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**Title: Exploring the Work-Life Balance Experiences of International PhD Students in the UK**

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## **Title: Exploring the Work-Life Balance Experiences of International PhD Students in the UK**

### **Summary**

Despite over two decades of research examining work-life (WF) balance, interest still soars. Extant research has examined antecedents and outcomes of WF balance initiatives and have found both individual and group level outcomes. Scholars across multiple disciplines have also explored and examined how various individuals (women, men, students etc.) in and out of the workplace manage and maintain a balance between their work lives and their personal lives. The extensive nature of existing research reflects the important challenges faced when attempting to balance work and personal lives. However, an important group which have been largely missed in scholarly work are international PhD students. In a qualitative study, we interviewed 26 international PhD students to explore their challenges, experience of barriers and coping strategies used in navigating the extremely stressful PhD journey, particularly as it relates to maintaining a balance between their work (study) lives and their personal lives. Our findings contribute to work-family balance theorisation and have practical implications for higher education institutions and students.

*Keywords:* Work-life balance, International PhD students, Coping strategies and Support system.

**Submission Track:** Human Resource Management

This paper is in its developmental stage and it is hoped that by the time of the conference (i.e. September, 2019). The authors would have completed data analysis and will be proceeding with write-up.

**Word Count:** 1,956

## **Introduction**

As noted earlier, despite the extensive nature of existing studies into work-life (WF) balance, there is a dearth in research exploring the unique experiences of PhD student, particularly international PhD students. Stimpson and Filer (2011) noted that previous studies on the topic of WF balance in higher education have placed more emphasis on faculty (teaching and research staff). Those that exist have mainly focused on female PhD students (e.g. Paksi, 2015; Haynes, Bulosan, Citty, Grant-Harris, Hudson, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2012; Carter, Blumenstein, & Cook, 2013). This was based on the fact that most of these women had challenges in meeting up with the demands of family responsibilities, academics demands and their personal lives (Carter et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the challenge of balancing academic demands and personal lives presently is not just limited to female graduate students alone. McCoy and Gardner (2011) noted that students (men and women) making a transition from full-time employment to become full-time graduate students also face the challenge of maintaining a balance. Consequently, there is need to explore the lived experiences of international PhD students as a means to understand their challenges, experience of barriers and coping strategies used in navigating the extremely stressful PhD journey. This is particularly important if we are to more accurately understand their unique experiences in order to contribute to and expand on the theorising of WF balance.

The doctoral degree is the highest academic degree awarded after PhD students have exhibited the ability to carry out academic research and have made a substantial contribution to knowledge (Park, 2005). As suggested by Jairam and Kahl (2012), the doctoral degree is the peak of education. To gain admission into HE to undergo a PhD programme oftentimes requires going through an intense selection process. Despite the selection process these individuals undergo, the attrition and dropout rate is very high, with a figure of 67% in humanities and social sciences and 24% in biomedical and behavioural sciences (Gardner, 2010). Understanding why this is the case has become important both for scholars and practitioners.

The unique demands of a PhD programme on its students differ from other graduate students. These demands coupled with personal responsibilities brought about by the maturity of these group of students (such as family responsibilities, financial responsibilities, demands from friends etc.) has been noted to be amongst the reasons for the high dropout rate. For example, Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine and Hubbard (2018), found that the demands and responsibilities of PhD students result in higher stress levels which in turn affect their WF balance. Studies have also found that the inability of PhD students to balance their work (study) lives and personal lives results in higher attrition rates (Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, & Suñe-Soler, 2017). Consequently, there is a link between social isolation, stress and student attrition (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Ali & Kohun, 2006; Lovitts, 2001).

The aim of this study, therefore, is to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the WF balance experiences of International PhD students in the UK higher education. We seek to answer the following research question: how do international PhD students maintain a balance between academic demands (work) and personal life? Our intent is to understand how these international PhD students manage the demands of their research and personal life while considering the financial demands, language barrier, attrition and visa requirement. Most of these International PhD students engage in part-time jobs to meet up with financial demands in terms of tuition fees as well as meeting up with family responsibilities and their personal lives. Within the context of this study, 'work' will refer to the academic demands of these PhD students while 'life' will be referring to their family life (married and single), personal and recreational time.

Our study will contribute to existing research in a number of ways. First, we extend the theorising of WF balance to international PhD students. International PhD students are an

important group in the educational sector both financially and academically as they make valuable contributions to research through their academic work, however, to date little is known about their WF balance challenges. As noted earlier, extant research have explored the WF balance of faculty/academic staff (e.g. Stimpson and Filer, 2011); female PhD students (Holm, J.M., Prosek, E.A. and Godwin Weisberger, A.C., 2015) (e.g. Holm, Prosek & Godwin Weisberger, 2015); and PhD/doctoral students in general. Studies exploring the lived experiences of international students are very few and of those that exist, they are limitations with the sample size, which limits our overall understanding of their experiences (e.g. Martinez et al, 2013; Haynes et al., 2012). Second, existing studies looking at PhD students, in general, have mainly been conducted in the US (e.g. Martinez et al, 2013), given the increasing numbers of International PhD students in the UK (the majority of students are international: see statistics by UKCISA, 2018), there is need for more research into this group of individuals. Finally, earlier research has noted the higher attrition rate of PhD students which results in financial loss to higher education institutions and the economy in the long run. It is therefore important to understand successful measures used by these group of students to balance their work (study) and family lives such that they are less likely to be stressed and hence less likely to drop-out.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Work-Life Balance***

“The first, and most widely held, meaning of work-family balance is a lack of conflict or interference between work and family roles” (Frone, 2003, p. 145). Work and family are two vital spheres of an individual’s life (Greenhaus & Powell, 2017). Russo, Shteigman, and Carmeli (2015) noted that WF balance is a key means used to enhance people’s views of being emotionally, physically or mentally available to take on several roles that release the positive force to meet with several works and life demands successfully. A state of imbalance between work and life is seen as a challenge that affects the well-being of the individual and leads to work-family conflict (Pookaiyaudom, 2015; Kofodimos, 1993), which is one of the most discussed concepts in the work-family interface literature. The varying nature of work and family responsibility has brought about a rise in research focusing on work-family issues that arise from this change (Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998). While the pressure and conflict that occurs between work and family might be common, cultural and societal context plays a significant role in the level of conflict as well as the circumstances that gives rise to that conflict. Brough and O’Driscoll (2005), stated that stress is linked to work-family conflict. Depression was found to be another outcome of work-family conflict as well as poor physical health (Frone, Rusell and Barnes, 1996). In a study by (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), they linked negative emotions and dissatisfaction with life to work-family conflict. Both (Frone et al., 1996) and (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) attributed work-family conflict to heavy drinking, while (Gareis, Barnett, Ertel & Berkman, 2009) connected it to self-rated mental health. Hence, an inability to balance work and family roles adequately could lead to detrimental effects.

### ***Work-Life Balance amongst PhD students***

The workplace has undergone some changes in global economies (Miller, 2012) as well as a change in demographic pattern (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). This demographic change resulted in more women in paid employment (Wang & Verma, 2012) and as a result drawn the attention of researchers to study the boundary between work and family lives of employees (Saeed & Farooqi, 2014). Hence, Ehrhart, Mayer and Ziegert (2011), suggested that these changes in the workforce contributed to the idea of WF balance. In the same

manner in which the workplace experienced a change in demography, the population of PhD students also underwent a demographic change (Offerman, 2011; Brus, 2006).

Therefore, a significant consideration when discussing WF balance and graduate education is changing demographics. Within the UK, statistical evidence (UKCISA, 2018) has shown a rise in the number of graduate students migrating from their countries of residence to other countries as International students, particularly coming to study at a doctoral level. In the past, getting into the university for a doctoral degree was made available to a few people who were privileged mainly white men, aged between 22-30, single, had no children, immersed in study, work in assistant role, funded through tuition waiver and given stipends (Brus, 2006). These class of individuals are called the traditional doctoral students. Presently, admission into the doctoral program is made accessible to more people and doctoral degrees obtained by more women and people from different racial and cultural backgrounds (Archbald, 2011). This demographic change has brought about enrichment to the individuals involved, the society and the workforce. Despite these demographic changes, and as noted earlier, not much is known about the WF balance of these group of individuals. Therefore, it is necessary to engage in a research that will help identify the WF balance experiences of International PhD students.

## **Methodology**

We explore the WF balance experiences of International PhD students using a qualitative research design. Based on an interpretivist perspective, we adopt a phenomenological research approach. Adams and Van Manen (2012) described phenomenology as “the reflective study of prereflective or lived experiences”. In other words, it is “the careful and systematic reflective study of the lived experience” (Usher & Jackson, 2017). This method is ideal because we intend to explore the lived experiences of individuals through in-depth interviews to understand how they balance their work (study) and personal lives.

## **Participants and Data Collection**

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 26 International PhD students in a University in the United Kingdom. Interviews were conducted in public places preferred by the participants and were recorded with the participants’ consent. Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes; interview questions are available as an appendix. We used purposive sampling for selection of participants that fit the selection criteria and had experienced the phenomenon of WF balance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants’ were also recruited using a snowball sampling in which the participants who were been interviewed knew other participants who met the inclusion criteria and had rich information about the phenomenon being explored (Cassell, 2015).

## **Data Analysis Technique**

One of the authors transcribed interviews verbatim to ensure they familiarized themselves with and immersed themselves in data before proceeding to data analysis. Thematic analysis was used to select themes which helped us answer our research questions

## **Initial findings**

Our initial findings indicate that the major challenge international student face in their PhD journey is financial constraint. They also experienced challenges such as language barriers and isolation as a result of being distant from their extended family although they all had their husbands and children around. Despite the challenges experienced, the desire to complete their PhD led them to develop coping strategies such as prioritising, setting out a

plan and work with a schedule. Support from their family and society had helped to maintain a good WF balance. Additionally, the support from their supervisors, institutional workshops and seminars as well as their colleagues acted as a form of organisational support thereby helping them to balance their work (study) and family lives.

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

Our findings extend WF theorisation by exploring how international PhD students experiences and how they manage their work (study) and personal lives. This has theoretical implications for work-family scholarship and practical implications for higher education and human resource practitioners who implement WF balance initiatives on behalf of the institutions.

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