

Female lecturers' experiences of work-life balance: A case of speech-language pathology and audiology

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The COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown in recent years resulted in many professionals, such as academics, having to work remotely for months, forcing them to renegotiate the boundaries between work and social life. Prior to this study, there was limited research conducted on work-life balance (WLB), particularly among female academics in Speech-Language Pathology or Audiology (SLP-A) disciplines in South African universities, despite the concept being introduced in the 1970s. To fill this knowledge gap, this study explored the current conceptions and experiences of WLB of female SLP-A academics at a South African University. The study draws on Conflict Theory, where time, physical, and emotional investments in academic work and social life domains are compared, including the resulting behavioural patterns. A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design guided this study, which involved conducting semi-structured interviews with eight female academics, aged 28–52 years, who work in Speech-Language-Pathology and Audiology disciplines at a South African University, with teaching experience ranging from 3 to 15 years in academia. Data were analysed thematically. The participants conceived of WLB as an ideal where robust boundaries between work and social life existed. Three themes emerged regarding their experiences. Firstly, work (teaching, related administration, and academic career development activities) dominated over social life, with the latter being the most compromised. Work occupied most of the academics' day, as reflected in the percentage of time spent on each domain each day. Secondly, institutional and academic culture promoted a compromise in WLB, and thirdly, being female further hindered a WLB. Academic work and related career development activities interfere with female academics' social lives, indicating a strong need to review the work expectations at universities, particularly for female academics.

Contribution: This study raises awareness concerning the lack of WLB and how developing female academics experience a compromise in their social life. It calls for transformation in academic culture and work expectations to better accommodate developing or early-career female academics.

Keywords: work-life-balance; female academics; speech-language pathology and audiology; work-family-conflict; experiences; developing academic.

Introduction

Historically, women did not have access to formal education and work, which stifled their educational and career trajectories in the pre-democracy era, especially in African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa (Aluko 2009). Opportunities to pursue formal careers emerged for South African women in the post-apartheid era, yet relief from their traditional domestic obligations has either not occurred or been insufficient for them to thrive in their careers. The COVID-19-related lockdown between March 2020 and January 2021 appears to have exacerbated the domestic responsibilities and demands on employed women (Makura 2022). It also led to work intensification as academics had to adjust their teaching to suit virtual or distance learning. During this time, most academics worked from home (WFH) and had to renegotiate their work-life balance or boundaries (WLB).

While WFH can be traced back to the 1970s, the concept only gained traction in recent years in academia as part of the renewed normal, with some academics preferring it over physically being at work (Mousa & Avolio 2025; Nilles 2003). However, for some female academics with family responsibilities, WFH presented several challenges. It reduced their academic productivity and negatively affected their WLB, specifically for early-career academics (Kasymova et al. 2021), as it required considerable preparation time to transition to online teaching, which most had not done before the pandemic. The WFH exposed women academics to competing work-intensification

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and family demands, as their children were also at home and needed to be guided through their online schooling (Boneva et al. 2020). Moreover, women typically face intersecting societal pressure to be homemakers and are expected by employers to excel in their careers (Banerjee 2019; Sengar & Shah 2024).

Academics typically need to balance various aspects of their work, including research, teaching, administrative tasks and student engagement. This often results in them working beyond normal office hours and taking work home, leading to conflicts with social, personal, or family responsibilities and relationships. This can also result in compromising family time to devote to work (Zappalà, Swanzy & Toscano 2022), thereby affecting the prospects of a good WLB (Griffin 2022).

Despite a broad coverage of WLB and related issues in the literature, the extent to which female academics' work interferes with their private life and affects their WLB remains unclear in the fields of speech language pathology and audiology (SLP-A). These two professions and health sciences disciplines were introduced into South Africa in the 1930s as a single discipline at the University of Witwatersrand, and later became semi-independent from each other (Moonsamy et al. 2017). Despite these developments, SLP-A disciplines remain female dominated (Pillay et al. 2020), with a strong focus of clinical practice and research. Thus, gender dynamics and WBL issues are scantily researched in these disciplines. In view of this gap, this study explores the conceptions and experiences of WLB from the perspectives of female developing academics (DA) (female lecturers pursuing a PhD qualification while developing as researchers and teachers) (Makhoba 2026). While DA and early career academic (ECA) may be used interchangeably, albeit with a lack of clarity regarding the PhD status of these individuals (Hlatshwayo & Majosi 2024), DA in this article exclusively denotes lecturers, still pursuing their PhD qualification. Filling the identified knowledge gap is pivotal in SLP-A disciplines, as WLB affects job productivity and related satisfaction (Marnoto, Supardi & Soegiarto 2024).

The framework: Understanding of work-life balance or conflict

Since the 1970s, WLB has been understood subjectively and broadly, depending on who defines it (Khan & Fazili 2016). Some adopt a conservative, traditional understanding of WLB, while others adopt a more modern, liberal conception, where work is not an exclusive full-time employment by one employer, and social life is multifaceted (Kelliher, Richardson & Boiarintseva 2019). Work-life balance has increasingly gained traction in research over the years, with a notable lack of coverage in the SLP-A disciplines (Akobo & Stewart 2020; Kelliher et al. 2019). Work-life balance can be viewed from a range of theoretical perspectives. Khateeb (2021) and Bello and Tanko (2020) review some of those theories. The Border Theory posits that borders exist in distinct domains, such as between

work and life, whereas the Spill Over Theory suggests that some domains may spill over and dominate the space of the other. The Conflict Theory contends that domains always conflict, with prioritisation of one diminishing the other. The Compensation Theory contends that an individual typically compensates by capitalising on one domain when they lack fulfilment in the other. These theories all influenced the theoretical perspective adopted in the study, with a dominance of the Conflict Theory, as applied by Akobo and Stewart (2020).

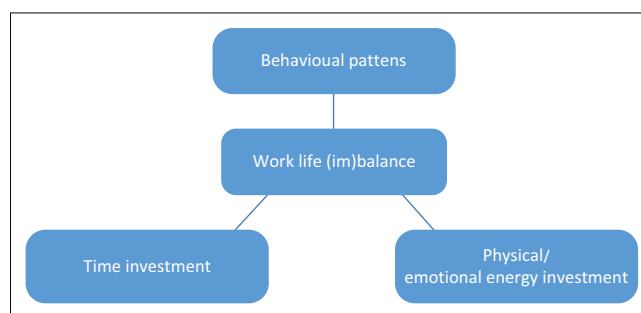
Therefore, Work-Life Conflict (WLC) and WLB in this article are regarded as the opposite ends of one spectrum, which has three key elements (Akobo & Stewart 2020). The *time-based* element relates to how academics allocate their time between family and work. The *strain-based* aspects relate to the physical and psycho-emotional well-being of an academic, particularly in relation to the demands of social life and work. Lastly, there are *behavioural aspects*, which relate to behaviours that an academic may exhibit because of the demands of work or social life, including the people close to them (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985).

In the absence of a universally agreed upon definition (Mwangi et al. 2017), WLB in this study is defined as effectively managing the time, physical and emotional investments required by both work and social life domains, as well as behavioural patterns that manifest as a result of work and social life responsibilities (Akobo & Stewart 2020; Fazal et al. 2019; Kelliher et al. 2019) (Figure 1).

With the above-stated theoretical understanding, the study's aim was to explore the female SLP-A academics' experiences of WLB within a South African tertiary institution, a University of Interest (UoI) (pseudonym), with objectives being to explore:

- Their conceptions of WLB.
- Their experience WLB.
- The reasons for how they experience WLB.
- The relationship between WLB and being female in academia.

This article invites the reader to compare the shared participant experiences with those in their own context, with the understanding that the findings are not intended to be



Source: Akobo, L. & Stewart, J., 2020, 'Contextualising work-life balance: A case of women of African origin in the UK', *Industrial and Commercial Training* 52(3), 133–153. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ICT-09-2019-0092>

FIGURE 1: Work-life balance framework rearranged.

generalised, but transferable to similar contexts. This study further seeks to inspire a critical discussion about managing a WLB, its impact on developing academics, and the need for transformation in this regard.

Literature review

A brief review of the literature suggests that academia poses challenges unique to female academics, which often negatively affect their WLB. Academics are driven by the expectations of a high workload and comparable research productivity (Marques, Amélia & Magalhães 2024). For most developing academics, the associated isolation from family, friends, and relatives is a major and inevitable part of the journey for those striving for academic success (Jandrić 2022). Such behaviours compromised WLB, a situation arguably unavoidable for female academics in pursuit of Academic Career Development (ACD) (Ahmad 2017; Makhoba 2026).

Why female academics

Female (biological female) academics are the interest group for this research because of their unique susceptibility to WLB challenges, which can negatively affect their ACD more than that of their male counterparts. Gender disparities in societal expectations stem from many factors, including societal norms, values and socioeconomic status. Some cultures emphasise the importance of a woman's role within their domestic setting, while diminishing their role in commercial spaces, as has been observed in some Asian and African societies (Fazal et al. 2019).

In Pakistan, Fazal et al. (2019) explored how female academics experienced WLB challenges and reported that an unconducive work environment was a barrier to their career progression. As a result, they invested considerable time and effort into their academic work and sacrificed their social life as a compensatory strategy to meet the demands of their academic careers. Similarly, a scoping review on literature from American, Asian, and European countries reported that work-life imbalance can emanate from unhealthy working conditions where gender inequality was evident (Franco et al. 2021). Twenty per cent of the studies they reviewed found that female academics' career ambitions were not as accepted or embraced as those of their male counterparts by their societies.

Africa is no exception, as some African countries' cultural and societal expectations typically pressure women to excel domestically but not in their academic and other careers. In Nigeria Ogbogu (2011) reported that marriage responsibilities negatively affected women's ACD. Mwangi et al. (2017) studied the relationship between WLB and staff productivity at Kabarak University in Kenya and found that it was negatively affected by their social life or family responsibilities, which disadvantaged both male and female academics.

In South Africa, Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo (2023) report on the negative impact of gendered expectations from some societies, which restricts the ACD of female academics. Their study, conducted at a South African university, found that the

typical home nurturing duties disadvantaged female academics, exposing them to a lack of time to work after hours, which slows down their rate of publication and, therefore, their career progression. This suggested that being female in academia comes with unique challenges.

Work-life balance challenges for female academics

In a study conducted by Muthala and Pillay (2023) at a university in Gauteng province, South Africa, most black female academics reported challenges in meeting expectations to excel both in the workplace and at home. Patriarchal cultural expectations, coupled with a lack of support at home and in the workplace, were among the challenges they experienced. Their families expect them to perform the homemaking responsibilities, as well as help children with homework and tend to their husbands (Muthala & Pillay 2023). They were also expected to excel at work with limited support from supervisors, and when they did, they received limited recognition from their family for it. These and other challenges are among the reasons for the slower pace of credentialing towards attaining PhD degrees and fewer publications (Marnoto et al. 2024).

A Speech Therapy and female Audiology academic, Professor Khatija Khoza-Shangase, reflects on the intersectionality of being a black female professor in a historically white institution, and regards the system as being oppressive towards female academics (Khoza-Shangase 2019). However, it remains unclear whether the system is similarly oppressive for developing female academics in these disciplines and whether this challenge has affected WLB.

To cope with the above-mentioned challenges, some female academics typically resort to compromising family and marriage responsibilities while prioritising their academic careers (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier 2017). Some elect to have fewer children than they desire in an effort to limit their domestic responsibilities and focus on productivity and ACD (Dubois-Shaik & Fusulier 2017). Alternatively, some female academics must sacrifice their career development opportunities to dedicate their time and energy to raising children, as balancing both appears virtually impossible (Darisa et al. 2010). Such demands can lead women in academia to experience depression and anxiety, which can further compromise their productivity and performance at work (Gallardo 2021; Ysseldyk et al. 2019). In light of the above, this study contributes to the existing knowledge gap concerning SLP-A's academic WLB experiences in the South African context.

Methodology and design

Following a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with eight purposively sampled SLT-A female lecturers at a South African University. Phenomenology is underpinned by the assumption that the world can only be understood through the interpretation of those who experience it (McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis 2011).

This study explored WLB from the participants' first-hand experiences, hence the choice of phenomenology as a suitable design, which guided the methods applied in this study (Lindseth & Norberg 2004).

The participants

Typically, 8–15 participants are involved in the chosen design (Tiwari, Tripathi & Srivastava 2025). Because of reaching data saturation, where no new themes emerged beyond Participant 7, data generation was terminated after the first eight participants (Ahmed 2025). The female academics had to be pursuing a PhD qualification with at least two years of full-time lecturing experience at the UoI to be considered as potential participants. Those who did not meet this criterion, including part-time staff or fully credentialed (with PhDs) lecturers, were excluded.

Data generation, analysis and trustworthiness

To maintain confidentiality, the UoI is used as a pseudonym for the university where the study was conducted. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using the Zoom software platform, with each interview guided by a schedule informed by the literature, study objectives, and overall focus. Using Zoom for online data generation was a convenient choice that eliminated the need for the researcher to travel to each participant without compromising data quality. Rapport was established with each participant through general greetings, small talk, and discussions regarding the study, which were not recorded. The English language interview schedule consisted of three sections covering their (1) demographic details, (2) conceptions of WLB (Objective 1) and experiences of WLB (Objective 2) and related reasons (Objective 3), as well as the impact of being female on WLB (Objective 4). The Zoom transcription function was used to transcribe the data, with each transcript verified by the researcher who listened to the audio recording (at two times slower speed for clarity) while reading the text and correcting any errors. Non-word verbal cues, such as 'ahm, like' were omitted as deemed redundant, to optimise the clarity of the transcriptions (Nascimento & Steinbruch 2019). The text for each interview was uploaded into NVivo version 12 for thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006:87) within the Hermeneutic strategy recommended by Ajjawi and Higgs (2007, Table 2, p. 622). All the above analysis was performed by the researcher using NVivo, including coding and thematisation. After familiarisation with the data (immersion and understanding), coding was performed, and themes were subsequently generated from related codes (abstraction). Those themes were revised as necessary if the next interview data provided better insights (synthesis and theme development).

Trustworthiness was ensured through methods consistent with suggestions by Treharne and Riggs (2015) and Ramsook (2018). The rigorous and transparent application of the methodology, combined with the selection of academics with first-hand experience of the phenomenon of interest in the

study, ensured the *credibility* of the findings. Verbatim transcription and reporting direct excerpts from the findings ensured the *strength* of the representation of their experiences. Repeated analysis of each interview data ensured that the generated themes were reproducible or *dependable* (Ahmed 2024). Being a developing academic, the researcher had a deep insider perspective on the higher education career journey. I, the interviewer, therefore probed with deep insight for optimum reflection from the participants. Objective measures, such as member checking and bracketing, are not necessary in hermeneutic phenomenology (McConnell-Henry et al. 2011; Vella 2024). The researcher's interpretations of the participants' experiences of WLB present one perspective that may differ when conducted by another researcher, an acceptable subjectivity within the chosen design. However, the extensive use of direct quotations from the participants and the transparency with which the findings are interpreted did not compromise the quality of the study.

Ethical considerations

The institutional Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, granted ethical clearance (HSSREC/00002775/2021) to conduct the study. Written gatekeeper permission to access potential participants from the institution where the study was conducted was granted. Each participant signed the informed consent form and verbally consented to participate in the study, which was audio-recorded. All other ethical considerations were taken to ensure that the study was ethically sound. None of the participants were exposed to physical or other forms of harm, with all their details being kept confidential and known only to the researcher. To ensure anonymity, no participant identification details were included in the data analysis, as each participant was assigned a number (Participant 1 – Participant 8). Therefore, all the generated data were stored anonymously in a password-protected computer that was accessible only to the researcher.

Results

The findings are organised according to the study objectives shared earlier in this article, following the same order as those objectives. Prior to those findings, the participants' characteristics are shared, as such background is understood to shape their views and experiences of WLB (see Table 1 for details).

Conceptions of work-life balance

Objective 1 concerned the participants' conceptions of WLB. The participants' conceptions of WLB could be summarised into two emergent themes as depicted in Table 2.

Under the first theme, the SLP-A academics conceived of WLB in two ways. For some, WLB is a situation where clear boundaries exist between the two domains, where social life does not interfere with work. For others, WLB entails an equal distribution of attention between social life and work. Participants 1 and 7's conceptions of WLB

TABLE 1: Participants' characteristics.

No.	Age	Qualification	Years' experience		Marital status	Children
			In academia	In DoH		
P1	39	SLP & A	5	10.0	Married	2
P2	52	SLP & A	11	19.5	Married	3
P3	36	A	12	3.0	Married	3
P4	34	A	6	7.0	Not married	1
P5	36	SLP	6	9.0	Married	4
P6	41	SLP	12	5.0	Married	0
P7	28	A	3	3.0	Not married	1
P8	37	SLP & A	10	5.0	Not married	1

Source: Makhoba, M., 2026, 'Female lecturers' academic career development: A case of speech-language pathology and audiology', *African Journal of Career Development* 8(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v8i1.178>

SLP, speech language pathologist; A, audiologist; SLP & A, dual qualification (a combination of both); DoH, Department of Health; No., number; P, participant.

TABLE 2: Conceptions of work-life balance.

Theme	Subthemes
Separation between work and social life	Having clear boundaries between work and life Giving equal attention to each domain
Integration of work and life	A lack of clear distinction between work and social life Work is life (work dominates life)

emphasise the importance of a clear separation between the two domains:

'For me, work-life balance is about being able to live your fulfilled life and have clear boundaries between work and your personal life. And both should not cross over or infringe on each other.' (Participant 1, married, two children)

'I understand it [WLB] to be sort of a position where you can attend to each separately, where you don't have one dominating the other, you are able to be present at work and function within that space, but also be able to give your social life and family, and all of those things the same sort of attention.' (Participant 7, married, one child)

Other participants reported a lack of clear distinction between work and social life. Participants 3 and 2 conceived of work as life, suggesting that the two are intertwined, with work dominating over social life:

'To say this is this is what would actually balance it out. I think until you figure out, how to have that balance, it would be very difficult to have an understanding of what a balanced academic and life is.' (Participant 3, married, three children)

'Now I'm beginning to think work is life. Yeah, and for many reasons, I'm saying that because I think even more so with COVID, and being given the opportunity to work from home, it [WLB] started to become very blurry at some stage where you can't make that distinction between work and life, it's like work is life. So, it seems like there's no separation of work and home life; it all started to merge.' (Participant 2, married, three children)

Experiences of work-life balance

Objective 2 concerned the experiences of WLB. Only one theme emerged within this objective, suggesting that the participants experienced a dominance of work at the expense of their social life. When asked to elaborate by indicating how they split their time on a typical day between work and social life, most participants reported that they spent the majority of their time on teaching and related administrative tasks (Figure 2).

The dominance of work at the expense of social life

The participants' experience suggested that WLB is an unachievable ideal. Instead, they each experienced work-work conflict where different work activities alone competed for their attention, which also contributed to their experience of WLB. To prevent confusion, ACD is mentioned as a component of the participants' work in this article, as it is an activity that the academics spend time on, away from their social life. Figure 2 illustrates how participants allocate their time between work (and ACD) and their social life on a typical day, expressed as a percentage of time of day.

The findings indicate a variation in how each participant divides their time between work and social life. Five participants (Participant 1, Participant 4, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8) reported that teaching and related administrative tasks, such as marking and preparing lecture content, consumed a significant portion (the majority) of their time. ACD dominated Participants 3 and Participant 5's time. Participant 2 had an equal split of time between ACD and teaching, with each being 35%. Evidently, social life received the least time from almost all participants (Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6 and Participant 8). The participants shared several reasons for this lack of WLB, which are covered in the next section.

Reasons for the work-life balance experiences

In response to Objective 3 of the study, which sought to identify the reasons for the way WLB or lack thereof was experienced, three themes emerged as depicted in Table 3.

Some participants neglected their social lives because of overwhelming work responsibilities. Participant 6 elaborates on how she had to *neglect her social life and herself* while developing as an academic. Participant 1 experienced having to neglect their families by taking work home. Participant 4 also elaborates on how she had to neglect friends because of work demands:

'There is no work-life balance. There's no me and work balance, so I also put myself aside. Work takes priority, so a lot gets set on the back burner. Your personal life and social life obviously get put aside because those don't have strict timelines.' (Participant 6, married, no children)

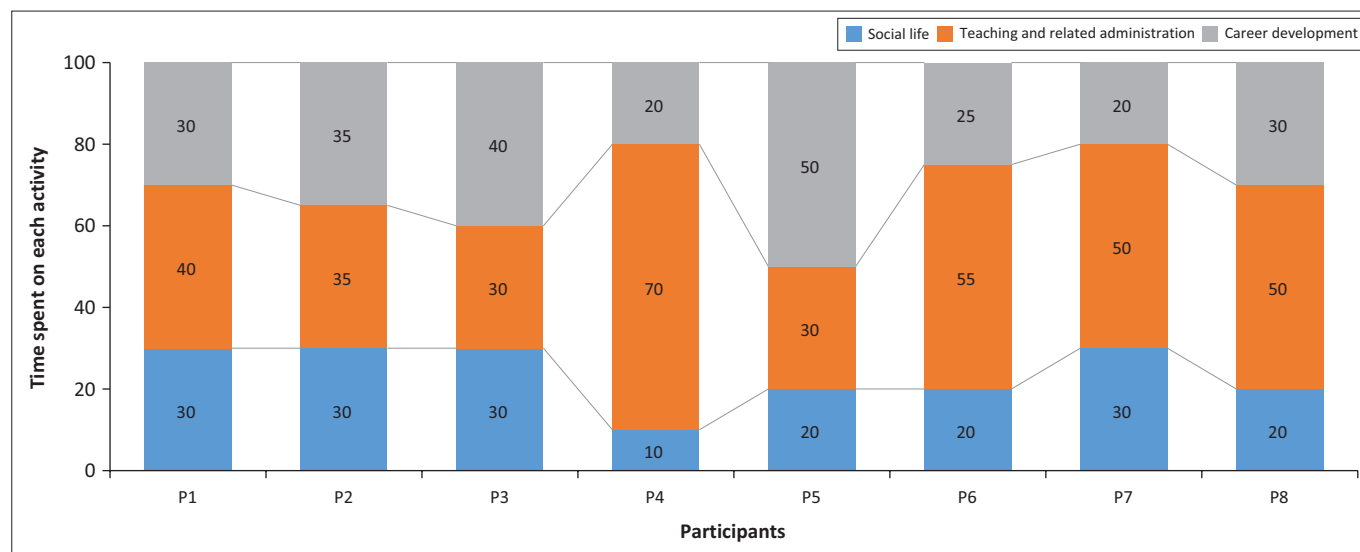


FIGURE 2: The participants' work-life imbalance.

TABLE 3: Reasons for *poor* work-life balance for female speech language pathology and audiology academics.

Themes	Subthemes
Neglect of social life to prioritise or meet work demands	Neglect of family Neglect of friendship Self-neglect
University (institutional) expectations or culture	High institutional (work demands) expectation Credentialing while working
Culture of academia	Imbalance is a lifestyle in academia

'I had to sacrifice quite a bit in terms of family life for the past four years because I'm also pursuing my PhD. Unfortunately, my children have had to be the ones I sacrifice at the altar of my career, meaning I don't have enough time to spend with them.' (Participant 1, married, two children)

'Friends had to take a backseat for a while. So, work, school [credentialing] and family are competing priorities. You end up neglecting important people in your life because of work. So, at the moment, for me. It's [work and life] not balanced. Because even if I try living life outside of work, I end up feeling guilty that I've got so much work to do. So, at the moment, there's no balance.' (Participant 4, single, one child)

Participants 3 and 7 share their experiences of an *institutional culture* that demands an imbalance between work and social life, further attesting to the experiences reported by Participant 1 earlier:

'Sometimes I feel that the way that the university is set up, sets you for failure. And what makes you have an imbalance is because you're constantly fighting this thing. But I refuse to fail.' (Participant 3, married, three children)

'I'm not sure if it's an institutional or a departmental [the Discipline] thing. The demand and expectation versus the number of hours that we should ideally be working sometimes doesn't even feel real. That you are still expected within this time to then still maintain a life outside of that? I think it's a culture thing. And also, an expectation. Because it's been personally said to me that I need to put in more work or hours. So, I think it's a culture and an expectation.' (Participant 7, married, one child)

The participants felt that the academic culture that normalises WLC sets them up for failure in their pursuit of ACD. As a result, academics adopt a lifestyle (*or culture in academia*) characterised by a work-life imbalance or conflict, as suggested by Participant 5 and Participant 3:

'I looked at my colleagues. "Academic people," so to speak. Most of them have taken a life of being by themselves. Most of them do not have partners, and they are just academics.' (Participant 5, married, four children)

'I myself am battling with the imbalance. I'm yet to meet a person who says that "I'm very much balanced and everything is OK."' (Participant 3, married, three children)

The relationship between work-life balance and being a female academic

To understand if being female affected the experiences of WLB, the participants were asked to reflect on this. Being female was experienced as a hindrance against WLB. Participants 5 and 7 elaborate:

'For me, as a woman, I have to make excuses in my work, and I have to work around other commitments like fetching children and dropping them off. But for my husband, it's easy for him to just say I'm working, and that's it. But you, as a female, have to be a mother, and you also have to be trying to go up in your academic development and other things, so you need to balance all those things, yeah, I just feel like it would be a whole lot different if I was a man.' (Participant 5, married, four children)

'I just generally think that it becomes difficult when you're a woman because also the societal pressures sort of expect you to be a certain way. For example, I have to be with my daughter all the time. I have to take care of certain things because it's expected of a mom. It's expected of a woman. Whereas the same expectations would not apply to a male.' (Participant 7, married, one child)

These findings suggest that female SLP-A carry more responsibilities at home than their male counterparts. To cope with the demands of academia, they also take work home, further contributing the WLI.

Discussion

This article reports on the WLB experiences of female Speech Language Pathology and Audiology (SLP-A) academics at the UoI. The discussion of the findings draws from the literature (Akobo & Stewart 2020; Kelliher et al. 2019; Khan & Fazili 2016) and the theoretical frame (Figure 1). The discussion is organised to address the study objectives. The characteristics of the participant are discussed to provide the background that may have influenced the participants' experiences of WLB.

The participants' average age was 38 years, with the youngest being 28 and the oldest 52, while the majority fell within the mid-to-late 30s (Table 1), which is consistent with the age of people who would have graduated from their first undergraduate degree a decade ago, and accumulated some years of work experience, while pursuing their PhD, even though the age range of developing academics can vary greatly (Crutchley, Nahaboo & Rao 2024). Only Participant 7 was scheduled to complete within three years, while the rest were delayed in completing their studies. Most participants were married mothers, suggesting that they each had competing responsibilities as mothers and wives. This suggests that each participant had social responsibilities that competed for their attention, potentially contributing to their experiences of WLB challenges, discussed next.

The SLP-A academics' conceptions of WLB could be separated into two. Firstly, work and social should have clear boundaries without one compromising the other. Therefore, there should be equal or equitable fulfilment of work (for financial remuneration), and social life without each domain affecting the other. Khan and Fazili (2016) shared this sentiment in their review of the concept of WLB, where they emphasised that work and social life are separated by a boundary that creates the balance. Secondly, WLB is conceived as an integration of work and social life, a more liberal and modern perspective aligned with those shared by Yao (2024). This author reviewed the literature on WLB, based on which he purports that WLB should be understood as an individualistic and prioritisation-based phenomenon, rather than a universal one. This conception suggests that, as in this study, work may be allowed to dominate social life and considered as a priority.

None of the participants had achieved WLB in their view, with some confirming that WLB does not exist in real life. Instead, they experienced a conflict in which work dominated their social lives. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Toffoletti and Starr (2016) at the University of Australia, which involved female academics. The study found that simultaneously meeting the demands of both work and social life, especially for women with familial domestic responsibilities, was perceived as impossible. As suggested by the conflict theory, work or social life tends to conflict, where one domain will always dominate the other at any given point in time (Greenhaus & Beutell 1985).

Despite the SLP-A academics working under flexible schedules in which they are not required to be in the office for a full workweek, a conflict between work and social life was evident. Instead, a lack of robust work-social life boundaries for female academics in SLP-A compromised their WLB. The physical, emotional, and time investments of SLP-A academics were skewed towards work, and not social life (Figure 1). The lack of robust boundaries is often abused by universities that overload academic staff with heavy workloads, expecting them to take some of the work home (Johnston et al. 2022). As suggested by Griffin (2022), staff in higher education institutions in Sweden, Finland and Norway often face such WLB challenges.

These conceptions and experiences of the lack of WLB can be attributed to several reasons. Academia appears to have normalised WLI, which affects female academics more than their male counterparts, especially in male-dominated science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines (Esquivel, Marincean & Benore, 2023). The study's findings, although only transferable to relatively similar contexts, suggest that WLB challenges are also experienced by female academics in female-dominated disciplines, such as the SLP-A. Female SLP-A academics take on as much workload as their male counterparts, despite being expected to do relatively more homemaking in their social life (Kalidasan, Geetha & Poulpunitha 2017). This results in behavioural patterns (Figure 1) such as neglecting friends and family, as well as self-isolation, in attempts to cope with the demands of academia.

The aforementioned behavioural patterns appear to be endemic to the institutional culture and the culture of academia, as this study's findings suggest, which is consistent with existing literature. For instance, Toffoletti and Starr (2016) reported that female academics who were not willing to compromise their social life were viewed as not taking their academic career seriously. Such a culture bred a typical lifestyle for some academics at the UoI, marked by a skewed prioritisation of academic career activities, a phenomenon common in academia (Bartlett et al. 2021). Hence, academics often find that their work significantly infringes on their social life, especially if they are female with homemaker roles at home (McKenzie 2022).

The current study participants experienced being female as a hindrance against WLB, as their work settings were ignorant of the roles and responsibilities outside of work. Wheeler and Wiese (2024) conducted focus groups with 85 female staff members, including 32 academics, at a South African university. They found that female academics were exposed to gender-based discrimination and difficulties in managing WLB. This further cements the argument that an academic career appears to be uncondusive for female academics unless they are willing to forgo their social life outside of work (Wullf-Wathne 2021).

While higher education institutions such as the UoI have put noticeable efforts into supporting female academics

towards their ACD, more ought to be done to help female academics achieve WLB (Makhoba 2026; Mbukanma & Strydom 2022). Garraio et al. (2022) share the same sentiment, indicating that female academics' social lives tend to be more distracted than those of their male counterparts, suggesting a need to consider the demands of their social lives in supporting them to cope and succeed in their academic careers. A consideration of this nature would avoid other negative consequences of WLI.

A lack of WLB has been found to negatively affect job satisfaction (Gragnano, Simbul & Miglioretti 2020) and reduce productivity at work (Thevanes & Mangaleswaran 2018). Indeed, female SLP-A academics at the UoI were not as productive as required by their institution because of slow ACD. These are some of the reasons for a stronger reconsideration of policies that could improve WLB at the UoI and other universities that are contextually similar in terms of having predominantly female SLP-A staff complement. The Human Resource (HR) Department could be instrumental in this regard, as HR policies have been reported to have a direct impact on WLB (Opoku, Kwao & Johnson 2023). In particular, a better alignment of the female academics' staff's teaching requirements and other roles should be made feasible, within the standard working hours, so that academic work does not demand more than eight hours of the academics' day. A consideration of workload (re)distribution that would not compromise the WLB should be made. Where some of the abovementioned changes have been implemented, a system of monitoring and evaluating their effectiveness in promoting a healthy WLB should be considered, beyond the currently existing key performance area evaluation system. Lastly, the findings may also inform future reviews of existing academic staff wellness programmes, with the intention of prioritising WLB for female academics.

Limitations and challenges

Qualitative research does not intend to generalise the findings beyond the studied or similar contexts. Therefore, the study's findings are only transferable to contexts similar to those at the UoI. Data generation was conducted through a virtual platform, which may have influenced how participants expressed themselves. However, because all participants were familiar with Zoom and used it at work, there were no signs of its use compromising the quality of this study. It was at each participant's discretion to trust that the interviewer would not break confidentiality agreements, but there is no guarantee that all participants trusted this promise and responded honestly to questions asked. Furthermore, member checking was not conducted as it deviates from the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, as some authors (McConnell-Henry et al. 2011; Vella 2024) have argued. Despite all the experienced challenges, the study's aim and objectives were achieved.

Implications

The study's findings suggest the need for tighter policy guidance towards enhancing or aligning the female

academics' career expectations with their social lives in order to enhance WLB (Opoku et al. 2023). Future research should explore the role that HR departments can play in facilitating WLB for developing female academics, and examine stronger control measures to address intradisciplinary and institutional interference in female academics' efforts to attain WLB by imposing excessive workloads or other related expectations. Work-life balance should be explored across a wider range of participants, institutions, and research methodologies, including quantitative research, to produce results that are generalisable and applicable to the broader contexts. Lastly, similar studies should be conducted with more heterogeneous groups to yield findings that are not specific to one gender.

Conclusion

This study has contributed to closing a research gap in Speech-Language Therapy and Audiology academia, as well as other Health Sciences disciplines, where WLB has received scant attention. Work-life balance is often perceived as an ideal that is unattainable for most academics. Overall, SLP-A academics' experiences of a lack of WLB, despite the flexibility of academia. This is because of institutional and industry culture, where neglect of social life and a focus on credentialing towards a PhD are expected of developing academics, particularly when they are employed as full-time lecturers. This study has brought to the fore the need to further explore this topic from the perspective of different stakeholders, with the aim of finding a solution that will make WLB a reality for staff at the UoI and other higher education institutions that may find this study transferable to their context.

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Competing interests

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CRedit authorship contribution

Musa Makhoba: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing-original draft, visualisation, project administration, writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Musa Makhoba, upon reasonable request.

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