

Conceptual and Theoretical Aspects of Work-Life Balance Practices, Psychological Wellbeing, and Employee Engagement. A Study of Academic staff at Private Universities in Uganda's Central Region

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Abstract: This paper explores the conceptual and theoretical foundations of work-life balance practices, psychological well-being, and employee engagement at private universities in Uganda's Central Region. It combines scholarly perspectives to show how flexible work arrangements, leave policies, and wellness programmes as work life balance practice attributes influence the experiences of academic staff. Using the Spillover Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory, the paper explains how work-life balance practices shape employee engagement directly and through their impact on psychological well-being. Evidence from literature indicates that supportive work-life policies enhance purpose, autonomy, and overall well-being, which in turn strengthens employees' commitment and involvement. Conversely, limited support, high workloads, and institutional pressures lead to strain and disengagement. The review highlights the need for private universities to adopt holistic, wellness-focused strategies that promote staff well-being, productivity, and long-term institutional performance.

Keywords - Academic Staff; Employee Engagement; Private Universities; Psychological Well-being; Work-Life Balance Practices; Uganda

1. INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance practices (WLBP) have been a central theme in global labor market transformations. Brough et al. (2020) observed that many of the changes and evolutions in the modern workforce were directly linked to challenges in achieving a balanced life between work and personal obligations. As global lifestyles evolve, individuals face increasing pressure to juggle professional demands alongside familial and personal responsibilities (Akanji et al., 2020; Marzec & Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2023). Kun and Gadancz (2022) emphasized that achieving a consistent balance between personal and professional life remains a formidable challenge for most employees. The demands of multiple roles often lead to psychological strain and diminished employee engagement, prompting organizations to rethink their work-life balance practices (Saraswati & Lie, 2020).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Although limited empirical data exist on the status of WLBP in Ugandan private universities, comparable trends from other sectors, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed growing challenges. Evidence from the banking, health sectors showed that employees with poor work-life balance were more likely to experience mental and physical health issues, which in turn reduced their engagement levels (Nwangwa, 2021; Venkateshwaran & Suganya, 2021; Mugizi et al., 2021; Shirmohammadi et al.,

2022). Most of these studies employed small samples or narrowly focused on specific populations, and few addressed the higher education sector, particularly private universities in Uganda. This study therefore sought to fill that gap by investigating whether and how WLBP relate to employee engagement among academic staff, and by identifying indicators of psychological well-being that influence this relationship.

In Uganda, this challenge is strengthened by socio-demographic pressures. According to the World Bank (2024), the country's age dependency ratio stood at 84.27%, indicating that for every 100 working-age Ugandans, there were approximately 84 dependents. This high dependency burden added financial and caregiving responsibilities to the working population, particularly affecting their engagement, productivity, and psychological well-being. Supporting this, Kabunga et al. (2021) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 61% of healthcare workers in Uganda experienced burnout due to increased workload. Similarly, Kirabira et al. (2022) found that 97.2% of 384 healthcare workers in their study reported psychological distress, which compromised their dedication, absorption, and vigor at work. These studies suggest that poor WLBP are likely associated with psychological well-being and, ultimately, employee engagement within Uganda's broader workforce.

The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2022) similarly reported that 29% of employees globally were caregivers, supporting children, elderly parents, or both.

These overlapping responsibilities highlight the critical need for institutions to adopt flexible, family-supportive policies. Experience (2023) found that organizations offering flexibility in terms of where, when, and how employees work were 30% more successful in attracting and retaining talent. In contrast, institutions with rigid work arrangements reported turnover rates as high as 61%. This emphasizes the importance of responsive work-life balance practices, especially in Uganda, where demographic and lifestyle pressures create additional challenges for employees.

Educational institutions were not exempted from these pressures. Many, including universities, have implemented practices such as flexible work arrangements, remote work options, maternity and paternity leave, and wellness programs to help staff balance their professional and personal lives (Ferdous, 2019). However, despite these measures, work-life balance issues remain prevalent and demand greater institutional attention (Akanji et al., 2020). In Uganda, although national labor laws cap daily work hours at eight or ten with overtime (Republic of Uganda - Employment Act, 2006), the realities of economic pressure led many academic staff to work longer hours at the expense of their health and family life, yet long working hours and inadequate rest adversely affect employee engagement and well-being (ILO, 2022). Effective work-life balance practices are supported by a strong legal and institutional framework that underscores their significance for employee well-being and organizational performance.

In confirmation, the International Labour Organization (ILO) revealed that flexible working arrangements such as flexible hours, teleworking, and compressed schedules enhance both productivity and work-life balance, provided they are well regulated. The ILO further noted that excessive working hours were linked to lower productivity and poor well-being, while flexible arrangements improved employee health and engagement, reinforcing the need for policies that safeguard work-life integration (ILO, 2022). Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasized the importance of mental health and stress reduction in workplace environments, aligning directly with this study's focus on psychological well-being of academic staff in higher education institutions.

In Uganda, the Employment Act (2006) provides the right to request flexible working hours after 26 weeks of continuous service and guarantees a minimum of 21 days of paid annual leave (Uganda Employment Act, 2006). These provisions directly align with this study's first and second objectives, which sought to determine the association between flexible work arrangements and employee engagement, and to investigate the relationship between leave programmes and employee engagement among academic staff. Furthermore, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (2006) mandates safe and healthy working environments and promotes employee well-being initiatives, which resonates with the third objective of this study that examined the impact of wellness programmes on employee engagement. In addition, the emphasis by WHO and national policies on mental health

aligns with the fourth objective of this study, which analyzed the mediating role of psychological well-being in the relationship between work-life balance practices and employee engagement.

These legal and institutional policy provisions are not only consistent with international labor standards but also align with Uganda's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under the Uganda Vision 2040 framework (National Planning Authority, 2013). Specifically, the Employment Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act reinforce SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by safeguarding employee welfare, while ILO recommendations on flexible work arrangements advance SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by promoting productivity, inclusion, and decent work conditions. Given that this study focused on the academic sector, its implications also contribute to SDG 4 (Quality Education), since engaged and healthy academic staff are essential for high-quality teaching and research.

Together, these policy instruments provided both the foundation and the framework for examining how flexible work arrangements, leave policies, and wellness programs influence employee engagement through psychological well-being among academic staff in Ugandan private universities. This study therefore sought to understand how institutional policies affected the ability of academic staff to perform effectively while maintaining a healthy life outside work.

By analyzing the interplay between work-life balance, psychological well-being, and employee engagement, this research contributed to the limited literature in the Ugandan context. It offered practical recommendations for improving institutional policies and practice, to enhance employee engagement and create more supportive and sustainable higher education institutions. The background of the study is further explained by the conceptual background.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Work-life balance practices (WLBP) gained prominence as a critical determinant of employee engagement, particularly in environments where employees juggle multiple responsibilities. Research indicated that an imbalance between professional and personal life contributes to burnout, poor health outcomes, and reduced productivity (Kun & Gadancz, 2022). Work-life balance practices (WLBP), psychological well-being (PWB), and employee engagement (E.E.) have increasingly attracted scholarly interest due to their potential to explain how organizations can support employee performance and well-being. These constructs are deeply interconnected and offer a basis for understanding how individuals manage their work and personal lives, and how such dynamics influence engagement levels at work. To contextualize the study within a researchable framework, the researcher provided conceptual definitions.

Work-life Balance Practices

Adekunle (2018) defines work-life balance practices as deliberate administrative strategies designed to reduce work-life conflict and encourage employees in managing their personal and professional responsibilities. Marzec & Szczudlińska-Kanoś, (2023) as well express Work-life balance practices (WLBP) as official and informal arrangements that help employees manage their work and personal lives. In today's workplace, there is increasing recognition that employees do not abandon their personal lives for work. Work and life remain two essential aspects of an employed individual's existence. The Global Risks Report (2023) asserted that employers increasingly acknowledge the influence of private life on work quality and recognize legitimate occupational reasons for supporting the integration of work and non-work roles. According to Kirby et al. (2022), proper WLBP ensure that staff maintain a healthy compromise between work and life commitments, such as caregiving, managing family duties, and pursuing personal interests. Contemporary scholars have categorized WLBP to include flextime, telecommuting, compressed work weeks, job sharing, family support services, leave programs, and employee assistance initiatives (Amir, 2020; Ngobe, 2023; Yawe, 2022). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2022) further highlights that many organizations use such arrangements to enhance work-life balance (Gascoigne, 2021).

In this study, WLBP are conceptualized to include flexible work arrangements, leave and wellness programs (Employee Assistance Programmes and Health Programmes). These practices are viewed as essential for enhancing employee engagement and institutional productivity. Despite improvements in working conditions globally, maintaining a separation between work and personal life remains a challenge. A lack of effective WLBP has been associated with psychological conditions such as anxiety, burnout, substance abuse, sleep difficulties, and absenteeism (Lee et al., 2021), all of which adversely impact engagement. The shift toward virtual work has further emphasized the need for managers to develop responsive strategies for staff engagement (Ahmed et al., 2020).

According to Abdulkadir (2018), poor WLBP result in significant health consequences, including deteriorating physical and mental well-being. The conflicting demands of work and personal roles often lead to stress, which disrupts employee engagement levels (Lee et al., 2015). Prolonged stress caused by inadequate WLBP can activate physiological processes that damage body systems and lead to physical disorders and diseases. This, in turn, negatively impacts employee engagement, reflected in diminished absorption, vigor, and dedication.

Several Ugandan studies examining WLBP and employee engagement highlight concerning trends, particularly in the healthcare sector. Obina et al. (2024) reported that challenges related to WLBP are prominent in healthcare, revealing psychological issues likely to contribute to poor employee engagement, an observation that may extend to academic staff in private universities.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement (E.E.) was originally defined by Khan (1990) as the harnessing of one's full self - physically, cognitively, and emotionally in performing work roles. Ahad and Khan (2020) describe E.E. as a workplace strategy aimed at ensuring employees are committed to their organization's values, motivated to contribute, and supported in enhancing their personal well-being. Engaged employees are generally more productive, satisfied, and likely to remain with their employer (Mugizi et al., 2021). In the academic sector, engagement is critical to teaching quality, research productivity, and institutional success (Coomber, 2019). However, academic staff in Uganda's private universities often face high workloads, long hours, and role overload conditions that may threaten engagement levels (Yawe, 2022). Although previous research has affirmed a positive relationship between WLBP and E.E., gaps remain regarding which specific practices are most effective, especially within private universities in Uganda. Few studies have explored how psychological well-being mediates the relationship between WLBP and employee engagement. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by examining PWB as a key mechanism influencing this relationship.

Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being (PWB) has been conceptualized in several ways. In line with Ryff's (1995) multidimensional model and related studies (e.g., Kun & Gadanez, 2022), this study adopts six dimensions of PWB - autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance as the basis for conceptualizing PWB as a mediating variable. Psychological well-being is proposed as the mechanism through which WLBP influence employee engagement, especially in contexts of high work demands and caregiving responsibilities. Empirical studies support this mediation model. Saraswati and Lie (2020) define it as a self-generated state reflected in the six dimensions. Ryan and Deci (2001) describe PWB as the outcome of fulfilled psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. McGregor and Little (1998) frame it as the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life. Eiroa-Orosa (2020) further expands the concept to include emotional, social, and physical dimensions of well-being, equating it to one's quality of life. Soren and Ryff (2023) demonstrated that meaningful work and supportive work-life conditions enhance both health and engagement. Harini et al. (2019) found that WLBP positively influence job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational commitment among lecturers.

Borowiec and Drygas (2022) reported that effective WLBP improve both psychological and physical health in high-responsibility roles. These conclusions are supported by a similar study from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2022), Kirby et al. (2023), and Nwangwa (2021), all suggesting that employees' psychological well-being mediates the impact of WLBP on engagement.

Collectively, these studies affirm the value of WLBP in fostering employee engagement but also highlight the critical role of PWB as an influencing factor. However, most of this research has not been conducted in the Ugandan context or among academic staff in private universities. This study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which WLBP are associated with employee engagement, and how PWB mediates this relationship. It is posited that psychological well-being influences how academic staff experience and respond to work-life balance practices, ultimately shaping their engagement levels. While the conceptual perspective highlights the practical challenges and institutional responses to work-life balance within higher education, the theoretical perspective provides the analytical lens through which these dynamics are explained, offering frameworks that clarify how work-life balance practices influence psychological well-being and, in turn, employee engagement

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since the 1970s, numerous theories had been propounded to explain work-life balance practices (WLBP) and their implications on employee engagement. Among these theories included spillover, social exchange, psychological contract, conflict, and boundary theories (Greenhaus et al., 1989; Campbell et al., 1990; Khateeb, 2021; Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Schnettler et al., 2021; Akanji et al., 2020). This study was anchored primarily on Spillover Theory, which posits that experiences in one life domain, whether positive or negative, often spill over into other domains (Marzec & Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2023). Applied to the present context, the work-life balance practices provided to academic staff had the potential to determine their engagement patterns, depending on how such spillovers were managed.

Spillover Theory

The Spillover Theory, originally developed by Kenneth Arrow (1962) and later expanded by Paul Romer (1986) and Pleck (1995), provided a foundational framework for understanding how roles in one domain influence outcomes in another (Abdulkadir, 2018; Khateeb, 2021). Pleck (1995) described spillover as the interaction whereby the work role affects the family role and vice versa. According to Khateeb (2021), employees who consistently worked long hours struggled to achieve equilibrium between work and family life. Bello and Tanko (2020) similarly argued that individuals' abilities, attitudes, and behaviours in one life sphere often influenced their experiences in another. Spillovers, therefore, occurred in both positive and negative directions. Abdulkadir (2018) emphasized that weak boundaries between work and home increased the likelihood of either positive or negative spillovers. In such situations, effective employee assistance programs were necessary to mitigate the adverse consequences of spillovers on both employees and their organizations. The theory suggested that adverse spillovers triggered stress and dissatisfaction, while positive spillover enhanced well-being. Pluck (1995)

underscored this bi-directional influence, which several studies adopted to explain work-life balance and its related constructs (Lee et al., 2021; Schnettler et al., 2021; Akanji et al., 2020; Bello & Tanko, 2020). The ability or failure to perform roles in either domain had implications for psychological well-being and engagement. Bolt and Homer (2024) observed that workers often transmitted attitudes and behaviours formed at the workplace into their private lives and vice versa. Xin et al. (2018) reported that job stress at work exacerbated conflict at home, which in turn affected family satisfaction. Conversely, Rodríguez-Muñoz et al. (2014) found that an employee's work engagement positively influenced their partner's happiness, showing the crossover effect of daily emotional experiences. Adekunle (2018) found gender-specific effects, where male work-to-family enrichment was positively associated with their female partner's satisfaction, while female enrichment showed mixed results.

The theory, therefore, acknowledged the dynamic interaction between work and social time. Positive spillover, particularly when supported by organizational flexibility, contributed to healthy work-life integration and improved psychological well-being (Schnettler et al., 2021). Due to its relevance, explanatory power, and applicability, the spillover theory was adopted in this study to illuminate how work-life balance practices and psychological well-being interrelate to influence employee engagement.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

The study also drew upon the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which explains human behaviour as a series of give-and-take exchanges between parties, such as employers and employees (Cook et al., 2013). Rooted in early sociological and management thinking, the Social Exchange Theory posits that workplace relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges between employers and employees, where favorable treatment by the organization fosters greater commitment and engagement (Cook et al., 2013). SET claims that individuals engage in exchanges with the expectation of receiving something of value, tangible or intangible in return, built on exchanges between employers and employees, where favorable treatment by the organization fosters greater commitment and engagement (Blau, 1964). It emphasizes trust, fairness, and mutual benefit as cornerstones of employee engagement.

In agreement, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) as well clarified that social exchanges are mutually dependent and often influenced by relational expectations. Ahmad et al. (2023) observed that decision-making in such exchanges was often guided by a cost-benefit analysis. SET distinguished between impersonal resources, e.g., monetary rewards and socio-emotional resources, e.g., loyalty and recognition (Socio & Gregory, 1986).

While some critics argued that SET might oversimplify human behaviour by assuming rationality, other studies later addressed these limitations by introducing psychological and emotional dimensions (Cropanzano &

Mitchell, 2005). According to Schein (1983), mutual obligations shaped commitment and engagement, where employers offered opportunities for self-actualization and meaningful work in exchange for loyalty and performance. Nevertheless, existing research on the SET largely focused on exchange dynamics in business organizations and public institutions, with less emphasis on the higher education sector in Uganda.

In the context of this study, the SET was particularly relevant to understanding employee engagement as a dependent variable. Engagement was considered a reciprocal response to favorable work-life balance practices. Employees responded to flexible arrangements, leave provisions, wellness programs, and support mechanisms by investing greater energy, dedication, and absorption in their roles. This reciprocity supported the argument that academic staff in private universities were more likely to engage when their psychological and professional needs were acknowledged through meaningful workplace exchanges. Little was known about how private universities, which often operate under different governance and resource constraints, facilitate reciprocal exchanges through work-life balance practices. This study filled that gap by analyzing how such exchanges fostered psychological well-being and employee engagement among academic staff

Psychological Contract Theory

The Psychological Contract Theory, developed by Chris Argyris in 1960, also informed this study. Drawing from organizational psychology, the theory posited an unspoken agreement between the employer and employee based on mutual expectations and perceived fairness (Mayes et al., 2018; Syed et al., 2015). Employees expected their organizations to uphold their end of the "contract" by providing supportive work arrangements, including work-life balance practices. When unmet, this psychological contract often led to dissatisfaction and disengagement. Conversely, when respected, it contributed to enhanced well-being and engagement. Mayes et al. (2018) noted that while many organizations focused on employee engagement, they often neglected psychological well-being, which could undermine long-term engagement. The theory provided insights into how unmet expectations around work-life balance could erode trust and diminish employee motivation. The relevance of this theory to the study lay in its emphasis on the psychological aspects of the employment relationship, how perceptions of fairness, autonomy, and support influenced both well-being and engagement. The theory, therefore, acknowledged the dynamic interaction between work and social time. Positive spillover, particularly when supported by organizational flexibility, contributed to healthy work-life integration and improved psychological well-being (Schnettler et al., 2021).

Psychological Contract Theory explained the unwritten expectations between employees and employers, which, when fulfilled, enhance motivation, engagement, and well-being (Rousseau, 1960). Breaches of these contracts often result in disengagement and reduced psychological

health. Yet, most studies applying this theory have focused on contract breaches in corporate and public sector settings, with limited exploration of academic environments in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Uganda's private universities, where staff often balance teaching, research, and administrative roles, the psychological contract may differ significantly from traditional employment contexts. This study addressed this gap by examining how institutional policies and work-life balance practices shaped psychological contracts and their influence on engagement through psychological well-being.

Due to its relevance, explanatory power, and applicability, the Spillover Theory was adopted in this study to illuminate how work-life balance practices and psychological well-being interrelate to influence employee engagement. However, most applications of the Spillover Theory have been conducted with limited attention to academic staff in African higher education institutions, particularly in Uganda's private universities. This study therefore addressed that gap by examining how positive and negative spillovers manifest in the academic environment, and how institutional policies shape the relationship between work-life balance, psychological well-being, and employee engagement.

While the theoretical perspectives provided explanatory power for understanding the link between work-life balance, psychological well-being, and employee engagement, the historical background situates these dynamics within Uganda's socio-economic and institutional context, illustrating how past developments, policy shifts, and labor market changes have shaped the realities of academic staff in private universities.

Together, the Spillover Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Psychological Contract Theory provided complementary perspectives for this study. The Spillover Theory presented how work-life balance practices influenced psychological well-being, while the Social Exchange Theory clarified how reciprocal dynamics promoted employee engagement, and the Psychological Contract Theory stressed the role of expectations and perceived obligations in shaping well-being and engagement.

However, each theory carried limitations when considered independently; Spillover Theory underrepresented employee engagement, Social Exchange Theory overlooked the mediating role of psychological well-being, and Psychological Contract Theory did not fully address the structural design of work-life balance practices. By integrating these perspectives, this study developed a more holistic framework that explained how work-life balance practices influenced employee engagement through the mediating role of psychological well-being among academic staff in private universities in Uganda.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The origin of work-life balance practices began shifting after the end of the World Wars between 1914 and 1945. By 1930, it had become apparent that work had

encroached on family life, especially in industrialized countries (ILO, 2022). The increasing demand for time from both white- and blue-collar workers began to limit the time available for other life demands, such as family activities. This predicted pattern manifested more clearly when laws governing weekly working hours were enacted in the USA and Great Britain during the 1970s and 1980s. At that point, employers recognized how important employees' free time was to the growth of individuals, businesses, and societies (Marzec & Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2023). The concept of achieving work-life balance practices gained recognition when vocal workers raised concerns about long working hours that conflicted with their family needs (Wambui et al., 2017), ultimately affecting their dedication and absorption levels.

Work-life balance practices became more popular in Europe and the USA at the start of the 20th century, with workers' unions reporting difficulties among employees, especially young mothers in balancing work duties and family responsibilities. Consequently, efforts to address this emerging challenge gained prominence (Wambui et al., 2017). Between 1938 and 1945, the US-based W.K. Kellogg Corporation devised flexible work arrangements, replacing the traditional three daily eight-hour shifts with four- to six-hour shifts (Lockwood, 2003). Notable outcomes of this workplace reform included increased employee engagement and well-being. However, despite early recognition of the phenomenon, changes in the modern world continued to exacerbate the problem of balancing occupational work and other life domains.

As Borowiec and Drygas (2022) noted, the issue became pervasive across workplace contexts, directly affecting employee engagement. The remarkable expansion of work-life balance research and implementation of organizational-level WLBP programs from the 1950s through the early 2000s could be attributed to the broad range of benefits they offered to both employers and employees (Naithani, 2010). These benefits extended beyond social and psychological domains to include economic gains. This was the rationale behind the strategic adoption of WLBP by proactive global organizations aiming to boost productivity and profitability through higher levels of employee engagement (Boakye et al., 2023a).

While it could be argued that modern employees should enjoy a healthy equilibrium between work and personal life (ILO, 2022), several studies revealed that this was not always the case. For example, a study by Accenture found that only 29% of employees believed their managers genuinely had their best interests at heart. Although 60% of employees expressed concern that emerging A.I. could increase stress and burnouts reduce engagement, only 37% of leaders saw this as an issue (Experience, 2023). These statistics demonstrated that the application of WLBP could help employees maximize their potential, foster trust, and enhance workplace comfort and engagement. Providing staff with a strong sense of purpose, belonging, and well-being including financial, emotional, and career confidence served

to promote an engaged workforce (Boakye et al., 2023a).

According to Experience (2023), organizations were 30% more likely to experience exponential business growth when they considered employees' personal lives, including how they perceived their ability to balance work and home demands. Flexible scheduling and remote work were found to significantly support work-life balance and mental health, as reported by 95% of team members in high-engagement companies. These companies also saw an average increase of 19.2% in operating income per year. Leisure time, both in quality and quantity, played a critical role in overall individual well-being. In OECD countries, full-time workers spent approximately 15 hours per day (63% of the day) on personal care and leisure, including eating, sleeping, socializing, and media use. However, women who worked fewer hours for pay did not necessarily have more free time than men across the 22 OECD countries studied.

The ILO (2022) acknowledged that workers are not commodities but human beings with personal goals and dreams. According to Article II(a) of the Declaration of Philadelphia, "All human beings, regardless of race, creed, or sex, hold the right to pursue both their physical well-being and their spiritual growth in an environment of dignity and freedom, of economic security, and equal opportunity" (ILO, 1994). In other words, paid employment ought to address employees' private and financial needs, which are essential to employee engagement. Presently, about 36% of workers globally were reported to work disproportionately long hours (ILO, 2022), with some exceeding 48 hours per week. Such working hours negatively impacted on psychological well-being and ultimately reduced engagement. This development was further attributed to shifts in the world of work. Constant internet connectivity, especially through ICT tools like smartphones and computers, blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, enabling work to extend into evenings, weekends, and home spaces. Consequently, the rise in stress and work-life imbalance practices became inevitable.

Stress, as a key component of psychological well-being, was cited as contributing to the annual deaths of approximately 2.8 million employees globally (ILO, 2022). Poor employee engagement often followed such conditions. The education sector was no exception. Over the years, the global higher education sector experienced major changes that contributed to employee engagement challenges. These included policy reforms, increased tuition costs, infrastructure demands, faculty remuneration concerns, shifting student expectations, rising enrollments, and the transition to blended learning formats (Agha et al., 2017).

This study, therefore, examined the extent to which WLBP and E.E. were related. More recent studies by Borowiec and Drygas reaffirmed that psychological well-being was a concern in workplace settings where work-life balance challenges persisted. Similarly, the antecedents of well-being were investigated. For instance, Jackson and Fransman (2018) found that professionals in high-stress roles such as policing, health, and teaching faced specific workplace stressors. These stressors had ripple effects on

employee dedication, vigor, and absorption (Gridwichei et al., 2020), key elements of engagement. As teaching was part of this category, academic staff were affected. Rok (2018) echoed these concerns, highlighting that WLBP significantly influenced engagement by shaping teaching quality and job enthusiasm. Such pressures detracted from an employee's dedication, absorption, or vigor and were thus labeled negative engagement traits.

These concerns require urgent attention from employers, stakeholders, and university administrators through the implementation of effective WLBP policies and strategies to reduce workplace stress and disengagement. As work-life balance challenges in higher education, particularly in private universities continued to evolve, they posed serious threats to academic staff well-being (Boakye et al., 2023b). This prompted scholars and practitioners to explore the nature and impact of WLBP and to identify targeted interventions that could foster higher levels of engagement among academic staff. The study's context is further expounded in the contextual background.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Central Uganda's private universities have experienced rapid growth due to rising demand for higher education. However, this expansion has introduced new challenges, especially for academic staff, who serve as the institutional backbone (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). While the growth of these institutions has improved access to tertiary education, it has also imposed considerable demands on academic staff (Ouma, 2019), particularly in resource-constrained environments typical of the private sector (Alani, 2021). These challenges have evolved into difficult work environments marked by delayed contracts, conflicting directives, deadline and workload pressures, low remuneration, moonlighting, and limited institutional support. Academic staff also face pressure to secure research funding, publish, meet work targets, and manage student-related demands, all of which affect their employee engagement (Yawe, 2022).

Additionally, many private universities operate with a profit-oriented mindset, often prioritizing financial returns over faculty investment. As a result, academic staff in private universities receive significantly lower salaries than their counterparts in public institutions, contributing to high turnover rates and difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified personnel (Yawe, 2022; Ouma, 2019; Ntirandekura et al., 2022). The lack of job security, professional development opportunities, and insufficient research resources further combines these issues (Alani, 2021).

Moreover, the integration of technology-enhanced learning, such as e-learning, adds new demands to lecturers' time and skills. High student-lecturer ratios further aggravate work-life balance challenges (NCHE, 2022). Ndagire et al. (2023) highlighted heavy teaching loads as a key concern, with private universities often striving to maximize enrollment and revenue. Consequently, lecturers are burdened with large classes, extensive grading responsibilities, and

limited time for research and academic advancement. These demands can diminish the quality of education and hinder lecturers' ability to meet their academic responsibilities.

According to Alani (2021), infrastructure limitations in private universities, including inadequately equipped laboratories, outdated libraries, and restricted access to academic resources hinder lecturers' ability to fully engage in hands-on teaching and research. Poor leadership and governance in some institutions further compromise academic performance. Ndagire (2023) emphasized that leadership styles and management practices significantly affect teaching and learning quality.

The above challenges warrant targeted interventions to improve academic staff well-being and foster a culture of engagement. Implementing effective WLBP could offer lecturers greater psychological well-being (PWB), which in turn enhances their engagement levels. By addressing work-life balance issues and strengthening institutional support, private universities can boost academic staff productivity and contribute to improved higher education outcomes in Uganda.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how work-life balance practices influence psychological well-being and employee engagement among academic staff at private universities in Uganda. The review showed that supportive practices such as flexible work arrangements, leave programmes, and wellness programmes contribute to healthier psychological well-being, which in turn enhances employee engagement. Guided by the Spillover, Social Exchange, and Psychological Contract theories, this paper demonstrated that when universities meet employees' work and personal needs, staff experience greater motivation and fulfillment; however, heavy workloads, job insecurity, and limited institutional support continue to spill over to their personal lives which undermines the well-being and employee engagement in many private universities. Overall, the review underscores the importance of creating supportive work environments that prioritize mental health, equitable workloads, and positive organizational practices. Future research should empirically test these relationships, compare public and private institutions, examine gender differences, explore digitalization's impact on work-life balance, and consider leadership and organizational culture as additional influences on employee well-being and engagement.

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