

Administrative Work and Institutional Challenges in State Universities: Executive Officers' Experiences through a Sustainable Development Goal Lens

O.V.L.P Anura¹, JMNR Jayasooriya¹, K.M.S Weerasinghe¹, W.D.T Tilakaratne²

University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka¹

Open university of Sri Lanka²

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ABSTRACT

Executive officers have an important responsibility when it comes to the management and smooth running of public institutions of higher education and ensuring their uninterrupted service. However, growing demands of administrative work, shortages of executives and other non-academic staff, and inequities of a structural nature within the professional hierarchy, have focused and heightened work dissatisfaction among these professionals. The purpose of this qualitative study, therefore, is to examine the phenomenon that is the dissatisfaction of executive officers arising from excessive workload, long working hours, and the absence of personnel and resources, as well as dissatisfaction relating to promotions, increments in pay, and other benefits. Using a specific research framework, executive officers with different administrative responsibilities from the public universities were selected, and a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The data were analyzed with a focus on themes to find patterns, and meanings that were comparable. The findings show intensive work, unpaid work, work after hours (both late at night and early morning), work for which pay does not correspond with the position held, and chronic shortages of work resources. The participants identified dissatisfaction that was associated with a lack of timely promotions, little increase in the salaries, inequities and differential treatment associated with newer or contracted staff with the same or lower qualifications. These factors were associated with emotional weariness, a lowered sense of commitment to the organization, motivation, the conflict between work and family, and a sense of loss of control. The findings, while viewed from the Sustainable Development Goals initiative, especially Goals 3, 8, 10, and 16, center on systemic issues of decent work and its absence, emotional and physical health, inequality, and institutional justice. The studies highlight the importance of instituting changes that include reforms of human resource policies, management of workloads, and the administrative restructuring which will help improve executive officers' governance and well-being.

Keywords: executive officers, work pressure, promotion dissatisfaction, negative work outcomes, psychological exhaustion, public universities, sustainable development goals, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Executive officers are, arguably, the most important staff members in the administrative and operational management of public sector and higher education institutions. They manage the personnel, finance, institutional compliance, security and health services, infrastructure, student services and academic support, and the overall functions of the institution. However, even though they are considered strategically positioned, they are, in fact, forgiven the attributes of heavy and prolonged work (overtime, without pay), work resource deficiencies, and career stagnation (no promotion, no career advancements).

Currently, the position of public universities executive officers is compounded by structural changes in their organizational environment, which have resulted in staff reductions, more stringent and broader norms and rules, and increasing institutional accountability. From the perspective of an executive officer, the sustained increase

in institutional expectations without a corresponding increase in the number and quality of staff, the level of remuneration, or the degree of organizational assistance is frustrating. There are numerous studies that conclusively state that work overload and prolonged hours of work result in psychological exhaustion and burnout that negatively impact levels of job satisfaction (e.g., Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Maslach et al., 2001).

Executive officers face further dissatisfaction due to delays in promotions, stagnant salary increases, and a perceived sense of inequity in reward systems. These officers are all academically qualified, holding graduate and postgraduate degrees, yet they describe a lack of flexibility and autonomy, along with a detriment in overall benefit packages in comparison to newer or contract-based staff, who, in contrast, are often compensated with higher salaries and allowances, and granted greater freedom. These situations are indicative of a lack of organizational justice and inadequate work environments.

From a global perspective, these are issues that pertain to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically goals 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, analyzing the lived experiences of executive officers is critical for supporting the sustainable governance of institutions and the overall wellbeing of employees. This qualitative study focuses on the work-related pressure, dissatisfaction with the prospects of promotions, and inadequate resources along with the long hours that executive officers in higher education institutions are experiencing.

Problem Description

Although public universities have significant institutional responsibilities, the workload and ongoing unpaid hours, assisted staff support, and additional resource scarcities on executives are chronic. While Promotion, Pay, and Benefit dissatisfaction are layered on top of these issues. Officers report psychological strain, work–family conflict, feelings of discrimination, and a sense of being trapped. Yet, these experiences are insufficiently documented, especially in relation to sustainable development and decent work qualitative frameworks.

Purpose of the Study

1. To investigate the pressures of work, including excessive workload, prolonged hours, insufficient support, and resource scarcity on executive officers within public higher education institutions.
2. To analyze executive officers' perceptions of dissatisfaction in relation to Promotion, Pay, Benefits, and inequities (especially in comparison to newly recruited and contractual staff).
3. To analyze the impact of sustained work pressure and career stagnation psychologically, professionally, and in relation to the family and to position these constructs within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Research Questions

1. What is the interpretation and lived experience of executive officers regarding the work pressures created by the workloads and working hours, the number of assistant staff, and the availability of resources in the field of public higher education?
2. What is the perception of executive officers regarding dissatisfaction related to promotion, salary increase, benefits, and inequitable distribution of workloads internally, especially in comparison to newer staff or contract staff with equal or fewer qualifications?
3. What are the effects of sustained work pressure and career stagnation on the psychological health, work motivation, and family-related outcomes of executive officers, and how are those effects related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workload, Long Working Hours, and Psychological Exhaustion

The JD-R model, explains how the absence of work resources and the presence of work pressures – in this case, workload and time pressure – will likely lead to burnout. (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) Working for too many hours a week has been connected to a variety of health-related problems in the literature, including anxiety, depression, and heart-related conditions (Kivimäki et al., 2015; Virtanen et al., 2012). Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, which is one of the main dimensions of the burnout phenomenon. This emotional exhaustion is frequent in administrators and managers. (Maslach et al., 2001)

The Effort-Reward Imbalance Theory and Job Promotion Dissatisfaction

According to the Effort-Reward Imbalance theory, if employees put an unreasonable amount of effort in and do not receive any meaningful rewards in return, the employees will be stressed and their health will decline (Siegrist, 1996). Delays in promotions, insufficient pay raises, and perceived discrimination in the workplace predict job and psychological dissatisfaction (Siegrist et al., 2004). In fairness in organizations leads to low trust and low commitment (Colquitt, 2001).

The Lack of Resources and the Overload of Roles

The absence of personnel, technical resources, and low quality of infrastructure leads to role overload and higher stress for the executive employees (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). When lower-level staff members are not sufficiently trained, senior officials have to do the extra work, which increases the tension and the burden (Allen et al., 2000).

The Consequences of Work-Family Conflict

The work-family conflict occurs when work interferes with the family (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Conflict of this type is of long duration and is the cause of problems in the marriage, low satisfaction with life, sleep disturbances, and a decline in mental health (Allen et al., 2000; Frone, 2003)

The Decent Work and the SDGs

The ILO states that decent work is the cornerstone of sustainable development and it includes fair pay, reasonable hours, and safe workplace (ILO, 2019). Unpaid overtime, unequal promotion opportunities and work conditions contrary to the SDGs undermine the sustainability of the institution (United Nations, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

For this research, the author carried out the study from the perspective of qualitative data, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews with executive officers of public higher education institutions. Since the goal was to obtain data from multiple levels of administration, the participants were chosen in this manner. The author examined the data through the lens of thematic analysis relating to the factors of dissatisfaction and well-being to the extent of the workload.

Prior to the collection of data, the author submitted her application for ethical clearance. The participants were informed of their rights and all measures were taken to ensure their privacy, confidentiality, and that the data were protected. Sensitive information was processed in such a manner that no specific individual could be identified.

Data Analysis

Recurring patterns of meaning and differing viewpoints were examined amongst the participants using thematic analysis. This technique assists in the systematic analysis of the lived experiences of the participants. In this case, it assists in understanding the pressures and discontent associated with the levels of work within the system. Merging the factors of dissatisfaction with the promotion and salary ranges helps in understanding the

complexities of the various elements within the organization. Data were coded and multiple themes were refined to describe the various structures and administrative organizational levels. Many of the executives face similar barriers throughout their careers and this analysis of professional pathways helps define the factors of motivation, well-being, and commitment. The themes articulate the understanding of barriers of work pressure and the associated discontent around career goals within administrative roles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Executive Officers' Experiences of Work Pressure (Code: EO-WP)

This section focuses on the narratives from the qualitative interviews that were conducted with executive officers from various organizational units. The participants possessed diverse seniority and tenure, which enabled the researchers to analyze the concurrence and divergence of participant experiences. The outcomes are outlined below.

Sub-theme 1.1: Growing Work Hours, Increased Duties, and Responsibilities (Code: EO-WP-ER)

Most interview participants identified an ever-increasing workload paired with the chronic expansion of roles and job descriptions provided to every executive officer. The interview participants stated that because of the gap in roles at the institution and the increases in administrative tasks, new duties would be assigned to executive officers and would become a part of their job descriptions. The interview participants stressed that they regularly worked long hours which included evenings and weekends and in some cases, participants were at the institution during all night hours.

Numerous participants indicated that even though they hold graduate and postgraduate degrees and possess impressive educational credentials, they still feel that they are highly under qualified in relation to younger, recently hired, academically oriented, or contract academic professionals. Participants noted that these younger employees, who in some instances, have the same or even lesser academic credentials stayed with the organization longer than they and benefited from the organization's system of economic rewards in the form of higher salaries, greater allowances, and more work autonomy. One participant expressed this age and qualification disparity stating, "We are academically qualified graduates and postgraduates, but new young recruits with the same or even fewer qualifications receive higher salaries and allowances and enjoy more freedom."

Executive officers described the imposition of stiff attendance regulations, such as timekeeping by fingerprinting, as one of the primary features of the organization's rigid control structures. In spite of this form of control, they indicated that they tend to work more than the control structures demand; most of them indicated that they routinely worked more than extra seven hours a day on advanced weekdays. A senior executive officer captures this phenomenon, stating, "Almost every day we work at least two to seven extra hours. Some days, even after going home, we continue working late at night or in the early morning."

To prevent the administrative lag that would accompany unmet deadlines, a number of executive officers described doing work that they characterized as beyond the call of duty by staying up late at night, or working early in the morning. These self-imposed time constraints and the consequences attached to them are interpreted as being crucial to preserving the organization's equilibrium and operational continuity.

Another respondent stated, "Some of us make sacrifices and work in the middle of the night or very early in the morning just to ensure everything gets done."

The problematic workload was exemplified by the staffing shortages. Participants noted that each executive officer manages over 600 files, which they described as almost three times the workload. Compared to other smaller universities, they noted even less prestigious institutions had more than one executive officer, while they each had more than 600 files to manage. "Even smaller universities have more executive officers than us, but each of us handles over 600 personnel files," said one participant.

Participants noted that even with the additional hours and deadlines, they would not be recognized, especially with the added stress from the deadlines. Executive officers stated, they do not get paid over time, and work more than the allotted two holiday claim days from the university, which are the only days they are permitted to claim work over the months. "We get nothing for extra working hours. Only two days per month can be claimed, but we work much more than that," stated one participant.

Participating members also vented their anger over the dwindling reductions in fringe benefits, including cuts in air travel and other allowances. The combination of no academic freedom, lack of recognition of overtime, and declining benefits added to the sentiments of being entrapped and discriminated against. As one of the executive officers put it, "We feel trapped and discriminated against."

Working under extreme pressure and the emotional drain caused by excessive workloads, uncompensated extra hours, and perceived inequities, as said by most participants, is one of the most important findings of this study, and it is in line with various theories of job demands. The findings suggest that the prolonged exposure to excessive workloads, extended hours, and diminished rewards is the main contributor to occupational stress, fatigue, and dissatisfaction.

Sub-theme 1.2: Time Pressure and Performance Expectations (Code: EO-WP-TPE)

Pressure at work increased due to both time constraints and expectations relating to task performance. Executive level employees described the need to work with time sensitive goals, urgent assignments, and the need to constantly change due to new policies. One senior officer commented, "The expectations are high and the time and resources given are limited, which creates constant pressure and often forces me to work longer."

This sub-theme illustrates the increase in stress due to performance driven workplace cultures with little to no support.

Dissatisfaction with Promotion Processes and Salary Increments (Code: EO-DPI)

Sub-theme 2.1: Promotion Pathways That Are Uncertain and Unduly Prolonged (Code: EO-DPI-DUP)

Dissatisfaction with promotion processes was expressed as a foremost concern. Pathways to promotion were described as obscure, extended, and unpredictable. Frustration was directed at the lengthy periods, even when the executive officers met the prerequisites. A participant recalled, "Promotions take years, and there is no clear explanation even after completing all requirements."

Such narratives speak to the concern of perceived procedural injustice, which causes trust in institutional processes to erode.

Sub-theme 2.2: Perceived Inequity and Favoritism (Code: EO-DPI-PIF)

Even distribution of promotion and increment opportunities was seen as bias and a lack of consideration for merit and experience. Participants recounted situations in which personal connections and arbitrary thoughts prevailed over merit and experience. An interviewee pointed out, "Hard work alone is not always enough; who you know also matters." Perceptions such as these contribute to demoralization and resonate with equity theory in which the perceived imbalance between effort and reward is greater than if no effort was provided.

Sub-theme 2.3: Inadequate Salary Increments and Cost of Living Pressures (Code: EO-DPI-ISI)

Salary increments do not seem to account for progressively worsening cost of living. Financial anxiety is compounded by delays in the implementation of salary increments. "Increments come late, and when they come, they barely match the cost of living, even though we put in extra hours regularly," said one of the executives.

This speaks to the more insidious, economic aspects of job dissatisfaction, connecting the insufficient salary increments to a lack of motivation and morale.

Negative Psychological and Professional Effects of Work Pressure and Career Dissatisfaction (Code: EO-PPID)

Sub-theme 3.1: Emotional Exhaustion and Increased Frustration (Code: EO-PPID-EERM)

Most participants articulated feelings of emotional exhaustion, frustration, and increased disillusionment. Work pressure, long hours, and no advancement career disengagement. One of the participants noted, “You start with enthusiasm, but over time, the pressure, extra hours, and lack of growth drain your energy.”

This sub-theme relates to burnout, mostly emotional exhaustion as a result of chronic workplace stress.

Sub-theme 3.2: Divestment of Organizational Commitment and Career Reflection (Code: EO-PPID-DOCC)

A few executive officers noted a divestment of organizational loyalty and the emergence of a possible career shift. Though not all aimed to leave, many exhibited some psychologically withdrawal behavior. One of them noted, “I still do my job, but the attachment to the organization is not the same anymore, especially after putting in so many extra hours without recognition.”

This attributed mental disengagement also referred to the long-term risks that organizations face when there is no resolution to work pressure and career dissatisfaction.

Organizational Support, Resource Constraints, and Structural Inequities (Code: EO-OSRSE)

Sub-theme 4.1: Insufficient Support and Skill Gaps of Assistant Staff (Code: EO-OSRSE-IAS)

Participants mentioned, as a consistent theme, the insufficient levels of assistant staff support given to tackle and negotiate the complexities and volumes of duties assigned. Executive officers mentioned the distribution of the assistant staff is inequitable, given the existing demands of the workload. In addition, staff who work under the supervision of the participants mentioned, and emphasized, the lack of procedural and technical knowledge that is current. Executives, therefore, had to take on additional tasks to compensate. One of the participants mentioned, “The workload is not supported by assistant staff as required. Many staff under us need proper workshops to upgrade their skills and technical knowledge.”

The absence of ongoing professional development activities directed towards subordinate staff increased the already existing pressure on executive officers, reinforcing the cycle of concentrating the managerial and operational tasks at the executive tier.

Sub-theme 4.2: Chronic Resource Constraints and Technological Limitations (Code: EO-OSRSE-CRT)

Participants mentioned scarcity of resources as a persistent and fundamental problem. Repeated concerns included a deficiency of office gear, antiquated apparatus, and restricted access to operational computers. One executive officer described the situation: “We are handling responsibilities with very limited resources. Even basic tools like computers are slow and outdated, which delays work and increases stress.”

With the imposition of large productivity expectations and strict deadlines on the additional administrative work, the scarcity of resources increases stress and lowers productivity.

Sub-theme 4.3: Misalignment of Workload with Cadre Categories (Code: EO-OSRSE-MWC)

Participants expressed strong dissatisfaction regarding workload allocation across executive cadres. They noted that Assistant Registrars carry out Deputy Registrars’ duties, with no comparable adjustment of the Assistant, Senior Assistant, and Deputy designations. This was viewed as promotional stagnation coupled with transfer complaints. One participant noted, “The workload is not aligned with cadre categories. Assistant registrars do the same workload as deputy registrars, but without recognition or career progression.”

This inequity was compounded by the pervasive feeling that there was a lack of justice and an increase in demotivation.

Sub-Theme 4.4: Sector-Wide Discrimination Across Executive Officer Categories (Code: EO-OSRSE-SWD)

Outside of administrative services, the participants stated that discrimination and unequal treatment spanned other categories of executive officers, specifically, Chief Security Officers, Works Engineers, Landscape Curators, Directors of Physical Education, Museum Curators, Farm Managers, and Chief Medical Officers. Regardless of the importance of their functions and the limited number of officers, participants sensed that there was systemic neglect when it came to promotions, recognition, and the distribution of resources. “This problem is not limited to one category; it affects many executive officers across the institution,” stated one participant.

Sub-Theme 4.5: Accumulated Stress from Unresolved Issues Over Time (Code: EO-OSRSE-ASL)

Executive officers noted that while they solve operational challenges that others face, there is no one to resolve their core issues—excessive workload, understaffing, lack of resources, and career stagnation. This lack of resolution to these challenges over time cause a build-up that ultimately manifests in stress and frustration. Someone stated, “We attend to everyone else’s problems, but our real problems are bigger, heavier, and have lasted for a very long time.”

This resulted in a combination of high levels of responsibility and low available resources which, in conjunction with the skills gaps of subordinate staff, and prolonged inaction from the institution, resulted in trouble for executive officers.

There is a need for systemic changes, such as adjusting staffs' cadres, implementing staffing capacity-building programs, optimizing the allocation of resources, and having fair and just policies on the personnel, as evidence suggests the need to change the root causes of the work pressures and dissatisfaction of the executive officers.

DISCUSSION

This study’s findings are best understood within the global sustainability and well-being frameworks, and in particular, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The reflections from the executive officers resonate with systemic issues around decent work, equitable institutions, health, and social well-being.

Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being Executive officers are exposed to physical and psychosocial health risks because of their emotionally intense, prolonged, and high-demand work with no recovery time. Narratives of the participants indicate considerable psychosocial distress attributable to their work, which in turn, points to a range of psychosocial stressors determined to be risks to positive mental health per SDG 3. The psychosocial health consequences of work coupled with the risk factors of stress and strain, because of the lack of recovery time, low pay and no recognition, are the potential consequences of stress-related disorders such as hypertension, anxiety, depression, and burnout. **SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth** SDG 8 promotes the ideal of equitable working conditions, just pay, and secure jobs. There are clear discrepancies between these folded up ideals and the lived realities of executive officers. Work conditions where overtimes are unpaid, promotion delays, absent pay increases, cuts to air travel, and rigid monitoring of attendance through fingerprints all contradict decent work. It is precisely these inequitable work benefits that are provided to executive officers in comparison to newly hired or contract staff that provide the basis for diminishing work dignity.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities Perceptions of discrimination and inequitable pay is the result of the inequality of opportunity in the presence of the same or fewer organizational level and job types. These imbalances worsen feelings of marginalization and being trapped for executive officers that have been in the position for a long period of time. These inequities relate to SDG 10 and more specifically, inequalities within institutions, and calls for inclusiveness and equity.

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions Effective and equitable promotion and personnel management are critical for building strong and just institutions. The unsystematic promotion, unrecognized overtime, and administrative overburdening are reported as indicators of insufficient institutional trust and governance. Administrative reforms consistent with SDG 16 would positively influence institutional integrity, employee trust, and sustained effectiveness.

Placing the work pressure and dissatisfaction of executive officers within the SDG framework, this study, captures the essence of these challenges as being beyond the individual or the organization, and intimately connected to the global imperative for sustainable development, human-centered institutions, and justice.

CONCLUSION

Negative systematic factors affecting the career satisfaction and psychological burden of executive officers in the public higher education sector are analyzed in this study. Executive officers are found to work in extremely resource-poor environments, with heavy and uncompensated work, and little to no subordinate staff support. Structural inequities, including unhurried and unclear promotion policies, little to no promotion salary increases, and need- and flex-job discrimination against new and contract staff, worsen the situation. Emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, diminished organizational commitment, and role over-involvement in family and personal life are negative outcomes of these psycho-social burdens. The negative psycho-social work conditions of executive officers signify broader issues of concern in the promotion of the SDGs, particularly Goals 3, 8, 10, and 16. From the perspective of the SDGs, issues of concern are decent work, psychological well-being, and inequality and justice in institutions. Addressing the psycho-social work conditions of executive officers demands systemic alteration of organizational structures, promotion policies, training of support staff, redistribution of adequate resources, and acknowledgment of informal work demands. Such changes are necessary to promote the well-being of executive officers and ensure the sustainability of public higher education institutions.

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