Exploring Academics' Work-Life Balance and Stress Levels Using Flexible Working Arrangements

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Abstract

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) provide academics a degree of freedom to control their working time, location and method. Academics need to be agile in managing their multiple work roles, but many universities are still not supportive. This research explores whether FWAs can affect academics' work-life balance (WLB) and stress levels. Using a focus group discussion, eight academics were interviewed. Findings reveal that FWAs have a positive impact on WLB and reduce stress levels amongst Malaysian academics. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home (WFH) has become a new normal, paving the way for similar policies to be put in place.

Keywords: Flexible working arrangements; academics; work-life balance; stress

1.0 Introduction

Over the last three decades, alternative working arrangements have been widely accepted in developed economies with the ultimate objective of achieving work-life balance (WLB) and improving productivity (Chandola et al., 2019). It is reported by the Global Organisation For Stress (2020) that 60% of individuals worldwide experience work-related stress. Organisations agreeing on alternative working arrangements can reduce stress levels, particularly if they are work-life related.

However, in developing countries, many organisations still prefer the conventional style of working specific hours at the stated time that require employees to clock-in and clock-out. Researchers have been trying to understand how flexible working hours can contribute to better organisational outcomes, which is now a growing field of research (Galea et al., 2014), although some researchers have provided an initial understanding of the impact of FWAs on organisational outcomes. At the same time, FWAs are expected to increase performance and productivity (Hill et al., 2001). From the employee's standpoint, FWAs can potentially bring about work-life balance and social interaction and changed lifestyle (Hill et al., 2001).

The need for FWAs in Malaysia for employees from all sectors is slowly gaining momentum (Ramakrishnan & Arokiasamy, 2019). Research, specifically for academics, in the area of WLB and job-related stress (Makhbul & Khairuddin, 2013), has begun to increase in the last couple of years. The results have not been conclusive and there are mixed views. While some opine that job commitment has impacted WLB (Khairunneezam et al., 2011) due to stress, others opine that Malaysian academics have managed their WLB and stress well, despite increasing challenges (Husin et al., 2018).

The development of higher educational institutions (HEIs), which began with the establishment of University of Malaya in 1962, has been experiencing a rise in both public and private universities, along with an extreme growth in student enrolments, expansion of courses and an increase in web-based teaching (Khairunneezam, 2011).

However, it is perceived that in Malaysia, FWAs are highly skewed among different types of Universities (Othman et al., 2019). International and private universities do allow FWAs of some kind, while public universities are still reluctant to provide alternative work arrangements for employees. Yet, with the COVID-19 pandemic the world has shifted to a new norm of work from home WFH culture forcing even the most conventional to embrace technology and accept alternative working arrangements (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). With such an accelerated growth within the academia and a sudden transition to a new normal, it is very timely to look into the potential acceptance of FWAs amongst the academic fraternity in Malaysia to increase the productivity and happiness quotient of the employees; hence, the motivation for this study. It is observed that research showing the differences in working arrangements between universities in Malaysia is still being discussed informally and to that extent, this study provides a niche.

This study's main objective is to gain a better understanding of academics' views on FWAs and the subsequent impact on their WLB and stress levels. The study covers academics' experiences from both the public and private HEIs in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review

FWAs depict the freedom given to employees in terms of determining the time, place and mode of work. Georgetown University Law Center (2010) defines FWAs as "*any one of a spectrum of work structure that alters the time and/or place that work gets done on a regular basis.*"

Various types of FWAs like working part-time, having compressed workweeks and time flexibility were introduced by employers to be cost-effective along with other benefits such as talent retention and higher financial performance (Stroup & Yoon, 2016). On the other hand, for employees, it is generally perceived to provide better WLB and lower stress levels leading to better organisational productivity as well as reduced work-life conflict leading to better job satisfaction (Azar et al., 2018).

Despite their benefits, it is also emphasised that the success of FWAs depend upon the specific conditions set out in organisations to monitor the employee's performance (Klindzic & Maric, 2019)

Institutions of higher learning normally face a dilemma when it comes to allowing staff the work flexibility. Work flexibility for academics is generally perceived to be a luxury by many since there is a general feeling that academics are enjoying excess idle time (Lewis, 2016), but at the same time casting doubts on their ability to conduct their activities through alternative arrangements. On the contrary, academics' work is that of multi-tasking since it not only involves educating students, but also extends to administrative roles, research-related activities as well as external engagement (Husin et al., 2018).The various roles played by an academic makes it sometimes difficult for him/her to switch-off, thereby, affecting his/her well-being (Lewis, 2016).

2.1 Well-Being

The concept of WLB has been gaining attention from many organisations and employees due to the shifting of family patterns and the increase of dual-income earners (Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014). Medina-Garido et al. (2017) describe WLB as obtaining a balance between the demands of employees' work lives and personal lives. Work-life balance affecting individuals, particularly females, irrespective of their academic positions (Helvaci, 2017), is often related to child-care. However, an individual's domestic duties extend beyond child-care to providing physical or health care support to elderly members within the household or even dealing with physically and mentally challenged children/siblings.

In an earlier study, Wortman et al. (1991) implied that WLB might be challenging for academics to maintain because academic work can be perceived as 'open-ended,' i.e., more reading to be completed or research and teaching preparation to be conducted. Despite the challenges faced by academics in Malaysia, it was observed almost a decade ago that academics demonstrate less propensity to leave the organisation due to job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Noor, 2011). Sang et al. (2015) suggested that an additional issue might be the perception of declining trust between academics and their employing institutions. This is reflected in academics' reduced autonomy resulting from the constant reporting of activities and active engagement in the managerial processes.

2.2 Stress

Events are judged to be stressful if individuals perceive that the demands being made overpower their capability to cope with them (Darabi et al., 2017). The American Institute of Stress has evidenced that 20% of Americans face stress due to juggling work and personal life (Boyd, 2020). It was noted that Malaysian employees, including academics, are more over-worked, stressed and lead unhealthy lifestyles and are less productive than some of their immediate neighbours like Singapore or Hong Kong (Ram, 2019).

Job stress in institutions of higher learning around the world has been on the uptrend, resulting in health issues and a decline in overall well-being, thereby influencing the teacher's contribution towards students' learning experience , and in worst cases disturb students' intellectual and social abilities (Ahsan et al., 2009). The work of academics is often highly salient to their personal identity, which leads to increased responsiveness to the demands of their work settings because professional success and rewards are essential to them. This is worsened with the non-work demand that might intensify the situation, especially in the form of work-life conflict. In Malaysia, employees of research universities have increased stress levels as a result of the various demands in publication quality, teaching quality as well as creating visibility of the lecturers for the outside world (Makhbul & Khairuddin, 2013). Such stress is a result of role overload and role ambiguity (Idris, 2011). Muhamad Zaki et al. (2016) evidence that almost 61% of academics faced either moderate or severe stress resulting from prolonged working hours, increased workload and responsibilities.

Hence, many studies show that FWAs positively increase WLB among employees. However, some studies show that FWAs' effect on employees' stress levels has mixed results. As not much has been researched on this situation among academics in Malaysia, hence, the motivation for this study to fill the gap.

3.0 Methodology

This paper explores the critical emergent issues relating to workplace flexibility and its positive and negative outcomes. A focus group discussion was conducted to explore the working arrangements within public and private universities in Malaysia. The focus group had eight participants and lasted for two hours (Klagge, 2018). The respondents were selected from public and private universities in Malaysia to ensure representation across age, gender, faculty, work flexibility and type of university.

Four of the respondents were in their 30's and two in their 40's and 50's, respectively. Three of the respondents were Indians and the rest were Malays. Four respondents were from private universities while the rest were from public universities. There were three males and five females. Two of the participants had caring duties at home.

FWAs lie in a spectrum that ranges from the least flexible to the most flexible, covering three dimensions of flexibility, as shown in Table 1. For this study, the flexibility of FWAs was defined and measured from the scale of one until three (Table 2). Five of the academics have a significant level of FWAs, one has semi-FWAs and the remaining two have the least FWAs.
The focus group probed themes relating to working life, well-being and stress.

Table1. Participants in the Focus Group

Age	Gender	Department	Degree of Flexibility	Type	Code
40's	Male	Business	3-Most Flexible	Private University	P1
40's	Female	Accounting	3-Most Flexible	Private University	P2
50's	Female	Economics	3-Most Flexible	Private University	P3
30's	Female	Engineering	1-Least Flexible	Private University	P4
50's	Female	Computer Science and Mathematics	3-Most Flexible	Public University	P5
30's	Female	Survey and Planning	3-Most flexible	Public University	P6
30's	Male	Hotel	2-Semi flexible	Public University	P7
30's	Male	Business	1-Least flexible	Public University	P8

Table 2. Dimension vs Types of Flexibility

Dimension of Flexibility	Types of Flexibility (Examples)
Time	Flexible hour, Staggered hour
Location	Teleworking, Satellite Working
Medium / Method	Job sharing, Part-time

Table 3. Numbers of Dimension vs Degree of Flexibility

Numbers of Dimension Covered by FWAs	The Degree of Flexibility
One Dimension	1- Least Flexible
Two Dimensions	2-Semi-Flexible
Three Dimensions	3- Most-Flexible

The focus group session opened with a welcoming gesture and reading of the guidelines and ground rules by the appointed moderator. The session proceeded with ten structured questions designed to capture the central essence of implementation of flexible working and its impact on academics' working and personal life, trying to capture their WLB and related stress. With the agreement of participants, the session was recorded, and then transcribed and anonymised before being analysed.

The data was analysed by using thematic analysis. Participants were assured of their anonymity.

As with any qualitative study, the purpose of this paper is not to draw generalisations, but rather to understand the experiences of academics working in different working environments through the rich data.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The findings and discussion relate to the issues and problems identified regarding the impact of FWAs on academics' work-life balance and stress levels.

4.1 FWAs and WLB
Hayman (2009) conceptualised that WLB is determined by three dimensions, that is, work-interference with personal life, personal life interference with work, and work/personal life enhancement. The following are some of the excerpts from the interview conducted:

Well-being
Workplace conditions can affect employees at the physical, mental or emotional level and enhance or harm their well-being. Healthy and happy employees have a better quality of life, a lower risk of disease and injury, and a greater likelihood of contributing to their communities than employees with poorer well-being (Hamar, 2015). That is why the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (2016) has identified worker well-being as a nationally important health issue.
Some participants felt that the absence of procedure in clock-in and clock-out gives academicians some ease and comfort:

"Our procedure is that we have to clock-in and clock out. Basically, this limits employee satisfaction because we are required to come to the office every day."
"The absence of clock-in and clock-out gives me some ease. If I don't have a class at 8 a.m., then I have some time to get ready to be in the office around 9 a.m., it gives me some comfort, …… I don't need to rush to work."

Some of the participants were less stressed as they did not need to rush to work and could do their work at any location and time. They further added how traffic jam and parking issues can be reduced by adopting FWAs:

"…so many students and the parking lots are very full and there's a lot of traffic...this was a brilliant idea to start flexi-hour so people can come in at staggered time…"

"Totally agree.. The positives of FWAs are a lot.. So with this system, it really makes our lives easier because we only have to travel when we have class."

Work-interference with Personal Life
Some participants repeatedly emphasised how WFH and control over work schedule have allowed them to prioritise their personal life needs such as tending to the children or doing house chores while maintaining work productivity at the same time:

"I am a mom of four, and the kids are at home currently… I must say that we are flexible to do our activities not in accordance with our [work] routine or schedule... I can schedule a meeting or my video presentation later or I can do it late at night…"

Academics are concerned with their well-being and the need to observe a balanced quality of work and personal life as highlighted by Medina-Garrido et al. (2017) who stressed the importance of achieving WLB between employees' work lives and personal lives.

Personal Life Interference with Work
Similar to the first dimension of WLB, among the responses commonly stressed by the academics is how FWAs have helped reduce the emotional and psychological burden that comes with juggling personal life and work-life. One of the academics that need to commute long distance to and from work can choose to work from home when permitted to effectively execute some of her domestic responsibilities resulting in reduced emotional and psychological stress:

"I always used to travel long distances.. I leave the kids behind with the babysitter, because I don't have anybody to look after them...when I have someone who is sick in the family...that used to be rather stressful for me. So, to me, I believe it's more on emotional and psychological support that I have from the university".

Academics would be better able to handle the emotional and psychological burden if they undertake FWAs. If demands being made overpower their capability to cope with them, it is considered stressful (Darabi et al., 2017).

Work/Personal Life Enhancement
The option of FWAs also appears appealing to certain academics who desire work flexibility due to household responsibilities. One of the academics preferred to join a university that was willing to offer FWAs to help him cope with his special needs child. Having FWAs as part of the work policy enhances work/personal life as it significantly improves the quality of both.

"The thing is I have a special needs son. So, I need to have flexible working hours.. because my wife is working as an academic as well, so we kind of balance out..so, I want to take turns..I do most of my work late at night after my kid has gone to sleep..

It [FWAs] *allows* me to come to the office a little bit late...this [FWAs] allows me to keep on working and remain productive as well.. *I made sure my publication is high, my research is good, so I met all the KPIs.*"

Academics with caring responsibilities have described how FWAs have helped them manage domestic and work requirements more effectively as shown by Helvaci (2017), who found that work-life does have a significant effect on an individual irrespective of their academic positions.

4.2 FWAs and Stress
Although FWAs undoubtedly envelop many elements central to academics' sense of fulfillment (productivity and well-being), flexibility in practice sometimes appears at a cost to them. In this study, two dimensions of stress were found to be expressed by the participants; physical stress and mental stress.

Working from home was generally associated with both, greater positive effect and lower negative effect (Vega et al., 2015). Academics are also tight with other tasks such as meetings and consultations and with FWAs they feel free to do their tasks, anywhere and everywhere.

Participants also revealed that satellite working, or FWAs, makes them happier and less stressed compared to when they have to thumbprint, and run to the machine. In general, stress occurs when a person has no control over when, where, and how he/she does the work. Stress causes some serious mental and physical problems that negatively influence employee's well-being.

Intense work pace and looming deadlines encroach academics' personal space and time. FWAs is like a double-edged sword as it blurs the line between working and leisure times. However, the debates around whether FWAs are linked to stress are specific to the type of flexibility. The concern of the blurring of work and home boundaries frequently is derived from teleworking or WFH (Chandola et al., 2019).

Physical stress
Physical stress is often cited as a negative physical symptom resulting from long working hours accommodated by the unintended merging of home and work. This is especially true in situations where both caring duties and working duties need to be taken care of at the same time.

> " I am working more hours…..we are much more tired.. even [at] night we are working...so from my [point of] view I feel it a little bit tiring because it [work] is like never-ending.."

> "I found that it's kind of fatigue as well because we cannot focus on our work activities as we are in the office physically...to prepare the presentation.. I might say that I will take a longer time as compared to physical class or working at the office."

Mental stress
Mental stress or psychological strain is commonly cited due to the increase of distraction, which leads to reduced focus in performing work tasks. As mentioned before, this typically occurs in a flexi-place setting, where the working environment might not be as conducive as in the office or any place specially designated for working. A number of academics have reflected on this issue when they are working away from the office:

> "Sometimes it becomes *stressful* for me….."

> "We don't feel very focussed in terms of what we are currently doing [office activities], it will have a negative impact, it will lead you to ...stressful [situations]."

It can be deduced that FWAs make participants happier and less stressed out than physically going to their respective workplaces. FWAs can be considered a 'double-edged sword' sometimes since it blurs the line between working and leisure times.

5.0 Conclusion
The main objective of this study is to explore the views of Malaysian academicians about FWAs. By looking at the current workplace flexibilities, the study looks at whether FWAs may benefit academics in terms of WLB and reduced stress levels.

Some interesting conclusions can be drawn from the focus group discussion on eight academics. Firstly, most of them value FWAs as a contributor to WLB as they found that they were in control of themselves; therefore, able to plan their work schedules. Secondly, as they were able to manage time and balance work and family, most of the academics had lower stress levels. Thirdly, a few of them faced the blurring of boundary issues and the inability to focus on work. Finally, looking at the cost-benefit of FWAs, they all agreed that benefits overpowered the costs of FWAs and increased their well-being.

The few contributions that this paper makes are: firstly, it triggers the idea of alternative working arrangements, which is not a norm for many academics in Malaysia. Secondly, it shows the growing health concerns resulting from work-related stress levels, which can negatively affect an academic's well-being. This form of stress is a result of role overload and role ambiguity. Finally, it can be said that FWAs may reduce some challenges for women in the workforce, help retain talent and also boost the Malaysian economy.

Even though this qualitative, exploratory study has many implications, but future research should look into an empirical research to examine how FWAs can impact academia's WLB and stress levels.

Based on the current pandemic, FWAs in the form of WFH were forced to be implemented globally and it has proved to be quite successful. Hence, this new norm, if implemented in a more structured and organised manner among academics, in terms of output-

based (KPI) blended learning, f2f +online and on a case-to-case basis, will definitely lead to an academic's well-being which is in line with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3).

Acknowledgments

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

With an accelerated growth within the academia and a sudden transition to a new normal, the potential acceptance of FWAs amongst the academic fraternity in Malaysia is pertinent.

The study shows how FWAs can lead to a better work-life balance with reduced stress-levels and hence higher productivity and happiness, which will lead to the well-being of academics.

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