WORK INTENSIFICATION AND TURNOVER INTENTION IN ACADEMIA: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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ABSTRACT

Numerous reforms in the Malaysian academia in recent years have resulted in academic work intensification which produces work-life balance and turnover intention in the higher education sector. This effect, however, has received limited research. This study aims to examine the relationships between work intensification, work-life balance and turnover intention among academics in Malaysian universities using the theory of Job Demand-Resources. The mediating effect of work-life balance on the relationship between work intensification and turnover intention was also explored. Data were collected through a survey from 190 respondents in public and private universities in Malaysia. As hypothesized, the PLS-SEM results revealed that the path relationships among the constructs were in the expected directions. Work intensification and turnover intention were found to be positively related, whereas work intensification and work-life balance were negatively related. In addition, work-life balance was negatively associated with turnover intention and it partially mediated the relationship between work intensification and turnover intention. Several important implications of the study findings for future research and practice were also discussed

Contribution/ Originality: Malaysian academics have experienced work intensification due to various work reforms. Using the JDR framework, this study examines the effects of work intensification on the academics' work-life balance perceptions and turnover intention. The findings confirm the JDR theory that achieving work-life balance is instrumental in decreasing academics' turnover intention.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past five decades, the Malaysian government has played a pivotal role in improving the quality of education and providing more educational opportunities for Malaysians. In particular, the Malaysian higher education aims to produce a pool of qualified and skilled graduates who are crucial to the development of the nation [1]. Academics, therefore act as the backbone and the guardians of knowledge to students [2]. In recent years, however, the roles and responsibilities of academics have expanded from merely sharing knowledge in the lecture hall to doing research, taking care of student affairs, events, course management and other administrative duties [3, 4].

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Academics have to multitask due to these multiple and sometimes conflicting work roles [5] which lead to increased work intensification. Work intensification in turn, produces negative outcomes such as poor work performance, emotional exhaustion [6] and decreased work-life balance [7]. Academics may subsequently distance themselves from work or may even express the intention to quit [8, 9]. Many researchers [10-13] contend that work-life balance is very crucial in an organisation as it does not only lead to improved work productivity but it also contributes to greater organisational loyalty and lower turnover intention.

Bowen and Schuster [14] posit that "the excellence of higher education is a function of the kind of people it is able to enlist and retain on its faculty." However, Malaysia faces a critical shortage of well-trained and experienced faculty members to meet the rapidly growing education requirements [15]. The turnover rate of academics in Malaysia is reported to be rather high [16, 17]. Given the aforementioned, this study aims to examine the effects of work intensification and work-life balance on academics' intention to leave. The study findings hold significant implications for policy makers and the top management of universities when they are developing effective retention practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Work Intensification

With the emergence of borderless jobs across work and family domains and the increasing need to adapt to continuous organisational change, employees are now left with lesser time for additional tasks [18]. The result is work intensification which involves rising levels of work demands during working hours. Work intensification also makes demands on individuals' private lives by invading their personal time Macky and Boxall [7]; Green [19]. Lu [20] defined work intensification as extra workload for employees. Franke [21] described work intensification as the extra stress beyond traditional demands. There are empirical evidences [6] supporting that work intensification is a new demand which employees at all levels experience alike and suffer from it. This paper argues that academics in Malaysia similarly experience work intensification given the recent reforms in the higher education sector.

The extant literature suggests that work intensification can induce absenteeism, increased accident rates, low productivity, high turnover intention, higher sickness levels and different kinds of occupational illness [20, 22]. Work intensification has also been associated with high levels of work-life imbalance Macky and Boxall [7]. Walter [23] survey shows that about 51% of American employees reported increase in responsibilities or extra hours at the office has negatively affected their well-being and work-life balance. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents agreed that they would not be able to sustain their current workload long-term. In the case of academics, when they have to work longer hours at the office and have lesser off time, many are forced to make special and expensive arrangement for additional childcare [23]. Work intensification can also lead to poor work performance, reduced family time, Burchell, et al. [6] poor work-life balance and intention to quit [8, 9].

2.2. Work-life Balance

The concept of work-life balance was first introduced in the 19th century when workers and unions successfully campaigned against long working hours in factories [24]. In the 1980s, organisations began to introduce family friendly policies, such as telecommuting and flexible scheduling. Although the policies were originally focused on women, in real, they support both women's and men's needs. In the late 1980s, work-life balance began to concentrate more on the development of effective recruitment or retention policies [25].

Work-life balance refers to the ability of individuals to be equally engaged in work and family responsibilities [26, 27]. This means balancing work and other commitments (hobbies, travelling and family), rather than just concentrating on paid work [25]. Similarly, Dundas [28] defined work-life balance as effectively managing the juggling act between paid work and all other activities that are important to people such as family, community

activities, voluntary work, personal development and leisure and recreation. Haar, et al. [29] work-life balance simply as an individual's perception of how well his or her life roles are balanced.

Generally, healthy work-life balance is an important issue in workplace because as mentioned earlier it can potentially influence employee's well-being and attitudes towards their company [30] and cause other outcomes such as increased productivity, loyalty, decreased turnover intention and actual turnover [10-13, 31].

2.3. Turnover Intention

Ang and Poh [32] defined turnover intention as an individual's intention to leave his or her organization within a defined period of time. According to Berndt [33] turnover intention is only about a specific behaviour of interest and not the actual behaviour. However, the theory of Planned Behaviour [34] states that intention can be a precise predictor of the subsequent behaviour of turnover. It is a type of withdrawal behaviour on work and it is considered to be an immediate prediction of actual turnover [35]. Other studies [11, 36] also confirm that turnover intention is correlated with actual turnover, thus offering considerable empirical support for the notion that turnover intention is probably the most significant antecedent of turnover decisions.

There are a number of factors that can contribute to turnover intention; two of which are individual's negative opinions and attitudes toward their job and workplace [37]. Other factors that contribute to intention to leave among academics are bureaucratisation [38] high level of job stress [39] and work-life imbalance [40]. When academics leave, it increases costs on recruiting and training new hires for the university. It will also affect the university's productivity given the low morale of the academics who choose to stay [41]. Thus, it is important for the top management of the university and policy makers to develop effective retention policies to better manage their human resources and to prevent academics from leaving.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework for this study was developed based on the preceding literature review. The underlying theory for this framework is Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) theory. This theory states that demanding jobs (e.g. work overload and emotional demands) exhaust academics' mental and physical resources and may therefore lead to the depletion of energy (e.g. a state of exhaustion) or other negative outcomes (e.g. health problems, turnover intention) [42, 43]. The proposed model suggests that work intensification is negatively related to work-life balance [7, 44] but is positively related to turnover intention [8, 9, 45]. On the other hand, positive work-life balance will lower turnover intention [10, 31]. It is also likely that work intensification will have indirect effects via work-life balance to help reduce turnover intention of academics. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Work intensification is positively related to turnover intention.

Hypothesis 2: Work intensification is negatively related to work-life balance.

Hypothesis 3: Work-life balance is positively related to turnover intention.

Hypothesis 4: Work-life balance significantly mediates the relationship between work intensification and turnover intention.

4. METHOD

Data were collected via a survey questionnaire. The measures in the survey were adapted from various sources. The 4-item work intensification scale was adapted from [46] which represents the perception of the need to work at increasing speed, perform different tasks simultaneously, and reduce idle time. A sample item is "These days, I have to work at high speed to complete my work". Work-life balance was assessed using 8 items [47] which gauge the enough time-off from work. A sample item is "I have enough time after work to carry out personal matters." The turnover intention 5-item scale was taken from [32]. A sample item is "I am seriously thinking of quitting my job".

A total of 320 survey forms were distributed to the target respondents. One hundred and ninety academics from public universities (60 or 21.6%) and private universities (130 or 78.4%) responded, giving a response rate of 59%. The sample comprising slightly more women (99 or 52.1%) than men represented different academic disciplines such as humanities, social sciences and formal sciences. Their ages ranged from 28 years to 58 years old. More than half of them were married (122 or 64.2%).

Smart PLS 3.0 was used to analyse the data. The analysis evaluated the measurement model (latent variables) first and then examined the structural model [48].

5. RESULTS

In the first phase of the analysis, each of the items in the constructs was tested for its validity and reliability. Due to low loadings of below 0.7, one item from the turnover intention scale (i.e. Ti5) was deleted. No items were deleted from the other three constructs since they were in range of the accepted values. As shown in table 7.1, CR values for the constructs were examined and found to have values exceeding 0.70, illustrating acceptable levels [49]. The AVE values for each construct model were found to be above 0.50 [50]. Thus, it can be concluded that the measures had sufficient convergent validity.

As seen in Table 1, the calculated mean and standard deviation of work intensification are 3.86 and 0.71, respectively. This suggests that academics experienced rather high levels of work intensification. Work-life balance was at a moderate level (M=3.36; SD=0.85). As for turnover intention, the level is low (M = 2.71, SD = 0.96).

Discriminant validity of the reflective indicators for all the constructs was also evaluated. As shown in Table 2, the values in the diagonal of the constructs were higher than all other values in the row and column. Hence, it can be concluded that all the measurements had discriminant validity [49].

Table-1. Descriptive Statistics and Convergent Validity for Reflective Measurement

Variable		M	SD	AVE	CR
Independent	Work Intensification	3.86	0.71	0.63	0.87
Mediator	Work-life Balance	3.36	0.85	0.64	0.93
Dependent	Turnover Intention	2.71	0.96	0.83	0.95

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability

Table-2. Results of Discriminant Validity for Reflective Measurement

	Turnover Intention	Work Intensification	Work-life Balance
Turnover Intention	**0.91**		
Work Intensification	0.18	**0.79**	
Work-Life Balance	0.16	-0.26	**0.80**

The second phase of the analysis proceeded to the testing of the structural model. Table 3 presents the final outcomes of the structural model estimate, which was run using bootstrapping by generating 5000 samples [51]. The results indicate that the path coefficients of the direct effects were significant, providing support for H1, H2 and H3 at 99% confidence level. Specifically, Table 7.3 shows that work intensification and turnover intention were positively related (β = 0.25, t-value = 2.71, p < 0.01) (H1), whereas work intensification and work-life balance were negatively related (β = -0.27, t-value = 3.21, p < 0.01) (H2). Finally, work-life balance was negatively associated with turnover intention (β = -0.23, t-value = 2.44, p < 0.01) (H3).
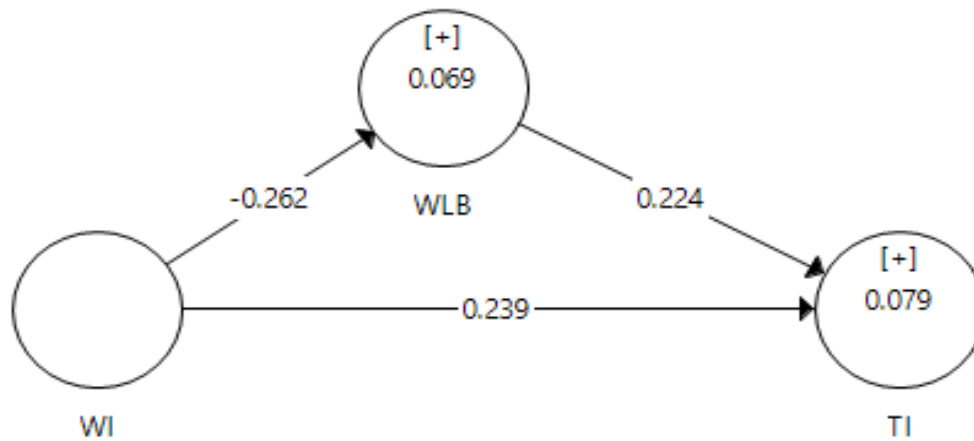
Figure-1. PLS Structural Model

Source: the results from Smart PLS 3.0

H4 was also supported at 95% confidence level as the indirect effects 95% bootstrapped confidence interval: [LL = -0.119, UL = -0.001] did not straddle a 0 in between [52]. Thus, we can conclude that partial mediation effect was statistically significant (β = -0.06, t-value = 1.99, p < 0.05).

Table-3. Structural Estimates – The Direct and Indirect Effects

Hypothesis	Relationshi	Std. Beta	Std. Error	*t*-value	Decision
H1	WI → TI	0.25	0.09	2.71**	Supported
H2	WI → WLB	- 0.27	0.08	3.21**	Supported
H3	WLB → TI	- 0.23	0.09	2.44**	Supported
H4	WI →WLB → TI	-0.06	0.03	1.99*	Suppor ed

Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01; WI = Work Intensification; WLB = Work-life Balance; TI = Turnover Intention

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of current study are generally congruent with past findings. First, the findings suggest that academics in Malaysian universities perceived high levels of work intensification. As noted earlier, work intensification can lead to a host of problems such as different kinds of occupational illness, low productivity, decreased work-life balance and high level of turnover intention. This study found that work intensification was positively related to turnover intention, confirming previous findings [9, 53]. The findings also align with past studies, [7, 44, 54] which reported negative associations between work intensification and work-life balance. It is also worth noting that this study found work intensification to explain slightly more variance in work-life balance than turnover intention.

Work-life balance was found to be negatively correlated to turnover intention, confirming past research that showed work-life balance decreases turnover intention [10, 11, 40]. When academics perceive work-life imbalance, it will in turn lead to turnover intention or even actual turnover. The voluntary turnover of academic staff will affect replacement costs and work arrangement. More importantly, it will have an adverse effect on the agenda of the higher education sector. Hence, experiences of work-life imbalance among academics should be duly addressed by the top management of the universities.

The study's finding on the mediating role of work-life balance in the relationship between work intensification and turnover intention further accentuates the important role that work-life balance plays in combating the issue of turnover among academics. Achieving work-life balance poses more challenges for academics given that their work is not essentially "open-ended" [55]. Therefore, it is very crucial for universities to create suitable conditions in which academics can balance work with their personal life or family life [27]. The universities should consider a more effective management of work-life balance for academics which encompasses work practices (e.g. working

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hours, work arrangements, etc.), flexibility, adequate support (e.g. parental leave entitlements) and resources for academics [12, 56] and more importantly work-life balance and health-promoting leadership.

The current study's finding only sought out the general outcomes of the relationships between work intensification, work-life balance and turnover intention. Further research can be done to examine these relationships from a gendered perspective given that work-life balance is an issue for both men and women [57]. Future studies may also consider the potential influence of demographics (e.g. age, marital status, number and age of children/dependents and work hours) on work-life balance and intention to quit among academics.

7. CONCLUSION

This study confirmed the interrelationships between work intensification, work-life balance and turnover intention from the perspective of academics in Malaysian universities. Besides, it provided empirical support for the important role of work-life balance in mediating the relationship between work intensification and turnover intention. The knowledge gained is useful for the top management of universities and policy makers for formulating and developing more effective talent management and retention for the higher education sector.

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