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Navigating disruption: Challenges and adaptive strategies and the implications for academic work-life balance in South African higher education

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Orientation: Although academics' work–life balance (WLB) challenges are well documented in well-resourced institutions, they remain underexplored in resource-constrained higher education contexts.

Research purpose: This article examines the nature of WLB challenges faced by academic staff in a resource-constrained higher educational institution in South Africa.

Motivation for the study: the is a need to examine WLB in South African higher education, where instability, resource constraints, disruptions, and intensified demands create underexplored Global South challenges.

Research design, approach and method: Seventeen academic staff members across multiple faculties at a South African public university participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling ensured representation across academic ranks and disciplinary areas. Data were analysed using iterative thematic analysis.

Main findings: The study found that academics face multi-level WLB challenges stemming from individual, interpersonal, and organisational constraints, including workload demands, limited institutional support, and misaligned expectations and resources, they use adaptive coping strategies to try and balance work and personal responsibilities.

Practical/managerial implications: Higher education institutions should strengthen support networks, implement flexible workload policies, and offer accessible, self-paced professional development.

Contribution/value-add: This study advances work-life integration literature by examining academics' challenges in resource-constrained higher education settings.

Keywords: higher education institution; work-life balance; academics; South Africa; role conflict; boundary management.

Introduction

A key component of an academic's professional identity is their work, yet balancing it with non-academic activities can be difficult. Harmonising research, teaching and personal life has become increasingly important. In the last two decades, the discourse on work-life balance (WLB) has witnessed profound changes in terms of social, demographic and workplace advancements which are affecting employee well-being. There is a variety of: (1) profound changes in the labour market, (2) modification of gender roles, (3) more contribution of women in the labour force, (4) augmented prevalence of dual-earner couples, (5) single parents in the workforce, (6) longer working hours, (7) 24/7 communication technology obscuring the lines between work and non-work and (8) increasing desire for the quality of life which are fuelling the need for WLB (Rashmi & Kataria 2022; Shabir, Khan & Gani 2020).

Because of the concurrent occurrence of these changes, people's obligations in their personal and professional lives have grown significantly, leading to an increase in 'imbalance' between work and life. Academics with excessive workloads frequently experience burnout and increased stress, which negatively affect their health and strain their relationships with family (Abraham et al. 2025; Verma et al. 2024). Academics are experiencing a growing difficulty known as 'work-work

balance', which refers to how higher education personnel manage mutually exclusive and simultaneous work demands. When examining the complexities of WLB, it is clear that the central issue is often a work-work imbalance (Johnson & Hlatshwayo 2025). Universities are realising that academics are under greater work-life conflict and with less control over their personal and professional obligations are typically less productive (Hwa 2021).

Academics are required to consistently succeed in grant acquisition, project management, research publication and impact demonstration (Elifneh, Wonda & Abbay 2025). They also have many 'invisible' responsibilities, such as reviewing for publishers and journals, editing journals or series, serving on national and international appointment committees, sitting on evaluation and research funding panels, mentoring, external examining and writing reports for government agencies. These activities, while often unappreciated and underappreciated, are important components of their workload (Griffin 2023).

For example, the European academic community has undergone restructuring, including corporatisation, casualisation, commercialisation, contractualism and compliance (Murray, Mgutshini & Mavundla 2024). These reforms have increased managerial control and market-driven practices in universities, reducing academic autonomy. They have also led to job insecurity, heavier administrative workloads and heightened pressure on academic staff. Similarly, South African universities have restructured through measures such as academic casualisation and performance management systems; research from two prominent South African institutions has shown that academics' job security has decreased and their workload has increased (Magiledzhi 2020).

Problem statement

Higher education in South Africa is characterised by structural transformation pressures, funding constraints, student activism, digital inequities and lingering post-pandemic shifts in work modalities (Aldirdiri 2024; Mwansa, Ngandu & Mkwambi 2025; Wolhuter 2023). Within this context, academics are required to maintain research productivity, teaching quality, community engagement and administrative participation despite recurrent disruption. While global scholarship highlights workload intensification in academia, less attention has been given to how academics in structurally volatile environments navigate these demands (Nyagope 2023). Previous research has examined issues such as job overload, burnout and role conflict among academics, highlighting their implications for employee well-being and job performance within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Kotecha, Geldenhuys & Ukpere 2014; Naidoo-Chetty, Du Plessis & Becker 2026). However, a large portion of this literature assumes that institutional environments are generally stable and do not adequately account for the complexities associated with persistent organisational disruption and resource constraints (Shange & Nyide 2025). This assumption overlooks the realities of HEIs operating within fundamentally disrupted and resource-constrained contexts. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how such institutional conditions exacerbate work-life conflicts among academics in systemic rather than episodic ways within the South African higher education context. This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) *What is the nature of the WLB challenges experienced by academics within a resource-constrained higher educational institution in South Africa?* and (2) *How can a contextually grounded understanding of WLB challenges among academics within a resource-constrained higher educational institution in South Africa be developed?*

Research objectives

The research objectives are:

- To understand the nature of WLB challenges experienced by academics within a resource-constrained higher educational institution in South Africa.
- To contribute a contextually grounded understanding of WLB challenges within a resource-constrained higher educational institution in South Africa.

Literature review

Stoica et al. (2025) are explicit that HEIs have evolved beyond their conventional functions to become important agents of social change and entrepreneurial universities. The university and its surroundings are well described by complex systems, which are dynamic, nonlinear and characterised by numerous sub-entities as well as numerous links or interconnections between them (Tsai et al. 2019).

Defining work-life balance

Work-life balance is the way a worker balances their personal and professional responsibilities (Bartlett et al. 2021). The word 'work' in WLB refers to tasks that require mental or physical skills to do. According to Clarke, Koch and Hill (2004), the notion uses the word 'balance' to provide equilibrium between the spheres of life and work. Work-life balance has evolved over time into a broad concept that encompasses appropriate viewpoints and balances work and life. This phrase is typically used in organisations while discussing employee well-being (Hariri et al. 2024; Thilagavathy & Geetha 2021). Concisely, WLB has the capacity to efficiently balance work and non-work commitments, making sure that neither is overburdened while attempting to maintain acceptable levels of fulfilment (Yildirim & Senel 2023).

In an effort to understand the complexity of the term WLB, numerous researchers (Eby et al. 2005; Frone, Russell & Cooper 1992; Irfan, Darmawan & Leonel da Costa 2023; Michel et al. 2011; Nippert-Eng 2016; Shirmohammadi, Au & Beigi 2022; Shockley et al. 2018) conducted empirical research focusing on concepts like work-family conflict, also known as positive work-family enrichment, also known as work-family spillover or work-family-enhancement (Grzywacz & Marks 2000).

Work-life balance discourse has also examined concepts such as work-family facilitation and work-family balance (Grzywacz & Marks 2000).

Work-life imbalance and the shift to work integration

In the parlance of Shockley et al. (2017), imbalance is defined as an unequal allocation of time, energy, and resources between work-related activities and non-work domains like leisure, family and personal well-being. It represents a situation in which people feel stressed, unsatisfied and overburdened by their perceived inability to fulfil their many responsibilities and roles (Cao, Che Hassan & Omar 2025; Kossek, Su & Wu 2020). Work-life imbalance, which often has a negative impact on people's general well-being, health and quality of life, is perhaps best described as a lack of integration and balance between work and personal life (Boakye, Asravor & Essuman 2023).

Work-life integration is the natural transition from 'WLB'. Work-Life Integration has gradually replaced the concept of 'WLB'. Organisations are acknowledging the benefits of remote work, which include increased productivity, reduced commuting times and better work-life integration (Jensen et al. 2020). The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of flexible schedules and remote work (Mahardiko & Wahyuningtyas, 2025). Although there are many advantages to telecommuting, there are also some problems related to work-home conflict. People may find it difficult to stop working if there are no boundaries and proper self-control, which could result in extended workdays (Crawford 2022).

Work-life challenges of academics in higher education institutions

In recent years, corporatisation has altered higher education from collegial, shared governance systems to managerial, business-oriented institutions with centralised decision-making (Alibasic, Atkinson & Pelcher 2023). This change has increased administrative control and duties, decreased academic autonomy, and made it more difficult for academics to balance their professional and personal lives. An increasing administrative bureaucracy has been the driving force behind the marketisation of traditionally public university operations (Thapa et al. 2022).

The shift from core institutional funding to competitive funding mechanisms has intensified audit cultures, increasing workload pressures and competitiveness among academics (Lacovoiu 2020). According to studies conducted at South African universities, audit culture pressures academics to prioritise quantifiable research outputs over teaching quality, creating conflicts between academic identity and institutional needs (Dlamini & Dlamini 2024; Hlatshwayo 2024; Mtshweni 2020). Academics must demonstrate a growing number of successful grant applications, project management, publication of outputs and impact demonstrations, often while engaging in the full complement of teaching and administration (Baker, Starck & Rising 2025; Quickfall & Wood 2025). It is interesting to note that academics also frequently perform unseen duties, such as reviewing for publishers and journals, editing journals or series, serving on appointment committees, serving on evaluation and assessment panels for research funders, mentoring, conducting external examinations, writing reports for government agencies and more (Hamblin, Barker & Arghode 2020). All these activities are labour-intensive but frequently underpaid or unpaid (Griffin 2023). However, universities benefit most from these fields in terms of status and awards (Ishra & Smyth 2013). Most senior academics are expected to be involved in these activities, imposing a burden on junior academics in terms of the heavy load of undergraduate teaching, while also being expected to develop a research profile (Murray et al. 2024).

A careful balance between expanding student access, addressing the high dropout rate and easing the burden on higher education resources is being called for in South African universities (Meyer & Schreiber 2024). Academics in South African institutions, for instance, must perform more work with fewer resources, which presents a difficult balancing act (Habib 2016). According to the 2024 Global Academic Mental Health Study, burnout is 40% more common among academic employees than in other industries. Academics starting their careers and those from underprivileged schools are the most vulnerable categories (Marck et al. 2024).

It has become clear that digital tiredness and technostress are becoming an occupational problem in the wake of the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2024 recommendations for workplace mental health (Crompton & Burke 2023). According to the WHO's 2024 report and Roberts and Lee's 2023 study, prolonged digital engagement has raised concerns about 'screen saturation syndrome', with 78% of higher education personnel reporting technostress symptoms like an inability to disconnect from digital devices and chronic exposure to information overload. The reports indicate that academics state that the frequency with which technologically enabled work invades their personal time has increased since the pandemic (Wang & Yao 2025).

Theoretical framework

The study was informed by two theories: (1) Border and Boundary Theory and (2) Role conflict. This study uses Boundary and Border Theory and Role conflict theory to frame its investigation of academics' work-life issues. Boundary and Border Theory explain how academics negotiate and regulate the boundaries between professional and personal spheres, emphasising tactics for segmentation and integration (Kamboj & Anthonysamy 2023; Rainoldi, Buhalis & Ladkin 2022). Role conflict theory adds to this by demonstrating how competing demands between work and personal roles cause stress, pressure and conflicts that impair well-being and performance (Anglin et al. 2022; Teh, Yong & Lin 2014). Together, these theories provide a lens for examining the interaction between institutional

expectations and individual coping strategies in resource-constrained higher education settings.

Research methods and design

This section provides an overview of the research methodology adopted in this study.

Context of study and design

This qualitative study formed part of a broader grounded theory investigation into adaptive compromise of work and life among academics working within institutionally disrupted and resource-constrained higher education contexts. The current research focuses on the subset of data pertaining to WLB challenges, even though the overall study sought to provide a grounded theoretical explanation of how academics deal with systemic instability. A deep, processual knowledge of how institutional conditions exacerbate role conflict, demand-resource mismatch and boundary erosion was made possible by the grounded theory approach.

Sampling

The study used purposive sampling and theoretical sampling. These approaches were appropriate because they support the development of a theory grounded in participants' lived experiences within a constructivist grounded theory framework. Purposive sampling was used to identify the first academic with the longest-serving years within the institution. They were also identified based on their depth of knowledge and experience. Participants were selected across six faculties within a South African institution and academic ranks to ensure variation in disciplinary contexts, career stages and role responsibilities. Theoretical sampling was used to collect and analyse data to clarify and develop new categories pertaining to work-life stress. Subsequent interviews were directed by concepts that needed more explanation rather than choosing participants at random. Theoretical sampling continued until conceptual categories were sufficiently developed and no substantially new properties of WLB challenges emerged.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The criterion involved starting with academics with the most years of service inside the faculty for rich data. This was established across all six faculties by contacting faculty administrators to identify their longest-serving academic. One faculty had the most extensive tenure (12 years), providing the deepest institutional memory and longitudinal perspective on WLB evolution at the university. The second criterion was to pick academics with at least 3 years of expertise, so that participants could discuss their experiences both during and after the pandemic.

Participants

The study interviewed 17 academics across different academic ranks, including professors, associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers. Because of this diversity, the study was able to record WLB experiences across a range of academic career stages. When combined, these viewpoints provide a thorough grasp of the difficulties associated with WLB at all academic levels.

Data collection

An interview guide was used to conduct interviews with academics to collect data from critical incidents. Face-to-face interviews were selected because they allowed the researcher to delve deeper into participants' lived experiences in rigorous academic settings, clarify questions and explore new themes. Following the advice of Strauss and Corbin (1990), all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed immediately to ensure that no important information was missed. This procedure guaranteed thorough data collection while acknowledging that the significance of some findings frequently doesn't become apparent until much later in the analysis phase.

Data analysis

The grounded theory study followed the data analysis procedures proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Creswell (1998) describes Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory technique as a systematic multistage procedure that includes open coding, axial coding and selective coding. This approach is intrinsically iterative, allowing data collection and analysis to occur continuously in a cyclical process, with insights from ongoing analysis informing future data collection. The goal of coding is to organise and segment data into meaningful units to improve understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry (Tie, Birks & Francis 2019). Open coding in this process involves recognising, labelling and classifying important concepts that arise from the data. To gain a deeper understanding of the patterns and connections in the data, axial coding examined the links between these categories. These categories were then combined and refined through selective coding to create a cohesive theoretical explanation of the main phenomenon. The study's explanatory power is strengthened by the ongoing interaction between data collection and analysis, which ensures that the developing categories and properties remain firmly grounded in empirical evidence.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Ethics Committee (No. HSSREC/00004303/2022).

Results

This study explored the multi-layered challenges experienced by academics at a South African HEI and shows that WLB difficulties are shaped by interrelated individual, interpersonal and organisational pressures. Rather than reflecting only personal coping limitations, the findings suggest that academics' work-life challenges are embedded in institutional structures, relational demands and disruptive

environmental conditions. The study demonstrates that academics negotiated WLB in a context marked by role overload, limited institutional support, resource constraints and instability. The first level of challenges depicts *individual and interpersonal level challenges*, which are evident in three different types of broad categories. Table 1 outlines the properties, sub-properties and dimensions associated with WLB challenges, with particular emphasis on professional development conflicts, behavioural role tensions and strain-based pressures. Its structure highlights both the nature and the complexity of these conflicts as they emerge within the academic work environment.

These categories collectively demonstrate how academics attempted to seek professional development, fulfil institutional responsibilities and manage personal commitments in conditions marked by pressure, limited time and emotional strain. This is consistent with the job demands-resources approach, which demonstrates that high job demands such as publication pressure, technology-mediated instruction and work-life balancing pressures exacerbate strain when not balanced by suitable organisational and personal resources (Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis 2021).

Table 1 indicates these two-level broad categories of individual and interpersonal related challenges; their respective properties, sub-properties and dimensions are presented in Table 1, followed by details of each.

Broad category of individual and interpersonal level related challenges

The individual and interpersonal level related challenges in terms of conflict revealed three properties, which include: (1) nature of the challenge of individual professional development and work conflict, (2) grappling with consequence of behaviour-based conflict and (3) grappling with the consequences of strain-based conflict, as depicted in Table 1.

Nature of the challenge of individual professional development and work conflict

The study found that academics strongly valued self-paced professional development because it gave them control over what, when and how they learnt through activities such as webinars, online courses and academic reading. However, restricted time and rigid routines impeded their ability to engage in such self-directed learning.

TABLE 1: Broad category, property, sub-property and dimensions of individual and interpersonal related conflicts.

Properties	Sub-property	Dimensions	
Nature of the challenge of individual professional development and work conflict	Degree of control of professional development	High value of Self-paced professional development	Low value of structured professional development
	Schedule conflict	Disrupts the pre-planned academic activities	Orderly schedule accommodating professional development
Grappling with consequence of behaviour-based conflict	Nature of behavioural clash between professional role expectations and the behaviours exhibited in the workplace	In-formal role conflict	Out-of-formal role conflict
Grappling with consequences of strain- based conflict	Complexity arising from and origin of incompatible role pressures	Few and simple	Many and complex

Participant (P) 2 demonstrated the high priority put on self-paced and flexible modes of academic development while minimising disruption to family responsibilities and routines, as seen below:

> 'There are times when I do non-accredited courses to develop myself mindful of my other roles such as student's appointments and consultations. The flexible office hours system allows students to book appointments conveniently. This way of working served a dual purpose. It enhanced my accessibility to students seeking guidance while giving me the flexibility to manage personal commitments and self-development. During my spare time I sometimes take MOOC courses as well, which are usually free.' (P2)

Some participants were clear about the high value of structured but external professional development as a platform for building supportive networks and social capital useful in disruptive times, despite the perceived low value of structured professional development and the lack of self-control by academics in the context of heavy workloads. In keeping with this, P7 said:

> 'I am one those who view most of the workshops as disrupting one's work as you struggle with heavy workload. I recently attended a workshop on research methodology which was really brilliant. The workshop had a timetable spelling out clearly time and the activities that were being done and by whom. This was a good and well-structured professional development for me as ATLAS.ti is enabling me to map complex relationships between concepts and produce conceptual diagrams for a research paper that I am busy writing. I also made new friends and academics from other institutions whom I am likely to work together as external examiners or co-authors. It's hard these days to find external examiners as the fees are depressing.' (P7)

Academics' productivity and well-being are negatively affected when work-life imbalance is intensified by institutional pressures and limited control over working conditions, even where staff attempt to manage competing demands proactively (Shange & Nyide 2025). The findings therefore indicate that personal agency in professional development is shaped by the broader work environment within which academics operate. The findings further indicate that internal tensions between personal and professional demands gave rise to behaviour-based conflict.

Grappling with consequences of behaviour-based conflict

Internal conflicts between personal and professional demands resulted in behaviour-based conflict, as excessive teaching, research and administrative workloads blurred work-life boundaries. Limited institutional support, resources and communication exacerbated behavioural conflict, leading to stress, dissatisfaction and decreased motivation among academics. For example, P5 mentioned:

> 'Last month, my child had a medical emergency, and I had to scramble to find money for the hospital bills. The medical aid simply did not cover all the costs, and I had to borrow from friends. We pay so much for the medical aid, and yet it's not enough. Working so hard but having to struggle like this is not good. It is very stressful, and I am not sure if it makes sense to me to work extra hard in future. I can tell you that a very unsupportive working environment or the strain from unresolved conflicts can impair work performance, creativity, and commitment to the institution.' (P5)

Academic well-being reports of ongoing stress, burnout and insufficient institutional support among university staff support the claim that behaviour-based conflict develops within larger organisational cultures, potentially normalising overwork while limiting opportunities for recovery and support (Abraham et al. 2025). These findings confirm role conflict theory, which states that individuals' ability to perform successfully across numerous roles is diminished by incompatible demands across life domains (Su & Jiang 2023). They also resonate with Wang et al. (2021), who found that rising expectations for academic performance intensified work-family role conflict among university staff.

Grappling with consequences of strain-based conflict

Participants were cognisant of a variety of strain-based conflicts, primarily in the form of inter-role conflict, where the stress, fatigue or tension from one role diminishes an individual's effectiveness in another role. Participant 7 reflected as follows:

> 'I was extremely busy with some committee work for an award in the humanities and social sciences at a time I was expected to rest mentally, socially and emotionally. I had to read and review many books, and this was after the assessment of the second semester. The deadline was February 1st for this committee work. I never rested properly as this role of adjudicator conflicted with my entire festive season, messed up my opportunity to interact with friends, recharge and recover after a heavy semester and ended up coming back to academic work already exhausted. These extra roles are good but then you do not have quality social time with family and have also to face the consequences of exhaustion and struggling to perform at one`s best in a new academic year.' (P7)

Participant 1 demonstrated the difficulty of managing role overload, insufficient time and the lack of a specific method for deliberately and equally dividing 24 h:

> 'There is pressure to have an adequate teaching load, graduate postgraduate students and publish journal articles but also engage in impactful community engagement as well. For academics, this can mean balancing the demands of research, teaching, administration, and community engagement, where fulfilling one responsibility means neglecting another. The strain or conflict arises not from a lack of clear information regarding one's job duties or the criteria for performance evaluation but rather time to do these three. Expectations from supervisors or the university create tension for academics as they cannot prioritise one and not the other as they say both are necessary.' (P1)

In many cases, fulfilling one responsibility meant neglecting another, thereby reinforcing a cycle of exhaustion and reduced well-being. The findings extend the argument on role conflict by showing that strain was not limited to daily job demands, but also affected academics' ability to recover, maintain relationships, and sustain personal well-being over time. This is consistent with systematic review evidence indicating that workload intensity, emotional demands and reduced institutional resources are recurring drivers of burnout in higher education, while supportive work environments and social support function as important protective factors (Cao et al. 2025).

Organisational-level challenges

At the organisational level, participants were explicit that there were five different types of organisation-level-related challenges. These included an increasing misalignment between effort and compensation, pressure to satisfy competitive academic norms, inadequate workload policies,

TABLE 2: Broad category, property, sub-property and dimensions of organisational-level related challenges faced by academics in disruptive times.

Category	Property	Sub-property	Dimension	
Challenge of growing misalignment between workload and compensation	Nature of misaligned workload and financial worth	Degree of alignment between workload and value	Overworked with high workload and financially undervalued	Well-paid with satisfied workload and financially valued
Pressure to meet competitive academic norms	Nature of competitive culture	Consequences of competitive culture	Employee excellence	Employee frustration and burnout and satisfaction
Inadequacy of workload policy to accommodate realities of academics	Nature of workload	Focus	High teaching load	Low teaching load
			Overemphasis on research productivity and publication	Low emphasis on research productivity and publication
Challenge of providing holistic resources and support for academic work and well-being	Type of resources	Individual and personal resources	Effective, sustainable	Ineffective, unsustainable
		Interpersonal and social resources	Highly valuable	Less valuable
		Institutional and policy resources	Weak	Strong
		Infrastructure resources-related challenge	Heightening Work intensity	Lowering work intensity
Dealing with VUCA events	Type of VUCA events	Nature of effect of event on academic work-life	Peaceful, disruptive strike	Violent, disruptive strike
	Navigating unstable environment	Complexity of campus-specific instability	High	Low
		Complexity of national-level university instability	High	Low

VUCA, volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous.

a lack of holistic resources and support for academic work and well-being, and exposure to volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous circumstances. Table 2 summarises the findings in terms of categories, property, sub-property and dimensions.

Challenge of growing misalignment between workload and compensation

Nature of misaligned workload and financial worth

The growing misalignment between workload and compensation highlighted disparities between academics' work demands and their financial rewards. Participants expanded on two areas of misalignment, namely: (1) job overload and (2) inadequate financial recompense for professors at the institution. Participant 2 focused on how heavy workload deteriorated personal relationships and triggered the search for alternative employment opportunities:

> 'Management is not alive to the challenges faced by academics in disruptive times. The massification of higher education has caused several challenges, including lecturer burnout. My personal relationship is suffering, I am stressed, and loneliness is getting to me because I am constantly working. I have started looking for alternative employment and will move as soon as an adequate opportunity presents itself. The financial reward for all these sacrifices is not motivating and everything does not seem to balance in my work, life and relationships because of giving too much where one is getting just little.' (P2)

Pressure to meet competitive academic norms

Nature and consequences of competitive culture

The second organisational-level challenge that academics confronted during disruptive times was the need to meet competitive academic norms, driven by expectations to publish, present research, and maintain institutional performance requirements. This competitive culture created mixed results, including both excellence and frustration, low job satisfaction, and burnout. Participant 2 provided an example of the competitive atmosphere at the institution and its effects on individual academics in terms of publication standards:

> 'The saying "publish or perish" in academia can be quite challenging, especially for new academics. This pressure often forces them to feel like they must constantly produce research or risk becoming irrelevant. However, there is little guidance on how to balance this with personal and social life, leading to isolation in the workplace. Academics often find themselves trapped in their offices for long hours, trying to meet the demands of research, which is one of the items we are measured on in our individual performance appraisals [*IPAs*]. This is very frustrating, especially for young academics who are struggling to do research and publish. For the experienced researchers, they have to publish more and some actually burn out chasing the publication targets.' (P2)

For instance, P7 demonstrated that the institution was forced to accept large class sizes to meet enrolment targets, while the quality of instruction provided by overworked and underappreciated staff declined under competitive pressure to meet academic norms:

> 'I do not know by name many of the students that I teach as the classes are very large as I said. I am talking about large classes with over 200 students. The large numbers of students are good as a metric in terms of student enrollment but not quality that comes from such cohort. As a lecturer, you are overworked and underpaid. The work overload culture creates high levels of stress and pressure for staff. You can imagine the quality of interactions in class with such a large number of students. I have always believed that managing classes of 150 students or more requires an assistant marker to help at least with the workload.' (P7)

This imbalance affected not only professional satisfaction but also personal relationships, psychological well-being and intentions to seek alternative employment. These findings are consistent with Amalia et al. (2019), who stress the difficulty academics have in distinguishing between their personal and professional lives, and Nuzhat and Ahmad (2021), who describe WLB as a nonlinear and continuing negotiation. The current data also reveal that academics were not maintaining a steady equilibrium but were constantly adapting to conflicting and fluctuating demands.

Inadequacy of workload policy to accommodate realities of academics

The third organisational-level challenge related to the inadequacy of workload policies to reflect the actual realities faced by academics, including heavy teaching loads, supervision demands and administrative responsibilities. An academic who is identified as P2 explicitly said that he was unaware of the university's work-life regulations:

> 'I am not aware of any such interventions or workload policy. The way work is distributed is not to realise fairness or balance teaching, research, and service. No, the well-being of the academics is said but the practices do not show that it matters. Productivity seems to come first, and I cannot say that the process of distributing workload is transparent. There is a lot of work needed on the workload practices we have here. There is poor work allocation as those with already heavy loads are given more. There is little regard for an employee's existing work or experience as long as the seniors do not like that work. As a result the poor work allocation overwhelms others who feel they are helpless and have little or lack of control or say on their duties and work allocation processes.' (P2)

Participant 11 had the following to add regarding the inadequacy of the workload policy and the impediment it posed to the career advancement of some academics at the institution:

> 'I joined in 2017, and since then, I've only used my accumulated leave days once. I haven't been able to use more of those days because of my responsibilities. For example, I'm supposed to take leave now, but I can't because students are on recess and preparing to write supplementary exams. I also cannot improve my research and get promoted as an academic. Work is unreasonable and disrespect work-life balance.' (P11)

In this study, the findings on the challenges faced by academics revealed a variety of strategies such as:

> 'I try to create separation between work and family but in my heart, I know that the separation will simply delay me and fail me to meet the deadline. I try to avoid checking work emails or taking calls outside of my work hours by turning off notifications, but I am sometimes scared that I may miss very important alerts. My point is that I do not have a particular technique to clearly and regularly distribute my hours equally between work, sleep and family to have a balanced schedule. Time is fluid so I stretch one activity, but it is always at the expense of the other, mainly family and exercises for personal care.' (P10)

Challenge of providing holistic resources and support for academic work and well-being

The fourth organisational-level challenge was the lack of comprehensive support for academics' WLB, including limited resources for mental, physical, social and financial well-being, flexible work arrangements and leadership support. This category highlighted the types of resources available and their role in supporting academics' efforts to manage work-life demands. Participant 13 highlighted that while self-motivation, self-efficacy and boundary management supported academics' efforts to achieve WLB, these personal resources were often unsustainable:

> 'The ability to set and maintain clear boundaries between work and personal life is key but entails mentally "switching off" from work concerns when at home and proactively communicating availability to colleagues and family which is not always easy. The ability to establish and maintain clear psychological and physical divisions between work and home life, such as not checking work emails after hours or having designated work-free areas is effective if there is discipline. However, academic work requires internal drive for perfection and tying self-worth to external achievements can make it hard to say no to demands or prioritise self-care all the time.' (P13)

Participant 15 elaborated on the significance of resilience for WLB but also emphasised the limitation of resilience as a resource because of how academics were engaging in unhealthy coping mechanisms:

> 'As an academic I demonstrate resilience capacity to adapt to stress and recover quickly from excessive work in a semester. It seems that say no to work may be misinterpreted as falling short as an academic. Academics just keep going through difficult situations and this leads to negative outcomes like social isolation, emotional instability and even physical health issues. It is very bad that constant perseverance is seen as a strength but often prevents one from healing and moving forward.' (P15).

In this regard, Gilbert, Foulk and Bono (2017) support the present findings by showing that institutional support influences both work engagement and turnover intentions. This suggests that institutional support is central not only to academics' well-being, but also to sustaining morale, engagement and retention in disruptive times.

Interpersonal and social resources used by the academics at the institution to deal with challenges included communication, capability to recognise when support is needed and conflict resolution skills. Participant 8 had the following to say:

> 'Open and professional communication is valuable in setting and reinforcing boundaries with colleagues and students so that they have informed expectations. Poor communication challenges managers and family members to negotiate expectations and find solutions. Conflict skills are a capability for addressing conflicts effectively, reducing stress and fostering harmony in both work and personal domains but are often constrained by emotions due to exhaustions by people. The capability to actively request help or information from appropriate sources without fear of appearing weak or incompetent negatively affect how academics use valuable support.' (P8)

Participant 1, demonstrated that leaders were unable to serve as role models of WLB, primarily because of excessive workload and a range of administrative duties at the institution:

> 'As the Head of Department [*HOD*] … there is a variety of administrative duties which involve addressing staff challenges, providing support to junior lecturers in managing their workload effectively and dealing with financial issues in the department. I have modules that I teach second year and Honours students … I participate in various committees. While I value research and community engagement, I recognise the importance of effectively managing the administrative aspects of teaching to ensure a holistic approach to academia but at times it becomes overwhelming.' (P1)

The study also revealed the challenge of infrastructure resources, especially in terms of power cuts and load-shedding, and protests that destroyed infrastructure on campus and affected the life and work of students and academics at the institution. Participant 3 captured his views as follows:

> 'Load-shedding in 2020 exemplifies what we term 'cascading disruption', where single infrastructure failures trigger multiple, interconnected challenges. When power fails, internet connectivity ceases, online teaching becomes impossible, schedules collapse, and academics must reorganise both work and family commitments. I faced a significant increase in workload as it must cover missed classes, reschedule exams, catch up on administrative tasks, and manage ongoing research. This intensifies my work and puts immense pressure on their time and energy.' (P3)

> 'There are too many power cuts which affect lecturing of large classes, meetings, and student activities so on. With so many duties that I have already it is impossible to say I will finish my work for the day, many at such a time. I take work home and wake up early hours to try and push more work, especially urgent matters like mark submission, marking and so forth. When there is power cut the disruption is serious as it affects all these different activities.' (P7)

Dealing with volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous events

The last challenge faced by academics at the institution was managing volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments that impacted efforts to establish WLB. These issues arose from both peaceful and violent protests, which affected both academic and personal life. Academics were also expected to function in unstable circumstances defined by campus-specific and national-level

institutional instability. Participant 7 had the following to say regarding the disruptive effect of campus-specific VUCA events on the sense of security:

> 'In 2017 there was a violent strike by students at the institution. This strike was violent as students were met by a very violent and fit team of private security personnel, not the usual police. The campus was hostile, and all members of staff worked from home as they had no choice.' (P7)

Participant 10 also discussed how certain groups of university stakeholders intentionally used both violent and nonviolent protest to draw attention to particular grievances in an unstable environment:

> 'In 2018 all the university staff, the cleaners, the admin staff, the academic staff were striking for a salary increment. The strike took about eight weeks, and it even affected the academic calendar. Students couldn't finish writing the mid-year exams and when they came back from vacation, we were still striking. Students were unhappy and staged their own peaceful demonstration to say that they wanted to go back to classes and finish the exams.' (P10)

> 'Protest about accommodation and National Student Financial Aid Scheme [*NSFAS*] issues frequently occurred over inadequate and expensive student accommodation, as well as delays or shortfalls in funding from the NSFAS Students were carrying sticks or any weapon to intimidate those who did not want to participate in the protest. The violent students were disrupting classes so that they could mobilise students to take part in the protest. The students also wanted to make sure that students that were still attending classes, because they had the money to pay for their fees, could not continue to do so.' (P5)

Protests, strikes, unstable infrastructure and larger national issues in higher education all influenced the VUCA institutional conditions in which academics worked in. Disruptions, whether peaceful or violent, had a major impact on psychological safety, educational continuity and academic calendars. The organisational-level findings imply that the challenges academics have in balancing their work and personal lives are structurally caused by institutional policies, performance expectations, resource limitations and environmental instability (Shange & Nyide 2025).

The study further demonstrated that academics' perceptions of work pressure were strongly influenced by institutional competitiveness. The 'publish or perish' mentality was exacerbated by performance cultures motivated by publishing targets, rankings and expectations for research productivity. Academics expressed ongoing pressure to maintain their scholarly visibility while juggling their growing teaching commitments, especially in massified higher education settings with sizeable class numbers (Ross 2025; Villarino et al. 2025).

Overall, the findings show that academics' WLB challenges are best understood as structurally embedded and relationally mediated rather than as isolated personal struggles. Sustainable WLB in higher education therefore requires more than individual resilience; it depends on institutional systems that recognise the complexity of academic labour, provide meaningful support, and respond effectively to the realities of disruptive times.

Discussion

Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this study. Firstly, in-depth interviews with the academics served as the study's primary data collection method. Because of this, the results relied on participants' individual narratives and on what they chose to share during the interview. To address this limitation, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews and follow-up interactions to clarify responses, probe emerging issues and gain a richer contextual understanding of participants' experiences. Future research may use diverse data sources to enrich our understanding of the challenges of WLB in resource-constrained universities in South Africa.

Secondly, the study relied on individuals' recollections of long-term work-life experiences, which could have resulted in recall bias. This restriction was addressed by comparing many accounts from academics across various jobs to achieve data saturation and uncover consistent patterns over time.

Lastly, the study was done with a small number of participants in a specific institutional environment; the results cannot be generalised to all HEIs.

Conclusion

Finally, the study found that academics face multiple challenges at the individual, interpersonal and organisational levels, which significantly impact their WLB. Heavy workloads, a misalignment of expectations and compensation, and insufficient institutional support exacerbated strain, fatigue and role conflict. Academics demonstrated adaptive coping mechanisms, such as self-control, boundary management and adaptable professional development, despite these demands. The findings demonstrate the importance of organisational structures and policies in promoting or impeding academic success and well-being. More adaptable institutional support structures that acknowledge the intricate realities of modern academic work are needed to address these issues.

Future research should include a larger sample of resource-constrained universities in South Africa to provide broader insight into the unique forms of resilience grounded in academic human capital and effective work-life integration in the digital era.

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Competing interests

The authors, Noluthando Mbangeleli; Cecile Gerwel Proches and MacDonald Kanyangale, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Noluthando Mbangeleli: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Cecile Gerwel Proches: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. MacDonald Kanyangale: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants and are available from the corresponding author, Noluthando Mbangeleli ,upon reasonable request.

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