A Qualitative Exploration of Work-Life Balance Among Private Universities Lecturers in Klang Valley

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the work-life balance (WLB) challenges and coping strategies among private university lecturers in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, it explores the interplay between professional demands, institutional expectations, and personal responsibilities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven lecturers of diverse demographics and roles. The findings reveal key challenges, including role complexity, emotional exhaustion, and workplace conflicts exacerbated by rigid institutional policies and excessive workloads. Effective coping mechanisms, such as flexible working arrangements, time management, and institutional support systems, emerged as pivotal in mitigating these challenges. This research underscores the importance of organizational policies that foster a balanced academic environment, emphasizing the need for enhanced institutional support and the adoption of sustainable practices to improve lecturers' well-being and job satisfaction. The insights contribute to the broader discourse on achieving work-life balance in higher education and its implications for academic productivity and institutional success.

Keywords: Work-life balance, private university lecturers, qualitative research, institutional support, role complexity, academic well-being, Klang Valley, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Higher Education aspires to position Malaysia as a leading hub of educational excellence on the global stage through its Malaysian Education initiatives (Putra, 2022). This ambitious vision places substantial responsibilities on the education sector, requiring institutions to enhance their academic standards, foster innovation, and deliver quality education that meets international benchmarks. To achieve this vision, higher education institutions must not only focus on academic excellence but also prioritize the holistic development of students to produce globally competent graduates. This includes investing in state-of-the-art infrastructure, adopting advanced teaching methodologies, and fostering research and development that addresses global challenges. Additionally, the sector must strengthen partnerships with international universities and industries to promote knowledge exchange and enhance global visibility.

Since the 1990s, Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia have become essential players in advancing the nation's educational objectives. These institutions contribute significantly to research, education, and innovation, producing skilled professionals, government leaders, entrepreneurs, and educators who drive national progress (Osman, 2023). Achieving these outcomes depends largely on the efforts of lecturers, whose expertise and dedication are crucial to the success of these institutions. Chin et al. (2024) highlight that lecturers in PHEIs are responsible for teaching innovations, conducting research, securing funding, managing administrative tasks, and providing community service. This broad range of responsibilities places considerable pressure on lecturers, particularly in the fast-paced, technology-driven academic environment. The rising expectations to innovate in teaching, meet research targets, and engage in community service often blur the lines between professional and personal life (Stephen et al., 2024). Without adequate support, these pressures can lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and long-term health

issues, which ultimately affect both personal well-being and institutional success.

In recent years, employers across all sectors have increasingly recognized the importance of ensuring WLB for their employees and in the education sector, WLB has emerged as a prominent research focus in disciplines such

as psychology, sociology, and human resource management (Husin, 2018). While the concept of WLB varies across individuals and organizational cultures, it fundamentally emphasizes balancing professional obligations with personal well-being. For lecturers, particularly those in PHEIs maintaining WLB is essential for productivity, healthier academic environment, and overall well-being (Oderinde et al., 2024).

Kamarudin et al. (2020) identifies teaching as one of the most stressful and high-risk professions, with educators frequently encountering challenges such as curriculum changes, technological advancements, student behavioral issues, heavy workloads, time constraints, and internal organizational politics. These stressors significantly impact lecturers' mental and physical health, often leading to burnout and strain, which in turn affects their overall well-being. Similarly, Hamami et al. (2022) emphasize that lecturers require adequate preparation time and stable mental, physical, and emotional well-being to deliver quality teaching. Excessive workloads can compromise these vital aspects, increasing the risk of stress-related illnesses and fatigue.

Given these challenges, WLB has become a critical topic of interest among researchers. For lecturers, this imbalance not only undermines their health but also impacts on their ability to provide quality education and maintain their commitment to institutional goals. As lecturers are pivotal in producing a skilled and competent workforce, their well-being directly influences the nation's education system and societal progress.

Therefore, this study aims to explore WLB within the academic profession, specifically focusing on private university lecturers in Klang Valley, by examining the challenges they face in achieving WLB and identifying the coping strategies that help them maintain a balance between their professional responsibilities and personal lives.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In an ideal situation, lecturers in Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia should be able to effectively balance their professional responsibilities, such as teaching, research, and administrative duties, while also maintaining their personal lives. This balance, often referred to as WLB, is crucial for their well-being, since it enables them to maintain physical, mental, and emotional health, which in turn fosters job satisfaction, productivity, and engagement. Achieving a healthy WLB would not only benefit lecturers but also enhance the overall quality of education (Fauzi et al, 2024), reduce turnover (Munyeka & Ngobeni, 2022), and foster organizational resilience (Susyana et al, 2021). Furthermore, supportive institutional policies and a conducive work environment should exist to help lecturers manage the pressures of their roles, thus promoting a holistic approach to both personal and professional development.

However, the current reality for lecturers in PHEIs in Malaysia falls far short of this ideal. Lecturers are often overwhelmed by increasing demands in their professional roles, such as teaching innovations, research targets, securing funding, and administrative tasks, which are further added to personal life pressures (Chin et al., 2024). Consequently, the pressure to perform in all these areas frequently leads to stress and burnout. This issue is reflective of a broader national trend. Malaysia's ranking among the lowest globally in WLB, with an average of 40.8 working hours per week (Morhan, 2024), highlights the broader challenges faced by employees, including lecturers. The president of the Malaysian Academic Association Congress noted that an alarming 98.75% of lecturers experience significant stress, primarily due to excessive workloads and insufficient time to manage their responsibilities effectively (Morhan, 2024). Quek et al. (2022) further revealed that 42.9% of medical academicians in Malaysia experienced moderate to high stress levels during the pandemic, underscoring the ongoing strain across disciplines. As a result, many lecturers are unable to achieve the WLB that is crucial for their well-being, leading to negative consequences such as reduced job satisfaction, poor mental health, and high turnover rates. The severity of this issue is evident in the high turnover rates of

academic staff in private universities, which exceed 26%, more than double the 11% observed in public universities (GuiXia & Rashid, 2019). Such turnover rates indicate dissatisfaction rooted in work-life imbalance, further exacerbated by excessive workloads (Shen & Slater, 2021) and extended working hours (John & Sims, 2021).

To move closer to the ideal situation of achieving WLB, it is essential to explore the specific challenges faced by private university lecturers in Klang Valley in managing their professional and personal responsibilities. Understanding these challenges provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to stress, burnout, and difficulties in maintaining balance. Furthermore, it is equally important to identify the coping strategies that lecturers adopt to navigate these challenges and sustain a balance between their work and personal lives.

By addressing these objectives, this research can inform the development of tailored interventions, such as better workload management, flexible working arrangements, and improved institutional support systems. These measures can enhance lecturers' well-being, reduce stress, and foster a healthier work environment. Ultimately, this will not only benefit lecturers by promoting job satisfaction and mental well-being but also strengthen the sustainability of high-quality education in Malaysia's private higher education sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance (WLB) is widely recognized as essential for employee well-being and organizational productivity. Lekchiri and Eversole (2020) defined WLB as the ability to manage both family and work responsibilities without experiencing overwhelming stress or anxiety. Expanding on this perspective, Hill et al. (2021) highlighted that WLB involves harmonizing emotional, behavioral, and time-related demands across professional and personal roles. From an organizational standpoint, creating opportunities that accommodate employees' family obligations is critical to supporting WLB, as suggested by Galea et al. (2014). Complementing this view, Greenhaus and Allen (2011) emphasized that employees perceive WLB when they experience a sense of equilibrium between work and family roles, which contributes to overall life satisfaction.

Challenges in Maintaining Work-Life Balance

Despite its importance, achieving WLB remains challenging, particularly for lecturers in academic settings where job demands frequently clash with family obligations. Russo et al. (2016) argued that the tension between professional duties and family commitments, combined with insufficient workplace support systems, significantly undermines WLB. This issue becomes even more pronounced among working mothers, as Kadale et al. (2018) found, noting that child-rearing responsibilities intensify stress and lower job satisfaction.

Adding to these challenges, Ismail et al. (2022) observed that women in the public sector often struggle to achieve WLB, citing work intrusions into family time, unsupportive organizational cultures, and entrenched social expectations as key contributing factors. Further compounding the issue, academic professionals frequently contend with heavy workloads and extended working hours. Hakri and Wan (2024) identified excessive workloads as a major barrier to balancing personal and professional responsibilities. Similarly, Wong et al. (2019) demonstrated that prolonged work hours reduce time for personal pursuits, leading to burnout and increased stress.

In addition to long hours and workload, the multifaceted roles of lecturers create further strain. Diego and Salazar (2021) noted that balancing teaching, research, and administrative duties often results in role conflict and time pressure. For instance, the need to prepare lesson plans, meet research deadlines, and attend departmental meetings within short timeframes can leave little room for personal life. This imbalance contributes to heightened stress, decreased job satisfaction, and poorer well-being, ultimately affecting productivity and the quality of education delivered.

Coping Strategies in Maintaining Work-Life Balance

To address these challenges, lecturers adopt various coping strategies aimed at improving WLB. One widely adopted approach is flexible working arrangements, which allow employees to adjust their work schedules. Indradewa and Prasetio (2023) emphasized that such flexibility enhances productivity and well-being. This sentiment is echoed by Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard (2014), who found that working during optimal hours not only reduces stress but also improves satisfaction by accommodating personal responsibilities.

Complementing flexible schedules, effective time management is another critical strategy. By prioritizing tasks and setting realistic timelines, lecturers can better navigate the demands of teaching, research, and administrative

responsibilities. Ganapathi and Aithal (2024) noted that organized scheduling minimizes overload and helps lecturers maintain control, contributing to a more sustainable balance between work and life.

Recognition and rewards also serve as important motivators. According to Tirta and Enrika (2020), non-monetary acknowledgments, such as praise and recognition, are often more effective than financial incentives in promoting employee morale and satisfaction. Additionally, performance-based rewards—such as development opportunities or additional leave—offer tangible appreciation, reinforcing lecturers' motivation to sustain WLB.

Finally, family support plays a vital role in easing the burden of work-related stress. Oludayo and Omonijo (2021) found that emotional support and practical assistance with domestic responsibilities significantly enhance lecturers' ability to manage competing demands. This kind of support network provides stability at home, which is crucial for achieving and maintaining WLB in high-demand professional environments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to gain a deep understanding of the challenges faced by private university lecturers in the Klang Valley concerning work-life balance (WLB). An inductive approach supported the identification of effective coping strategies used to manage professional and personal responsibilities. A qualitative design allowed the exploration of lived experiences in rich detail (Creswell, 2002), and the study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes subjective meaning-making and contextual understanding of human experiences.

Sampling Strategy

The study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to select participants who had relevant knowledge or lived experiences concerning WLB in academia. Inclusion criteria required participants to (i) be full-time lecturers or academic staff members, (ii) be employed at a private university located in the Klang Valley, and (iii) have a minimum of two years of academic teaching experience. Exclusion criteria included part-time or adjunct lecturers and those working in public universities.

Participants were drawn from four private universities in the Klang Valley. A total of seven lecturers participated in the study, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, marital status, academic rank, and years of service. The sample included both senior and junior lecturers, as well as those in leadership roles such as heads of programmes and deans, to ensure broad perspectives were represented.

Initial contact was made via WhatsApp, where potential participants were provided with an overview of the study's purpose and objectives. They were given an opportunity to ask questions and were required to provide written informed consent before participating. Interview times were then scheduled based on participant availability. Detailed profiles of each participant are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants Profile

Participants	Age	Gender	Current Position	Years of Service	Marital Status	Ways of Interview
1	48	Female	Senior Lecturer	24	Maried	Online
2	42	Male	Lecturer	18	Single	F2F
3	33	Female	Lecturer/ Counsellor	8	Single	F2F
4	42	Female	Lecturer	14	Single	F2F
5	41	Male	Senior Lecturer	2	Single	Online
6	45	Female	Head of Programme	20	Maried	Online
7	57	Male	Dean	57	Maried	Online

Source: Authors

Research Instrument Development

The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature on academic work-life balance, job stress, and coping mechanisms. The guide consisted of open-ended questions organized into three thematic sections: (1) challenges to achieving WLB, (2) strategies used to manage WLB, and (3) recommendations for institutional improvement. The guide was reviewed by two qualitative research experts to assess its clarity, content validity, and alignment with the study objectives. A pilot interview was conducted with one academic not included in the final sample, resulting in minor adjustments to phrasing and question order.

Data Collection

Data collection took place over a period of six weeks, from March to April 2025. A total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted, five online (via Zoom and Microsoft Teams) and two face-to-face. Each interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and was conducted in English. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Participants were again briefed at the start of each interview about the study objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and assurances of confidentiality. Data was transcribed using Turbo Scribe, followed by manual review to ensure transcription accuracy. Translations were also performed where necessary to maintain the original meaning of participant responses.

Data Analysis and Validation

Thematic analysis was employed following the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually by two researchers independently to ensure credibility. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before the interviews. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and their participation was voluntary. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study used the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) is a systematic approach to qualitative data analysis that involves comparing pieces of data (e.g., incidents, events, statements) continuously to identify patterns, themes, and relationships. Developed as part of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the method involves four iterative stages: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory. This process allows researchers to generate conceptual understandings grounded in the data itself, ensuring rigor and depth in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006).

Open Coding

In the open coding process, the opinions and insights of the participants were collected, and their views were recorded as explanations. All the descriptions provided by the participants were reviewed, and those with the most frequent repetitions during the interview sessions were identified and documented.

Table 2: Open Code

Open Coding		
Dual Role	High teaching load	Limited Administrative or Institutional Support
Student Engagement	Task Delegation	Emotional Fatigue, and Strained Relationships
Mentoring	Time Management Tech- niques	Self-Care Practices
Teaching preparation	Monetary Rewards and Non- Monetary Rewards	Boundary Setting
Meeting KPI	Flexible Work Policies	Unrealistic Career Goals
Research	Promotions and Titles	Service Reliability
Counselling	Recognition Through Pub- lic Platforms and Institu- tional Events	Community Service Expecta- tions
Volatile Time	Rigid Work Policies	Work-First Mentality
Budget constraints	Unrealistic Career Goals	Rigid Work Policies

Source: Authors

Axial Coding

Axial coding is the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding to establish connections between categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It focuses on identifying relationships between the categories and refining them to create a coherent understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

In this research, axial coding was used to explore the interconnections between the identified themes and sub-

themes from the seven interviews, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and coping strategies related to work-life balance.

Selective Coding

Selective coding involves refining and integrating categories to identify core themes and their relationships, leading to the development of a cohesive narrative or theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At this stage, researchers focus on the key categories that provide the most explanatory power for the phenomenon being studied.

Table 3 Proposed Themes and Corresponding Selective Codes

Axial Codes	Selective Codes
Multiple Task Professional Demands and Institutional Expectations Interpersonal Roles Struggle with time for Family	**Role Complexity**
Institutional and Cultural Expectations Conflict	**Work-Life Conflict**
Stress and workload Role Conflict and Anxiety Emotional Exhaustion and Burnout Work-Life Imbalance Technology Overload	**Mental and Health Issues**
Time and Task Management	**Time Management**
Role Segmentation Support Systems Self-Care and Stress Reduction	**Support System and Self-Care**
Flexible Work Practices Material Rewards Professional Recognition Career Development Opportunities Workplace Flexibility Social and Institutional Visibility	**Reward and Recognition**

Source (s): Authors

The researchers reviewed the categories developed during open coding to identify core themes that represented the essence of the challenges and strategies discussed by participants. Below are the explanations:

Theme 1: Role complexity

Lecturers described juggling multiple responsibilities teaching, research, mentorship, program coordination, and administrative duties often simultaneously. These overlapping tasks created cognitive strain and diluted their capacity for focused engagement.

"I'm not just teaching. I'm also coordinating MPU and Foundation programs... it feels like I'm working several jobs at once." — Participant 2

This theme highlights how the breadth of academic roles in private universities, driven by institutional demands, increases workload without proportional structural support. The expectation to perform across domains reflects systemic role inflation, a key contributor to burnout and dissatisfaction (Smallwood et al., 2021).

Theme 2: Workplace Conflict

Participants frequently noted a misalignment between institutional expectations and their personal well-being. Policies that emphasize profit or rankings often overlook lecturers' mental and emotional capacities.

"Top management prioritizes student enrollment and financial outcomes over staff welfare." Participant 3

Such conflict exacerbated emotional strain and reduced morale, confirming Saleem et al.'s (2021) assertion that value misalignment in workplaces contributes to internal stress and disengagement.

Theme 3: Mental and Health Issues

The psychological toll of academic pressures was evident. Lecturers reported fatigue, anxiety, and in some cases, clinical interventions.

"Every six months I see a psychiatrist for depression and anxiety. It's part of staying afloat." Participant 2

These accounts underscore that WLB challenges are not merely logistical but deeply affect lecturers' emotional health echoing WHO (2004) definitions of mental well-being as fundamental to sustainable productivity and life satisfaction.

Theme 4: Time Management

Although many adopted strategic time management techniques using planners, setting daily priorities, and segmenting tasks lecturers acknowledged that these were often reactive measures rather than solutions to structural overload.

"I start with my email and list out the day's tasks, but sometimes unexpected work just overrides everything." Participant 7

Time management alone, while helpful, cannot compensate for institutional inflexibility or excessive workload. Ghafar (2024) notes that successful time planning must be supported by organizational policies to be effective.

Theme 5: Support Systems and Self-Care

Strong peer and family support networks served as buffers against stress. Participants emphasized the importance of institutional initiatives such as counseling, workload distribution, and wellness programs.

"Sessions with work counselors and hiring more lecturers would really make a difference." Participant 5

These findings reinforce the need for multi-layered support emotional, professional, and systemic as key components in preserving WLB (NHS England, 2020).

Theme 6: Reward and Recognition

Recognition whether through promotion, praise, or performance-based leave—was seen as vital to sustaining motivation and morale.

"Being acknowledged as 'Best Lecturer' made me feel like my extra hours were worth it." Participant 6

This aligns with Hussain et al. (2019), who argue that non-monetary rewards play a pivotal role in reducing turnover and enhancing commitment among academic staff.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework
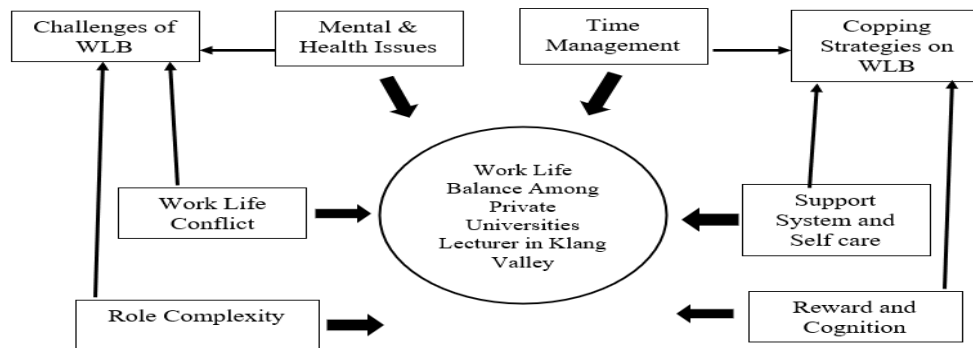
Source (s): Authors

Collectively, the findings reveal that WLB for lecturers is shaped by a dynamic interplay between institutional expectations and personal coping strategies. While individual practices such as time management and self-care are vital, they are insufficient in isolation. Sustainable balance requires organizational transformation, particularly in policy flexibility, role clarity, and meaningful recognition.

The themes further indicate that WLB is not just about hours worked, but about how those hours are structured, valued, and supported. Interventions must therefore address both structural reforms and individual empowerment, offering a holistic approach to improving lecturer well-being and institutional effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study provides critical insight into the multifaceted challenges of work-life balance (WLB) faced by private university lecturers in Klang Valley, Malaysia. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological lens, it captures the lived experiences of academics navigating institutional expectations, role complexity, mental health strain, and limited organizational support. The findings extend existing literature by illustrating how structural pressures specific to private higher education such as high teaching loads, performance-driven policies, and limited recognition create compounding barriers to achieving sustainable WLB.

A key contribution of this study lies in its context-specific focus, revealing how national educational imperatives and profit-oriented institutional cultures shape lecturers' experiences in ways often overlooked in broader WLB discourse. Additionally, the research emphasizes that while personal coping strategies such as time management and self-care are essential, they must be complemented by institutional reforms that prioritize employee well-being.

The implications are twofold: First, higher education leaders should urgently consider implementing flexible workload arrangements, expanding access to mental health resources, and embedding recognition systems that value both academic output and well-being. Second, policymakers should recognize the broader impact of lecturer well-being on educational quality, student outcomes, and institutional sustainability.

Future research should explore these themes across a broader sample and consider longitudinal designs to examine how WLB evolves over time. Comparative studies between public and private institutions, or across regions, would also yield valuable insights into the role of organizational culture in shaping WLB outcomes.

Ultimately, addressing work-life balance is not only a matter of individual adaptation but a strategic imperative for the long-term health of the higher education sector.

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