Balans privatnog i profesionalnog života nastavnog osoblja na visokoškolskim ustanovama u uslovima pandemije virusa Covid 19

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Apstrakt: Pitanje ravnoteže između poslovnog i privatnog života nastavnog osoblja na visokoškolskim ustanovama postaje sve zanimljivije za istraživače zbog složenosti odgovornosti nastavnika koje uključuju ne samo nastavu i pripremu predavanja, već prvenstveno naučna istraživanja i pisanje naučnih radova, kao i razne administrativne dužnosti i eventualne menadžerske dužnosti (šefovi katedri, prodekani, itd.). Ova tema dobija na značaju ne samo u odnosu na žene na nastavničkim pozicijama u visokom obrazovanju, već i u celini pri privlačenju i zadržavanju talenata. Ovaj složeni problem je posebno očigledan u okolnostima katastrofe poput pandemije virusa COVID-19. Ovaj rad proučava stavove (u obliku intervjua) nastavnog osoblja - asistenata u nastavi, predavača (stranih jezika), docenata, vanrednih i redovnih profesora prema postignutom balansu poslovnog i privatnog života u periodu rada od kuće tokom vanrednog stanja u Srbiji od 16. marta do 18. maja, kada se većina visokoškolskih ustanova vratila na poluregularne načine rada na primeru Fakulteta za inženjerski menadžment, Beograd, Srbija. Iako je uzorak mali, može se zaključiti da su svi nivoi nastavnog osoblja imali poteškoća u održavanju ravnoteže između radnog i privatnog života tokom rada od kuće, posebno oni sa decom školskog uzrasta.

Ključne reči: Balans privatnog i profesionalnog života, nastavno osoblje, visokoškolske ustanove, pandemija Covid 19 virusa.

Work-life balance of teaching staff at higher education during COVID 19 pandemic

Abstract: The issue of work-life balance of teaching staff at higher education institutions is becoming more interesting for the researchers due to complexity in responsibilities of teachers which include not only teaching and preparation of lectures, but primarily scientific research and scientific papers writing, as well as various administrative and managerial duties (vice deans, department chiefs, etc.). This topic is getting importance not only in regard to women in higher education teaching positions, but to overall attracting and retaining talent. This complex problem has been particularly evident in disaster circumstances such as the COVID-19 virus pandemic. This paper studies attitudes (in the form of interviews) of teaching staff - teaching assistants, lecturers (languages), assistant professors, associate professors and full professors towards the achieved work-life balance during period of working from home during the lockdown imposed in Serbia from March, to May when the most higher education institutions returned to semi-regular ways of operations on the example of the School of Engineering Management from Belgrade, the Republic of Serbia. Even though the sample is small, it can be concluded that all levels of teaching staff have had difficulties in maintaining work-life balance during the work from home, especially the ones with children of school age.

Key Words: Work-life balance, teaching staff, higher education institutions, Covid 19 pandemic.

Introduction

One of the most elucidated definitions of work-life balance has been the one by Campbell Clark (2000), who defines *work-life balance* as ‘satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict’. The expression *work-life balance* shows a remarkable phenomenon – the

separation of work and all other life roles, thus provoking the thought that work is not an integral part of life and that it is actually burdening factor on one's life. The term *work-life balance* has been accepted from the 1980's (Currie and Eveline, 2011; Gervais and Millea, 2016; Greenhouse and Beutell, 2008; Gregory and Milner 2008; Guest, 2002; Lockwood, 2003). The widely accepted phrase, at the beginning of scientific research, has been mainly focused on women, namely working women with children (Rafnsdottir and Heijstra, 2013; Adisa et al., 2021).

Human resources management policies at higher education institutions are in the last decade more focused on talent attraction and retention due to increasing competition between faculties and universities and the need for establishing the institutions as reputable, science, and innovation driven major factors for knowledge development and dissemination. One of the main centres of attention of those policies and practices is establishing work environment which provides its teaching workforce with the conditions for delivering excellent teaching and scientific results. Higher education teachers' workload is becoming more complex and includes demands that go well beyond the limits of teaching and scientific research (Castaneda and Isgro, 2013; Sallee, 2008), thus opening the question of balance between academic and private life of the higher education teachers.

The entirely new set of problems for human resource management policies and procedures for supporting achievement of work-life balance of academic staff at higher education institutions have emerged from the onset of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has been identified in December 2019 in China, Hubei province - the city of Wuhan. The news on the virus has been globally spread from the beginning of January 2020. The virus has spread from China to other Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, and Singapore), United States, Western, and Eastern Europe, and South America. World Health Organization (WHO) declared pandemic on March 11. The Republic of Serbia was not an exception, and the first official case has been confirmed on March 6, 2020.

This research is aimed to observe attitudes of teachers in higher education institutions in various ranks towards the influence of imposed lockdown and shifting to online mode of teaching and other academic responsibilities on their work-life balance. The research has been performed as a case study of the School of Engineering Management and the attitudes have been collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. The participants have been interviewed in September 2020, when the effects of online classes from March to June 2020 have been evaluated and the plans for the next school years have been set. Main focus has been given to the elements that blurred the lines of work-life balance.

1. Work-life balance of higher education teachers in pandemic

Academic life is mainly consisting of teaching, preparation of lectures, students' mentoring, students' papers grading, scientific research and papers publishing, textbooks writing, preparation for and participation at scientific conferences, participation in academic and scientific bodies and organizations, participation in scientific projects, participation in professional and consulting projects, administrative work (various reports, analyses, participation in various scientific and administrative bodies), managerial work (chiefs of departments, vice deans, etc.) (Castaneda and Isgro, 2013; Misra, et al., 2012; Philipsen and Bostic, 2010; Sallee, 2008). The academics are evaluated and their advancement is first and foremost based on the number of publications in high impact academic journals (van den Brink, et al., 2013; Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013).

Private life is consisting of various roles: family life, raising the children, home chorus, taking care of elderly, friendships maintenance, emotional relationships, travel, leisure, hobbies, etc. The academic and professional responsibilities have been mounting during the last decade and are overflowing to private life. The thin line between academic and private life of the teachers is thus disappearing and already having hard times to balance work and other aspects of their life (Rapanta, et al., 2020). Commonly, the teachers at the higher education institutions work much more than traditional 40 hour working week (Castaneda and Isgro, 2013) and many factors affect the add to the amount of working hours of teaching staff.

The use of latest information technologies calls for teachers to be accessible to students almost 24 hours a day for the entire week, weekends included. Even when academics work from home for several days a week, they are available for students through information technologies (Currie and Eveline, 2011). In the last decade there are more research that found out that teachers carry various

responsibilities home, which is made possible by the expansion of information technology (writing scientific and professional papers, sources and literature search through digital databases, review of student papers), and that female teachers, particularly ones with children, tend to write scientific papers mostly at night (Currie and Eveline, 2011; Ryan and Peters, 2014; Koppes Bryan and Wilson, 2015).

The question that has great influence on work-life balance, not only of female academics, but male academics too is job uncertainty as academics take a long time for a permanent contract. (Fontinha et al., 2018). One of the extremely important consequences of increasing responsibilities is elevated academics' level of stress, and also other health issues especially for female academics (Brazeau et al., 2020). Nevertheless, this issue is not exclusively associated to female academics; it is affecting male academics, too.

As in other countries, it is the same situation with the academics in the Republic of Serbia who have to follow rigorous requirements for academic advancement. There are not many research on this issue in the Republic of Serbia, nevertheless, some of the research in Serbia concluded that the attitudes of teachers on the balance of professional and private life differ, women believe that they to a lesser extent achieve a balance of professional and private life and cannot complete all their job responsibilities during the forty-hour work week (Ilić-Kosanović et al., 2016; Ilić-Kosanović et al., 2017).

The spread of Covid-19 disease pandemic caused by a Corona Virus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 - SARS-CoV-2) from March 2020 compelled the most of the higher education institutions in most of the countries affected by the virus to transfer, most of their teaching to online forms. The pandemic also affected higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia which had to transfer their teaching to online platforms after the State of emergency was announced on March 15, 2020 (Službeni glasnik, 2020) for the entire Summer semester with the exception of the exams that by *Serbian Law on Higher Education* (Republika Srbija, 2017) can be carried out exclusively at a higher education institution premises.

There is various research on the topic of influence of Covid-19 pandemic on the work life balance, especially in the case of working women under the lockdown circumstances (Rodríguez-Rivero et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Adisa et al., 2021; Möhring, et al., 2021) There is already conflicting research on the issues of possible disruption of work-life balance of the higher education teachers due to new forms of teaching (Parham and Rauf, 2020). One of the studies has shown that from 146 participants in the survey, total of 63.2% of female respondents have stated that their work-life balance has worsened and 33.3% that it has actually improved, while 44.8% of male participants have stated the same with the equal percentage of male participants stating the opposite (Ashencaen Crabtree, Esteves, Hemingway, 2020), while a study of academics in Austria, Switzerland and Germany has shown that actual satisfaction with work-life balance increased during the lockdown because of the flexibility of work without increased dissatisfaction of the female participants with children (Raabe et al., 2020).

The one of the central issues that has emerged from the situation is the need for new set of skills for teachers in higher education, not only because of adaptation to technological changes and the use of information technologies (Pažun and Langović, 2020), but also because the call for acquiring new teaching methods for new circumstances (Langford and Damsa, 2020). Some of the previous research has stated that completely new teaching style is required, with the need for almost theatrical skills (Mishra et al., 2020) in order to gather students' attention and interest in a course subject.

2. Research

The scope of study and data collection

Methodology and methods

School of Engineering Management, a private faculty located in Belgrade, the Republic of Serbia, is a part of the "University Union – Nikola Tesla", and has accredited undergraduate study programs *Engineering Management* and *Management*; master study programs *Project Management and Industry 4.0*, *Engineering and Management of Security Information Systems*, *Economics and Management of Energy*, with a novel accredited PhD program *Waste Management*. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the School has started to realize online forms of teaching on March 23, a week after the announcement of

the state of emergency, using Zoom platform with the Google classroom as an additional mean for sharing information, teaching materials, and homework.

The objective of the empirical part is to examine the attitudes teaching staff - teaching assistants, lecturers (languages), assistant professors, associate professors and full professors towards the achieved work-life balance during period of working from home during the lockdown imposed in Serbia from March 23, to May 18. The interviews have been conducted from September 14th to 18th through semi-structured in person interviews and the answers have been recorded by the author.

Survey design

The interviewees have been given two closed questions:

1. Do you feel that the new situation affected their work life balance in a negative way?
2. Do you feel that the new situation affected their work life balance in a positive way?

After that, the participants have been given the opportunity to express their thoughts on the elements that are blurring the lines between private and professional (academic) life.

Description of the sample

For the purpose of this study, eighteen participants in teaching positions: Teaching assistant, lecturer (languages), assistant professor, associate professor, full professor have been interviewed. The demographical data of the sample are given at Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic variables (Source: author)

Code Name	Scientific field	Position	Gender	Age	Status	Number of children currently living in the household	Age of the children
P1	Engineering	Full professor	M1	43	S	0	/
P2	Humanities	Full professor	F	40	M	1	7
P3	Management	Full professor	M2	44	M	2	5,9
P4	Security studies	Full professor	M3	57	M	0	/
P5	Information technologies	Associate professor	F	41	M	1	8
P6	Engineering	Associate professor	F	55	M	0	/
P7	Management	Associate professor	F	49	M	2	8,8
P8	Engineering	Associate professor	M4	52	M	0	/
P9	Environmental engineering	Associate professor	F	42	S	0	/
P10	Chemical engineering	Assistant professor	F	40	M	1	2
P11	Economics	Assistant professor	M5	36	M	2	1,3
P12	Languages	Lecturer	F	46	M	1	4
P13	Languages	Lecturer	F	40	M	2	6, 9,
P14	Management	Teaching assistant	F	36	M	1	5
P15	Management	Teaching assistant	M6	41	M	2	1
P16	Security management	Teaching assistant	M7	28	S	0	/
P17	Industrial management	Teaching assistant	F	30	M	0	/
P18	Engineering management	Teaching assistant	M8	49	M	2	8, 8

As it can be seen at Table 1, ten participants have been female and eight male. Three participants have been single (one female and two male) and twelve participants have had children of school age. Four professors have been in the rank of full professor, five associate professors, two assistant professors, two lecturers (foreign language), and five teaching assistants.

3. Results

All of the participant teaching staff stated yes on the first question and no on the second. Nevertheless, the comments have shown different, not so strict, stance.

During the second part (unstructured) of the interview, they have had the opportunity to clarify their thoughts on work life balance disruptions. The first issue that emerged is the question of accessibility of information technologies, especially for the participants with partners working from home and the children going through online classes at primary and high schools. P7 have stated:

‘For me the first problem regarding the IT was the fact that my daughters had online classes, luckily they could use one computer in their room, my husband is in teaching and used a desktop in our room, I used a lap top in the living room. If we didn’t have classes at the same time it was doable, but if we all had something at the same time, the Wi-Fi signal would weaken and it was not going smoothly.’

The same technical situation has emerged for participants P2, P3, P5, P13, and P18, all who have had children of school age. They have used PC’s, lap tops, tablets, and phones to be able to access to or to post materials, or have classes with various technical difficulties.

It should be stressed out that the adaptation to new forms of teaching regarding the technical skills and learning the new platforms and apps have not been the significant issue in disruption of work-life balance because the new tools (Zoom and Google Classroom) are user friendly. P9 has indicated:

‘Honestly, I thought it would be a challenge for older professors, but it is very simple, understanding the mechanisms of those platforms takes minutes, not hours.’

The other situation that negatively affects the work-life balance of the participants with the children is organization of day to day activities. P2, P3, P5, P7, P13, P18 have similarly stated that the organization has been the key issue, because different work related and school related obligations have been scheduled at the same time, and even when they have been scheduled apart it has been very difficult to arrange breaks for meals or for family activities. Participant 17 has stated:

‘Yes, it was difficult, my younger child is first grader and their classes would start on TV at 08.00, so I would prepare the breakfast for him early, and then my older child had classes from 11.00 and would ask for breakfast at about nine or ten, I would have my classes, then would help the children after 13.00 to download their homework sent by the teachers, and then I would prepare lunch, then we would have lunch break at about 15.00 and then continue with their homework and I with mine. My husband was home at about 17.00 and he would eat. Then I would send instructions for my students and give the children dinner and then at about eight I would gather homework from my children, photograph it and post it on their Google classroom. After nine or ten I would answer my students E-mails and help my children get ready for sleep. So my day would end at about 11.00.’

The participants with the preschool children have had another set of problems, the difficulty to watch over their children and work at the same time. Participant 12 has stated:

‘My son has been pulled out the kindergarten for the duration of emergency situation, and it has been very difficult for me, because my classes [foreign language] are interactive and he couldn’t eat or play without me. Every now and then I had to switch off the camera or tone.’

Similar problems have been stated by the participants P10, P14, P15 whose children of kindergarten age also stayed at home to avoid overcrowded kindergartens. P10 has stated:

‘I can leave my child at kindergarten, but even it is tiresome sometimes to watch over a small child and work at a same time, I want to protect my child from potential illness and to take the burden off the kindergarten teachers, because there are parents that have to work and don’t have any other options.’

Stress has emerged as an important issue. P4 have stated that the most stressful periods have been the weekends with complete lockdown when the time has been an asset, but the stress of it strongly influenced the organization of the activities. P17 (teaching assistant) have stated that even though the weekends should be time for leisure, it has been a time of difficulty of focusing on one activity. She has said:

‘It sounds great, you know, you had a hectic week with online classes, sending materials, answering mails for my professor, and now you can read a book or watch some movie or just sit on a terrace and enjoy nice weather, but the lockdown situation itself brought such a confusion, I would prepare a book and a coffee to enjoy a terrace view and then I would start watching TV forgetting about my previous plan, and then I would be watching nice weather and being frustrated that my husband and I just couldn’t go for a walk near the river and clear our heads a little bit’.

Participants without family obligations have shown some frustrations with initial organization of their obligations and the need to acquire new technical knowledge fast (P1, P9, P16). Nevertheless, participants without family obligations have expressed more time for academic improvement (reading academic papers), as well as more time for private life (walks, watching films, reading books, cooking, gardening, etc.). P16 has stated:

‘After initial stress and, I can say confusion, I can use more spare time that I have to read literature that is not from my narrow field. You know, I lose every day about one and half or two hours for travelling alone to and from work alone, so this is great now.’

Rank itself has proved not to be relevant, but additional duties (department chairs, vice deans, etc.) had major influence, as two full professors (P2 and P3), and one assistant professor (P7) have stated that other, administrative and managerial duties, especially “paperwork”, like various analyses, and reports, especially quality assessment reports, have had extremely negative impact on their work-life balance as they have been time consuming and the communication and cooperation between various professors has shown various difficulties.

4. Discussion

The first issue that connects various studies on the influence of Covid-19 pandemic on work-life balance of higher education teachers on all levels is the issue of higher education teachers' information technology skills adjustment that has been prerequisite for smooth transition to online teaching methods (Marinoni and van't Land, 2020; Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2020; Langford and Damsa, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020; Coman et al., 2020) as almost all higher education institutions had to promptly shift to online models of teaching. A research of Canadian teachers' attitudes toward technology before and during the pandemic has shown no significant difference in attitudes (Sokal et al., 2020), which is slightly surprising, but actually supports the thought that previous technologies' shrewdness (or the lack of it) of teaching staff assists in adjusting the new working conditions.

As one of previous studies conducted in Great Britain has shown that some of the participants have reported increased levels of stress due to disruption of their regular activities, that is especially burdening mothers with children, excluding some of the participants who appreciated new challenges that generated a need for more innovative solutions (Ashencaen Crabtree et al., 2020), we can see that the interviews conducted at our observed Institution got similar results.

Some of the research has been focused on increasing levels of stress and its relation, among others, to feelings of burnout, teaching competence, attitudes toward change of various ranks of university teachers (Sokal et al., 2021; Pyhältö et al., 2021; Shlenskaya et al., 2020) that have showed different levels of stress for various groups of teachers.

5. Limitations and scope of further research

This research includes the sample that is small, as it is a case study of a particular higher education institution, further research is desirable and this important issue calls for larger sample, structured survey and implementation of a variety of statistical methods.

6. Conclusion

The question of added value of online higher education classes and courses, their benefits and shortcomings for students and teachers alike, that is rising from the beginning of the 21st century, and that have become particularly important during last decade, because of the expansion of online learning programs and platforms, have had its trial in almost entire world with the emergence of Covid-19 disease pandemic caused by a Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2) mainly from March 2020. The most of higher education institutions in Europe have had to transfer to online teaching forms in a matter of weeks or even days.

Many questions have been emerging since then: technological development and appropriate skills of teaching staff; teachers' and students' flexibility and swiftness in adaptation to new circumstances; organization of the teaching process; organization of exams; stress and worries of students and teachers alike, etc. Among them, the question of work-life balance of teaching staff during the compulsory online classes during the lockdowns has gained a real importance.

This paper have examined attitudes of teaching staff - teaching assistants, lecturers (languages), assistant professors, associate professors and full professors of the School of Engineering Management from Belgrade, the Republic of Serbia on the achieved work-life balance during working from home in the imposed lockdown in Serbia from March, to May 2020. In that period higher education institutions in Serbia transferred their education process to online forms.

Although this paper is focused on only one higher education institution, it can be concluded that all levels of teaching staff have had difficulties in maintaining work-life balance throughout the work from home, specifically the ones with children of school age.

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