

Work–life balance in the higher education sector: A systematic literature review



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Orientation: Academics in higher education (HE) are struggling to strike a balance between work and family life because of excessive work demands, as well as family life pressures.

Research purpose: The aim of the study was to provide a comprehensive synthesis and critical evaluation of the literature that currently exists regarding academics' work–life balance (WLB) within higher education institutions, as well as providing an evidence-based state of knowledge on the subject, major themes, contradictions or research gaps.

Motivation for the study: The motivation for this study stems from the growing emphasis on WLB in HE, where faculty members face distinct challenges and demands.

Research approach/design and method: The literature review focused on the literature in HE through reviewed articles from 2000 to 2025. The review selected a sample of 112 journal articles from databases that included Web of Science, Directory of Open Access Journals, ScienceDirect, Education Resources Information Centre, PsycINFO and Scopus that focused on faculty or academics in HE.

Main findings: The results of this review are summarised in four thematic clusters: the antecedents of imbalance, the psychological and organisational consequences, the intervention strategies and the contextual moderators. The majority of the studies were based in Western countries and fewer from the Global South.

Practical/managerial implications: Higher education institutions need to consider moving away from generic policies to provide tailored interventions. They should consider developing flexible work arrangements that are co-designed with employees, and create robust, context-sensitive institutional support systems.

Contribution/value-add: An integrated conceptual framework that outlines the interconnection of Border, Conflict, and Zedeck and Mosier's model, and contemporary drivers of imbalance. Comparative studies and the design of WLB frameworks for academics working in developing economies are necessary.

Keywords: work–life balance; institutional support; employee well-being; academic staff; higher education; turnover; systematic review.

Introduction

Work–life balance (WLB) issues are becoming more common in all higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world. These challenges are exacerbated by the increasing burden of work being placed on academics who are expected to fulfil multiple responsibilities in teaching, research, administrative duties and community service (Kossek & Lee, 2017). Academic work was previously defined by some level of autonomy and time-based boundaries; however, the current environment is now defined by pressure and a lack of boundaries (Griffin, 2022). Individual harm and organisational cost occur when there is an imbalance in either domain, for example, stress, burnout, decreased job satisfaction, among others (Mamun & Hasan, 2017; Watermark, 2023).

Three major changes have taken place in academia over the last 20 years, which have created a perfect storm for WLB issues. First of all, with the shift towards neoliberalism in the way public sector entities are managed, HEIs have been run differently, adopting some of the principles of New Public Management (NPM). New public management refers to the adoption of private sector business practices, such as performance-based measures and audit cultures, into the management of public sector entities (Abraham, 2017). This has led to the emergence of a new type of HEI, referred to as the 'entrepreneurial university', which operates similar to a business,

commodifies knowledge production, pursues self-funding strategies and enhances financial autonomy (Baporikar, 2022). As demonstrated by Desideri et al. (2024), different universities in Europe reflect NPM in various ways. However, the result is always an increased pressure to perform among faculty. Grisard (2023) further shows how the workload models used in the entrepreneurial university construct academics as output-oriented entrepreneurs. This creates a general expectation among academics to increase the amount of time they spend at work, not simply as a matter of personal preference, but as part of an inherent aspect of an institutional culture. This, therefore, diminishes the boundaries of both work and personal life (Syahrir & Falaah, 2021). The effects of this trend towards corporatisation have diminished the concept of professional autonomy and changed the nature of academia, such that personal time is secondary to productivity (Blair-Loy, 2003; Rincy & Panchanatham, 2014).

In addition to providing increased accessibility and flexibility in using educational resources, the rise of digital technology has also created psychological and temporal barriers that are increasingly blurring the lines between work and home for many families. While research based on the 2018 survey of US faculty illustrates many of these aspects, it also highlights the pressures caused by this blurring of boundaries. For example, even though 74% of those who had taught an online class stated that they developed important pedagogical skills, including critical thinking and how to engage students using various forms of media, the survey states that 78% of faculty do not believe their institutions consider the time required to teach online classes when determining workload; 81% of faculty do not believe that their institution provides either monetary or non-monetary incentives for faculty to teach online classes (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018).

The pervasive use of email, virtual learning systems and cloud-based tools has promoted expectations of continuous availability and rapid feedback (Lesia, 2023). Technostress is a direct challenge to WLB by way of techno-invasion. This is a method in which an employee's use of ICT technology enters their personal domain and creates a sense of being 'on call' constantly at home so they are never able to psychologically disconnect from work during non-working hours (Bencsik & Juhász, 2023). UK research data recently confirmed these findings and showed 55% of teaching staff in HE report constant Wi-Fi connectivity issues. Furthermore, 47% of the teaching staff face challenges accessing necessary systems, and 37% of teaching staff report having no private and conducive workspace to complete academic tasks (Jisc, 2025). As digital technologies allow work to permeate family spaces and times traditionally reserved for personal life, the permeability of the work-home boundary intensifies. Clark's (2000) Border Theory offers a valuable analytical framework for understanding this phenomenon. When domain boundaries become highly flexible and permeable, as is the case with digital connectivity, individuals experience greater challenges maintaining psychological separation between roles. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic

dramatically accelerated this trend by normalising remote work while at the same time complicating boundary management. A survey by Eurofound (2024) shows an increase in the number of respondents (30%) reporting work-family conflict. This aligns with the pandemic's peak, reversing the improvements witnessed between 2022 and 2023. This was buttressed by the United States survey, where 51% of employees reported experiencing burnout during the last 12 months. This represents a 15 percentage point increase in the number of employees reporting burnout since 2023. While many of the employees cited a variety of reasons for this experience, a majority, 63% mentioned mental or emotional stress, and another significant majority, 54%, attributed it to working long hours (Grant Thornton, 2024). This acceleration represents not only a temporary disruption but also a structural transformation of academic work, in which digital connectivity has become institutionalised as an expectation (Morales-Spier, 2024).

A significant challenge exists regarding applying Western-based WLB theories to non-Western contexts (Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). Although globalisation has created links among countries' economies such as South Africa through a global economy, scholars have argued that the direct use of Western-based WLB models will generally fail because of the unique constraints present in each non-Western country (Chandra, 2012). One of the greatest obstacles is the differences in their socio-economic environment. For example, in areas experiencing high levels of unemployment and frequent layoffs, WLB may be viewed as less important and therefore not a priority, which is a stark contrast to the emphasis on wellness in Westernised nations (Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). The number of WLB studies has increased over the last few years; however, much of what is known about WLB remains fragmented and not well integrated into a cohesive body of knowledge. Several systematic reviews have synthesised the literature in this area and described some of the major barriers to achieving balance. These reviews, while identifying many important stressors associated with HE teachers (gender inequality, excessive workload, etc.) typically identify each stressor individually without integrating them into a larger framework. Franco et al. (2021), for example, found that most studies are focused on a specific activity area (most commonly teaching) and have limited comparative studies examining WLB across different academic programmes with significant gaps in the study of engineering and information technology programmes. In addition, the literature concerning WLB is plagued by conceptual ambiguity concerning how to define 'work-life balance'. As a result, it is challenging to differentiate WLB from other closely related constructs, such as health and well-being. Future research will need to address these gaps by not only describing the challenges associated with WLB but also by synthesising findings across disciplinary boundaries and developing theoretically robust frameworks which consider the interconnectedness of institutional policies, career stages and individual characteristics.

Although there is considerable and growing interest in WLB in the academic literature, several critical synthesis gaps still exist. Firstly, although several empirical studies have examined the WLB aspect, most systematic reviews provide primarily descriptive summaries of challenges and potential solutions. It appears that most studies are still descriptive, rather than developing a comprehensive theory that provides a full understanding of the processes, which are behind WLB (Verma et al., 2024). Further still, Verma et al. (2024) were able to identify the prevalent issues that have been studied regarding WLB globally. For example, job stress, flexibility in work arrangements and productivity, and map them onto the predominant patterns of research clusters and trends. However it did not develop a comprehensive theoretical framework to unify these concepts.

There is a need for a theoretical integration of the various components to go from simply listing variables to explaining their interactive effects. The call for theoretical integration has been expressed by authors in recent WLB literature. In a bibliometric study of 2717 WLB publications, Verma et al. (2024) stated that 'the field is fragmented, with little theoretical explanation of how individual, organisational, and societal factors interact to determine work-life balance outcomes', and recommended that future research 'should prioritise the development of integrated theoretical models that can explain the interplay of multiple levels of interaction'.

Secondly, the existing evidence, although rich, is biased towards Western countries, for example, the US, UK and Australia. Academic staff well-being is shaped by contextual factors in addition to what has been found in previous researches. This is because of the differences in cultural, economic and institutional contexts of academic staff in South Africa compared to other Western countries (Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024).

Thirdly, although the post-COVID-19 transition to hybrid and remote work may represent a turning point for academic practice, few systematic syntheses have evaluated its long-term implications for WLB norms, burnout rates and institutional policy responses. In a global study on academic staff from 11 nations through the pandemic, Leal Filho et al. (2022) found that the rapid transition to distance learning created significant disruptions for academic staff as they experienced increased workloads, mental health issues and difficulty in separating work and family obligations. While their research captured these immediate effects of the pandemic, it highlighted future-oriented questions such as whether the knowledge gained from the pandemic, specifically with respect to remote work and flexible work arrangements (FWAs), would be used to create long-lasting practices or quickly abandoned once a preference to resume normal pre-pandemic practices was again established (Leal Filho et al., 2022). Thereby leaving HE leaders without evidence-based advice for post-pandemic work practices. These findings suggest that despite increasing recognition of COVID-19's transformative potential, there remains an area of significant under-researched importance requiring scholarly focus.

This systematic review sought to fill the identified gaps by answering the following integrated research question: How has empirical research from 2000 to 2025 conceptualised, studied and proposed solutions to WLB among academics, and what are the critical theoretical, methodological and contextual limitations and future directions of this area of study? To respond to the above research question, this review has four specific objectives: (1) to synthesise the findings of previous studies into a cohesive thematic structure identifying the antecedents, consequences, intervention options and moderating variables of WLB; (2) to critically assess the methodological practices and quality of previous studies on WLB; (3) to incorporate the key theories of WLB that is, Border Theory, Spillover, and Conflict into a single comprehensive explanatory model of the modern academic experience; and (4) to outline a targeted agenda for future research and evidence-based practice focused on understudied regions and populations. By completing these objectives, the review served to go beyond the description of the existing literature to provide a critical and integrative analysis that will facilitate both the development of WLB theory and the practical design of more equitable and sustainable academic work environments.

Work-life balance theoretical frameworks

To understand how academics manage their WLB, there is a need for a combination of theories that may represent the multilevel characteristics of modern HE. Four theories were used to provide a solid basis for understanding the WLB issues for academics. The first is the work-life conflict theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), the second is Clark's (2000) Border Theory, the third is the work-family relationship models developed by Zedeck and Mosier (1990) and extended by Guest (2002), and the fourth is Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory.

These theories were selected based on their ability to explain the structural, psychological and resource-based aspects of WLB, which are particularly relevant to academics. Additional theories such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and work-family enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) were also considered, although the latter two theories basically deal with the positive outcomes associated with participating in multiple roles and the design of jobs. Therefore, do not specifically address the boundary dynamics and resource conflicts identified in the reviewed literature.

In recent years, the study of work-family interface has expanded beyond a focus on the negative nexus between work and family roles towards a more comprehensive work-life orientation (Tavassoli & Sunyer, 2025). This development in work-family research has resulted from several theoretical criticisms made of the early work-family conflict models, such as those by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985). Initially, work-family conflict models viewed the work and family domains as mutually exclusive and therefore assumed that they were inherently incompatible. The early studies about

work-family roles focused on the negative side of the work and family interface, particularly in terms of the conflict associated with working and being a family member. This proposition was represented most clearly by Greenhaus and Beutel's (1985) seminal work on work-family conflict. There is an increasing recognition among researchers that conflict represents only one possible outcome for individuals who are actively engaging in work and family roles. Building upon this growing body of research, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) suggested that while conflict may occur as a result of participating in multiple roles, it is not the only outcome. They proposed the concept of enrichment or positive outcomes between work and family roles. They also provided evidence that the transfer of resources, skills and positive emotions from one role to another can contribute to enhance functioning in both domains. Since then, the positive perspective has been widely accepted, and researchers have continued to investigate how the resources, skills and positive affect that develop through participation in one role, can be transferred to positively impact the other role. Conversely, although research on conflict has been active for decades and continues to thrive, contemporary conflict research has begun to focus on specific dimensions of conflict, including its bidirectionality. For example, work-to-family versus family-to-work. Whether conflict occurs based on strain, that is, psychological exhaustion or based on time, that is, lack of time available for one domain. In addition to how the forms and consequences of conflict vary by gender and the composition of the household (Kobayashi et al., 2025).

The acceptance of the limitations of conflict models led to the expansion of the work-family domain to include a more inclusive concept, WLB. This development acknowledges that employees may have multiple roles outside of family. For example, leisure activities, volunteer service, personal development and caregiving responsibilities for non-family members (Guest, 2002; Kelliher et al., 2019). Research on boundary management styles has expanded Clark's (2000) Border Theory. Ashforth et al. (2000) introduced an important distinction between individuals who prefer to segment versus integrate work and non-work domains. Kreiner (2006) furthered this distinction by providing measures of boundary management preference and boundary management. In recent years, the literature has established that boundary management results are affected by an employee's preferences alignment with a company's support for managing the work-life boundary (Chen et al., 2009). The literature also establishes that employees use different strategies for managing work-life boundary as they experience it (Kreiner et al., 2009). As individuals manage the ever-increasing boundary permeability of digital technologies, individual differences in boundary management style influence the degree to which technological permeability impacts well-being outcomes.

A more recent framework that has received considerable empirical support in occupational health psychology is the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R model

posits that job demands, that is, components of work that require significant effort, deplete employees' resources. Whereas job resources, that is, components of work that facilitate goal attainment and personal growth, promote employee engagement. In the academic context, the JD-R model suggests that job demands, for example, heavy teaching load, high expectations for publication output and administrative load contribute to employee burnout. Whereas job resources, such as collegial support and autonomy, moderate against burnout. Although the JD-R model has advantages related to saving resources, it is less analytically particular about the boundary aspects through which work invades non-work domains, a central theme of this review, compared to the integrated framework proposed here.

Enrichment processes are a key component of Work-family enrichment theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), a shift from deficit-based to growth-based conceptualisations of being involved in multiple roles. Resource transfer is the process by which employees generate new resources, skills, perspectives, flexibility and social networks in one role that enhance performance or affects in another role. Wayne et al. (2007) extended this framework by distinguishing between enrichment, that is, resource transfer that directly improves performance and facilitation, that is resource transfer that facilitates system functioning more broadly. Carlson et al. (2009) provided an important extension to the body of knowledge regarding work-family balance by establishing that work-family balance is a distinct theoretical construct both conceptually and empirically from the constructs of work-family conflict and work-family enrichment. Utilising a conceptualisation of balance that was theoretically based using Grzywacz and Carlson's (2007) definition they demonstrated that balance accounted for unique variance in job satisfaction, organisational commitment, family satisfaction, family performance and family functioning over and above the variance that was explained by conflict and enrichment. These findings indicate that balance is a separate component of the work-family interface, which should be separately studied in both research and practice.

Overall, the movement from conflict to enrichment perspectives in WLB research represents a larger transition in WLB research. Early research on WLB implicitly positioned work as the source of the problem and family as the source of the solution, work invaded family, and family was invaded. Ten Brummelhuis (2024) views the work-home interface as a system, which includes positive and negative work-family experiences. This is why there is an imperative for researchers to consider the variety of roles and conditions that are now present in today's workforce. This transformation is especially important for understanding academic work, as academics invest identity and motivation in their work, creating the potential for work to be both demanding and highly fulfilling. Recent reviews of WLB research demonstrate that the field has matured significantly over the last 20 years. The article develops an integrative theoretical framework for

understanding WLB in academia. This analysis is situated within the broader theoretical context of work–life research that has undergone significant changes since the foundational studies.

Defining work–life balance

The progression in definitions from conflict and segmentation to integration and to a more holistic perspective of well-being is reflective of broader societal, technological and workplace changes and will be important in understanding the unique challenges academics experience.

The first era, from the 1980s to the 1990s, was primarily focused on managing conflict and segmenting roles. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) and Kossek and Ozeki (1998) both define WLB as an individual's ability to manage or balance competing demands, thus viewing work and family as two distinct areas of one's life competing for finite resources. These authors were reflecting the then-dominant conflict theory of the time and the industrial era views of work with clear time-based and spatial boundaries, an era that was fast becoming out of date for academics.

In the current era, post-2010, the definitions continue to evolve further and include more of the elements of well-being, resilience and digital integration. For example, Maertz et al. (2019) and Brough et al. (2020) have all included physical and mental health, resilience, flexibility and autonomy as examples of the desired outcomes of WLB. Furthermore, Malik (2023) emphasises the need for stable resource allocations, that is, time, energy and attention across all aspects of one's life. These developments reflect a response to the increasing pressure of work in the knowledge economy (Abraham, 2017). In addition, the growth of wellness discourse and the ubiquity of digital tools in all aspects of daily life are trends that are particularly pronounced in the always-on environment of academia, as observed by Malik (2023).

Thus, for this systematic review, we employ an integrated operational definition: *Work–life balance in higher education refers to the sustainable and value-congruent integration of academic work with other life aspects, through the utilisation of individual boundary management strategies and institutional support to promote overall well-being.* This revised definition is directly used to inform the analysis in the review and guides the synthesis of empirical research findings regarding how WLB is measured, experienced and sought to be improved within the increasingly complex and changing environment of higher education (HE). After establishing the development and implications of definitions for WLB, the next section outlines the systematic methodology employed to identify, select and synthesise empirical literature that addresses these issues.

Research design

Methodology

The systematic literature review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews

and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA, 2020) statement (Page et al., 2021), so that methodological rigour, transparency and replicability were assured (see Figure 1).

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020 flow diagram

The following review protocol, before searching, was prepared to outline objectives, eligibility criteria and an analytic framework for the search, as is recommended to limit potential researcher bias in the search process.

Eligibility criteria

Criteria were defined to identify the most applicable and rigorous studies that investigated the review's objectives and, therefore, are relevant.

Inclusion criteria

We included the studies that satisfied the following criteria:

- Peer-reviewed empirical studies that used qualitative, quantitative or mixed method designs.
- Primary focus on academic staff, that is, faculty members, lecturers, professors and instructors in postsecondary or tertiary institutions.
- Examination of WLB, work–family conflict, work–life integration or similar constructs as a main variable.
- Published in English, between 01 January 2000 and 31 March 2025.

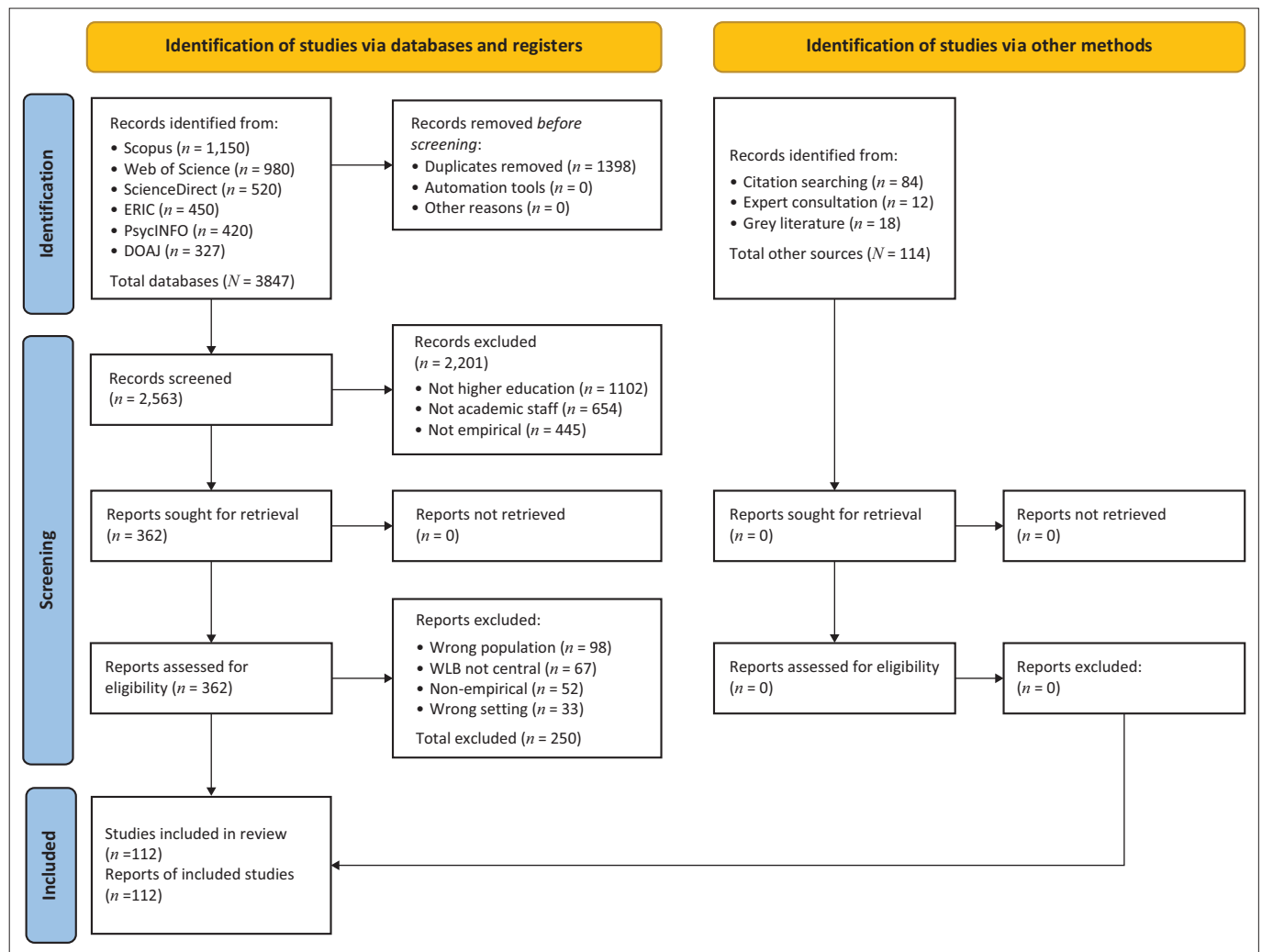
Exclusion criteria

The following studies were excluded:

- Studies that examine professionals in other sectors, such as, corporate, healthcare, elementary and/or secondary education, and/or only focus on non-academic university staff, such as administrative staff.
- Non-empirical publications, such as conceptual pieces, editorial pieces/opinion pieces/editorial pieces/literature reviews that do not include original data.
- Dissertations/theses/conference proceedings/book chapters, to ensure a consistent level of peer review for the studies.
- Studies for which the full-text cannot be accessed via institutional subscription or interlibrary loan.

Information sources and search strategy

Systematic searches using a broad search strategy were conducted in six main electronic databases in the last week of March 2026. The multiterm, multifield method utilised here was intended to address the concern that studies focused on aspects such as workload, burnout, time pressure or faculty stress but did not use the phrase 'work–life balance' would inadvertently be left out of the analysis. For example, include studies that analyse the relationship between a lecturer's workload and their level of emotional exhaustion, which are also related to WLB and could have



Source: Adopted from Page, M.J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P.M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T.C., Mulrow, C.D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J.M., Akl, E.A., Brennan, S.E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J.M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M.M., Li, T., Loder, E.W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., McGuinness, L.A., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>

WLB, work-life balance.

FIGURE 1: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020 flow diagram.

been found using the component term(s), regardless of whether or not the study itself utilises the WLB phrase. The inclusion of burnout, emotional exhaustion, job stress and well-being provides an adequate measure of the extent to which research regarding the psychological effects of work-life imbalance has been addressed. While workload, working hours and time pressure provide an adequate means to identify studies addressing the antecedent conditions of WLB. A sensitivity check was performed using a test group of 20 previously identified relevant studies utilising prior knowledge and recommendations from subject matter experts to determine if the search strategy was effective in retrieving these studies. The results showed that each of the 20 studies was correctly identified using the search strategy and thus demonstrates that the strategy was effective in identifying the relevant literature.

Database-specific search modifications were recorded to allow future reproduction. For the Scopus database, the TITLE-ABS-KEY field code was used; the Web of Science

database used the TS field code (which searches title, abstract, author keywords, and Keywords Plus); the Science Direct database made use of title-abstract-keywords, but searches were also made of the full text of articles for each of the component terms as the platform allows; for the Directories of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) database, searches were made of article abstracts and keywords. A standard search in ERIC searches all fields for title, authors, sources, descriptors, and abstracts. Controlled terms from the ERIC Thesaurus are used within the descriptor field as well to describe the content of each record. It is the 'descriptor' field in particular, because the descriptors are terms from the ERIC Thesaurus that are used to describe the content of an ERIC record. The search field options for the PsycINFO database were used and can vary depending on the search platform, that is, Ovid and EBSCOhost. However, the most common search criteria include the title, abstract and key concepts.

In addition to database searching, complementary search methods were used to minimise the possibility of missing

relevant studies. Backward citation searching, also known as snowballing, was used to identify references cited in the bibliographies of the studies selected after full-text screening. Forward citation searching was completed utilising both Scopus and Google Scholar to identify studies that cite the included articles. Finally, consultation with three subject matter experts was completed to determine if there were any additional studies that met the inclusion criteria. The combined use of a broad database search and supplemental search methods to maximise sensitivity while limiting specificity represents a best practice for conducting systematic reviews, as observed in the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021) and to address observed limitations in searching for complex, multifaceted constructs such as WLB.

Study selection process

The methodology to select the study was carefully developed so as to eliminate bias and to allow for reproducible identification of relevant research literature. After conducting the database searches, all search results were exported into Zotero reference management software to merge and remove duplicates. From a total of 3847 references identified across all databases, a total of 2563 references remained after removing duplicates and were screened for inclusion in the study. Blinded screening of the title and abstract of each reference was completed using the Rayyan platform. The screening process had two stages:

Stage 1: Title and abstract screening

Two researchers independently examined the title and abstract of each reference to determine whether it met the eligibility criteria of the study. To evaluate the level of inter-rater reliability in the screening process, a pilot screening of 100 references was conducted, and a Cohen's Kappa value of 0.87 was obtained, which indicated an extremely high level of agreement among the raters. References were retained if they: (1) focused on faculty in HE; (2) focused on WLB or similar constructs that is, workload, stress, burnout, well-being; and (3) reported empirical data. In total, 2201 references were eliminated based on the title and abstract screening and 362 references were selected for full-text review.

Stage 2: Full-text review

All references that passed the first stage of screening were accessed in their entirety and independently assessed by two researchers to determine whether they met the eligibility criteria of the study. Systematic reasons for elimination of references were documented using a predefined taxonomy of exclusions: (1) incorrect population, for example, non-faculty staff, primary and secondary teachers; (2) incorrect setting, such as corporate, healthcare; (3) non-empirical, for example, conceptual, editorial, review articles; (4) WLB was not a central variable in the study; (5) full-text not available; and (6) duplicate publication. Disagreements regarding the

inclusion or exclusion of references among reviewers were resolved either through structured discussions among reviewers or through consultation with a third reviewer. Following the full-text review, 250 references were eliminated, and 112 references were deemed to meet all inclusion criteria of the study.

This process is illustrated in detail in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (see Figure 1). The final sample of 112 studies represents the most complete and representative sample of empirical research on WLB in HE published between January 2000 and March 2025.

The methodology used to gather the evidence described in this study is based on a comprehensive systematic search of six electronic databases that was undertaken to identify research published since 2000. This approach was used to ensure the extensive coverage of existing literature in relation to WLB in HE; to enable an assessment of the extent to which the themes discussed have been researched over time; and to facilitate an analysis of how changes such as academic work and HE policy have impacted upon the nature of WLB in this sector. The use of a systematic search strategy also facilitated the achievement of greater objectivity in identifying relevant studies than might have been achieved through less formal approaches to literature review, such as those based solely on expert opinion or unstructured web searches.

The six databases searched

To establish an inclusive and systematic assessment of evidence from existing literature, the following 6 electronic databases were accessed:

- Scopus, which provides access to a wide range of journals across the social sciences, education and management disciplines.
- The Web of Science, which is another large and multidisciplinary database covering many areas of academic research.
- ScienceDirect, which provides online full-text access to scientific and technical literature published by Elsevier and other leading publishers in the social sciences.
- Education Resources Information Centre, a specialist education database provided by the U.S. Department of Education that covers the literature of education and educational technology.
- Directories of Open Access Journals, a database of open access journals and books that provides access to a wider body of research than can be accessed via commercial databases alone.
- PsycINFO, a large and highly selective database of literature in psychology and related disciplines. It provides a wealth of information about the psychological dimensions of WLB, and how academic work can affect well-being.

These six databases were selected because they offer complementary coverage of relevant disciplines. Together

they allow for a comprehensive search of the literature. For example, while Scopus and Web of Science provide broad multidisciplinary coverage, ERIC provides a specialist focus on the literature of education and educational technology. Similarly, DOAJ provides access to a wider body of research usually not available on commercial databases, particularly in respect of research from countries of the Global South. Finally, PsycINFO provides a wealth of information about the psychological dimensions of WLB and how academic work can affect well-being.

All six databases were searched for studies published between January 2000 and March 2025. This decision to include studies from 25 years was made for several reasons. Firstly, it allowed the inclusion of some of the first studies of academic work conditions and the first studies of the application of Border theory (Clark, 2000) in the context of WLB. Secondly, it allowed for an analysis of how the WLB debate has evolved, including the influence of the emergence of new technologies (Kinman & Jones, 2008), and of the introduction of market-based reforms into HE systems (see Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Finally, it ensured that studies that had been produced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic could be included in the review.

Each of the six databases was searched using a unique combination of keywords and Boolean operators. The search strategies were developed iteratively, initially using a small number of databases and then refining them based on the results obtained.

Search strategy development

We recognised that studies on WLB in academia may not always use 'work-life balance' terms explicitly. Therefore, we devised a search strategy that is able to identify literature on related constructs from different disciplines. In order to conduct the search, we used all three of the database fields for Title, Abstract and Keywords and also performed subject heading searches using databases with controlled vocabularies (ERIC Thesaurus, PsycINFO Thesaurus, and MeSH headings as appropriate). We iteratively tested and refined our Boolean search strings throughout the pilot testing process. We organised the search into three conceptual blocks:

- Block 1: Work-Life Balance and related constructs ('work-life balance' OR 'work-family balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR 'work-life integration' OR 'work-nonwork balance' OR 'work-home conflict' OR 'work-personal life' OR 'work-family interface' OR 'work-family spillover' OR 'work-family enrichment' OR 'work-family facilitation')
- Block 2: Component and outcome terms (workload* OR 'job demand' OR 'time pressure' OR 'working hour' OR 'work hour' OR overtime OR burnout OR 'emotional exhaustion' OR 'job stress' OR 'occupational stress' OR 'faculty stress' OR 'academic stress' OR well-being OR wellbeing OR 'mental health' OR 'psychological distress' OR 'job satisfaction' OR 'turnover intention*' OR 'intention to leave')
- Block 3: Population and setting terms ('higher education' OR universit* OR academ* OR college* OR 'tertiary education' OR 'post-secondary education') AND (faculty OR lecturer* OR professor* OR 'academic staff' OR instructor* OR scholar* OR researcher* OR 'teaching staff')

Database-Specific Search Strings:

Scopus (Title-Abs-Key):

TITLE-ABS-KEY(('work-life balance' OR 'work-family balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR 'work-life integration' OR 'work-nonwork balance' OR 'work-home conflict' OR 'work-family spillover' OR 'work-family enrichment') OR (('workload' OR 'job demand' OR 'time pressure' OR 'working hour' OR 'burnout' OR 'emotional exhaustion' OR 'job stress' OR 'faculty stress' OR 'well-being') AND ('academ' OR 'faculty' OR 'higher education')))) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(('higher education' OR universit OR academ* OR college) AND (faculty OR lecturer OR professor* OR 'academic staff' OR instructor*))

Web of Science (Topic field, searches Title, Abstract, Author Keywords, Keywords Plus):

TS=((('work-life balance' OR 'work-family balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR 'work-life integration' OR 'work-nonwork balance' OR 'work-home conflict' OR 'work-family spillover' OR 'work-family enrichment') OR (('workload' OR 'job demand' OR 'time pressure' OR 'working hour' OR 'burnout' OR 'emotional exhaustion' OR 'job stress' OR 'faculty stress' OR 'well-being') AND (academ* OR faculty OR 'higher education')))) AND TS=('higher education' OR universit* OR academ* OR college) AND TS=(faculty OR lecturer OR professor* OR 'academic staff' OR instructor*)

ERIC (via EBSCOhost):

(DE 'Work Life Balance' OR DE 'Family Work Relationship' OR TI ('work-life balance' OR 'work-family balance' OR 'work-family conflict') OR AB ('work-life balance' OR 'work-family balance' OR 'work-family conflict')) OR (TI (workload* OR burnout OR 'job stress') AND AB (faculty OR academic OR university)) AND (DE 'College Faculty' OR DE 'Teacher Burnout' OR DE 'Faculty Workload' OR TI (faculty OR lecturer* OR professor) OR AB (faculty OR lecturer OR professor*))

PsycINFO (via Ovid):

exp Work-Life Balance/ OR exp Family Work Conflict/ OR exp Occupational Stress/ OR exp Teacher Burnout/ OR (('work-life balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR workload* OR burnout).ti,ab.) AND (exp Higher Education/ OR (universit* OR academ* OR college).ti,ab.) AND (exp College Teachers/ OR (faculty OR lecturer OR professor*).ti,ab.)

ScienceDirect:

Title, abstract, keywords: ('work-life balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR 'faculty workload' OR 'academic burnout') AND (university OR higher education) AND (faculty OR academic staff)

DOAJ:

('work-life balance' OR 'work-family conflict' OR workload OR burnout) AND ('higher education' OR university) AND (faculty OR 'academic staff')

A reason for the success of the search strategy employed in this study is that it utilised a variety of search fields in each database. Each database searched in this study uses a variety of search fields, including titles, abstracts and keywords. In addition, each database employed controlled vocabularies to categorise the subjects covered by the literature in each database. As a result, the search strategy employed in this study was able to utilise these controlled vocabularies to capture literature that was indexed under broader categories of subject matter, such as occupation, employment, work, and narrower categories of subject matter, such as WLB, workload, burnout and stress. Therefore, overall, the search strategy employed in this study was comprehensive and was capable of capturing the vast majority of the literature relevant to WLB in HE that exists in the literature.

Supplementary search techniques

A variety of supplementary search techniques were used to reduce the possibility of omitting important research findings as much as possible:

- Backward citation searching (Snowball): The reference lists of all studies that were ultimately included in this synthesis were searched for other studies that could potentially meet the inclusion criteria of the study.
- Forward citation searching: Studies that cited key articles from the final group of studies were identified using Scopus and Google Scholar.
- Subject matter expert consultations: Subject matter experts in WLB and HE research were consulted to find additional studies and to confirm the completeness of the final group of studies included in the study.
- Grey literature search: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global were searched to find doctoral research studies related to WLB in HE, and any doctoral research studies that meet the inclusion criteria of the study, that is, reports empirical data and meet quality thresholds were considered for inclusion in the study if applicable.

Data extraction and management

A pilot-tested, standardised and Microsoft Excel-based data extraction form was created to provide an effective way to obtain complete and accurate data from all of the included studies. The form was tested with five randomly

chosen studies that were part of the studies included within this systematic review. Based upon the testing of these five studies, it was revised for clarity before the extraction of data from the remaining 107 studies. Data extraction from all 112 studies was completed by one reviewer. A second reviewer cross-checked the extraction of data from each study to verify its accuracy and completeness. Any discrepancies regarding the extracted data were resolved through joint re-examination of the source articles.

Data were extracted from each of the 112 studies included within this systematic review as follows:

- Bibliographic information: Authors, year published, journal title, country/region in which the study was conducted.
- Study characteristics: Stated purpose/research objectives of the study; theoretical model used or lack thereof; detailed description of the methodology employed in the study (Research design, sample size and characteristics, instruments used to collect data).
- Substantive findings: Key findings based on empirical evidence relative to antecedents of WLB; consequences of WLB; interventions related to WLB; contextual moderators of WLB; direct measures of these constructs, correlation coefficients, thematic descriptions.
- Conclusions and implications: Authors' interpretations; limitations of the study; recommendations for practice; recommendations for future research.

Critical appraisal

A formal critical appraisal of all studies that contributed to the synthesis was completed to enhance the validity of the synthesis. Due to its reliability and applicability to the appraisal of qualitative, quantitative studies, both randomised and non-randomised; both descriptive and analytical, and mixed-methods studies as part of a single review, the Mixed-Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) Version 2018 was used (Hong et al., 2018). Each of the two reviewers independently rated each study using the five relevant methodological quality criteria for each study's design.

A summary of these ratings is provided in narrative form in the results section. The MMAT ratings were not used to exclude studies from inclusion in the synthesis; rather, they were used to provide a critical perspective to inform the thematic synthesis regarding the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the evidence base it drew upon. This has allowed for a more focused discussion of the findings which have been informed by the quality of the underlying studies.

Data synthesis method

A thematic synthesis methodology was selected for this systematic review to facilitate the generation of new

interpretive understandings from the data gathered (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). An inductive thematic synthesis process was performed, utilising NVivo 14 as the data management tool to provide an audit trail for the synthesis. The synthesis process took place over three iterative stages:

- Stage 1: Free line-by-line coding: A systematic coding process was undertaken to code all studies identified through the inclusion criteria of 'Results or Findings' section of each study to identify key concepts and insights within the studies.
- Stage 2: Development of descriptive themes: The free line-by-line coding was organised into groupings of similar codes to develop descriptive themes that were reflective of the findings from the studies.
- Stage 3: Generation of analytical themes: Using a series of discussions and refinements between members of the research team, the descriptive themes were analysed to establish relationships with the review's research questions, and thus developed higher-order analytical themes; and created a new integrated conceptual framework to explain how different factors interact to influence WLB in academia.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No. 2025_FBMSREC_ST07).

Results and discussion

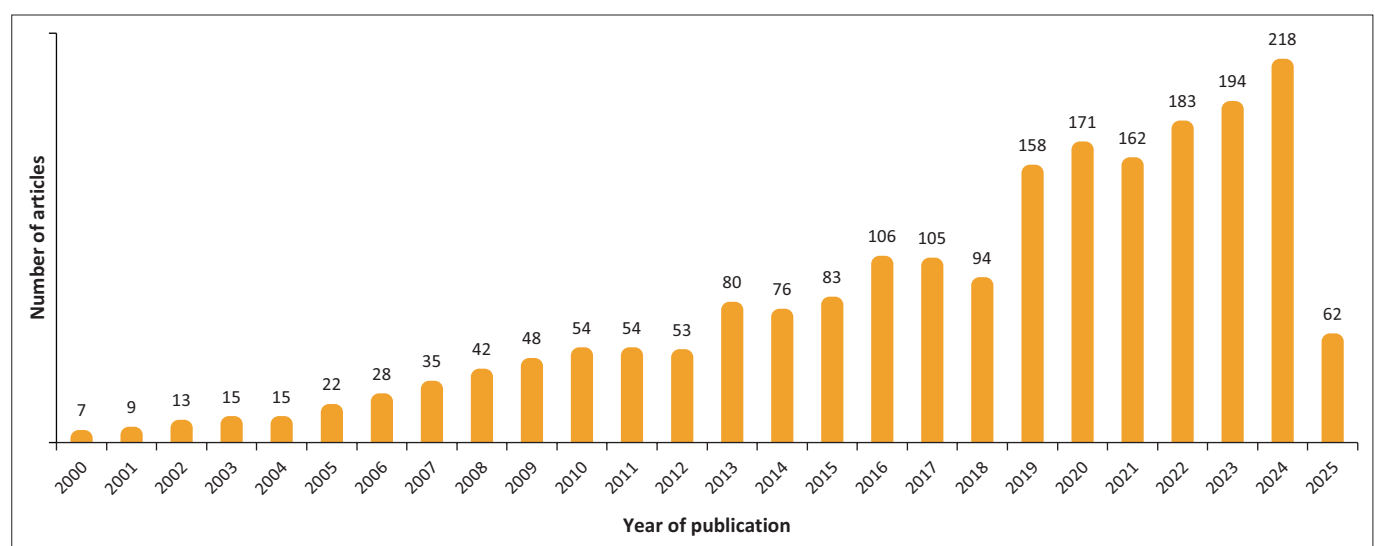
This section presents a thematic synthesis of the 112 studies that were included in this study and organised using the integrated conceptual framework. The findings from this thematic synthesis were interpreted and then placed within the theoretical frameworks that supported the development of these findings and the larger body of literature examining WLB in academia.

Prior to providing the thematic synthesis, an evaluation of the number of publications is presented as it provides essential background information regarding the nature of the evidence base (see Figure 2).

These findings suggest that the development of WLB is not a single continuous process, but rather it occurs through various stages of development due to changes in technology and society (Malik, 2023). The significant, near-exponential growth that occurred between 2013 and 2019 appears to be directly related to both an increase in smartphone use by scholars and an expansion in the availability of cloud-based computing resources, including the Internet of Things. Thus, this evidence supports the *digital permeability* antecedent identified as a key part of our conceptual model. De Vries et al. (2021) argue that the flattening of growth rates between 2020 and 2021 likely relates to the large-scale disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted research and academic productivity. The rapid growth seen from 2022 forward likely represents a response to the pandemic's impact on WLB, and is indicative of a system-wide recognition of the importance of balancing work and life responsibilities. Thus, this trend suggests that WLB has grown beyond a specialised area of study to become a long-term, sustainable field of study for the academia. Therefore, there was a timely need for this current synthesis.

Integrated conceptual framework of work-life balance in higher education

Excessive workloads: Figure 3 shows that academics have identified three roles of research, teaching and administration (Lestari & Rahardianto, 2021), and many now experience a fourth burden of generating income and adding value in order to satisfy the Entrepreneurial University Model (Grisard, 2023). This new demand has created a number of hours of work, and exemplifies the compensatory pressures



WLB, work-life balance.

FIGURE 2: Number of publications in the period 2000–2025 on work-life balance.

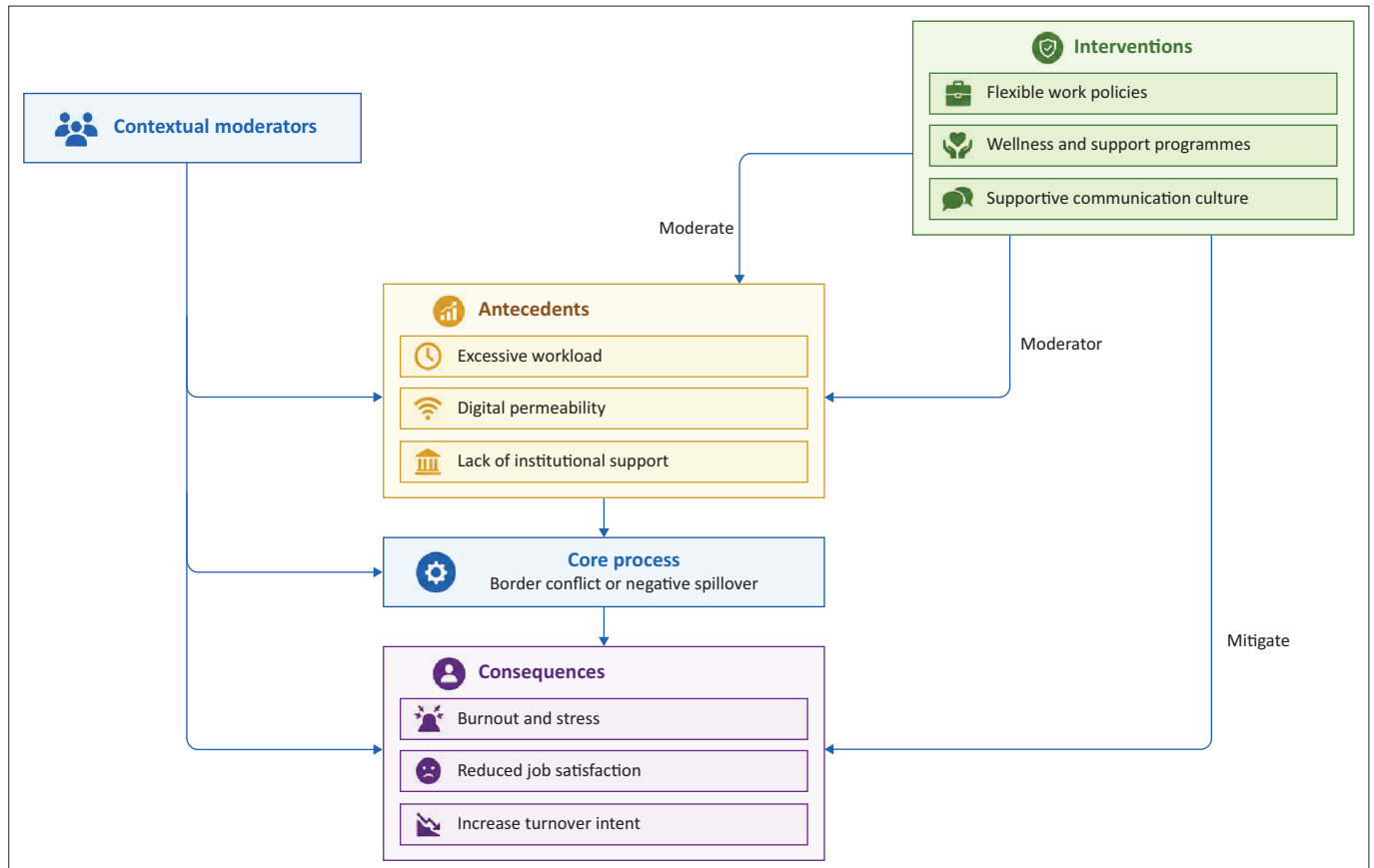


FIGURE 3: Integrated conceptual framework of work-life balance in higher education.

described in Zedeck and Mosier's (1990) models. Because the current academic environment equates prestige and job security with quantifiable productivity, academics will be compelled to invest huge amounts of their time and energy into their work to compensate for the pressures they experience from the system, thereby creating time-based, strain-based and inter-role conflicts (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Technological permeability and blurred boundaries: The digital workplace has created a boundary-less environment for academic workers. In addition to being expected to be connected at all times, there is a blurring of boundaries between work and non-work time (Guest, 2002; Onyema et al., 2024). This represents one of the clearest illustrations of Clark's (2000) Border theory in the contemporary world. Thus, the synthesis supports that the permeability and malleability of borders have been radically changed through technology, and that while this increased permeability may simply be a way for the transfer of stress from work to the non-work sphere, it also represents an invasion of the worker's personal space and time, and therefore, a challenge to segmentation.

Lack of institutional support: One common thread running through this study is the lack of institutional support for WLB and the actual policy, resource and/or culture-based changes which are needed to support it (Zishiri et al., 2024). Haar and Harris (2025) submit that when no support is

offered by the organisation for employees to achieve WLB, then balance will be seen as an individual choice. Therefore, the organisation's focus on achieving balance would not exist. This is also one of the contextual moderating factors within the proposed model. Institutional support for WLB does little to mitigate the effect of the other factors that contribute to employee burnout. If viewed from a COR theory angle, the organisation would become a source of resource drain, time and energy, as opposed to a source of support for gaining or conserving resources leading to increased burnout.

Consequences of work-life imbalance

These antecedents lead to a series of adverse effects that confirm the suggested pathways in the theoretical model.

Psychological stress: A significant relationship is found between work-life conflict and stress, anxiety, burnout and job dissatisfaction (Ismail et al., 2022; Xavier, 2023), which represent the immediate individual-level effect of the continued conflict at the border and subsequent spillover.

Strain caused by conflicting role demands will ultimately cause depletion of both emotional and cognitive resources, resulting in burnout based on exhausted resources. This is consistent with COR theory, which states that continuous and persistent imbalance is an ongoing threat or reduction to one's available resources, energy and positive affect

(Holmgreen et al., 2017). This ultimately leads to burnout when resources can no longer be conserved. Reduced job satisfaction further illustrates a breakdown in the positive psychological contract between the academic and their institution.

Turnover intentions: The most significant organisational impact of work–life imbalance identified in this literature review is the direct relationship between poor WLB and an employee's intentions to either leave their institution or leave academia as a whole. As Mamun and Hasan (2017) observed, an employee's intention to leave is a clear behavioural outcome from chronic stress associated with poor WLB. The intention to leave can also be viewed through a social exchange lens (Chênevert et al., 2022) as well as a COR perspective (Holmgreen et al., 2017). For example, if an individual perceives that they are making excessive investments into their job, that is, time, energy, etc., but receiving little or no reward in terms of support. Further still, if the job is consistently draining an individual's personal resources, that is, emotional, mental and physical, without providing sufficient resources to replace those depleted, it is rational for the individual to disengage psychologically, followed by physically. Thus, WLB is a central factor that affects the financial costs to institutions, the loss of knowledge and skills and the overall stability of an institution.

Interventions and the critical effects of implementation

Studies have proposed multilevel interventions; however, they show the many effects of implementing these multilevel interventions.

Flexible work arrangements: Telecommuting and flexible hours are used as ways to promote autonomy (Shanker, 2022). The findings in this synthesis show that FWAs can be a double-edged sword; while promoting autonomy, if there are no clear border-keeping guidelines for employees to follow, then FWAs may increase the same type of boundary blurring that FWAs were intended to decrease. This key finding has the potential to inform both the theoretical and practical application of interventions. Thus, for an intervention to be successful, the design of that intervention must take into account border theory. Therefore, policies need to consider not only where and when work is completed but also how digital borders are managed.

Wellness and support programmes: Support for workers' mental health, time-management and mentoring are all valuable initiatives (Wei & Li, 2024). The effectiveness of these interventions depends heavily on how much they are supported by institutions and accepted within cultures. These types of interventions provide opportunities to replenish depleted emotional and cognitive resources or to build resilience to help reduce the effects of stressors, according to the COR model. If the effect of such interventions

is to be maximised, they cannot simply be implemented as individual programmes. For example, time-management workshops, without first addressing systemic antecedents, such as excessive workload.

Building supportive communication: Leaders who use transparent, empathetic communication to foster an environment of psychological safety and perceived organisational support (POS) have been found to promote supportive communication (Bucata & Rizescu, 2017; Eisenberger et al., 1986). Supporting communication helps to create the foundation of the social exchange relationship. As defined by Eisenberger et al. (1986), POS is employees' perception that the organisation values their contributions and has concern for their welfare. A high level of POS acts as a significant moderator, reducing the impact of stressors. By modelling and supporting the concept of setting boundaries, this practice becomes culturally acceptable and counters the always-on culture, providing a critical contextual resource.

The role of context and identified gaps

Context was the most important thematic area identified to arise significantly throughout the synthesis of the literature reviewed.

Geographic disparity: Over 70% of the studies reviewed were conducted within the United States, the United Kingdom or Western European nations. Therefore, this imbalance in geography is directly reflected in the disproportionate influence the findings of those studies have on the evidence-based findings that make up the synthesised body of knowledge of the literature reviewed. Therefore, this imbalance also impacts the integrated conceptual framework developed in the study. As observed by Fatima et al. (2022), the unique challenges faced by HEIs in the Global South, that is, infrastructure shortages, political instability and large class sizes, are grossly under-represented in the literature. Thus, the integrated conceptual framework may provide a useful framework for application. But it should be used with caution because it does not account for differences in contexts, such as the lack of institutional support found at an underfunded public university in Africa compared to that found at a well-funded private institution in the West. This further supports the review's critique of the literature as being too narrow geographically and emphasises the need for research and policy development that is sensitive to context.

The limitations in methodology limit the causal understanding of the field: The large number of cross-sectional designs gives the field a great deal of information regarding correlations between digital permeability and burnout. However, it does very little to establish causal processes or trends for an extended period of time. Thus, limiting our ability to conclude anything based upon this research. Therefore, the field will have to develop longitudinal and intervention-based research as its next steps.

Methodological profile and critical appraisal of the studies

In addition to synthesising all the existing research into one document, a rigorous systematic review should also critique how the research was created. The purpose of this section is to provide a meta-analysis of the methodological and contextual characteristics of the 112 research studies that were included in the review. Through this analysis, it was clear that there are several issues affecting the body of evidence, the extent to which the evidence base is capable of informing theory and practice, including many of the same methodological shortcomings, similar to those identified in other reviews of the literature, and a lack of geographic diversity across the world. These challenges affect the potential for the field to advance theoretically and practically.

Distribution of methodological designs

A dominant group of design in a particular field shows that the field is reliant upon cross-sectional data, while there are few long-term studies. The distribution of the types of methods used to investigate the field (Table 1) is an important diagnostic of the field's epistemological orientation.

Publications by data collection method

The largest proportion of surveys was conducted with cross-sectional surveys (40%), which present researchers with a paradigm that is static and correlational by nature. Cross-sectional surveys are very useful for providing a snapshot of how widespread WLB issues are, and provide valuable information about the correlations between issues such as workload and burnout. Nevertheless, these surveys treat WLB as a static issue to be measured, rather than a dynamic process to be understood. While qualitative studies provided important insight into the breadth and complexity of the experiences of academics, they could not overcome the basic design constraint of correlational and static designs.

The biggest concern, however, was the low number of longitudinal studies (4%). The fact that longitudinal studies are so rare is a significant obstacle to advancing science on this subject. Longitudinal studies would help answer critical questions, including: Does implementing a flexible work policy lead to improved well-being in the long run or are

flexible policies implemented by already stressed departments? How do major transitions in life, such as becoming a parent or moving into a senior faculty role, impact the way that academics manage the boundaries of their work and personal lives? Without longitudinal data, our understanding of WLB will remain fixed in time, and we will have no empirical basis to support the causal pathways suggested by the integrated conceptual framework, or to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of interventions designed to improve WLB.

Strengths, weaknesses and validity of knowledge

Evaluating the methodological quality of the studies included in this systematic review provides insights into the degree of confidence we can place in the evidence produced by the studies. The overall higher credibility of the qualitative studies is a strength because their rich descriptions of the lived experiences of academics provide a strong grounding for the development of theoretical models of WLB. A notable weakness of many qualitative studies of WLB is the lack of attention to the issue of researcher positionality. Because studies of WLB are necessarily value-laden and rich in experience, failing to examine how the researcher's own perspectives and biases influence their interpretation of data compromises the reflexivity that is foundational to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Gurr et al., 2024).

In addition to the qualitative weaknesses, there are several quantitative cross-sectional study weaknesses that are structural and collectively contribute to undermining the reliability of the large body of widely cited correlational studies. The overwhelming reliance on convenience sampling in quantitative cross-sectional studies produces a body of evidence-based on voluntary participation. Therefore, this reliance tends to over-represent individuals who are in a high level of conflict, that is, those who respond to surveys on academic stress, and under-represent individuals who are in a stable balance. As a result, the literature may consistently overestimate the extent to which people are experiencing a crisis when reporting WLB issues.

Finally, the fact that all quantitative studies rely solely on self-report measures for all variables creates a mono-method bias and thereby leads to a common method variance effect, which artificially inflates the magnitude of the correlations reported between the variables of interest. When respondents report both their workload and their burnout on the same survey instrument, the relationship between the two variables is influenced by their current affective state and cognitive perspective at the time of completing the survey. Therefore, the methodology used in the studies reviewed here raises doubts about the precision of the correlations that provide the foundation for quantitative knowledge in the field of WLB (Verma et al., 2024). In addition, the field has largely relied upon

TABLE 1: Publications by data collection method.

Methodological design	Proportion of studies (%)	n	Key characteristics and focus
Cross-sectional surveys	40	45	Quantitative; one-time data collection via questionnaire; often measures correlations between WLB, stress, job satisfaction and turnover intent.
Qualitative interviews and/or focus groups	36	40	In-depth exploration of personal experiences, narratives and contextual challenges; rich in detail but limited in generalisability.
Mixed-methods studies	20	22	Combines surveys and interviews; seeks to triangulate findings and provide both breadth and depth of understanding.
Longitudinal designs	4	5	Data collection over multiple time points; essential for establishing causality and understanding WLB as a dynamic process.

WLB, work-life balance.

generic WLB surveys that have not been validated specifically for academics, and therefore likely measure the construct of WLB imprecisely. That is, there is a need for measurement tools that are sensitive to the unique threefold burden experienced by academics.

Implications of a fragmented and narrow evidence base

The methodological profiles described earlier, combined with the previously identified geographic bias, have serious implications, both individually and collectively, that define the evidence base of the academia:

- *The process and prevalence puzzle:* There are two extremes of the evidence base relative to process, the why and how, and prevalence, the what. Quantitative survey methods provide a strong foundation for documenting prevalence, the 'what', and qualitative methods show experiences, the 'what it is like'. However, the evidence base is very weak in illustrating the process, the why and how, which has produced a paradox. While the field can demonstrate with great confidence that problems exist and can describe their manifestations in vivid detail, it lacks the theoretical and empirical basis necessary to propose explanations for how they evolve. Neither proposes how interventions might disrupt the causal mechanisms underlying them. Therefore, there is a barrier to the development of prescriptive science based upon descriptive scholarship (Deckert & Wilson, 2023).
- *The generalisability crisis:* The combination of convenient sampling methods used to collect data and the extreme geographic bias towards high-resource Western contexts generates a compounding validity threat. In addition to the sample being biased, the evidence also has a contextual bias. The average academic that emerges from this literature is likely to be affiliated with a research-intensive university in North America or Europe. Thus, the universal theories and models that have been developed using this body, including the compensation and spillover dynamics of Zedeck and Mosier's models, are based upon a weak foundation. Therefore, their applicability to academics working in the Global South who face challenges associated with infrastructure shortages, political instability or significantly different cultural norms about work and family are not simply untested; they are examples of scholarly extrapolation that this analysis finds to be unjustified.
- *An imperative for diversifying methodologies and contexts:* A critical synthesis such as this one identifies weaknesses in the current state of knowledge. In contrast, it is a call for a deliberate reorientation of priorities for future research. For example, to develop a credible knowledge base that is applicable and useful throughout the world, the field must:

Invest in longitudinal and causal designs: Move resources to support academic studies that model WLB as a process over time, and to support quasi-experimental designs to evaluate interventions designed to promote better balance between work and life.

Use context as core, not caveat: Design studies that use the geographical, institutional and cultural context as a central variable of interest in comparative studies, rather than something to be acknowledged in the discussion section.

Develop measurement: Develop and validate WLB measurement tools that are specifically focused on the academic profession to ensure that the field is measuring what it claims to be measuring with precision and sensitivity.

Thus, this analysis illustrates that the existing evidence concerning WLB in HE is substantial but is constructed under considerable methodological and geographical constraints. These constraints mean that the literature provides a detailed, although possibly exaggerated, portrait of the problem in particular regions. However, it may offer less stable guidance regarding the causal pathways of the integrated conceptual framework or effective interventions for the global academic community. Understanding these foundations is required to correctly interpret the thematic results of this review and to establish a more rigorous and inclusive course of action for the field.

Conclusion

A systematic review provides substantial evidence that WLB continues to be a difficult problem in global HE as a result of the interplay of neoliberalism, the ubiquitous use of digital technologies and lack of support from institutions. A systematic review integrates empirical literature and utilises Clark's Border theory and Zedeck and Mosier's model to provide a cohesive theoretical explanation for why academics are currently experiencing a crisis. The review suggests that the entrepreneurial university model creates pressure to compensate for time spent working, digital tools allow for hyper-permeable borders between professional and private life, and the negative spillover from these issues can negatively affect individual well-being and organisational health. The main contributions of the systematic review are in three areas: from synthesis to critique to actionable recommendations.

Firstly, it presents a new, integrated conceptual framework that illustrates the causal relationships between macro-structural precursors, that is, workload, digital permeability, the core psychological process of border conflict and the micro-level individual and organisational outcomes resulting from border conflict. The framework allows researchers to move away from listing factors and towards modelling how factors interact dynamically, thereby creating a useful heuristic for researchers in diagnosing problems and conducting future research.

Secondly, the systematic review conducts a critical geographic and methodological analysis of the body of evidence related to WLB. The results indicate that research on WLB has been limited by an over-reliance on Western, Anglo-American contexts and by the reliance on cross-sectional, self-report designs. These biases limit the generalisability of what is known about WLB and suggest that current knowledge is

largely contextual and not universally applicable. In addition, the severe lack of longitudinal research represents the largest methodological shortcoming of existing work. This prevents researchers from making causal statements regarding how WLB evolves.

Thirdly, the systematic review goes beyond generic recommendations to provide specific and differentiated recommendations. Specifically, for researchers, there is a need to conduct more longitudinal and comparative research, especially in the previously under-represented Global South. For academic leaders and practitioners, there is a responsibility to design FWAs that protect boundaries in ways that are smart, and to develop infrastructure that supports the diverse needs of the heterogeneous academic workforce.

Limitations and future research

Because this review was completed using the PRISMA guidelines, the results of the review are also limited by the body of literature reviewed. Because the conclusions of the review reflect limitations within the body of literature reviewed, they are also reflective of the limitations within the methods used to conduct those studies, that is, primarily the geographic limitations of most primary studies and the lack of longitudinal designs, which limit our ability to understand causal pathways.

Therefore, going forward, to create a comprehensive knowledge base of WLB that is both inclusive and actionable, researchers must focus on the following areas:

- *Designs to investigate longitudinal causality:* To better understand the causal pathways of WLB interventions and their potential long-term effectiveness and/or negative consequences, studies tracking academics longitudinally are needed to provide more than just snapshots of correlations of WLB interventions.
- *Contextualised studies of work–life balance in the Global South:* Given the growing awareness of the disparities between the Global North and South, there is a pressing need for studies that are deeply rooted in the context of regions such as Africa, Asia and Latin America. Such studies will investigate how regional socio-economic factors, cultural norms and resource constraints contribute to distinct WLB challenges, and begin to develop models of WLB that are relevant to each region rather than simply adopting frameworks developed in the Global North.
- *Rigorous testing of WLB Interventions:* Researchers require more quasi-experimental and action-research studies that systematically test the effectiveness of particular policies, for example, right-to-disconnect provisions, mandatory flexibility across multiple institutional settings, and measure the effects of those policies on academics' well-being, retention and productivity.
- *Theory development and intersectionality of WLB:* Going forward, researchers must expand theories of WLB to

include the ways in which WLB is moderated by equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, career stage, disability and caregiver responsibilities. Therefore, research is required to examine the differences in how WLB resources and challenges are experienced by individuals based on EDI characteristics.

Theoretical implications

This study identifies theoretical implications as it demonstrates the necessity to update classic WLB theory to remain applicable. Border theory needs to incorporate digital technology's influence in creating continuous and unavoidable border crossings. Zedeck and Mosier's models need to be used to provide an explanation of the particular compensatory and spillover processes at play in the audit-intensive culture of the entrepreneurial university. The proposed integrated framework represents the first steps towards this more focused and context-aware theoretical development.

Practical and managerial implications

The study presents the following practical and managerial implications for HEI leaders. The findings strongly suggest that there will be no single solution, which works across all contexts. Therefore, HEI leaders must develop a multifaceted approach:

- *Formulation of policy:* Establish formal, FWAs through policy that are developed using faculty input and that have explicit communication protocols to prevent digital challenges, for example, expected email response time(s) outside of regular working hours.
- *Establishment of support infrastructure:* Invest in tangible resources rather than symbolic support; for example, fund dedicated well-being employee positions; provide confidential mental health counselling services; provide or subsidise practical support systems including child care, elder care and domestic assistance.
- *Systemic or cultural change:* Academic leadership must model sustainable practice and transform how evaluations of performance occur; that is, stop rewarding people who work long hours and are available to work around the clock; instead, evaluate performance-based on quality and sustainability, rather than quantity. Academic leaders must create a cultural environment in which setting boundaries is acceptable and supported, not discouraged.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

David Chibhoyi: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Gilbert J. Dale: Conceptualisation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Jerome Kiley: 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 authors declare that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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