



Lecturers' Experiences of the Blurring of Work and Home Boundaries During the Covid-19 Pandemic at a South African ODeL University

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented extended Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to find innovative ways to effectively deliver student tuition and support. The lockdown brought many challenges to the education sector, including increasing the blurring of the work-home boundaries. This study investigated how Covid-19 accelerated the blurring of lecturers' work-home boundaries in the College of Education at a distance education institution in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 15 lecturers. The results showed that a lack of workspace at many lecturers' homes forced them to work beyond normal office hours. One of the key findings was that complete segmentation and integration were impossible because these lines were continuously blurred during the pandemic. The demand for immediate feedback by students exacerbated the situation for many lecturers. There is a need for the design of fluid policies that can be readily implemented during times of emergency such as the pandemic.

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The Covid-19 pandemic brought extraordinary changes and unimaginable disruption to the education landscape, forcing educators to shift almost overnight to an online teaching mode (Dhawan, 2020). Technology provides a workable transfer of teaching and learning activities to online spaces, with online learning becoming the only viable solution to ensuring the continuity of education. Information and communication technology (ICT) has often been blamed and praised for the many changes in higher education, including the blurring of work-home boundaries. The increased use of ICT at work, blurred the work-home interface. ICT has enabled work to be done at any time and in almost any location, thereby blending the existing domains and removing the existing boundaries between the interfaces.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns took the blurring of work-home boundaries to unprecedented levels, affecting all aspects of life and work (Manzanedo & Manning, 2020). The pandemic greatly impacted all nations of the world. The Covid-19 pandemic demanded that HEIs continue providing educational services to students by way of digital environments (Deslandes & Coutinho, 2020; Gurukkal, 2020; Mishra et al., 2021).

Educational institutions in South Africa and worldwide had to continue their teaching and learning activities using various educational technologies. Such use created high levels of unexpected blurring of the boundaries between work and home. As schools and childcare facilities closed, lecturers with young children requiring childcare and those with children at school had to take care of their children while simultaneously performing the duties and responsibilities required by their employers. The blurring of the lecturers' work-home boundaries, specifically in terms of time and space brought about by the ubiquity of technology, was inevitable.

This study is situated at the University of South Africa (Unisa), an open and distance learning (ODL) institution which officially implemented e-learning in 2013 (Baijnath, 2014). As an open, distance and e-learning (ODEL) university, Unisa has a space-time concept of its own because the learners and lecturers are separated by transactional distance (Moore, 2013). While the assumption was that ODeL institutions should have been better prepared to continue teaching and learning during disruptions such as the pandemic and lockdowns, most Unisa lecturers were not well-prepared to work from home. The Covid-19 pandemic posed enormous challenges to education systems (Daniel, 2020), with many institutions being unprepared to teach and support their learners remotely. Hodges et al. (2020, p. 1) explain that, "well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster". This study investigated how the lecturers' experienced the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, specifically the blurring of work-home boundaries. The research question guiding the study was: how did the lecturers at an open distance and e-learning institution experience the blurring of work-home boundaries during the Covid-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The blurring of the boundaries between the work-home interface is not a new phenomenon, but it was aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies by Derks et al. (2015) and Köffer et al. (2015) show the use of technology has been the greatest catalyst of the blurring of the work-home interface (WHI). Field and Chan (2018) similarly found that the work-life interface is becoming increasingly boundaryless, especially for technology-enabled workers like academics. ICT has facilitated the blurring of boundaries between the work-home domains in modern society and extended the length and ambit of non-standard work schedules (Derks & Bakker, 2014). The pervasiveness of technology and the Internet have become the answer to life's problems, particularly in education, where teaching and learning may take place anytime and anywhere.

The work-home interface is a process of merging and interacting between work and home domains (Holmes et al., 2020). ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) explain that when incumbents can't balance their WHIs, they tend to have negative perceptions and experiences that bring about some level of discomfort. Often, relationships within family settings are the first to be adversely affected by such circumstances, including mental health. Hertzberg et al. (2016) found that the work-home interface stress is a predictor of emotional exhaustion.

Mosleh et al. (2022) found that the sudden transition to online teaching negatively impacted family life, physical health, mental health and coping with stress.

Kinman (2016) indicates that, for several reasons, knowledge workers, like lecturers, might find it difficult to achieve an effective work-home balance. The challenge of work-home boundaries is that if one domain demands are not well-managed, it may deplete the existing resources and impede accomplishments in the other domains (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker 2012). Some lecturers might have main workstations in their homes, such as an office or a corner that they use exclusively for office work, while others may not. The Covid-19 pandemic forced many lecturers to continue their teaching and learning responsibilities in their homes irrespective of whether they had a dedicated workspace or not. This forced many lecturers to balance the demands of work-home domains. However, Stadlander et al. (2017, p. 45) found that most of the participants in their study “consciously separated their home and workplace through either utilising a separate room/area or maintaining a work schedule that separated work and home through the management of their time”.

The Covid-19 situation created different dynamics to the work-home boundaries because not all the lecturers had access to relevant resources to effectively manage their work-home interface. Within the South African context, some of the main challenges of working online are load-shedding, data and connectivity (Van Wyk et al., 2021). To add to this, the schools and early childhood education centres also closed because of the pandemic, resulting in many lecturers having to manage their childcare duties while simultaneously having to perform work duties such as research, teaching and learning and the effective support of students from their homes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Ashforth et al.’s (2000) boundary theory. Boundary theory is a useful lens for understanding the interface between work and home relations. Ashforth et al. (2000, p. 474) describe boundary theory as a process whereby “individuals create and maintain boundaries as a means of simplifying and ordering the environment.” Such boundaries exist to separate and secure the integrity of different domains in life. The term “boundary” refers to the “physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive and or relational limits that define entities as separate from one another” (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 474).

Clark (2000, p. 753) describes domains as, “worlds people have associated with different rules, thought patterns and behaviour.” Overlap between the domains occurs through the mechanisms of *integration* (the mixing of work and home domains) and *segmentation* (the separating of work and home domains) (Ashforth et al., 2000). These mechanisms are some of the strategies individuals use to simplify and order their boundaries to prevent work or family conflict.

Adults spend most of their working life striving for a work-home balance; however, the magnitude of the Covid-19 pandemic disturbed and disrupted the traditional work-home balance. Work and home responsibilities required constant planning and the maintaining of boundaries. Integration and overlapping of roles became the new normal for many lecturers during the lockdowns. The context of Covid-19 fostered and enforced the flexibility and permeability of work and home interfaces, which makes it difficult for lecturers to maintain strong boundaries. Clark (2000) warns that work and home cultures tend to create expectations about rules, attitudes and behaviours that often differ, creating conflict. Negotiating and maintaining boundaries between work and home has been the concern of research in various disciplines for centuries (Kylin, 2007). The boundary theory explains everyday transitions, such as those between work and home.

METHODOLOGY

This study was located in an open, distance and e-learning university in South Africa, one of Africa’s mega ODeL universities. We adopted a case study design, one of the qualitative research methods in education. According to Yin (2009, p. 4), a case study allows for exploring “the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events”. Starman (2013) also explained that a case study allows a researcher to comprehensively describe an individual case and its

analysis. This design was appropriate as it gave us access to the lecturers' real-life experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. This also gave us an opportunity to have indepth conversations with the participants.

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

Participants were chosen from the ten departments in the College of Education via purposive sampling. The College of Education employs about 267 teaching staff, and the study purposively sampled a minimum of two lecturers in each department who could provide us with the data we required. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to 20 lecturers via e-mail with all the research details, to which 15 responded positively. The College has a large population of lecturers who have all experienced the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially regarding work-related challenges. However, when recruiting participants for the research, the aim was to specifically choose lecturers who have been teaching at Unisa for at least three years or longer, because they are familiar with the ODeL environment. Although most participants used the University's learning management system (LMS) for teaching, others employed social media tools to communicate with and support their students. Most of the participants in the study were women, with some having young children at the time of the research.

Before the study took place, an application for ethical clearance to conduct the research was submitted to the College of Education's Ethics Committee. Once the application was approved, consent was obtained from the lecturers, and the purpose of the research was explained before the interview. We also explained to the participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study at any time. The participants' anonymity was also protected by assigning a code to their comments – P1, P2, ..., P15.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected from 15 participants through semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility and for the ability to capture the participants' views and opinions (Iyamu, 2018). This also allowed us to ask further questions for clarity and to probe the participants where necessary. The collected data were submitted for professional transcription. To unpack and make sense of the data, thematic analysis was used together with collaborative manual coding. This enabled us to immerse ourselves in the data (Saldaña, 2021). To strengthen our study's rigour, the intercoder reliability was achieved through iterative and systematic member checking and meetings (Hamilton 2020). The themes were derived from the research question and from the emergent categories during coding.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are based on the research question, *how did the lecturers at an ODeL institution experience the blurring of work-home boundaries during the Covid-19 pandemic?* The subsequent themes are discussed in this section.

THE BLURRING OF TIME – OFFICIAL VERSUS NON-STANDARDISED WORKING HOURS

The study found that the working hours were blurred during the Covid-19 lockdown. The pre-Covid-19 era was characterised by strict working hours in the office, that is, from 7:45 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., to which many lectures were accustomed. However, Covid-19 completely enmeshed the boundaries between official and non-standard work hours.

Although the lecturers were never explicitly expected to work after hours, the participants revealed that they tended to respond to e-mails and text messages when they received them after hours. The current study found that the lecturers felt that they were being encouraged to work outside their official work hours and days, as a participant revealed:

Messages would pop up at 7 p.m. and urgently require you to respond, and you felt the urge to respond. (P1)

Another participant explained her reason for working outside of the standard working hours:

... because sometimes some systems do not work well during the day, so I prefer to work late in the evening or very early in the morning, around 2 a.m., on the jRouter or learning management system, or whatever. (P3)

Since lecturers were no longer travelling to the office, some participants appreciated the time they saved on travelling, preferring to work in the quiet, undisturbed early hours in their own homes, as doing so increased their productivity.

We used to travel one hour from where I stayed to Unisa and leave home at half past five to avoid traffic, but now we are not travelling, and I have more hours; I have gained a lot because I have done much work during this period. I have actually accomplished many things during this period. (P8)

Although this was a positive encounter, this further contributed to the blurring of time boundaries with an increase in time spent on work outside official working hours.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS OUTSIDE WORK HOURS

The study highlighted that the students' need for immediate feedback and support during the Covid-19 lockdown contributed to the blurring of the boundaries of time. One of the participants stated:

My students called me at night or, at times, at 5 a.m. I realised this was out of frustration, as they (students) also worked from home and wanted immediate help. (P10)

Some participants indicated that almost every e-mail they received from the university and their students had an urgent tag on it, prompting them to respond to it as soon as possible. The participants also reported receiving e-mails, phone calls and WhatsApp text messages from students after office hours. One of the participants indicated that she transferred her office telephone line to her cellphone so that she could effectively continue to support her students during the lockdown:

I actually transferred my office line to my cellphone, so even when they [the students] called the office line, I could still assist them. (P14)

When they [students] were sending you an e-mail at twenty past nine and then sending you a WhatsApp message, ...then you have to drop whatever you were doing, or quickly put kids to bed, and you respond. (P7)

JUGGLING HOME AND WORK ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Working from home meant that lecturers had to juggle their roles as spouses, parents and family members while also doing the work of the University. Most participants in this study were women with children, with some of the women expressing the frustrations of juggling roles between the work and home interfaces. Interestingly, not only the female lecturers were challenged by the responsibility of having to care for their children. A male participant in the study explained that his partner, an "essential worker", had to continue working outside their home, forcing him to babysit and assume home-schooling responsibilities. The juggling of work and home responsibilities created challenges for some lecturers, many of which were related to constant interruptions, such as when their children asked for help with doing their school activities or when they required their parents' attention. One participant pointed out the following:

We underestimate the time [and the amount of attention that] it takes to take care of children and [to] do domestic chores. (P8)

When you are at home, you wear different hats, you know. You are a parent, a childminder, So that took a lot of your time. (P13)

This situation resulted in many lecturers being forced to work until late in the evenings.

The new normal included participating in online meetings and activities via Microsoft Teams, which encroached on family time and space, putting further strain on household arrangements. In some cases, some lecturers had to manage the digital spaces (online meetings on Microsoft Teams) while simultaneously managing their physical spaces (home). One participant pointed out:

The major shift was adapting my home to be suitable for work. I had to change my lifestyle at home to accommodate my new work schedule. (P14)

For many lecturers, it was not easy to find suitable spaces within their own homes from which to work, as many of their homes lacked specially designated studies or libraries. As a result, their living rooms, bedrooms, guest rooms and garages became their unofficial offices and lecture spaces. Some lecturers reported that, at times, they had to juggle workspace with cooking space at their kitchen table. The next section presents the discussion on the blurring of the work and home interfaces as the participants in this study experienced.

DISCUSSION

The general practice in the world changed overnight in response to the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, and most people found themselves negotiating and rearranging their domains. Like many HEIs in Africa and other developing countries, the University of South Africa officially implemented e-learning only in 2013; however, to allow for a smooth transition to such a platform, the institution was still running some systems in a blended mode (Bajjnath, 2014).

The sudden shift from a blended learning approach to a fully online approach came with challenges, such as online examinations. Previously, students wrote their examinations at a venue, but with Covid-19 lockdowns being in place, such an approach had to change immediately. Students wrote their examinations from home, and lecturers had to administer these examinations from their homes. This change compounded the stress already experienced by the students and the lecturers, as neither group was prepared to deal with the challenges that a fully online examination brought. The university management's lack of preparation and training for fully online teaching and learning posed a challenge to successful online examinations. This was fuelled by the lack of stable internet connectivity and access to data.

The sudden change in the education delivery mode changed the rules of engagement between students and lecturers, creating a shift in the expectations about rules, attitudes, and behaviours; as Clark (2000) warned, this would create conflict. Students communicated with lecturers by e-mailing, texting, and calling at any time, day or night. The need for immediate feedback from students forced lecturers to work outside normal office hours, thus blurring the lecturers' work-home boundaries.

For some time now, technology has been at the centre of the blurring of work and home boundaries. The technology that enabled the staff of many institutions to continue teaching, communicating, connecting, and supporting their students during the Covid-19 lockdown also accelerated the blurring of boundaries. Technological advances made in the recent past, which have continued to be made in the present, have increased the pressure placed on non-standard work schedules (Derks & Bakker, 2014). For example, the ubiquity of mobile phones meant that they were used for both personal needs and work, anytime and anywhere, thus leading to the blurring of the domains.

The new normal meant that e-mails could flood the lecturers' inboxes at any time (thus blurring a time distinction), irrespective of where the lecturers were (thus blurring a space distinction), which meant that they could attend to e-mails anywhere and at any time. Some departments and teams created WhatsApp groups to facilitate the ongoing business, as well as for the ease of access and the quick updating of information and communication. The formation of such groups meant lecturers received new information and other communication throughout the day. Consequently, many lecturers found it difficult to know when to respond to work-related messages and e-mails. This was the case for many of the participants in the current study throughout the period under review.

The lecturers felt pressurised to work outside their standard work schedules for various reasons. The resources, such as smartphones and internet data, provided by the employer to workers creates expectations of after-hours availability (Mellner, 2016). Derks and Bakker (2014) also reported that receiving technical support tools from their employers gave the respondents the impression that the employer strongly expected them to be available for work after office hours. The appeal of the boundary theory lies in its acknowledgement of the idea of flexibility and of the ability of an individual to decide how much integration they are prepared to allow between their work and non-work boundaries. However, the Covid-19 pandemic offered little choice and few options to most people. Working from home meant that the two worlds of home and office merged, resulting in the blending, and blurring of the boundaries.

Many of the participants in the study stated that they had struggled to simplify and manage their work-home environments, which confirms Ashforth et al.'s (2000) boundary theory. The magnitude and scale of the Covid-19 lockdown disrupted the sought-after traditional work-home balance for which many continuously strive. For example, the temporal boundary at the end of a workday allows individuals to apply "psychological boundaries", with the attendant "rules dictating appropriate thinking patterns, behaviour patterns and emotions for domains" (Clark, 2000, p. 756) was unfeasible during the Covid-19 lockdown. Many of the lecturers participating in the study could not "switch off", after the official work hours, because of the continuous influx of communication from the university, colleagues, and students.

The Covid-19 lockdown encouraged lecturers to become more creative with their resources such as time and space than in the past (Zawacki-Richter, 2021). Working from home meant sharing whatever space was available with other family members. The need to share space, thus, negatively impacted family relationships. The consequent blurring of roles and responsibilities further strained the family, as the lecturers experienced increased conflict between their work and family roles (Ünal & Dulay, 2022).

The blending and blurring of work and home boundaries created discord in many participants' lives, leading to the interruption of family settings. Applying a segregation strategy during lockdown was difficult (Ashforth et al., 2000); hence, work-home integration resulted almost automatically. Although many tried to demarcate specific spaces and times for work and home activities, it was difficult for others and nearly impossible for some, especially for those who lived with large inter-generational families or in small homes. However, some of the lecturers successfully negotiated their time and space within the limits of their work-home boundaries (Karunanayaka et al., 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

For decades professionals and academics have been juggling their work and home boundaries with some flexibility. However, this study revealed the Covid-19 pandemic did not offer much more flexibility for many lecturers to manage their work and home boundaries.

Therefore, university management must develop human resource policies that provide clear guidance for core and flexible work hours, especially during pandemics. Accordingly, lecturers can attend meetings and workshops and respond to their students during their core work hours while completing intensive tasks such as research and academic writing during their flexible work hours. Doing so will allow the lecturers to plan their tasks more efficiently, improve their time management skills, and reduce work outside their standard work hours, including over the weekends.

The lack of appropriate resources led to some discomfort and frustration for the lecturers involved during the lockdown. For example, most lecturers reported a lack of access to Wi-Fi and stable Internet access. As a result, some lecturers had to use their personal resources to further Unisa's activities, while the lack of stable access to the Internet prevented other lecturers from performing their duties efficiently. Therefore, the performance management policies, systems and tools should be aligned with the conditions of employment that can be applied during special times such as the pandemic. The university management should also ensure that all the lecturers be equipped with the necessary tools of the trade. Such tools should help overcome any frustration experienced by the lecturers and improve the quality of the service they currently provide their students.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the blurring between work and home boundaries along with its impact on roles, family time, relationships, and the general well-being of the lecturers. Many lecturers in this study experienced the blurring of work and home boundaries and had to find creative ways to manage the demands of their work and home responsibilities. According to Ashforth et al. (2000), people use segmentation and integration strategies to manage their boundaries. This study found that complete segmentation and integration was impossible because the lines were continuously blurred during the pandemic.

Some of the challenges that lecturers experienced related to time management, having to work outside the standard office hours, having limited resources, and the lack of digital skills. Besides such challenges, some lecturers resiliently negotiated their work-home boundaries and made the necessary adjustments to fit in with the new normal. This study focused on how lecturers in the College of Education in an open, distance and e-learning university in a developing country experienced the merging of their work and home boundaries. The study, therefore, involved a small sample that does not reflect the entire university population or lecturers in different contexts. However, the study should serve as a basis for further research concerning the importance of the fluidity of an institution's human resources policies designed for different times. One of these policies should adequately address issues of working from home. As Van den Berg (2020) argued, it remains a university's responsibility to put relevant systems in place and provide the necessary training and support for all stakeholders.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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