ACADEMICS WELL-BEING AS A PILLAR OF INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY: A STUDY ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AMIDST AND POST COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, intricate relationships among academic freedom, academic welfare, institutional autonomy, and public accountability have become increasingly evident. This research investigates the critical issue of balancing work and home lives for academics and its significant ramifications. This research aimed to evaluate the influence of work life balance on academics productivity at a specific university in South Africa. Three sophisticated quantitative approaches, the JD-R Model, structural equation modelling (SEM), and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) 27 statistical software, were applied in the study of 175 full-time academics. The results of this research indicated a substantial negative connection among academics performance and work life imbalance ($\beta = -0.232\dagger$, $p < 0.100$). This is an example of how difficult it is to be an academic and have a life. It is evident that productivity and meaningful contributions to an institution will increase when academics are able to successfully manage their personal and professional lives. However, institutional autonomy has an impact on administrative decisions and measures, which in turn affect the work environment, resources at disposal, job security, and overall welfare of academics.

Keywords: Work life balance, Academic productivity, Higher education, Occupational stress and Institutional autonomy

INTRODUCTION

In the present context of higher education, various challenges highlight the precarious balance among academic well-being, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and public accountability (Eisenberg, 2018; Kinman, 2017; Altbach, 2007). Mustapha and Ghee (2013) assert that academics need to establish a better balance between their personal lives and work. This improves their health and makes academic institutions work better (Bataineh, 2019; Semlali and Hassi, 2016). This balance is even more important now that academic freedom is threatened by rising pressure on academics (Eisenburg, 2018; Kinman, 2017; Altbach, 2007). The sudden change from traditional to online education brought on by COVID-19 has caused problems for academics that they do not expect (Shoaib et al*.,* 2022). Simultaneously, the economic instability resulting from the pandemic has become a significant source of stress, negatively affecting the psychological health and efficiency of academics (Pacheco et al*.,* 2020; Wilson et al*.,* 2020; Zhou et al*.,* 2020; Giorgi et al*.,* 2020). Additionally, other stress factors, such as increased accountability, high publishing demands, heavier workloads, frequent structural changes, and external scrutiny, have been added to the stress that comes with academic work (Bell, Rajendran and Theiler, 2012). As noted by Nnadozie and Chinomona (2024), resulting in elevated workloads for academics, universities have observed an increase in administrative responsibilities. Academics are now finding it increasingly difficult to separate their personal and professional lives, often risking burnout, as they are expected to independently plan and carry out their work, often from home (Pienaar and Bester, 2020).

Institutional independence, academic freedom, and public responsibility are of paramount importance in higher education (de Boer et al*.,* 2017; Amaral, Tavares and Santos, 2012). Amaral et al*.* (2012) contended that institutional autonomy enables universities to make pivotal decisions, establish academic priorities, and promote innovation. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 has tested the limits of institutional autonomy, compelling universities to rapidly transition to remote operations and online education while simultaneously addressing the mental health of their academics (Teixeira, Biscaia, and Rocha, 2022; García-Cabrera et al*.,* 2018). Kasymova et al*.* (2021) academic freedom, inherently linked with institutional autonomy, preserves for the academics the freedom to research and to enter into critical discourse. The pandemic has heightened concerns about potential threats to academic freedom arising from outside influence or changing research directions (Bethke and Wolff, 2023; Kasymova et al*,* 2021). Public accountability in higher education emphasises the need for open governance and careful financial oversight. However, the pandemic has made people more interested in how institutions of higher learning run their campuses and set their tuition rates (Bergan, 2021; Oplatka, 2017). These difficulties have increased much pressure on individuals in academia

and their workplaces, making it even more crucial for them to strike a balance among health and job demands (Bethke and Wolff, 2023; Kasymova et al*,* 2021).

This research examined the pertinent issue of academics' work–life balance and its implications for academic productivity. This research references prior works by multiple authors, as noted in the previously reviewed studies. It emphasises the significance of universities being autonomous, enjoying academic freedom, and embodying responsible citizenship. It also looks into how these ideas are connected to the problems that academics have in finding a good balance among their work and home lives. However, this study is different because it looks closely at specific problems and changes in this situation. This shows that sustaining a good work life balance is important not just for the health of academics, but additionally for the independence of institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While numerous studies have probed the link among academics productivity and work life balance, there remains a gap in understanding how institutional autonomy influences these dynamics in South African universities (Jasson, Du Plessis and Simons2022; Edmore, 2016; Mafini, 2014). Jasson and Du Plessis (2022) highlight that strong institutional support enhances academic well-being, while Edmore (2016) warns that government intervention can limit universities' flexibility in managing workloads. Mafini (2014) further links job autonomy to higher satisfaction and productivity.

Despite growing interest in academic well-being, there remains a lack of research specifically exploring how institutional policies, governance structures, and administrative decisions affect academics' capacity to maintain wellness in their professional and personal lives, protect their mental health, and sustain productivity (Blignaut et al*,* 2022). These concerns are particularly relevant in the broader context of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and universities' social responsibilities. Institutions must continuously navigate the tension between external regulatory demands and internal decision making to ensure the welfare and effectiveness of their academic staff (Magkahlela et al*.,* 2021).

Given the complex relationship between institutional independence and academic well-being, it is important to ground this study within a theoretical framework that can meaningfully capture how academics manage these overlapping pressures. The Job Demands–resources (JD-R) model is especially well-matched for this purpose, as it supplies a comprehensive structure for analysing the balance between job demands and the resources available to support staff welfare and performance (Pansini et al., 2023; Dixit and Upadhyay, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This research employed the Job Demands–resources (JD-R) model as its primary theoretical framework because it enables a comprehensive assessment of how job demands and available resources affect academic well-being and productivity (Demerouti and Bakker 2023; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017). Originally developed in the early 2000s by Arnold Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti in the field of occupational psychology, the JD-R Model has since been empirically validated across diverse organisational settings (Schaufeli, 2017; Schaufeli et al*.,* 2009; Pansini, 2023).

The model distinguishes between job demands (JDs) and job resources (JRs), offering a robust framework for analysing how academics manage their work responsibilities alongside private commitments. This is particularly relevant in the academic environment, where competing needs and limited resources often intersect (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017).

A key strength of the JD-R Model is its adaptability, which allows for the integration of critical universities dimensions, such as institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and public accountability (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014; Dixit and Upadhyay, 2021). This flexibility makes it especially suitable for exploring the challenges faced by academics within South African Universities of Technology. Recent studies (Hagenauer*,* Volet and Edwards*,* 2021; Loon, 2020) have demonstrated the effectiveness of the model in examining academic well-being, particularly in response to shifting job demands, such as the increased workloads resulting from the transition to remote teaching and the availability of supportive resources, including institutional backing for online learning.

The Nexus Among Academics Work life Balance and Wellbeing and Institutional Autonomy

Amaral et al*.* (2012) note that institutional autonomy means that universities can make their own choices and run their own businesses. It allows universities to run their own businesses, which is beneficial for academic freedom and quality of education. Huisman (2020) asserted that public accountability in higher education means that universities should be honest and open about what they do for the public good.

The COVID-19 has caused many changes, making academics quickly learn new ways to teach. Kuhfeld et al*.* (2020) note that academics' jobs have become much harder since they started teaching online. Before the pandemic, many academics had trouble balancing work hours and personal lives (Franco et al*.* 2021; Bataineh 2019). A sudden switch to online teaching has made this even more difficult. This disruption in the balance between personal and work life has directly affected the health of academics.

The consequences are greater than the individual experiences of academics that they have embedded themselves in the core operations of universities. Franco et al. (2021) and Fazal et al. (2019) highlight the importance of academic welfare in their administration, research, and teaching. Academics perform less effectively in these critical roles when burdened with an increased workload and associated stress. This, in turn, has implications for institutional independence (Rodríguez-Rey, Garrido-Hernansaiz and Collado 2020; Shevlin et al., 2020). Work life conflicts and mental health issues that beset academics make it ever harder for them to fight for the right to read, write, teach, and research on their own terms, free of interference. The fundamental essence of institutional autonomy, characterised by the independence of educational entities from external oversight, may be scrutinised when the exigencies of the pandemic necessitate rapid modifications in the operations of these institutions.

Universities had to quickly switch to online classes when the COVID-19 hit them. This required the restructuring of curricula, development of online instructional resources, and administration of assessments through online platforms (Hagenauer et al., 2021; Loon, 2020). Furthermore, heightened expectations for research output, substantial class sizes and significant administrative duties (including student support, compliance documentation and committee participation) have burdened academics, constraining their ability to pursue independent research and innovate curricula (Nnadozie and Chinomona, 2024). The fundamental concept of institutional autonomy, characterised by the independence of educational institutions from external influences, is further compromised when governmental regulations, emergency mandates, and financial limitations dictate institutional operations (Kallio et al., 2021).

For example, alterations in financing priorities, abrupt budget reductions, and heightened regulatory scrutiny have compelled higher education institutions to make concessions regarding academic programme offers, personnel recruitment, and research agendas (Scott, 2021). Strain workload not only hinders the seamless operation of academic activities, but also reduces institutions' capacity for self-governance, rendering them more responsive to external influences rather than proactively defining their academic objectives (Kallio et al., 2021; Scott, 2021).

Internal and External Factors Influencing Academic Wellbeing and Institutional Autonomy

The pandemic has brought with it a host of internal and external factors that have left an indelible mark on academics' wellbeing and the autonomy of their institutions. Fear, economic uncertainty, and a sense of instability have become increasingly common among academics, particularly in South Africa (Cavallo and Forman, 2020). The abrupt shift to online teaching,

though necessary for health and safety, significantly disrupted the work life balance of many academics, leading to heightened work life conflict and psychological strain (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Gigauri, 2020; Anderson, 2020).

These challenges have had far-reaching effects on the overall well-being of the academic staff (Shoaib et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2020). The resulting stress and financial insecurity not only threaten individual mental health but also have implications for the operational independence of education institutions. Academic well-being is closely tied to the quality of teaching, research, and institutional management (Franco et al., 2021; Fazal et al., 2019), and students' well-being is similarly influenced by the emotional and psychological states of their lecturers (Mwangi et al., 2017; Mustapha and Ghee, 2013).

Addressing these intersecting challenges within the context of work life balance and academic well-being is essential, particularly when considering the broader principles of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and public accountability. When academics are overwhelmed by excessive demands and deteriorating well-being, the capacity of institutions to make autonomous decisions regarding academic programmes and research may be compromised. This highlights the urgency of identifying strategies to mitigate these pressures and support both individual academics and institutional governance.

In light of this, the evolving higher education environment calls for a deeper investigation into the relationship among work and life balance, academic well-being, and institutional autonomy. Through such an enquiry, evidence-based interventions can be developed to safeguard the well-being of academic staff, reinforce institutional autonomy, and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education. This study seeks to contribute to this understanding by offering insights and practical solutions from the South African context with relevance to higher education systems globally.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected using a quantitative approach in this investigation. Creswell and Creswell (2018) maintain that a quantitative design effectively identifies configurations and delineates the interactions among the components mentioned in the literature. Data were collected from three faculty members at a selected university in South Africa, including junior academics, academics, senior academics, and professors. The quantitative approach facilitated the collection of the requisite data and the statistical comparison of various scenarios. Census sample was employed in this investigation, which encompassed 175 academics. Table 1 contains the population and sample sizes.

Table 1: Population and Sample Size

Titles	Population size	Sample size
Junior Academics	41	41
Academics	103	103
Senior Academics	27	27
Associate Professor	2	2
Assistant Professor	2	2
Total	**175**	**175**

This research employed SEM techniques to assess the predicted validity and reliability of the newly developed model. The AMOS 27 statistical software was employed to analyse the data. In order to evaluate the reliability and validity of the data collecting instrument and determine the acceptability of the data for analysis, Exploratory Factor Analysis was carried out. In order to evaluate the links and strengths among the observed variables and to illustrate the model's goodness of fit, confirmatory factor analysis was implemented.

The Exploratory Factor Analysis approach involved assessing the data's suitability for factor analysis and deciding the number of factors to extract, retain, rotate, and interpret. Moreover, the survey instrument's reliability was assessed using measures such as composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha, as well as convergent and discriminant validity. The measurement accuracy was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 2 illustrates that all elements satisfied the composite dependability measure's minimal threshold of 0.7, as previously established by Mulang (2022). As a result, the primary prerequisite for convergent validity in these regions was satisfied. Table 2 illustrates that the lowest item value in the Work Life Balance (WLB) model was 0.717 (B9), while the maximum item value was 0.905. (B7). The model's evaluation revealed that all item indicators accurately represented the underlying elements, suggesting remarkable reliability.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Statistics

	AVE	CR	Alpha
WLB	0.600	0.899	0.775
SDA	0.617	0.918	0.785
TOI	0.806	0.806	0.714
ACP	0.853	0.853	0.771

In the evaluation, the research employed composite reliability, a metric preferred for its better estimation of actual reliability, as proposed by (Naicker, 2019). Composite reliability offers a more accurate assessment of reliability than Cronbach's alpha, which can occasionally over- or under-evaluate the reliability of a scale (Naicker, 2019). Composite reliability evaluates the dependability of indicators on a scale from 0 to 1. Significantly, each factor demonstrated composite reliability values exceeding 0.70. Specifically, among the factors, the "Psychological

well-being of academics (SDA)" exhibited the highest value at 0.918. The "Work Life Balance (WLB)" factor was closely followed, achieving a value of 0.899, while the "Academics Productivity (ACP)" factor reported a reliability value of 0.853. The smallest value among the factors was noted in "Turn-over Intentions (TOI)" at 0.806.

Utilizing the average variance extracted (AVE) methodology, it was feasible to assess convergence validity, a crucial assessment. It is recommended that the AVE be more than 0.5, as it should reflect more than 50 per cent of the observed variations (Naicker, 2019; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Our results suggested that the AVE values ranged from 0.600 to 0.853. Significantly, the "Psychological well-being of academics (SDA)" exhibited the highest AVE value of 0.806, followed by "Work Life Balance (WLB)" at 0.600 and "Academics Productivity (ACP)" at 0.853. The effective convergence of validity is confirmed by the observed AVE values, which above the recommended threshold of 0.5. This outcome underscores the measurement model's legitimacy, dependability, and efficacy. Consequently, we verified that each component of the measurement model had both convergent validity and adequate reliability.

RESULTS

This section presents a thorough analysis of questionnaire data using descriptive statistics.

Inclusion Criteria

Full-time academics, including Deans of Faculties, Heads of Departments, Professors, Senior Academics, Academics and Junior Academics, from the selected University were included in this investigation. These individuals were chosen because they were permanently employed and actively engaged in teaching, research, administrative responsibilities and community. Other categories of staff were excluded due to their part-time or contractual employment, which makes them more difficult to track. This selection ensures that the study focuses on a stable and accessible group for data collection.

Participants Demographic Information

Table 3 comprehensively outlines the participant demographics, highlighting the frequency and percentage distribution. Predominantly, a notable majority of the respondents self-identified as female. Among the academic cohort, 63.7 per cent reported their marital status as married, while 30.4 per cent identified as single, and 5.9 per cent opted for a non-disclosure of their marital status, herein categorised as "other." Moreover, a substantial proportion, specifically 77.5 per cent, affirmed their residence with dependents.

Table 3 demonstrates that a substantial majority (75.4 percent) of participants possessed either a master's degree (62.7%) or a PhD (12.7%), suggesting a highly educated academic workforce. Furthermore, 10.8% of respondents reported a BTech, 9.8 per cent held an honours degree, and 3.9 per cent stated additional qualifications. Academics comprised the largest group (63.7%), succeeded by senior academics (19.6%) and junior academics (14.7%). Assistant professors and associate professors each comprised barely one percent of the participants.

Table 3: Participants Demographic Information (authors own)

Variable	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (per cent)
Gender	Female	64	62.7
	Male	38	37.3
Marital Status	Single	31	30.4
	Married	65	63.7
	Other	6	5.9
Living with Dependants	Yes	79	77.5
	No	23	22.5
Highest Qualification	PhD	13	12.7
	Master's Degree	64	62.7
	Honours Degree	10	9.8
	BTech	11	10.8
	Other	4	3.9
Professional Position	Assistant Professor	1	1.0
	Associate Professor	1	1.0
	Senior Academics	20	19.6
	Academics	65	63.7
	Junior Academics	15	14.7
Years Employed	01 – 10	38	37.3
	11 – 20	39	38.2
	21 – 30	25	24.5
Hours Worked per Week	05 – 25	11	10.8
	26 – 45	57	55.9
	46 – 85	34	33.3

Results from the Model

Every construct in the research was evaluated through multiple valid items. For example, the work life balance concept originally included ten items. However, the validity of just six items (B2, B5, B6, B7, B8, and B9) was determined when the data was analysed within the framework of the University of Technology (UoT). The other four components did not align with the work life balance concept. The measurement contribution of each item is indicated by the factor

loading, with values beyond 0.5 being acceptable and those below 0.5 indicative of low factor loading.

In the measurement model (Figure 1), the items that contribute to assessing work life balance include: B2 (72%), B5 (68%), B6 (76%), B7 (87%), B8 (85%) and B9 (77%). It is important to highlight that, due to the inherent margin of error in assessing abstract ideas, every item comes with a corresponding error term (e) (Mabaso, 2017). As a result, regarding the work life balance construct, e8 relates to item B2, e9 to item B5, e10 to item B6, e11 to item B7, e12 to item B8 and e13 to item B9.

The single-arrowed coefficients depict the correlation coefficients among the constructs. For example, the connection among academic output and work life balance shows a value of -0.25, indicating that when the standard deviation of one of these variables rises, the standard deviation of the other falls by 25 per cent.

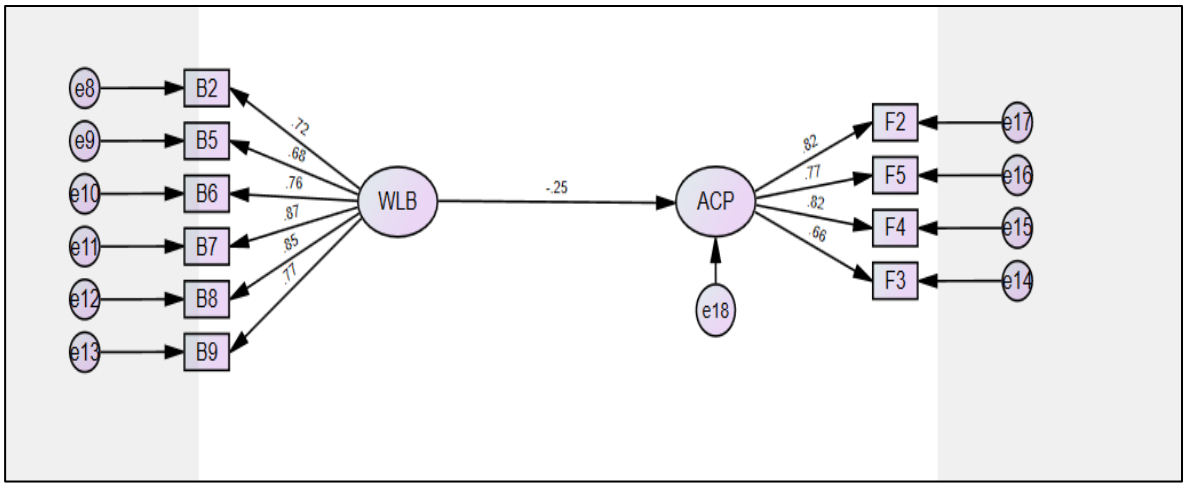

Figure 1: Measurement Model (authors own)

The measurement model as illustrated in Figure 1, comprises two key constructs:

- Work Life Balance (WLB)
- Academics Productivity (ACP)

The influence of work life imbalance on academics performance is substantiated by empirical evidence: Beta = -0.238* (P-value <0.05). This suggests that work life balance plays a pivotal role in shaping academic productivity. Factors such as extended working hours and heightened workloads contribute to academic professionals experiencing stress and work-related health issues, aligning with the notion that an imbalance in work life balance leads to reduced academic productivity. These outcomes are in concordance with prior research, as highlighted by Park et al. (2021) emphasising the challenges academics face in managing work obligations

alongside personal commitments. Numerous studies have underscored the significance of achieving a harmonious work life balance for academics to attain peak performance (Charoensukmongkol and Puyod, 2021; Toquero, 2020; Javier, 2020).

Moderating Effects

Figure 2 shows how WLB and Stress, Depression and Anxiety (SDA) change the relationship between turnover intention (TIO) and ACP. The standardised path coefficients indicate how strong and in what direction these connections are. Work life balance (Zscore(WLB)) has a negative effect on Academics Productivity (-0.31), which means that improving work life balance might actually worsen academic productivity, probably because people are less engaged at work. Stress, Depression and Anxiety (Zscore(SDA)) negatively impact Academics Productivity (-0.20), indicating that increased stress levels result in diminished productivity.

The interaction term of SDA and WLB (SDAWLB) has a negative coefficient (-0.25), which means that work life balance worsens the negative effect of stress on productivity. The moderation of turnover intention while mediating the impact of TIOWLB on productivity (0.01) indicates that TIOWLB does not seem to significantly buffer the negative consequences of turnover intention on productivity. The three-way interaction term (TIOWLBSDA) has a negative effect (-0.18), denoting that the compound of work life Balance, Stress and Turnover Intention worsens the decrease in Academic Productivity. These results highlight that the link among work stressors, work life balance and turnover intention in affecting academics productivity is multifaceted, and these associations are co-dependent, reflecting the necessity for contextualised programmes to relieve negative consequences.

Z-score statistics are an important analytical tool in this work, comparing scores obtained from different normal distributions and determining the probability of a score lying within a particular range (Joseph and Olugbara, 2018). This process converts the data points from a normal distribution into Z-scores within a standard normal distribution (Joseph and Olugbara, 2018). Negative Z-scores indicate that the raw data were below the mean, and positive values indicate that the scores were above the mean.

The study's results demonstrate a significant interplay between academics' psychological well-being, their intentions to depart, and their work–life balance, which subsequently affects academics productivity. It is essential to acknowledge that there is insufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that either turnover intentions alone or the synergistic effect of psychological well-being and turnover intentions significantly enhances the influence of work

life balance on academics productivity. However, this relationship was not statistically significant.

This study highlights how academics perceive control over stress triggered by working pressure. They also lament how difficult it is for them to carve out time to relax and to be with their families. Academics have asserted that research obligations do not integrate smoothly with routine professional duties. These findings are concurrent with the participant feedback and study results.

The present study analysed the negative implications of the institutional environment's occupational stress on academics' attitudes and behaviours regarding work stress management. However, this highlights the intricate relationship between academics' welfare and the fundamental principles of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and accountability in higher education. This study highlights the obligation that institutions must address such issues because they have important implications for the overall welfare and functioning of the academic workforce.

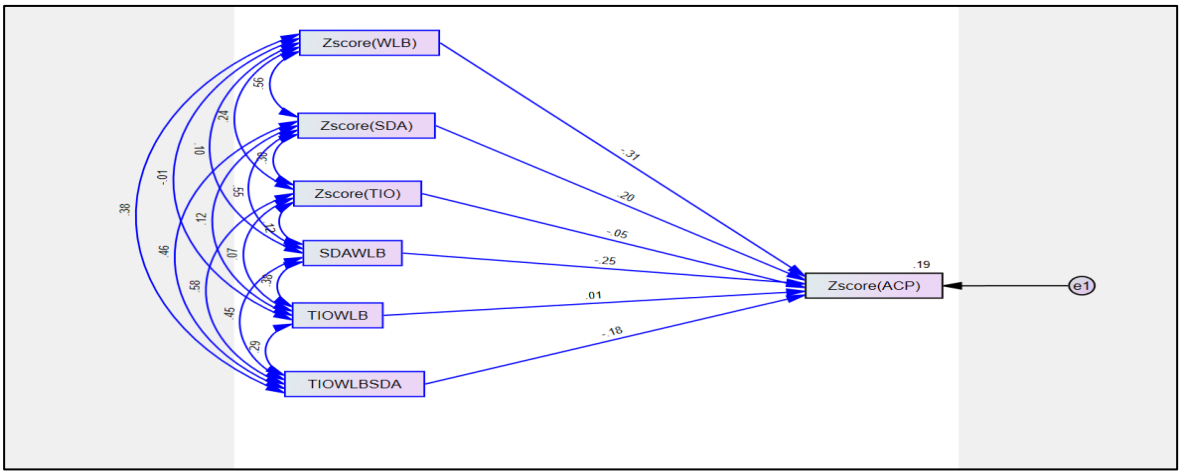

Figure 2: Moderating Effects (authors own)

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation reveal several important aspects of academic well-being, work-family balance, and their influence on system autonomy in universities. The outcomes reveal the complex relationship of these criterion variables and unveil the urgent issues facing academics at the UoT.

Work Life Balance and Academics Productivity

The results indicate that there is a notable negative association among work life balance and academics productivity, supported by the statistical evidence: Beta = -0.238* (P-value <0.05). This result aligns with previous research showing that disharmony between professional and personal aspects adversely affects academic performance (Park et al., 2021; Charoensukmongkol and Puyod, 2021; Toquero, 2020). Work-related stress and health problems have become more common among academics during this pandemic. This is because they have had to work longer hours and take on more work.

For many academics, the situation has changed more than usual, as they must quickly adapt to new ways of conducting online lectures (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). This disturbance has made it more difficult for them to separate their work from their private lives, which increases their risk of burnout and emotional problems (Franco et al., 2021; Bataineh, 2019). Failure to be effective in work life balance affects their administrative, research, and teaching performance, and eventually the functionality of higher education institutions (Fazal et al., 2019).

Psychological Well-Being and Turnover Intentions

The research demonstrates a significant correlation between the mental well-being of academics, their propensity to leave, and their work–life balance, all of which collectively influence academic productivity. Nonetheless, there is an absence of compelling evidence demonstrating that turnover intentions alone, or the synergistic effect of psychological well-being and turnover intentions, significantly augments the influence of work life balance on academic productivity.

Psychological well-being and voluntary turnover intentions are key variables, but their relationship with research productivity is complex and possibly related to other variables. Researchers have found that a heavy workload causes elevated levels of stress and provides less time for relaxation and family interaction (Wilson et al., 2020; Pacheco et al., 2020). In this study, turnover intention is defined as an employee's wilful and planned wish to leave his or her current position or organisation within a certain period (Els et al., 2021). Akosile and Ekemen's (2022) study has shown that intention to leave is one of the predictors of leave behaviour and that leaving employment because of various factors, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, workload, career development opportunities, and workplace climate. Anees et al. (2021) also performed similar research and emphasised that intention to leave is often assessed using self-report surveys that measure an individual's thoughts on leaving, seeking alternative employment, or leaving intentionally.

Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom

The study findings demonstrate that occupational stress arising from the institutional environment negatively influences the attitudes and behaviours of academics. When academics are unable to manage workplace stress effectively, their well-being deteriorates, consequently affecting their ability to uphold academic freedom and endorse institutional autonomy. The principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom are vital for promoting innovation and guaranteeing quality of teaching and learning (Amaral et al. 2012). The pandemic has raised many important questions about the limits of institutional autonomy, especially since universities have to quickly switch to remote work and online learning (Teixeira et al., 2022).

This rapid change has made it harder to find a balance between institutional autonomy and academic well-being (Bergan, 2021; Oplatka, 2017). This is because there is greater public scrutiny and accountability requirements. Heightened workload and stress have undermined academics' capacity to exercise their academic freedom and autonomously dictate their teaching and research (Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2020; Shevlin et al., 2020).

Internal and External Stress Factors

This research underscores numerous internal and external stressors that have significantly impacted the well-being of academics and the autonomy of institutions. Economic instability, fear, and compromised well-being due to the pandemic have become widespread among academics, particularly in South Africa (Cavallo and Forman, 2020). The sudden shift to online education has disrupted work life balance, leading to increased conflicts among work and private life (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Gigauri, 2020; Anderson, 2020).

These stressors have adversely affected not only the overall well-being of academics but also pose substantial implications for the autonomy of educational institutions. Academics' efficacy as pedagogues, administrators, and researchers are closely related to their well-being, and any decline in their well-being can impair their ability to function autonomously at their institutions and affect decisions regarding their research activities and academic curricula (Franco et al., 2021; Fazal et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS

This research focused only on permanent academics at a particular UoT in KwaZulu-Natal; hence, the findings would not necessarily be applicable to other universities. The research had the challenge of achieving full participation, particularly from high-ranking academics, possibly resulting in a biased dataset. The study's findings are more limited in their applicability

to a wider group of people, since they were only conducted at a single university. This illustrates the amount of care needed to interpret these findings. The "new normal" of the worldwide COVID-19, however, made it more challenging to collect data, which may have contributed to lower response rates and participation. Despite these issues, this research offers valuable insight into the intricate connection among work life balance and academics. It discusses how the institutions that were selected were impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and how these considerations connect to academic freedom, public responsibility, and institutional independence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study led to several suggestions on how to improve work life balance, mental health, and academics productivity at the selected UoT. Institutions should establish regulations that assist academics in reconciling their professional and personal lives by providing flexible work arrangements, reallocating tasks, and educating them on effective time management. Reducing non-instructional administrative work for academics will free them to teach and conduct research. It might also be beneficial to foster a culture that respects personal time by restricting after-hour work communications, for example, to avoid burnout.

Universities should also offer mental health resources, including counselling services, wellness workshops, and stress reduction programs, to assist academics as they grapple with the added strain and anxiety they face. Creating systems of peer mentoring and academic support may help people to work together more productively and face work challenges with a degree of emotional strength. To boost academic output, universities ought to evaluate and modify academic workloads to ensure an equitable distribution of responsibilities. To make teaching more effective and research more productive, more money should be spent on research assistants, digital learning tools, and professional growth programs. Following these suggestions could make the academic environment more dynamic and effective, which would make both academics happier and the university performs better.

CONCLUSION

The current investigation examined the complex experiences of academics at the UoT during COVID-19. The importance of addressing work life balance, mental health, and retention intentions of academics is a key focus of this study, as these issues impact not only the quality of life for academics but are also linked to the overall productivity and effectiveness of universities.

The results raise questions for universities and policymakers to understand the nuanced balance of organisational autonomy, academic freedom, public accountability, and academic welfare. Institutions can aid academics in achieving a healthier work life balance and better mental health by implementing targeted strategies and support. This will improve the quality of the institution, student performance, and academic satisfaction. Employing the JD-R Model as a theoretical framework and SEM, this study was able to properly understand the mechanisms at play in this case. These findings provide a foundation for future research to investigate and verify these findings in South Africa as well as in other educational settings.

This research makes a significant contribution to the discussion on work life balance, the mental health of academics and the autonomy of institutions of higher education. This spurs further research and presses universities and policymakers to prioritise their students' overall well-being. This will enable them to maintain the values of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability and, in the process, to create a vigorous and effective academic community better equipped to address whatever difficulties may lie ahead. Finally, this research is consistent with the broad aim of preserving and improving universities, ensuring that they continue to be representative of knowledge, innovation, and progress for the world, at a global testament to changes in it.

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