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Work Life Balance in Higher Education Institutions – A Case Study of European Universities

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Abstract

The article presents the professional lives work researchers who, despite geographical diversity and the varied education system at different universities, present a fairly consistent perception of work-life balance (WLB). WLB at universities is not widely discussed or researched, making this study particularly significant. The aim of the study

was to assess the level of WLB among academic teachers. Data were collected by analysing documentation at universities and conducting an online survey among university employees. A total of 582 respondents completed the survey. Although job satisfaction was reported, researchers pointed out a lack of balance between professional and personal life. The study was limited to academic staff, excluding administrative staff. Expanding the research to other universities could help determine if the results are applicable to the entire scientific community.

The article is empirical in nature.

Keywords: higher education, public sector, work-life balance

JEL Classification Code: M59

Introduction

Management evolves with changes in the environment, living conditions, educational levels of workers, and the development of civilisation. It has been a part of human activity from the earliest times, thus having a practical dimension, with humans being the central of these actions. Management and quality sciences are based on a multidimensional scientific foundation, drawing from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, and economics. At the core of this discourse is the human being, often referred to as human capital (Sułkowski, 2016). From the early management theories of F.W. Taylor, the role of humans in the management process has been a significant factor in most management models and techniques. One can observe a shift in the approach to humans from being considered merely as human resources to being recognised as human capital, indicating a transformation from tools to a subjects in management. Indeed, in the early 20th century, E. Mayo, through his research, highlighted the human being as a social individual with needs, concerns, and aspirations (Wojtaszek, 2014). Looking back, it can be observed that knowledge about employee well-being and its potential impact on work outcomes emerged somewhat incidentally during research on people's behaviour at work and their motivations. This knowledge was captured through individual studies and observations, but ultimately, profit was the most crucial criterion for the management methods and techniques used, and research results were interpreted from that angle. As a result of research, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of Work-Life Balance (WLB) emerged. Translated directly, it means a balance between professional work and personal life. The emergence of this idea was influenced by various factors, ranging from the increasing workaholicism of employees and professional burnout, which ultimately led to a decrease in employee creativity, to changes in the labour market and greater opportunities for choosing qualified workers (Smoder, 2012; Leoński, 2015).

Work and personal life are fundamental domains of human life (Leslie, King, Clair, 2019), and finding a balance between the two is an absolute necessity in the modern world. Literature on the topic of Work-Life Balance (WLB) indicates that work primarily refers to employment in an organisational setting, while personal life is a domain unrelated to work, that includes family, education, travel, physical fitness, health, etc. (Benito-Osorio, Muñoz-Aguado, Villar, 2014; Kar, Panda, Pathak, 2019). WLB is often described as a dynamic phenomenon, one in which individuals oscillate between two extremes – work and life – at specific moments and under specific conditions (Leslie, King, Clair, 2019). This situation applies to all employees, including academic teachers who were the subjects of the research described in this article.

The idea of work-life balance

The basis for the concept of work-life balance originated from the observation that time spent at work was increasingly encroaching on private life. Initially WLB aimed to separate these two spheres, but it soon became apparent that drawing a clear line between them was not feasible... It was necessary to harmoniously integrate these spheres, allowing work, family, and employees' passions to form a cohesive whole (Robak, 2010). As a result, it became impossible to adopt any single, universally accepted definition of this phenomenon, leading to various interpretations. Some describe WLB as having satisfying experiences both at work and at home (Kirchmeyer, 2013). Others understand it as the joy and satisfaction derived from work and private life with as few conflicts as possible (Clark, 2000) or alternatively, as a process which leads to a person being equally interested and satisfied with their professional and family roles (Greenhaus, Powell, 2003). In the course of developing research on the phenomenon over time, modifications to the definition were made, indicating that the balance between work and private life is a process through which an individual's performance and fulfilment of professional and family duties align with their life roles at a given moment (Greenhaus, Allen, Spector, 2006). Consequently, WLB has been described as the realisation of role expectations that are negotiated and shared with partners both in the organisation as well as in the family (Mengistu, 2020).

The most common definition is the ability/possibility to combine work with other dimensions of human life, such as home, family, social activities and personal interests (Leoński, 2015). In other words, it can be said to be a balance between work and the employee's life outside of work (family, social, health) (Borkowska, 2010), or a comparison between time spent as an employee and as a member of society or a family (Malau, 2023). The balance described relates to achieving equilibrium

through managing, organising, and setting priorities for personal tasks and tasks related to work (Fazal, Naz, Khan, Pedder, 2019; Franco, Picinin, Pilatti, Franco, 2021). In the first decades of the 21st century, it was observed that a larger number of workers valued WLB more than high compensation (in 16 out of 23 surveyed countries, it was over 50% of respondents) (Kelly Global Workforce Index, 2014). This is an individual approach, while in terms of the central management level of a country WLB is the implementation of several policies: family, gender equality and employment (Polkowska, 2013). Although the presence of many definitions can provide an adequate understanding of the concept, the multiplicity of definitions can also be a source of misunderstandings among researchers (Lakshmi, Gopinath, 2013)

In management practice, Work-Life Balance is increasingly being taken into account, especially with changes in the labour market, such as a shift from an employer's market to an employee's market. In such cases, the needs and expectations of employees become bargaining elements. Another factor is the level of commitment or efficiency – there is a growing body of scientific literature pointing to the indirect relationship between economic efficiency and increased work-life balance (Borkowska, 2010; Spytek-Bandurska, 2022; Malau, 2023; Opoku, Kwao, Johnson, 2023). Research also highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on increasing awareness of the need for balance and equilibrium between work and private life (Godlewska-Bujok, 2020; Gross-Gołacka, Bojanowska-Sosnowska, 2023).

Faced with socio-economic consequences impacting the functioning of employers in both the private and public spheres, European institutions have also taken notice. Recognising the importance of the WLB, the European Union, introduced Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers, commonly referred to as the Work-Life Balance Directive (Dyrektywa 2019/1158). The directive entered the Polish legal system on April 26, 2023, amending the Labor Code and other acts (*The Act of March 9, 2023*). The provisions impact the situation of all workers, although the minimum expectations of the directive are primarily directed towards caregivers of dependents and parents of minor children, with a particular emphasis on promoting gender equality and redefining the roles of mothers and fathers. Additionally, the directive aims to create possibilities for flexible work arrangements for every employee allowing agreements on work timing and extent to be negotiated with employers.

Work life balance in higher education institutions

The aforementioned European Directive 2019/1158 has modified the Polish Labor Code. One of its effects is its impact on the legal regulations of higher education institutions – for example, as of April 2023, it is possible for non-academic staff

to work remotely. The Labor Code has also strengthened the role of parental leave and paternal leave, as well as time off due to force majeure. This allows for greater flexibility in work for all groups of employees, which can enhance the sense of work-life balance. The mere creation of a legal framework makes it possible to introduce into everyday life a greater awareness of the importance of balancing professional and personal life, seen as one of the elements of increasing socio-economic efficiency. In the public sector, a flexible approach, e.g. to working hours, is a challenge due to legal constraints that emphasise a subservient role toward society, high discipline in public finances, organisational hierarchy, and control systems (Spytek-Bandurska, 2022). On the other hand, the higher education system is an atypical part of the public sector where work-life balance is more difficult to define through regulations (other than regulations regarding maternity, parental, and caregiving leaves) due to the individual nature of the work of academic teachers (Opoku, Kwao, Johnson, 2023). Taking into account these limitations and conditions, addressing the issue of work-life balance in universities may require multi-faceted research across various fields.

The influence of colleges and universities in shaping the framework of their functioning (legal, organisational, social) is multidimensional. On the one hand, universities educate new generations of engineers, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. On the other hand, universities themselves are workplaces for thousands of employees who, having the tools and skills, can contribute to the implementation and verification of various elements of work-life balance. Higher education institutions also serve as an example of how challenging it is to achieve this balance through flexible, non-normative ways of working and legal regulations (Franco et al., 2021). Where does the topic of work-life balance for academic teachers come from? Increased competition, a global knowledge economy, rising levels of public scrutiny and political interventions in university affairs, digitalisation, rising staff-to-student ratios, and continuous demands for improved efficiency and greater engagement have radically changed the nature of academic work in recent years (Randell-Moon, Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith, 2013; Saltmarsh, Randell-Moon, 2015).

The lecturer plays a significant role in achieving the organisational goals of the university, and their work influences the learning process and often the future of students (Gooding, 2018). As employees, they face continuous pressures related to the quality of teaching, conducting and publishing scientific research, meeting deadlines, evaluating results within programmes, requirements for frequent participation in academic events, conferences, handling administrative matters, and other activities (Johnson, Willis, Evans, 2019). Due to the specific nature of their work, research on work-life balance of higher education teachers and other professionals working at universities is conducted in relation to factors such as stress levels, workload, and academic duties including conducting and publishing research (You, 2016). It

is important to note that working in academia requires autonomy and creativity (Saltmarsh, Randell-Moon, 2015). However, research indicates that academic teachers are working increasingly longer hours, and working evenings and weekends is becoming commonplace (Kinman, Jones, 2008; Randell-Moon, Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith, 2013). In the face of diverse professional tasks and responsibilities (for example, serving in roles such as rector, dean, director, programme coordinator) and their role in the family, lecturers may encounter fatigue, stress, depression, and physical or mental health issues, leading to a disruption of the work-family balance (WLB) (Haar, Brougham, 2022). Moreover, working conditions, such as remote teaching from home or writing articles from home, increasingly blur the boundaries between work and non-work areas.

Relatively little research on WLB in higher education institutions has been conducted in Europe (Franco et al., 2021). However, research described in peer-reviewed open-access articles from the last 3 years (2020–2023) in Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia) (Khan, Chiu Yiong Lim, Yacob, 2022; Malau, 2023) and Africa (Opoku, Kwao, Johnson, 2023) indicates that the connection between work efficiency and the ability to maintain work-life balance is significant from a research perspective. Organisational support and the provision of a friendly personnel policy (which requires appropriate labour laws) are also crucial elements influencing WLB in the organisation. The studies described in articles on work-life balance phenomena in Europe primarily focus on the use of digital tools by students or gender equality issues (Bucea-Manea-Țoniș, Simion, Ilic, Braicu, Manea, 2020). However, there is a lack of broader research on this phenomenon in academia. Research conducted as part of university management processes, which can provide information about WLB practices in higher education institutions, is essential and necessary for a deeper understanding of the topic. Such a challenge was addressed in the final report of a study conducted by eight universities as part of the UNA EUROPA UNA.RESIN project.

Empirical research methodology – a description of the research methodology (ANETA)

The Una Resin project, conducted from March 2021 to April 2023, was based on research data collected from eight European universities affiliated with the Una Europa consortium. It highlighted the significance of work-life balance in the functioning of higher education institutions. Employees from the following universities participated in the study: Jagiellonian University, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Helsingfors Universitet, University

of Edinburgh, Freie Univeritat Berlin, KU Leuven, and Alma Mater Studiorum – Universita di Bologna. A total of 582 respondents, all employed as academic teachers, took part in the survey. The purpose of the study was to assess the level of work-life balance among academic teachers in conjunction with six other demographic elements: age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, background, and disability.

In the Una Resin project, the WLB was included as part of the research area focused on Equality and Diversity (Area 3 of the Una Resin project). Adhering to the principle of triangulation, the project employed multiple data collection methods: an analysis of existing documentation at participating universities and an online survey conducted among university employees. This comprehensive approach allowed for a robust examination of the WLB issue, as clearly evidenced by the data analysis from the surveys conducted among university employees.

As part of the document analysis, various university documents were examined, including the university's strategy and documents from the central administration, particularly those of the HR department as identified by the Chancellor's office. However, the least amount of information was obtained through interviews, where WLB issues were primarily addressed only in relation to systemic solutions outlined in the existing documentation of the university.

Empirical research findings

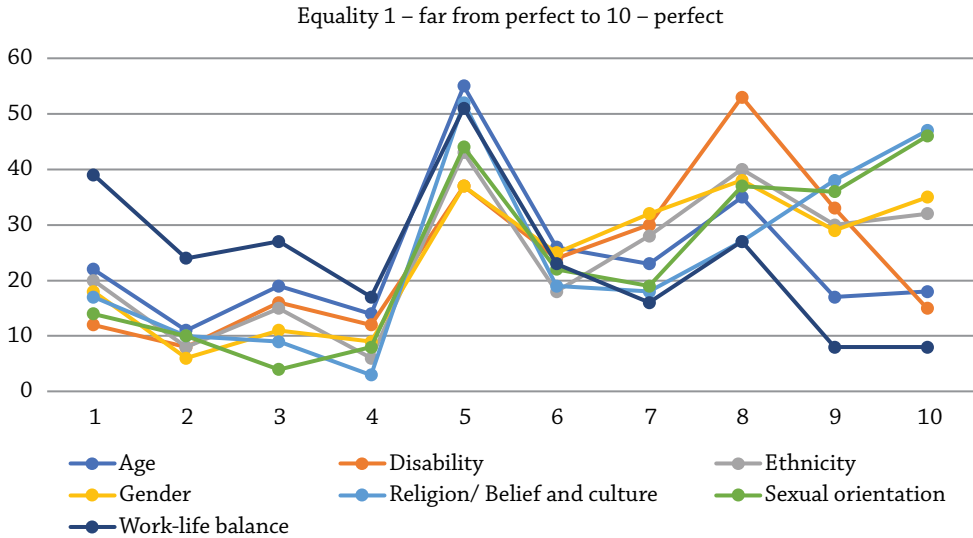
WLB issues were alongside six other elements deemed important from the perspective of modern management: age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, background, and disability.

Respondents used a scale from 1 to 10 to express their opinions on how the university ensures equality and diversity in terms of the seven elements mentioned earlier. Significantly different and at the same time negative results, were recorded in only one area, namely work-life balance. In this area, there were more ratings of 'decidedly negative' and 'negative' (scoring range 1–3) and fewer ratings of 'decidedly positive' (9–10 points) compared to other areas. This indicates that respondents rated the work-life balance aspect significantly worse than the others (compare Figure 1).

Respondents used the same 1 to 10 scale to express their opinions on how the university ensures diversity (compare Figure 2).

Once again, 'decidedly negative' results, compared to other areas of interest, were noted only in one area – work-life balance. In this area, there were more ratings of 'decidedly negative' (1–2 points) and fewer ratings of 'decidedly positive' (9–10 points).

Figure 1. Respondent Perceptions of Equality Initiatives Across All Universities (cumulative headcount)



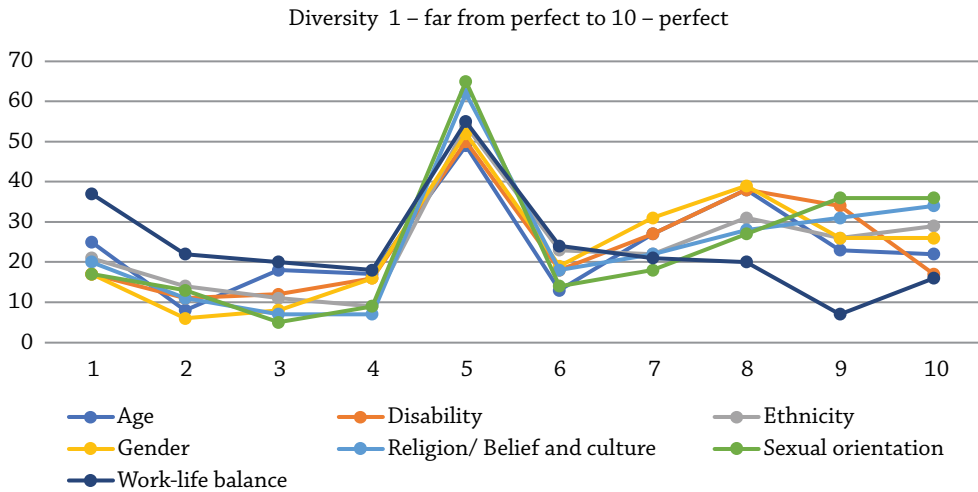
Source: based on Una.Resin. Mapping HR Strategies and priorities for joint strategy.

Of course, the significantly negative perception could stem from various reasons. When analysing other data sources for the project, we also found data related to work-life balance evident in the documentation analysis. The documents contained information about the following forms of support for work-life balance:

1. subsidising sports cards,
2. subsidising tickets to events,
3. organising and funding of employee trips,
4. social support for employees who are parents, including subsidies for nursery/preschool costs; summer/winter vacations for employees and their families; and summer/winter vacations specifically for employees' children,
5. a comprehensive programme integrating the activities of the HR and Health and Safety departments,
6. participation in a comprehensive external audit to ensure compliance with required standards,
7. support for employees in managing their career and life choices – from workplace support measures (e.g., offering courses, insights into career prospects, focus and quiet spaces, counselling) to external support measures (e.g., childcare, sports offers) and promoting a healthy lifestyle,
8. support for those responsible for childcare, such as a fund for scientists unable to perform laboratory work due to pregnancy,

9. the university’s Health Management Office and the Dual Career and Family Service offer a range of measures to promote the full participation of older workers and support their work-life balance.

Figure 2. Respondent perceptions of diversity initiatives across all universities (cumulative headcount)



Source: based on Una.Resin. Mapping HR Strategies and priorities for joint strategy.

The analysis of the documentation revealed that deficiencies in work-life balance are not solely due to systemic and organisational issues. Instead, they are often related to everyday work and relationships within departmental teams. For example, while universities have systems in place to support parents with young children returning to work, departmental practices can still disrupt work-life balance. Factors such as the timing, duration, and frequency of meetings and sessions (especially remote ones), along with the expectations for deadlines and delivering results, can disrupt work-life balance. Furthermore, the attitudes of supervisors/subordinates toward work commitment and the expected balance between private and professional life are crucial elements of work-life balance. The present generational gaps in the labour market make this challenge more complex, as there are various attitudes and positions among supervisors and subordinates. These differences are particularly significant because they influence the recruitment and retention of new employees representing the generation entering the labour market.

Conclusion

Research has shown that work-life balance is assessed significantly more negatively by academic teachers compared to six other co-evaluated elements.

The analysis of documentation determined that the causes are not systemic. At the university level, systematic measures have been implemented to address work-life balance through university regulations in accordance with national labour laws or other measures supporting employees and their families. The challenges predominantly lie at the department level (e.g., organisation of meetings) and at the team level, where expectations of superiors and generational differences intensify these issues. Universities seem to ensure flexible working conditions and family-friendly working hours, but these measures often appear insufficient or contentious. Given the results obtained, it can be considered a challenge for the university, as organisations, to balance the professional and personal lives of academic teachers. This could be achieved, for example, by delegating some administrative tasks to be administrative staff, thereby providing better organisational support.

Since the research was limited to eight universities, it could be extended to other institutions to confirm whether the results can be generalised to the entire academic community. It is worth noting that the study was conducted exclusively among academic teachers, while the university community also includes a vast number of administrative staff, who were excluded from this study.

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