

An Exploratory Analysis of the Life-Cycle Influence on Lecturers' Management of Work and Life

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Abstract: The integrating and balancing of job responsibilities with other roles in life (such as family, personal, religious and society) among Malaysian academics is an aspect seldom investigated and documented. This study is driven by the acute lack of literature on the subject and a pertinent need to explore the interrelation of factors/contributory factors, especially in view of the recent change in the academic calendar in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The academic year in HEIs now commences in September (instead of June) with the first semester ending in January of the following year. The upside of this change is that the new schedule facilitates the enrolment of international students; however since the semester only ends in January, it is no longer parallel to the standardised end-of-year school holidays in Malaysia thus effectively bringing implications to family vacation plans of academics with children of school-going age. This study aims to explore how life-cycle stages influence lecturers' management of work and life when there is an overlap between their duties in HEIs and their children's annual end-of-year school holidays. Qualitative findings suggest that the semester shift from June to September in the academic HEI calendar has generated numerous responses from the respondents, with these reactions differentiated according to three life-cycle stages: post-conflict, in-conflict and pre-conflict. In general, two responses emerged from these three life-cycle stages: the rescheduling of semesters has: impinged on family ties and not created any difficulties in the family. Institutional and social support factors are perceived as important in ensuring the fulfillment of work and life responsibilities and the subsequent sustainment of a harmonious work-life relationship. There is therefore an cogent need for the organisation and management to be alert to the situational needs of employees so as to ensure work and life expectations are optimised without ignoring other domains.

Key words: Life-cycle, work-life integration, change in semester, institutional support, expectations

INTRODUCTION

Having a job is important for individuals because it generates income. One of the aspirations in the New Economic Model is for Malaysia to become a high-income nation. A positive quality of life plays a significant role towards the realisation of this objective. However high-income attainment is not the sole determinant in ensuring this positive life quality since achieving a balance between job expectations and life responsibilities (such as personal needs, family obligations, religious requirements, tenets of culture and tradition and societal norms) is also a major element in the attainment of this condition. The integration and balance between work and family life poses a challenge and impacts the work and life satisfaction of the affected individual. Blunsdon *et al.* (2006) defines 'work-life integration' as "individuals 'successfully' segmenting or integrating 'life' and work so as to achieve a satisfying quality of life, overall satisfaction and less strain or stress from not having to juggle conflicting role demands".

The aspect of Work-Life Integration (WLI) is critical in organisations, individual workers, family and society due to its potential in affecting organisational and work performance, work functions and personal life (Noon and Blyton, 2007; Warhurst *et al.*, 2008). Both the domains of work and daily life are indicators of societal well-being and often used as a platform for harmonious employment relationships (Houston, 2005). However, a clash between work and personal or family obligations, unless properly managed, could lead to work-life conflicts (Ren and Foster, 2011), even more so if the nature and schedule of the work itself is not able to accommodate or provide space to fulfil these other life responsibilities (Wong and Ko, 2009).

In Malaysia, the available literature on work-life issues demonstrates a very obvious gap with most of the studies focused on the negative aspects of 'work-life conflict' and less on positive approaches geared towards work-life facilitation or enhancement (Sidin *et al.*, 2010; Hassan *et al.*, 2010; Samad, 2006). A study by Kee Y Sabariah dan Mahadirin Ahmad examined the 'work-life

balance' agenda incorporated in the collective agreement among telecommunications employees whereas Khairunnezam Mohd. Noor (2011)'s study explored the issue of work-life balance among academics in three HEIs in Peninsular Malaysia with the focus more on identifying the link between their satisfaction on work- life balance and the intention of leaving the profession.

The knowledge-based work specifications in local HEIs necessitate the transformation of academics' traditional role of teaching and research into one that also supports economic development (Hagen, 2002). This means academics are expected to assist in the generation of the economy by means of knowledge diffusion and the sharing of expertise through collaborations with the industry (Hagen, 2002), an entrusted responsibility that requires a high level of commitment and dedication. Given the very visible lack of literature on the experience of integrating and balancing work with other facets of life (such as family, personal, religious and society) among Malaysian academics, it is therefore pertinent that this study should be undertaken especially in the light of the recent change in the HEI academic calendar which now runs from September to January of the following year and no longer parallel to the annual end-of-year school holiday nationwide.

In 2012, the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia introduced adjustments to the academic calendar of HEIs. These changes were made in stages with the final part of the schedule restructuring implemented in the 2013/2014 academic session. The new semester structure affected not only students but the entire academia throughout the country. Among the rationale for the change was to incorporate the concept of knowledge sharing with the international community through a more effective implementation of academic mobility programmes as well as to expose local students to the culture and practices of international higher education. This study will explore the extent of the influence of life-cycle stages on lecturers' management of their work-life when faced with the mismatch between end-of-year school holidays and on-going university term time.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The discussion of data in this study is exploratory in nature and seeks to examine issues regarding the implementation of the new academic calendar structure and the work-life management style of lecturers. The findings are based on the qualitative approach and derived from in-depth interviews with 13 lecturers from a

Table 1: Profile of respondents

Profile	Number
Gender	
Male	4
Female	9
Marital status/Dependents	
Single	2
Married (with young children)	7
Married (with adult children)	3
Married (no children)	1
Position	
Lecturer	5
Senior lecturer	5
Associate professor	2
Professor	1
Status of service	
Permanent	11
Contract	2
Age range	
30-39 year	7
40-49 year	3
50-59 year	1
60 year and above	2

public university in Sabah, Malaysia. Respondents were selected based on the random sampling method and drawn from across nine faculties in the university's main campus in Kota Kinabalu. The data obtained was analysed thematically. The actual names of the respondents were not used to ensure confidentiality. The respondent profile is presented in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data indicates that the change in the HEI calendar with the academic year commencing in September instead of June initiated various reactions from the respondents. These responses were manifested in different ways according to the three life-cycle stages: post-conflict, in-conflict and pre-conflict.

Post-conflict stage: The study revealed that for respondents at the post-conflict stage (where the individual had passed through the critical conflict stage in life, attained an optimum level in his career and had independent adult children), the change in academic calendar schedule neither brought impact nor created difficulties for them. This was reflected in the response by Mr. M: To me, the bringing forward of the long semester break is quite suitable and I do not have problems with it. The new system can be adapted accordingly (Mr. M, 63 years, with six children between 24-39 years old).

This sentiment was echoed by Mr. B: This is in line with the enrolment of foreign students in other universities such as in the United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom. The international student enrolment is mostly done in September. This is

most appropriate and I do not have any problems with it (Mr. B, 63 year with three children between 27-32 years old).

Both responses indicate that the academic calendar change did not pose any difficulty since the new schedule could be adapted to suit the individual's routine. However, there were respondents not in agreement with the new academic schedule structure.

In-conflict stage: Conflict in this context pertains to work-life discord when work responsibilities are directly at odds with other obligations. At this stage, the respondent would be at the peak of conflict in his life with the majority being those with young school going (pre and primary school) children or dependents. The new HEI academic year commencement date of September was perceived as burdensome and creating issues and difficulties in fulfilling their work and life responsibilities. With the change in semester structure, academics could no longer afford to plan their holiday to coincide with their children's year-end school holidays since university lectures would be on-going and their presence at work necessary. This was voiced in the findings here: Moving the start of the semester to September is totally not appropriate since it clashes with the (year-end school) holiday and we have to rush to accommodate this. Even then, we can only do so after we have completed our work (marking) that is required of us. For instance, recently I (and my husband) could only take leave from work towards the end of December (when the school holidays were about to end) (Dr. A, 45 year with six children between 4-15 year old).

This sentiment was echoed by 41 year old Mdm H, with two children aged two and 12 years who had faced difficulties and dilemma with the academic calendar change. Her dissatisfaction on the matter was reflected in her statement: Truth be told, the change to September in semester commencement is not suitable because it means there is less time to be with our children and family.

This unhappiness was also shared by Mdm R who opined the semester calendar change as inconvenient and posing difficulties for her to be with her children and family due to them being on their long school holiday while the university semester was still ongoing and she herself would still be working (teaching). Mdm R who was 33 years old with 2 young children aged between 2 months and 3 years commented that: The previous semester schedule (with June as the beginning of the academic year) was much better; now I still have to work even during the year end school holidays. It used to be that when the children had their holidays, the university too would be on semester break and this made it easier to

be with them because there was no conflict or clash of time. But this no longer is possible with the new semester schedule.

Dr. M, with a 5 year old pre-schooler, agreed that the change in academic calendar had brought work-life restrictions: Personally, I do not agree with the new semester calendar because there aren't so many foreign students enrolled in our university. Even those that are here come from countries that practise the same semester system like we had (the previous one). Compared to now, the old system was more family-friendly because the university holidays were in sync with our children's school holiday and this had made it easier for us to make plans. In the past (previous schedule), we would choose to attend conferences held during the school holidays so that once these meetings were over, we could then continue our leave to be with the family. With the change in semester, it is now quite difficult to do the same.

This dissatisfaction on the academic calendar change was voiced not only by the teaching staff but also by academicians holding administrative positions. This was shared by Dr. S (44 years old) with six children ranging from 4-18 years of age: Lecturers normally took their leave in December every year. Outsiders (non-lecturers) would also go on holiday in the same month. The problem (in this university) is that in December we are still in semester. So there's a disturbance here. December is holiday mood and the mood to work is not there. Everyone wants to go on holiday but lectures are on-going and so on (other duties).

Another academician holding an administrative role shared the difficulty she faced in integrating his work-life responsibilities due to the semester change. Dr. F, with 2 young primary school children, viewed the new schedule as not properly planned since it clashed with the school holiday period. As a consequence, the time spent with her children cannot be fully optimised: If the government and relevant authorities are concerned at all about the well-being of workers and their families (as a priority), the system (semester change) isn't really good because the year-end school holiday is at the most 40 days in total. By right, this should be when we take the opportunity to be with the family, go sight-seeing with the children, go on holiday with them and so on but now it is difficult to do these things with the recent semester change. Our Heads of Department would blame us (academicians) 'this staff, the semester is on-going and he wants to take leave'. Cases like this have actually happened. We should not blame the staff because it is the fault of the system. Last year, my children spent their year-end school holiday in the village (with their grandparents) and not at all with me. This dissatisfaction was expressed clearly by those with pre-schoolers or children in primary and secondary school.

Pre-conflict stage: The pre-conflict stage refers to the type of worker yet to experience the peak-of-conflict process due to absence of nuclear family responsibilities. This might be due to the individual being unmarried but with responsibilities towards his extended family, or married but without dependents (children) which precludes them from such life obligations thus enabling them to focus more on their responsibilities at work.

Several respondents viewed the change in the academic year commencement date (from June to September) as creating difficulties for prolonged family activities thus adversely affecting family bonding time. For instance, although Dr. N was single, the family institution was paramount to her and end-of-year school holidays would usually be spent with her extended family (relatives). Dr. N perceived the change in semester as: The long semester holiday (of universities) should be based on the school holiday schedule in Malaysia to make it easier to be with the family... the new system which now starts in September is not suitable because it is not good for family ties. This is because the holidays are not standardised. It is difficult to obtain leave similar to other family members and this results in family interactions or meetings being limited. It is difficult for me to take part in family activities due to lectures being on-going when the school year-end holiday is on.

There were however respondents without children who felt the change in semester as a non-issue since there was no conflict or clash in obligations compared to those with school-going children who only had long holidays at the end of the year. Mdm S, married without children, stated: For me, the change (in semester) does not impact me... it's no problem. Those with families might find their work hours conflicting with the school vacation and this would create problems for those with children (school-going). I don't have any children yet, so maybe there's no problem. The difference in reaction at this stage indicates that managing work-life responsibilities is also dependent on both internal and external factors.

The effective integration of work and life is of major importance if a harmonious employment relationship is to be established. There is a need for the various parties to assume a proactive role to ensure work and life responsibilities and obligations are given their due attention. The workplace is host to different types of employees and the onus is on the management to be aware of the needs that can arise from this diverse group of individuals. This is reflected from the initial findings of this study which point to the life-cycle factor as a determinant in the work-life management style of the

individual. For those already at the post-conflict stage (at the peak of their career and with adult independent children), work responsibilities that necessitate extra time or energy are no longer viewed as constraints or in conflict with their other responsibilities in life. Individuals at this life-cycle stage are able to focus fully on work-related matters even during the long year-end school holiday due to the absence of any distractions (e.g., planning vacation time with children). This is in comparison to the individuals at the in-conflict stage, the majority with children of school-going age, who are directly affected by the shift to September in the academic calendar and as such face dilemma in balancing the needs of work with their family obligations. It is then that conflict is very likely to occur.

CONCLUSION

This study points to the two different types of responses to the change in the academic calendar for HEIs in Sabah: firstly, the change affected family bonding time and secondly that there were no issues or difficulties associated with the calendar shift. The first type of response represented individuals at the in-conflict stage of their life-cycle whereby children in the family are yet able to be independent. The second response type emerged amongst those at the post-conflict stage and without dependent children. Both types of response bear certain implications not only to the individuals in question but also to the organisation as a whole. Institutional and social support factors are integral in ensuring that the work-life responsibilities are fulfilled thus maintaining a harmonious employment relationship. It is therefore vital for the organisation and management to be aware of the needs of their employees to ensure the optimisation of work and life outputs without detriment to any other domain.

SUGGESTIONS

A suggestion here would be for any new implementation or restructuring of existing policies to take into consideration the needs of those affected directly by the changes and formulate a win-win situation benefitting all parties. Institutional support in the form of policy or the provision of workplace facilities (such as on-site crèches and flexible work hours) and a supportive management are aspects that could be strengthened, in the same way that community and family support are vital elements towards creating and developing a productive, high-income and family-oriented Malaysian generation.

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