over academic engagement. Further, Sahdan and Hussain (2022) find that employees face extended work

hours due to additional administrative tasks, which spill over into their personal time. This results in a reduced academic focus and increased stress in balancing work and study (Priyadharshini, 2025).

Work-life imbalance: The work-life imbalance reveals the ongoing struggle part-time postgraduate government employees face in allocating time across professional, familial, and academic demands, often requiring deliberate sacrifices and family negotiations. One of the informants, Nor (pseudonym), aged 43, shared:

“One keyword that I hold on to in my learning journey is sacrifice because I need to balance my time between work, family, and studies. When I decided to further my studies, I thought it would be helpful to share this with anyone about to begin their learning journey: the first step is to discuss it with your family. Only when there is mutual understanding can we proceed to the next step.”

The findings align with a study conducted by Rockman et al. (2022), who state that juggling professional duties and academic pursuits significantly reduces time for family and personal well-being. Bureaucratic demands and additional tasks exacerbate this imbalance, disrupting employees' personal lives and mental health (Sahdan &

Hussain, 2022). This often leads to burnout, decreased motivation, and reduced performance, posing a significant obstacle to the academic and professional success of part-time postgraduate government employees.

Age factors: Ageing influences learning capacity, memory, and energy, often presenting challenges for adult learners. This resonates with Tina's (pseudonym) experience, an Iban postgraduate student aged 41, who reflected on how age affected her academic journey:

"Yes, it is challenging. (Laughs). When you reach a certain age, the ability to memorize becomes more difficult. Sometimes I feel that my energy levels are not the same as they were before, and I tire more easily. I also need more time to understand and process new knowledge compared to when I was younger."

Tina's account highlights how the age factor becomes a challenge in postgraduate learning, aligning with scholarly discussions on the complex interplay between ageing, autonomy, and learning. Age-related cognitive declines impair attention and comprehension, requiring compensatory strategies (Schiller et al., 2020). Additionally, mature students experience heightened cognitive fatigue and energy depletion, which reduces their persistence and engagement in flexible or online learning environments (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Political Challenge

The findings reveal that inequitable access to government financial support presents a substantial political challenge for the informants. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

Inequitable access to government financial support: One of the challenges raised by informants relates to the inequitable financial support or scholarships from the government for part-time students. For example, Nor (pseudonym), aged 43, reflected:

"As I mentioned earlier, perhaps the government could provide scholarships specifically for part-time staff. I feel it is quite limited for government staff to obtain special scholarships. Sometimes it is not that there are none, but the ones offered are minimal. They are often restricted by age, especially for those of us who are older; the chances are fewer. Then, we still have to compete with others to secure the scholarship."

Similarly, Dan (pseudonym), aged 25, explained:

"I did not receive any financial support from my organization throughout my studies."

Participant experiences of limited institutional support reflect wider systemic issues highlighted in Malaysia's policy frameworks. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MOE, 2015) identifies gaps between workplace learning and postgraduate pathways, limiting effective support. The Public Service Department's Human Capital Development Policy (JPA, 2023) promotes upskilling but faces implementation challenges. Ministry of Higher Education data show low postgraduate completion rates among government employees (MOHE, 2024), underscoring structural barriers. These policies explain persistent challenges and point to the need for targeted reforms

The findings align with a study conducted by Ardisson et al. (2021) and Baharudin et al. (2013), who highlight the challenges faced by postgraduate students, particularly when institutional and governmental policies restrict access to scholarships and funding. Prior studies confirm that part-time students are systematically excluded from many scholarship opportunities despite demonstrating comparable academic performance to full-time peers.

Economic Challenges

The findings reveal that budget prioritization and sacrifices, as well as economic instability and the need for supplemental income, are vital economic challenges for the informants. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

Budget prioritization and sacrifices: The informant reports significant financial constraints due to the need to prioritise education expenses over both wants and, at times, even necessities. This demonstrates how budget

prioritisation not only demands sacrifices of personal desires but also creates tension in managing essential daily living costs, leading to feelings of deprivation compared to others. Dan (pseudonym), 25 years old, reflected this, stating:

“I did not purchase any of the wants or things I desired to buy. Instead, I chose to prioritise my future, focusing on my education and the costs that I need to bear at this moment. This often leaves me feeling financially restricted, unable to enjoy the same lifestyle as my peers.”

The findings align with studies conducted by Baharudin et al. (2013) and Havenga and Sengane's (2018), who reported that financial management is a significant challenge for postgraduate students, often necessitating sacrifices across various lifestyle domains to fund their education.

Economic stability and supplemental income: The informant highlights the challenge of maintaining economic stability, as the primary salary only covers basic needs, requiring the pursuit of extra income through part-time or gig work. However, the irregularity of these side earnings and the presence of unexpected expenses contribute to ongoing financial instability, leaving the informants concerned about their long-term financial balance. Dan (pseudonym), 25 years old, described his experience as follows:

“My salary is barely enough to cover my daily expenses, such as food, bills, and transportation. For any additional expenses, I am forced to seek extra income through part-time jobs. I helped my family in the village to earn some money, and while in Johor, I worked as a delivery rider with a delivery service company. Even with these efforts, I still feel financially unstable because my income is irregular, and unexpected expenses, such as family emergencies or study-related costs, often disrupt my financial balance. At times, I struggle to maintain consistent economic stability, leaving me worried about the future.”

These realities align with Hordosy et al. (2018), Abraham and Houseman (2019), and Douglas and Attewell (2019) who emphasise the economic instability faced by students and highlight the critical role of diversified income strategies in the face of uncertainty.

Psychological Challenges

The findings reveal that stress, burnout, and cognitive strain are vital psychological challenges for the informants. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

Stress: The informant described prioritising studies over attending to family obligations during a time when his father-in-law was ill. This situation reflects the emotional toll of balancing postgraduate studies with family responsibilities, leading to increased stress. Dan (pseudonym), 25 years old, described his experience during a family health crisis as follows:

“I had to prioritise my studies when my father-in-law recently fell ill. Together with my partner, we were unable to be with other family members to visit my father-in-law (expression showed sadness and guilt).”

This finding aligns with broader research that identifies situational and structural stressors, such as conflicting responsibilities, job commitments, and financial concerns, which impact emotional well-being and lead to stress (Baqtayan et al., 2017; Ramli et al., 2022).

Despite these challenges, participants found ways to cope which are they scheduled study times, stay positive and relied on family support for encouragement. One of the informants, Tina (pseudonym), aged 41, said:

“I manage stress by fixing study times, stay positive and counting on my family support.”

These ways of coping fit Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory, which says there are two main types of coping. The first one is problem-focused coping deals with solving the problem causing stress like managing time and asking for help. Other than that, emotion-focused coping which helps to manage feelings like relying on family or friends for emotional support. These both types will help people to handle stress and keep going even when things are hard.

Burnout: The informant expressed experiencing burnout, as evidenced by repeated thoughts of quitting their studies. The pressure of examinations, coupled with work commitments and limited study time, led to burnout. Additionally, the inability to delegate official tasks and the decline in family commitments further intensified feelings of exhaustion, forcing them to spend financially to compensate for family time. In relation to this, Ahmad (pseudonym), 33 years old, stated:

“I once thought about quitting because my studies required me to sit for examinations at the end of the semester, and for that, I needed to focus and really study. However, due to my work commitments, I had less time to study, and that created some pressure and a feeling of wanting to give up. Sometimes, the physical tiredness and mental stress combined, making me feel like I was heading towards burnout.”

Herman (pseudonym), 50 years old, also shared his experience as follows:

“Yes, I did feel like quitting. First, the official tasks I was responsible for could not be delegated to anyone, even though I was granted one day of leave on Friday. Second, my commitment to my family was decreasing, and as a result, I had to allocate funds to take them on a vacation. At the same time, the heavy workload and the mental pressure made me feel exhausted, as if I was moving towards burnout.”

Research on burnout among Malaysian professionals reveals significant challenges faced by postgraduate students and academics in the workplace. These findings align with studies done by Fitriyani and Oktaviani (2022), Shetty et al. (2015), and Andrade et al. (2023).

Cognitive strain: The informant highlighted the central pressure arising from managing work and study commitments, mainly due to time constraints. Spending nearly five hours commuting to the study centre intensifies feelings of stress and contributes to cognitive strain. Ahmad (pseudonym), 33 years old, noted that:

“The main pressure in managing both work and study commitments is the time pressure of having to attend classes. I need about 2 hours to drive to the university. Going to and from takes almost 5 hours.”

The findings align with those of Ramli et al. (2022) and Hassim et al. (2022), who highlight the significant impact of cognitive strain on academic and professional performance, particularly among students and workers facing multiple stressors. Cognitive strain, characterised by mental fatigue, reduced attention, impaired memory, and difficulty making decisions, arises from excessive cognitive load caused by stressors like tight deadlines, heavy workloads, and family responsibilities. These pressures lead to emotional exhaustion and a decline in psychological well-being, thereby increasing the risk of burnout. In Malaysia, studies have confirmed that cognitive strain impairs concentration and learning efficiency, making individuals more susceptible to burnout, which in turn negatively affects academic success, career development, and overall mental health.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by part-time postgraduate government employees in Malaysia, highlighting the intricate interplay of social, political, economic, and psychological barriers that impact their academic and professional journeys. The findings underscore that social challenges, including people's expectations, work overload, struggles with work-life balance, and age-related factors, vitally hinder these students' ability to thrive. Politically, inequitable access to government financial support exacerbates their difficulties, while economic pressures, including budget prioritization, sacrifices, and economic instability, further compound their challenges. Psychologically, stress, burnout, and cognitive strain pose substantial threats to their well-being and academic success. These insights emphasize the urgent need for targeted interventions to support this unique group of learners.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that universities, policymakers, and government agencies collaborate to address the multidimensional challenges faced by part-time postgraduate government employees. First, institutional policies should prioritize inclusivity by introducing scholarships and financial aid packages tailored to part-time learners,

particularly for older employees who are often excluded from such opportunities. Second, universities should adopt flexible academic arrangements, such as weekend or evening classes and blended learning approaches, to accommodate employees' professional schedules. Third, organizations and government agencies are encouraged to provide workplace accommodations, such as study leave or reduced workloads during examination periods, to help employees balance their dual responsibilities. Finally, targeted programs in financial literacy, stress management, and mental health support should be made available, empowering part-time postgraduate students with the skills and resilience needed to sustain both academic and professional effectiveness.

LIMITATION

While this qualitative study offers valuable insights into the experiences of part-time postgraduate government employees, several limitations should be noted. The research was conducted within a single university context, which may restrict the generalizability of findings to other institutions or regions in Malaysia. Additionally, the reliance on in-depth interviews, though rich in capturing personal narratives, may not fully represent the diversity of challenges across different demographic groups and employment levels. The study also focused primarily on the perspectives of government employees, thereby excluding the experiences of private-sector part-time students who may encounter similar or distinct challenges. Future research could address these gaps by employing mixed-methods approaches, expanding the sample size across multiple institutions, and incorporating quantitative measures to provide a broader and more representative understanding of the academic, social, economic, and political challenges faced by working postgraduate students.

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