

Navigating Dual Roles: How Perceived Work-Life Balance Shapes Recovery Experience and Well-Being of Student Workers in Service Industries

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Abstract

Student-workers in postgraduate education represent a growing and increasingly visible workforce segment, yet research on how mature learners navigate the intersection of academic progression, employment responsibilities, and personal life remains limited. Unlike traditional undergraduates, postgraduate workers aged 28-55 often manage wider spheres of responsibility, including family caregiving, organizational leadership, and long-term financial obligations, which makes their work-study-life equilibrium uniquely complex. Grounded in work-life balance theory, recovery experience, and subjective well-being, this study investigates how postgraduate students employed in cafés, retail services, public institutions, professional offices, and other customer-facing roles negotiate dual-role demands while pursuing advanced degrees. Using a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten respondents working 20-30 hours per week alongside ongoing postgraduate coursework and research. The study centers on three core questions: (1) How do postgraduate student-workers perceive and sustain work-life balance? (2) What recovery strategies help them regulate stress, fatigue, and emotional strain? (3) How do these mechanisms reinforce subjective well-being, academic clarity, and personal growth as long-term learners and workers?. Findings reveal that boundary-setting, time-blocking routines, micro-recovery activities, reflective or spiritual grounding, and intentional psychological detachment serve as core balancing strategies. Well-being is supported by schedule autonomy, academic-work alignment, and socio-emotional support from family or peers, whereas challenges commonly include research deadlines, rigid scheduling, emotional overload, and domestic responsibilities that intersect with academic demands more heavily than expected. Theoretically, this study extends work-life balance and recovery literature into the postgraduate context, highlighting the psychosocial load experienced by mature dual-role learners. Practically, the findings offer insight for universities and service-sector employers to develop flexible and humane policy structures that reduce burnout risk, support research continuity, and sustain academic-professional performance among adult students. This study further recommends institutional collaboration in designing mentoring systems, time-management literacy, and recovery-supportive academic environments for postgraduate workers to thrive.

Keywords: Perceived Work-Life Balance, Student Workers, Recovery Experience, Subjective Well-Being, Dual Role, Time Management.

1. Introduction

1.1 Why Is This Research Interesting?

Work–Life Balance (WLB) has emerged as a central issue in contemporary organizational and behavioral research due to its strong association with employee well-being, job satisfaction, and long-term performance sustainability (Brough et al., 2020; Gagnano et al., 2020). The increasing complexity of modern work arrangements, characterized by flexible schedules, digital connectivity, and blurred role boundaries, has intensified challenges in managing work, personal life, and non-work responsibilities (Carreri, 2020; Deloitte, 2022). While substantial literature has examined WLB among full-time employees and undergraduate working students, significantly less attention has been devoted to postgraduate student-workers who simultaneously pursue advanced academic degrees while remaining active in the workforce.

Postgraduate student-workers, typically aged between 28 and 55, occupy a distinctive position within the work–study continuum. Unlike traditional undergraduate students, this group often carries broader and more demanding responsibilities, including family caregiving, professional leadership roles, and long-term financial obligations (Dube & Nodifiregi, 2024; Greenhaus & Powell, 2000). Many are employed in service-sector roles such as cafés, retail services, public institutions, hospitality, and professional offices, sectors characterized by emotional labor, rigid schedules, and high interpersonal demands (McAdams & Gallant, 2022; Sun et al., 2023). Consequently, maintaining balance between academic progression, employment duties, and personal life becomes a complex and psychologically taxing endeavor.

This research is particularly interesting because postgraduate student-workers represent an increasingly visible yet under-researched population in higher education and organizational studies. They embody a *dual-role condition* in which academic identity intersects with professional responsibility, often under conditions of limited time, energy, and recovery opportunities. Unlike undergraduate working students who may work primarily for experience, postgraduate workers frequently rely on employment for economic stability, family support, and career continuity (Hakim & Hasmira, 2022; Azizah, 2023). Their lived experiences offer a unique lens for understanding how balance, recovery, and well-being are constructed under sustained role pressure.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that WLB positively influences job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee engagement (Ammari et al., 2017; Li, 2018; Nancy Yunista & Rahma, 2024). Conversely, role imbalance is associated with burnout, emotional exhaustion, and declining performance outcomes (Saridakis et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2022). Recovery experience, such as psychological detachment, emotional restoration, time autonomy, and reflective practices, has been shown to mitigate these negative effects (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2018; Pradhan et al., 2016). However, most existing studies adopt quantitative approaches and focus on single-role employees, leaving limited insight into *how* mature postgraduate learners actually negotiate balance and recovery in everyday life.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the growing number of postgraduate students who work while studying, there remains a lack of in-depth understanding of how these individuals perceive work–life balance, implement recovery strategies, and sustain subjective well-being over time. Prior research largely explains statistical relationships between WLB, job satisfaction, and commitment, yet

fails to capture the subjective processes, emotional struggles, and adaptive strategies employed by postgraduate student-workers (Gunarto et al., 2024; Rekarti et al., 2025). As a result, universities and employers often lack empirically grounded guidance to design flexible, humane, and recovery-supportive systems for adult learners.

This study adopts a qualitative interview approach to address these gaps because work–life balance, recovery, and well-being are inherently subjective and context-dependent phenomena. Quantitative measures may indicate the presence of imbalance or stress but are insufficient to reveal *how balance is constructed, defended, or restored* amid competing academic, professional, and personal demands. Semi-structured interviews allow postgraduate student-workers to articulate their lived experiences, coping mechanisms, emotional responses, and meaning-making processes in their own voices. This approach provides rich, contextualized insights that are critical for advancing theory and informing institutional and organizational policy development.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of postgraduate student-workers in service industries by addressing three research questions:

- 1) How do postgraduate student-workers perceive and sustain work–life balance?
- 2) What recovery strategies do they employ to manage physical, emotional, and psychological strain?
- 3) How do these strategies contribute to subjective well-being, academic clarity, and long-term role sustainability?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Work–Life Balance in Dual-Role Contexts

Work-Life Balance (WLB) is commonly defined as an individual’s ability to effectively manage work and non-work roles without excessive role conflict or strain (Brough et al., 2020). Rather than representing a simple allocation of time, WLB reflects a subjective perception of harmony across life domains, including work, family, education, and personal recovery (Gagnano et al., 2020). In contemporary work environments characterized by flexible schedules and digital connectivity, role boundaries have become increasingly porous, intensifying the challenge of maintaining balance (Carreri, 2020; Deloitte, 2022).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that WLB is positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee engagement (Ammari et al., 2017; Li, 2018; Saridakis et al., 2020). Conversely, imbalance has been linked to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and decreased performance (Dube & Nodifiregi, 2024; Jin et al., 2022). For individuals managing dual roles, such as working students, the potential for conflict between academic and occupational demands is substantially higher (Hakim & Hasmira, 2022). Azizah (2023) further highlights that employee-class students often experience heightened pressure due to overlapping deadlines, rigid schedules, and limited recovery time.

Postgraduate student-workers represent a particularly complex subgroup within WLB research. Unlike undergraduates, postgraduate learners are more likely to be embedded in long-term professional trajectories, family systems, and financial responsibilities (Greenhaus & Powell, 2000). Their employment is often not optional but essential, making balance a necessity rather than a preference. Studies in service-sector contexts show that emotional labor, customer-facing

demands, and shift rigidity further exacerbate role strain (McAdams & Gallant, 2022; Sun et al., 2023). Despite these realities, existing WLB models rarely account for the lived experiences of mature postgraduate student-workers.

2.2 Recovery Experience as a Balancing Mechanism

Recovery experience refers to the processes through which individuals restore depleted physical, emotional, and psychological resources after exposure to stressors (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2018). Key recovery dimensions include psychological detachment, relaxation, control over personal time, and engagement in restorative activities (Pradhan et al., 2016). Recovery is not merely rest but an active process of energy renewal that enables sustained role performance.

Research indicates that recovery experiences play a crucial mediating role between work demands and well-being outcomes (Gragnano et al., 2020). Individuals who are able to detach from work-related stressors and regain a sense of autonomy report higher levels of satisfaction and lower burnout risk (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2018). In contrast, insufficient recovery intensifies emotional fatigue and undermines long-term functioning, particularly in high-demand environments (McAdams & Gallant, 2022).

For postgraduate student-workers, recovery opportunities are often constrained by continuous cognitive engagement with academic tasks, research deadlines, and professional responsibilities. Digitalization further blurs recovery boundaries by extending academic and work-related communication beyond formal hours (Goel et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2024). As a result, recovery strategies among postgraduate workers may differ significantly from those of traditional employees. Qualitative insights are therefore necessary to understand how recovery is subjectively experienced and operationalized in this context.

2.3 Subjective Well-Being and Role Sustainability

Subjective well-being (SWB) encompasses individuals' cognitive and emotional evaluations of their lives, including life satisfaction, positive affect, and perceived meaning (Jin et al., 2022). Extensive literature confirms that WLB is a critical antecedent of SWB, influencing both emotional stability and long-term engagement (Li, 2018; Rekarti et al., 2025). When balance is maintained, individuals experience greater clarity, motivation, and resilience; when balance deteriorates, well-being declines accordingly.

Studies across organizational settings demonstrate that job satisfaction and organizational commitment function as important pathways linking WLB to performance and retention outcomes (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Firdaus et al., 2024; Nancy Yunista & Rahma, 2024). Social and organizational support further strengthens this relationship by providing emotional reassurance and practical flexibility (Gunarto et al., 2024; Lutrlean et al., 2019). From a social exchange perspective, perceived fairness and support encourage individuals to reciprocate with sustained engagement and loyalty (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008).

However, postgraduate student-workers often operate within institutional environments that are not fully designed to accommodate their dual roles. Limited flexibility, rigid academic expectations, and insufficient mentoring structures may undermine well-being and increase dropout risk (Sitohang et al., 2023; Yusriani & Patirol, 2024). Understanding how SWB is preserved, or compromised, under these conditions is therefore essential for ensuring role sustainability among adult learners.

2.4 Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Although existing literature establishes strong relationships among WLB, recovery experience, and well-being, most studies rely on quantitative designs and focus on single-role employees or undergraduate populations. There is a clear lack of qualitative evidence capturing the lived experiences of postgraduate student-workers who navigate prolonged role overlap under high responsibility conditions. This study addresses that gap by qualitatively exploring how postgraduate student-workers in service industries perceive balance, enact recovery strategies, and sustain subjective well-being over time.

By integrating perspectives from WLB theory, recovery research, and well-being literature, this study positions postgraduate student-workers as a critical yet underrepresented group within contemporary organizational and educational research.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design and Approach

By integrating perspectives from Work-Life Balance (WLB) theory, recovery research, and subjective well-being literature, this study positions postgraduate student-workers as a critical yet underrepresented group within contemporary organizational and educational research. To capture the depth, complexity, and subjectivity of their lived experiences, this study adopts a qualitative research design.

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research design using semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the phenomena under investigation, perceived work-life balance, recovery experience, and subjective well-being, are deeply personal, context-dependent, and shaped by individual meaning-making processes. Prior research in WLB and well-being has been dominated by quantitative survey-based models, which are effective for testing relationships but limited in explaining *how* individuals negotiate balance and recovery in real-life settings (Brough et al., 2020; Gragnano et al., 2020).

Given the dual-role complexity faced by postgraduate student-workers, qualitative inquiry allows for rich, nuanced exploration of role conflict, coping strategies, emotional regulation, and recovery practices that may not be fully captured through standardized instruments. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility for participants to articulate their experiences while ensuring consistency with the study's research questions.

Research Approach, An interpretive phenomenological approach underpins this study, focusing on participants' subjective interpretations of their dual roles as students and workers. This approach aligns with the study's objective to understand how balance and well-being are perceived, constructed, and sustained over time rather than measured as static outcomes. The interview protocol was developed based on established indicators from WLB, recovery experience, and well-being literature, ensuring theoretical grounding while allowing openness to emergent themes.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

The study involved ten postgraduate student-workers enrolled in Master's (S2) and Doctoral (S3) programs. Participants were aged 28–55 years and employed in various service-sector roles, including cafés, retail outlets, public institutions, hospitality services, and professional

offices. All participants worked between 20–30 hours per week while actively pursuing postgraduate coursework and/or research.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria defined as:

1. Active enrollment in a postgraduate program (Master's or Doctoral level),
2. Concurrent employment in the service sector,
3. Minimum of six months' experience managing both study and work roles.

This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed sufficient experience to reflect meaningfully on balance, recovery, and well-being.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted either face-to-face or online depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview guide covered six main areas: demographic background, perceived work–life balance, role conflict, recovery experiences, subjective well-being, and support systems. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share detailed narratives, reflections, and personal insights related to their dual-role experiences.

All interviews were conducted with informed consent, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data following a systematic and iterative process. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization, followed by initial coding, theme development, and thematic refinement. Codes were grouped into higher-order themes aligned with the study's research questions, while remaining open to emergent insights beyond predefined theoretical categories.

Trustworthiness of the Study, To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied:

- Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data and careful alignment between interview questions and research objectives.
- Dependability was supported by maintaining a transparent audit trail of coding decisions and analytical steps.
- Confirmability was strengthened by grounding interpretations in direct participant quotations.
- Transferability was enhanced by providing rich contextual descriptions of participants and settings, allowing readers to assess relevance to similar contexts.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was assured, and all identifying information was anonymized. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Table 1. Research Process Flow

Step	Description
Step 1	Identification of research gap in WLB, recovery, and well-being among postgraduate student-workers
Step 2	Development of interview protocol based on WLB, recovery experience, and SWB literature
Step 3	Purposive sampling of postgraduate student-workers (S2 & S3) in service industries
Step 4	Semi-structured interview data collection (45–60 minutes per participant)
Step 5	Verbatim transcription and data familiarization
Step 6	Thematic analysis and theme refinement
Step 7	Interpretation of findings linked to research questions and theory
Step 8	Theoretical and practical implications formulation

Source: Authors' analysis (2025)

4. Findings and Discussions

Based on the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with ten postgraduate student-workers in the service sector, several recurring themes emerged regarding perceived work–life balance, recovery experience, and subjective well-being. Despite variations in occupational roles and family structures, respondents demonstrated strikingly similar coping patterns, particularly between early and later participants (Respondents 1-2 and 9-10), suggesting thematic saturation.

4.1 Perceived Work-Life Balance in Dual Roles (RQ1)

All respondents perceived work–life balance not as an equal division of time, but as adaptive prioritization among work, study, and personal life. Most participants worked between 45-50 hours per week while simultaneously managing postgraduate coursework and research responsibilities. A dominant strategy involved structured daily scheduling, in which working hours were clearly separated from study time, with evenings, late nights, or weekends commonly allocated for academic activities.

Respondents emphasized discipline, role clarity, and situational flexibility, particularly when work and academic deadlines overlapped. When conflicts arose, participants adopted urgency-based decision-making, prioritizing tasks perceived as carrying greater institutional, professional, or personal consequences.

Notably, postgraduate status intensified role complexity, as respondents frequently held managerial responsibilities, family caregiving roles, and heightened professional accountability. As a result, work–life balance was experienced not as a fixed or stable condition,

but as a continuous and dynamic negotiation requiring ongoing adjustment and conscious effort to maintain equilibrium between work and study demands.

4.2 Recovery Experience and Energy Restoration (RQ2)

Recovery was described as intentional, fragmented, and micro-based, rather than extended rest periods. Physical recovery commonly involved short sleep episodes, light exercise, family outings, or simple leisure activities such as walking, eating together, or quiet time at home. Emotional recovery emerged through family interaction, spiritual reflection, and brief disengagement from digital devices. Several respondents highlighted the importance of psychological detachment, deliberately restricting work-related thoughts and communication outside formal working hours. However, full detachment was often constrained by family responsibilities, particularly for single parents and primary caregivers.

Perceived control over time averaged moderate levels (scale 3-4), reflecting realistic acceptance that not all demands could be fully managed simultaneously.

4.3 Subjective Well-Being, Meaning, and Personal Growth (RQ3)

Subjective well-being was strongly linked to a sense of meaning rather than comfort. Respondents reported moderate to high life satisfaction despite fatigue, framing their dual-role experience as a long-term investment in personal growth, career advancement, and family future. Positive affect emerged during moments of academic achievement, task completion, and alignment between professional practice and academic theory.

Burnout signals were consistently identified as physical exhaustion, emotional withdrawal, mood fluctuations, and cognitive fatigue. Nevertheless, most respondents demonstrated resilience by reframing stress as a temporary phase within a purposeful journey.

Importantly, all participants described working while studying as personally transformative, enhancing self-discipline, perspective-taking, and professional identity integration.

4.4 Discussion

This study provides qualitative evidence that postgraduate student-workers experience work-life balance as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process, rather than a fixed or idealized state. Consistent with prior conceptualizations of work-life balance as a subjective and context-dependent construct (Brough et al., 2020; Gragnano et al., 2020), respondents in this study emphasized adaptive prioritization, temporal flexibility, and role clarity as central mechanisms for sustaining balance across work, study, and personal life domains. This finding extends earlier quantitative research by illustrating *how* balance is enacted in daily practice among mature learners with high role density.

The findings from RQ1 align with role theory and work-family conflict literature, which posit that individuals managing multiple salient roles are particularly vulnerable to role strain and overload (Greenhaus & Powell, 2000). Unlike undergraduate populations, postgraduate student-workers frequently occupy professional or managerial positions and carry family caregiving responsibilities, intensifying role interdependence. This supports previous evidence suggesting that employee-class students experience heightened work-study conflict due to overlapping institutional demands and limited temporal boundaries (Azizah, 2023; Hakim & Hasmira, 2022). The present study adds depth by showing that balance is maintained not

through workload reduction, but through disciplined scheduling and urgency-based decision-making.

Regarding recovery experience (RQ2), the findings reinforce recovery theory by demonstrating that micro-recovery practices play a critical role in sustaining functioning under prolonged role pressure. Similar to Bayl-Smith and Griffin (2018), respondents relied on short, intentional recovery moments, such as brief rest, family interaction, or spiritual reflection, to replenish depleted resources. Psychological detachment, identified as a core recovery mechanism in prior studies (Carreri, 2020; Pradhan et al., 2016), emerged as both essential and constrained, particularly for participants with caregiving responsibilities. This supports Gragnano et al.'s (2020) argument that recovery is shaped not only by individual agency but also by structural and relational contexts.

In line with subjective well-being literature (RQ3), participants associated well-being more strongly with meaning, purpose, and perceived growth than with comfort or reduced workload. This finding echoes research demonstrating that well-being among working adults is closely linked to role meaningfulness and perceived personal development (Jin et al., 2022; Wardani & Amaliah, 2020). Despite clear indicators of fatigue and emotional strain, respondents reframed their dual-role experience as a long-term investment, reflecting a form of adaptive resilience. Such meaning-oriented coping aligns with social exchange perspectives, wherein sustained effort is justified by anticipated future rewards and reciprocal outcomes (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008).

Importantly, this study also highlights the critical role of support systems and institutional flexibility in shaping balance and well-being outcomes. Consistent with prior findings, perceived organizational and familial support enhanced individuals' capacity to manage competing demands and mitigated burnout risk (Gunarto et al., 2024; Lutrlean et al., 2019; Rekarti et al., 2025). Conversely, rigid scheduling, heavy academic deadlines, and limited recovery opportunities mirrored barriers identified in service-sector and higher-education contexts (Dube & Nodifiregi, 2024; McAdams & Gallant, 2022; Sun et al., 2023).

Overall, the discussion underscores that postgraduate student-workers represent a distinct population within work-life balance research, characterized by prolonged dual-role engagement, high responsibility load, and meaning-driven persistence. By capturing their lived experiences through qualitative inquiry, this study complements existing quantitative evidence and responds to calls for more human-centered and context-sensitive approaches to understanding balance, recovery, and well-being in contemporary educational and organizational settings.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how postgraduate student-workers in service industries navigate dual-role demands through the lenses of perceived work-life balance, recovery experience, and subjective well-being. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, the findings reveal that balance among postgraduate student-workers is not experienced as a static or ideal condition, but rather as a dynamic, effortful, and meaning-driven process shaped by continuous prioritization, recovery practices, and personal values.

The findings demonstrate that postgraduate student-workers actively construct work-life balance through structured scheduling, role boundary-setting, and urgency-based decision-

making, particularly under conditions of high academic and professional pressure. Rather than striving for equal role distribution, participants emphasized adaptive strategies that allowed them to sustain functioning across work, study, and personal life domains. This highlights that balance for mature learners is less about symmetry and more about contextual alignment and temporal negotiation.

Recovery experience emerged as a crucial mechanism enabling sustainability under prolonged dual-role engagement. Participants relied heavily on micro-recovery strategies, such as short rest periods, emotional support from family, spiritual grounding, and psychological detachment, to restore depleted resources. These practices were often constrained by caregiving responsibilities and digital connectivity, underscoring that recovery is both an individual and structural challenge. Nevertheless, intentional recovery practices played a decisive role in preventing burnout escalation.

In terms of subjective well-being, the study found that well-being among postgraduate student-workers is strongly anchored in meaning, purpose, and perceived personal growth, rather than comfort or workload reduction. Despite experiencing fatigue and emotional strain, participants framed their dual-role journey as an investment in long-term academic, professional, and family outcomes. This meaning-oriented orientation contributed to resilience, identity integration, and sustained engagement.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, this study extends work–life balance and recovery frameworks into the postgraduate education context by foregrounding the lived experiences of mature student-workers. It contributes to the literature by demonstrating how work–life balance, recovery experience, and subjective well-being interact dynamically over time, particularly under conditions of sustained role overlap and high responsibility. By adopting a qualitative lens, the study enriches existing models that have predominantly relied on cross-sectional quantitative approaches.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings suggest that universities and service-sector employers must move beyond one-size-fits-all policies. Institutions are encouraged to develop flexible academic scheduling, recovery-supportive learning environments, mentoring systems, and time-management literacy programs tailored to postgraduate workers. Similarly, service-sector organizations can support employee well-being by offering schedule autonomy, empathetic supervision, and realistic workload expectations for employees pursuing advanced education.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The qualitative design and limited sample size restrict generalizability; however, the depth of insight provides strong analytical transferability. Future research may extend this work by employing longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to examine how balance and recovery evolve across different stages of postgraduate study. Comparative studies across sectors or cultural contexts would further enhance understanding of dual-role sustainability.

In conclusion, postgraduate student-workers represent a vital yet underexplored population within contemporary organizational and educational research. Supporting their ability to

balance work, study, and well-being is not only an individual concern but a strategic investment in human capital sustainability.

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