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**MANAGING DUAL DEMANDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WORK–LIFE BALANCE AND
PERCEIVED ACADEMIC EMERGENCY RESPONSE
EFFICIENCY AMONG INTERNATIONAL PART-TIME
MASTER’S STUDENTS FROM CHINA**

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Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate how work-life balance, employment type, and time management skills affect perceived academic emergency response efficiency (PERE) among international Chinese students who are enrolled in a part-time master’s degree at a private university in Malaysia. Interviews with ten participants indicated that flexible working hours and careful planning help students to effectively respond when unexpected academic demands surface. In contrast, strict work schedules, sudden demands, and issues maintaining work-life balance potentially lowered their confidence in responding to such situations. Based on the role strain theory, the findings indicate that many students experience parallel pressures from their professional roles, academic responsibilities, and family commitments. Organised time management, flexible arrangements at the workplace, and supportive academic environments are among the practices that appear to help students cope and respond to academic challenges more effectively. Although the study is conducted in Malaysia, the issues highlighted reflect challenges commonly faced by working international postgraduate students in many countries and offer useful insights for institutions that support this group. The findings contribute to understanding how structural and individual factors interact in shaping students’ academic responsiveness in higher education contexts.

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Employment Type; Part-Time Master's Students; Perceived Academic Emergency Response Efficiency; Role Strain Theory; Time Management; Work-Life Balance



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Introduction

The number of working part-time Chinese Master's students seeking higher education in Malaysia has been on the rise. It is worth noting that many of them are full-time teachers or professionals whose employers are in China and who go on leave or attend block modules during school holidays, after which they return home. Others work remotely while studying in Malaysia, and this situation represents a form of 'come-and-go' mobility that is evident in modern international student mobility (Beech, 2015). According to the Student Pass policies in Malaysia, international students are obliged to spend the majority of the semester in the country and attend classes physically (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2023). Work flexibility, role strain, and perceived academic readiness are influenced by such work mobility arrangements (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The combination of the specific demands of postgraduate research, family, and employment places unique strains that can affect levels of stress, learning experiences, and perceptions of institutional support (Pineda, 2024). It is therefore important to understand how part-time students cope with these competing demands. Work-life balance helps students in their academic activities and in their ability to react adequately to any unplanned or demanding academic encounters. Imbalance can lead to decreased motivation, emotional strain, and weaker responses to the needs of the institution (Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022; Trotter et al., 2022). Exploring how Chinese students manage this balance is a valuable source of information on how such students can facilitate their studies to achieve their best outcomes. In this study, academic engagement is examined based on the perceived readiness of students to respond effectively to academic and institutional emergencies, conceptualised as perceived academic emergency response efficiency (Joseph Jeyaraj, 2023).

These dynamics are additional influences of employment type. Flexibility in employment can enable students to adapt to academic schedules. In contrast, inflexible work arrangements can

alleviate stress and improve responsiveness (Prager et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2024). Time management skills are also a key factor on which part-time students heavily depend in order to manage work, study, and personal commitments. Time management can help lessen role conflict and promote adaptive functioning (Valente et al., 2024), whereas inefficient time management can cause increased stress and decreased responsiveness (Tofighi et al., 2022).

This study is based on Role Strain Theory, which proposes that strains arise due to competing role expectations (Pearlin, 1983; Kulik, 2025). The study also identifies the pressures experienced and how such pressures are handled when individuals interact across multiple roles in the daily lives of part-time students.

The study is guided by the research questions listed below:

1. How does perceived work-life balance influence part-time master's students' perceived academic emergency response efficiency (PERE)?
2. How does employment type influence part-time master's students' perceived academic emergency response efficiency?
3. How do time management skills contribute to perceived efficiency in academic emergency response situations?
4. What is the combined impact of work-life balance and employment type on perceived academic emergency response efficiency?

Literature Review

Role Strain Theory

For part-time master's students, role strain theory, which explains the strain of managing conflicting roles, is highly applicable. These students are likely to juggle extended hours at work with study sessions, which causes conflict in various kinds of role requirements, which can be observed in time management, working conditions, and perceived work-life balance. This theory offers a conceptual approach to understanding how competing role requirements influence students' perceptions of their academic emergency response effectiveness. The stress arising from such conflicting positions may weaken students' ability to respond to academic demands or unforeseen academic circumstances. Although the theory effectively explains the psychological burden of multitasking, it does not consider individual factors that may alleviate this burden, including effective time management skills (Antoniadou & Antoniadis, 2024). This study, therefore, offers insight into how role overload is experienced and managed by part-time students and how these experiences influence their perceived readiness to respond to academic demands, with implications for strengthening perceived academic emergency response strategies.

Perceived Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance refers to the extent to which individuals can efficiently distribute their time and energy between work, academic responsibilities, and personal relationships (Boamah et al., 2022). For full-time students, this balance may be easier to maintain. Nonetheless, for part-time postgraduate students, balancing work and family responsibilities often makes maintaining such a balance more difficult, particularly in the presence of long work hours, irregular shift patterns, and family obligations. A positive perception of work-life balance is

associated with greater focus, reduced stress, and stronger academic engagement among students (Yusuf et al., 2020). In contrast, imbalance may result in emotional exhaustion, increased cognitive load, and reduced responsiveness when students face demanding academic situations (Valente et al., 2024). Students' perceptions of available time shape their task prioritisation and their ability to cope with unexpected academic demands, a relationship widely discussed in existing literature. Nevertheless, limited studies have explored how perceived work-life balance is experienced by part-time students in relation to their readiness to manage unexpected academic demands.

Employment Type

The experience of students in managing two responsibilities is also influenced by employment conditions. Flexible employment has been found to ease the academic load by allowing students greater freedom in managing their time (Juarez et al., 2024). Such flexibility might facilitate the ability to respond to abrupt academic needs, including immediate tasks or changes in schedules. On the other hand, strict job schedules, such as fixed hours or a highly demanding workload, can be more stressful, less accommodating, and more restrictive of students' ability to adapt to the needs of the institution (Prager et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2024). Role strain may be aggravated by unpredictability in some forms of work arrangements, for example, temporary or freelance employment, where students may not have sufficient coping mechanisms or institutional support. In spite of these observations, limited research has investigated how students in various employment situations experience their perceived readiness to meet academic demands. This study examines such experiences with the aim of providing insights that can guide policy changes in institutions to support working students.

Time Management Skills

Time management skills are the capacity of students to organise, plan, and perform tasks and duties within available time constraints. These skills are especially necessary for part-time students who have to balance competing commitments in work, study, and personal life. Academic stress, engagement support, and the ability of students to handle diverse demands simultaneously may be mitigated by applying effective time management practices (Tofighi et al., 2022). Conversely, the inability to manage time well can be one of the causes of burnout, low-quality work, and a loss of intellectual ability to handle stressful academic circumstances.

Time management is a technical skill and a behavioural practice that is influenced by motivation, discipline, and contextual aspects. Even students who are aware of time management techniques might not be able to foresee work requirements or may encounter disruptions in life (Bailey & Suddaby, 2023). With proper time management practices, students can be in better positions to change and react to new and unforeseen academic requirements, including new policy changes, examination disruptions, or urgent communications on campus. These practices can also assist students in coping with the strains that come with work-life balance or heavy work requirements. Ensuring the development of time management in academic programmes can therefore help part-time learners pass through complicated and conflicting roles.

Perceived Academic Emergency Response Efficiency

Perceived academic emergency response efficiency is the perceived preparedness and confidence among students towards responding to unforeseen academic or institutional

demands. These situations can be in the form of an abrupt increase in workload, alarming assignment needs, an institutional upheaval, or changes in the academic timetable. The part-time postgraduate students manage professional and personal life alongside academic commitments, and the demands of coping with disruptions between professional and academic responsibilities require them to remain active academically and to cope effectively with these disruptions. The confidence that the students have in the possibility of responding positively could serve to maintain engagement and decrease stress in such cases (Joseph Jeyaraj, 2023). On the other hand, decreased perceived preparedness can be a source of anxiety, less preparation, and poor academic performance.

Both internal and external factors determine perceived readiness, such as time management habits, resilience, work flexibility, institutional communication, and academic support (Isnainy & Zainaro, 2024). Even occasions when students are able to respond can make them feel less prepared, especially when employment or work-life requirements erode their confidence. Therefore, the perception of readiness depends not only on personal ability but also on previous experience, organisational support, and trust in the use of appropriate systems. Institutions are thus crucial in offering effective response mechanisms as well as in fostering students' confidence in these systems. This viewpoint reveals the interaction between role strain, coping behaviours, and institutional support on the perceived efficiency of academic response to emergency situations by students and is in line with role strain theory.

Conceptual Framework

The connections between the work-life balance, employment type, time management competence, and the perceived academic emergency response effectiveness are built on the role strain theory (Pearlin, 1983; Kulik, 2025). The framework has informed the qualitative investigation to examine how the competing role requirements and the coping practices influence the experiences that students have about responding to academic emergencies (See Figure 1).

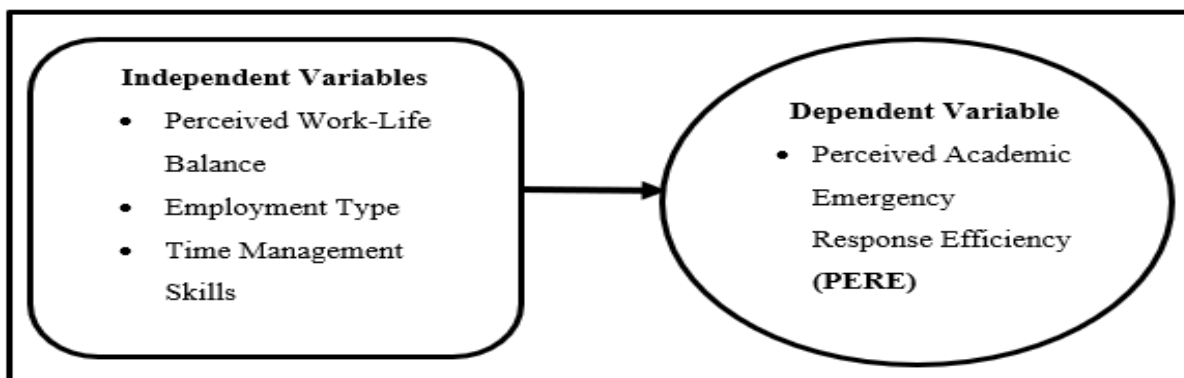


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The framework demonstrates the ways in which employment conditions, work-life balance, and time management affect students in their perceived readiness to respond to unplanned academic demands. These aspects have constantly been analysed individually. Nevertheless, the current research is undertaken to understand the experience of these aspects in the daily lives of part-time postgraduate students in dealing with multiple responsibilities.

By attempting to address this gap, the study provides an understanding that can guide universities and employers in establishing policies and supportive systems to enhance the well-being, resilience, and emergency preparedness of part-time working students.

Methodology

Research Approach

This research used a qualitative research design based on an abductive approach, which helps merge theory development with real-world observations (Creswell & Poth, 2024). For understanding the complex relationship between work-life balance and academic engagement, the abductive process is particularly useful because it lets the researcher question current theories and be open to surprising results based on real data. The study employed semi-structured interviews (N = 10), which enable the inductive exploration of students' experiences. This methodological strategy follows a theoretical and context-sensitive approach to discovery.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was the best choice for answering the study's questions because it provides information on how students manage their work and study responsibilities (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This design is suitable, as it systematically utilises qualitative methodology. The researcher provides a meaning for patterns of experience by performing in-depth, qualitative interviews. This methodological procedure can help the researchers to establish the validity of the study and present a comprehensive understanding of the double-bind experience of part-time students. The method represents the wider ideals of coherence in methodology and integration of interpretation of research (Fetters et al., 2013). In general, despite the mixed-methods research format in which it was initially expressed, the concepts focus on the significance of alignment of systematic design, as well as analytic rigour. This design allows the findings to be rigorous and culturally relevant, which is in line with best practices by focusing on qualitative inquiry.

The process of producing in-depth contextual data based on qualitative techniques helped clarify the challenges, coping patterns, and the institutional role played in handling the dual commitments of the participants. This stage is important in answering the questions of why and how, as well as detecting unexpected or conflicting findings that emerge. The qualitative method can verify the trends of what the participants experienced in their lives, which makes the research more reliable and stronger (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Moreover, the data creation methods make the outcomes obtained applicable to the context of sufficiently similar cases and provide a comprehensive picture of the issue under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Thus, inductive reasoning is closely aligned with the objectives of the study and will lead to credible, applicable, and useful conclusions that are directly related to the educational practices and policies of higher education.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

To ensure that the research collected data that was specific, relevant, and aligned with the research objectives, purposive sampling was adopted in the study (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024). The respondents were Chinese by nationality, part-time students working either full-time or part-time, where they travelled back and forth or took seasonal leave to study during

blocks. This approach ensures the sample represents the real patterns of transnational student mobility and work arrangements (Beech, 2015). The measure aligns closely with the research emphasis on working students' management of dual responsibilities.

Maximum variation sampling was used to recruit 10 participants, ensuring the representation of diverse viewpoints on work-life balance, coping strategies, and institutional settings. This approach facilitates data saturation, indicating that additional data collection does not produce new themes or insights and that the sample size is sufficient to represent the full range of experiences within the population (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The principle guided the decision to aim for a sample size of 10, as smaller 'emotional richness' samples are more appropriate for the in-depth investigation of complex, subtle issues (Morse, 2000).

Although purposive sampling limits statistical generalisation to the wider population of part-time postgraduates, the approach allows the findings to be transferred to similar contexts, such as other part-time postgraduate student groups in comparable circumstances. This potential for transferability is a key strength of the study. To further enhance trustworthiness, participants' characteristics and the study's sampling will be described in detail, enabling other readers to determine to what extent the findings can be applied to their context.

Research Instruments

The semi-structured interview guide was selected to be able to bring out unexpected areas of insight while ensuring a degree of reliability and a clear thematic focus (Karatsareas, 2022). This format is well-suited to exploring respondents' vivid everyday lives and the contexts that shape their coping and sense of institutional support. Semi-structured interviews offer descriptive, qualitative insights into participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The intention is to generate in-depth cases that provide deep insights, which aligns with the fundamental aim of achieving data sufficiency in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Morse, 2000).

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative data were gathered through individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each student in a quiet, private meeting room on campus. The researchers chose to conduct in-person interviews to help build relationships with the students, encourage them to think more deeply, and allow the researchers to notice important nonverbal signals that improve understanding. This approach is particularly beneficial in qualitative research where trust and capturing details of experiences are crucial (Opdenakker, 2006). The interviews were conducted with participants' permission, recorded by the researchers, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to protect confidentiality and uphold ethical data management standards (Karatsareas, 2022).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted to establish methodological rigor. The six-stage approach to undertake thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) guided this process. Once the interview transcripts were available from repeated readings, the researcher systematically coded meaningful sections of data to identify any repetitive ideas and surprising

views. The coding process was conducted manually, with codes continuously refined through comparison across transcripts to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation.

The researchers subsequently categorised the initial codes into general themes that portrayed similarities, experiences, and restrictions that these part-time master students underwent while juggling both obligations. The researchers also gave the themes further consideration and adjusted them to correspond to the data and research question. Subsequently, all these themes were identified and labelled in order to explain the meaning, and the researchers used illustrative quotations to provide “authoritative” voices to enhance the understanding of the data.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data and repeated reading of interview transcripts to ensure accurate interpretation of participants’ perspectives. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of coding decisions and theme development throughout the analysis process. Confirmability was addressed by minimising researcher bias through systematic coding and constant comparison of data segments. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants’ backgrounds and research context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar settings.

Results

Qualitative Themes

The thematic analysis of the ten semi-structured interviews is reported in the following sections. The analysis resulted in five major themes that were the experiences of the participants as they dealt with work and academic-related issues (See Tables 1-5). The differences in the employment arrangements on academic management among students are shown in Theme 1 (Refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Theme 1: Impact of Employment Type on Academic Engagement

Participant No.	Employment Type	Key Quote
1	Night shifts	<i>“Sometimes I have to work night shifts. Feeling tired most of the time affects my ability to stay focused on my coursework. This affects my academic performance.”</i>
2	Flexible remote job	<i>“Since I can adjust my work hours in my remote job, I experience less stress when managing my academic commitments.”</i>
3	Healthcare worker (irregular)	<i>“Unpredictable shifts interfere with deadlines and class participation, increasing academic pressure significantly.”</i>

4	Self-employed	<i>"Being self-employed gives me control over time, but client demands often overlap with critical academic deadlines."</i>
5	Full-time office job (fixed)	<i>"My full-time office job with fixed hours restricts available study time, especially during peak work seasons."</i>
6	Retail (fluctuating shifts)	<i>Working in retail, fluctuating shifts make it hard to maintain consistent academic engagement or learning."</i>
7	Part-time with flexibility	<i>"My part-time position provides adequate flexibility, allowing me to attend classes and meet assignment timelines effectively."</i>
8	Corporate (high workload, cyclical)	<i>"Corporate workload intensifies during quarter-end; academic responsibilities become secondary and often rushed during that period."</i>
9	Government job (predictable hours)	<i>"A government job with predictable hours helps maintain a structured routine supporting both work and academic tasks."</i>
10	Consulting (frequent travel)	<i>"My consulting role requires frequent travel, making it difficult to maintain steady academic engagement or routine."</i>

Students that have flexible work schedules (2, 7, and 9; Refer to Table 1) report less difficulties, improved time management, and more involvement in academic pursuits. Fatigue, schedule difficulties, and unexpected job demands were often cited as major obstacles by participants working in irregular, shift-based, or high-stress occupations (1, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10). However, according to Participant 4's report, self-employment does not always avoid conflicts between job and university deadlines, while providing more freedom and flexibility. The results show that although excessive workloads, travel obligations, and erratic employment demands interfere with constant focus and consistency, predictability and flexibility improve academic engagement.

Effective time management strategies, including prioritisation (1 and 9), time-blocking (3), planning tools on digital platforms (5), and set study periods (8), assist students in managing clashing expectations in various aspects of life, as shown in Table 2 (Theme 2).

Table 2: Theme 2: Impact of Time Management Skills on Balancing Coursework with Personal and Work Demands

Participant No.	Time Management Practice	Key Quote
1	Strong Prioritisation skills	<i>"Strong time management helps me prioritise tasks, minimising last-minute stress and allowing personal time preservation."</i>

2	Poor planning, procrastination	<i>"Without structured planning, frequently procrastinate, which affects both work quality and academic performance negatively."</i>
3	Time-blocking strategies	<i>"Time-blocking strategies allow me to juggle assignments and work tasks more effectively and consistently."</i>
4	Lack of planning	<i>"Lack of planning leads to missed deadlines, especially when multiple tasks from work and school coincide."</i>
5	Digital planners and accountability	<i>"Using digital planners, I track responsibility, which enhances accountability and ensures timely academic submissions."</i>
6	Effective overlap management	<i>"Effective time management minimises overlap between work duties and schoolwork, helping me maintain overall performance."</i>
7	Poor time management, frequent burnout	<i>"Poor time management results in frequent burnout, as I often neglect rest and personal commitments."</i>
8	Fixed study hours allocation	<i>"Allocating fixed hours weekly for studies helps me balance deadlines while preserving some family time."</i>
9	Prioritising critical tasks daily	<i>"Prioritising critical tasks daily supports a healthy rhythm, avoiding last-minute academic pressure or rushed work."</i>
10	Adherence to routine	<i>"When I adhere to a routine, everything flows better; lack of planning disrupts both spheres."</i>

While poor time management (2, 4, and 7; See Table 2) was associated with procrastination, missed deadlines, burnout, and neglect of personal obligations, regular practice implementation was generally associated with lower stress levels and improved work quality in the participants. According to this research, time management techniques are a crucial coping mechanism that help students maintain balance and reduce pressure on their well-being at the last minute. Additionally, when trying to maintain a work-life balance during periods of intense study, students encounter a number of overlapping challenges (See Table 3, Theme 3).

Table 3: Theme 3: Challenges in Maintaining Work-Life Balance During Intensive Academic Periods

Participant No.	Challenge Area	Key Quote
1	Family time sacrificed	<i>"Family time suffers the most for me, especially during exams and when group projects have very tight deadlines."</i>
2	Sleep deprivation	<i>"I lose sleep regularly trying to meet academic and work obligations simultaneously during peak seasons."</i>

3	Neglected self-care	<i>"I often neglect self-care and relationships, focusing entirely on meeting academic requirements under pressure."</i>
4	Guilt and role conflict	<i>"There's constant guilt, either I am falling behind at work or sacrificing academic performance for deadlines."</i>
5	Conflicting peak cycles	<i>"Intensive academic periods conflict with my busiest work cycles, making balance nearly impossible without compromising quality."</i>
6	Burnout and lack of recovery time	<i>"Burnout is common as I juggle meetings, lectures, and assignments without adequate personal recovery time."</i>
7	Frequent schedule clashes	<i>"Frequent schedule clashes force me to choose between work performance and academic engagement, increasing stress."</i>
8	Loss of downtime	<i>"My weekends, once for rest, are now for assignments, leaving no downtime or family engagement."</i>
9	Emotional distance from loved ones	<i>"During exams, I barely interact with loved ones, creating emotional distance and mental exhaustion."</i>
10	Unpredictability disrupts routines	<i>"The biggest challenge is unpredictability; sudden academic or work demands disrupt all personal plans and routines."</i>

Major issues mentioned by respondents included little time spent with family (1, 8, and 9; See Table 3), insufficient sleep that causes self-care to be neglected (2 and 3), and burnout caused by not enough rest (6). Stress levels have also increased because of role conflict and guilt (4), while forward planning suffered due to inconsistent timetables (10) and conflicting demands within the same workload (5 and 7). Overall, the findings demonstrate that students normally give importance to academic obligations over family time, relaxation, and personal well-being during times of intense study, which is one of the reasons for relationship issues and burnout to occur.

Students' perceptions of work-life balance have an impact on their academic focus, motivation, and enjoyment, as shown by Theme 4 in Table 4.

Table 4: Theme 4: Impact of Work-Life Balance on Academic Focus and Engagement

Participant No.	Balance Perception	Key Quote
1	Poor balance reduces focus	<i>"When balance is poor, my academic focus drops drastically, and motivation becomes very difficult to sustain."</i>

2	Healthy balance boosts clarity	<i>"A healthy balance boosts my energy and clarity, directly enhancing academic concentration and participation."</i>
3	Imbalance causes disengagement	<i>"Feeling overwhelmed by imbalance, I disengage mentally from coursework even when physically present in class."</i>
4	Balance reduces stress	<i>"Balance helps reduce stress, letting me approach academic tasks with greater creativity and efficiency."</i>
5	Stable personal life supports focus	<i>"I perform better academically when work-life boundaries are respected and my personal life feels stable."</i>
6	Imbalance triggers anxiety	<i>"Lack of balance triggers constant anxiety, leading to missed classes and reduced academic output."</i>
7	Balance increases learning enjoyment	<i>"When balanced, I enjoy learning more; otherwise, I view academic work as an additional burden."</i>
8	Emotional fatigue weakens focus	<i>"Emotional fatigue from imbalance makes focusing on lectures and assignments extremely difficult and unproductive."</i>
9	Balance supports full engagement	<i>"Balance lets me engage fully; without it, I multitask poorly, missing key academic instructions."</i>
10	Chaos reduces academic interest	<i>"When personal life is in chaos, my academic interest fades, and tasks feel pointless or overwhelming."</i>

Respondents who feel a healthy balance and stability (2, 4, 5, and 9; See Table 4) confessed that they feel more energised, become creative, and do not think of anything but studying. On the other hand, individuals with balance and personal disturbance (1, 3, 6, 8, and 10) always complain about mental disengagement, anxiety, fatigue, missed classes, and lack of interest in studying. The findings indicate that continuing academic success is highly related not only to time management or the type of employment but also to the balance and well-being in the personal and professional lives of students. Lastly, respondents reported mixed responses when dealing with academic emergencies (See Table 5, Theme 5).

Table 5: Theme 5: Perceived Efficiency in Responding to Academic Emergencies

Participant No.	Response Strategy	Key Quote
1	Quick response but affects quality	<i>"I think I am always quite fast in handling urgent academic tasks, but when I am rushing, the work is not always my best."</i>
2	Contingency planning helps	<i>"Most of the time, I am able to cope with academic emergencies because I organise my work in advance and start assignments early."</i>
3	Struggles due to overlapping work	<i>"It is hard for me to quickly adjust to urgent academic situations when my work commitments occur at the same time."</i>
4	Overwhelmed by last-minute tasks	<i>"I feel stressed by last-minute tasks, especially when unexpected family issues or work demands come up."</i>
5	Uses checklists and alarms	<i>"With checklists and alarms, I address urgent academic needs efficiently without missing critical deadlines."</i>
6	Panics during emergencies	<i>"I often panic during academic emergencies, which affect productivity and lead to incomplete work."</i>
7	Schedules buffer time	<i>"I manage well by keeping buffer time in my schedule, anticipating possible academic emergencies."</i>
8	Unexpected assignments disrupt focus	<i>"Unexpected assignments disrupt my focus, especially during work hours, causing delays in completion or submission."</i>
9	Years of multitasking help	<i>"I usually respond well under pressure; years of multitasking have improved my academic emergency response."</i>
10	Lacks flexibility to handle crises	<i>"When crises occur, my workflow collapses. I lack the flexibility to handle academic surprises effectively."</i>

Individuals who deployed contingency plans, scheduled some buffer time, or used simple organisational tools such as checklists (2, 5, 7, and 9; See Table 5) found themselves more confident and worked more effectively despite any kind of unexpected demands. At the same time, participants with no or low planning or flexibility (1, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 10) were stressed, panicky, or experienced collapsed workflow, which led to lower quality output or late delivery in most cases. These lessons imply that the perceived academic emergency response efficacy is intimately connected to previous planning, flexible scheduling, and practical strategies of coping, or impeded by uncompromising schedules and conflicting demands.

Discussion

The qualitative results indicate that perceived work-life balance, employment type, and time management skills are significant factors in perceived academic emergency response efficiency (PERE) in the case of part-time master's students. The findings are in line with role strain

theory, which proposes that role demands conflict with adaptive functioning as a result of competing role demands (Pearlin, 1983). The results revealed that work-life balance was the reason behind cognitive disengagement and anxiety, which subsequently led to diminished responsiveness among students in crisis situations (See Table 1, Participant 6) (Boamah et al., 2022; Valente et al., 2024). Conversely, those with better balance indicated that they were more focused and recovered better. This suggests that role strain operates not only as a structural constraint but also as a psychological mechanism that influences students' confidence and responsiveness. The findings extend role strain theory by highlighting how perceived preparedness is shaped by both external demands and internal coping capacity.

The type of employment also had an impact on the capability of students to react well to academic challenges. Students who had flexible employment stated they had enhanced academic engagement, whereas work that was irregular or shift-based (such as healthcare) frequently interrupted studies (Prager et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2024). This relationship was confirmed by participant 1 (See Theme 1, Table 1). In addition, the unpredictability of self-employment posed unique challenges to crisis response, emphasising employment rigidity as a structural constraint. This finding reinforces the importance of structural flexibility, indicating that employment conditions act as enabling or constraining factors in students' academic responsiveness. It also suggests that institutional and workplace coordination is essential in reducing role conflict.

The findings further indicated that time management practices played a central role in shaping students' responses to academic demands. The adoption of planners, digital tools, or time-blocking strategies enabled students to feel more confident in responding to unexpected academic demands (for example, Table 2, Participant 5). In contrast, insufficient planning was related to burnout and lower levels of effectiveness (for example, Table 2, Participant 10). These findings revealed that effective time management functions as an excellent coping mechanism that supports students in managing competing responsibilities (Tofighi et al., 2022). These findings extended prior literature suggesting that time management practices function as an adaptive mechanism that helps mitigate role strain among working students. This highlights time management as an adaptive coping mechanism that mitigates the negative effects of role strain. It further suggests that behavioural strategies can partially compensate for structural constraints imposed by employment conditions.

Overall, the qualitative evidence suggests that time management practices play a direct and actionable role, whereas employment type establishes structural boundaries, and work-life balance affects students' broader preparedness for crisis situations. These findings indicate that students' responses are affected not by any single factor in isolation but by the interaction between structural work conditions and individual coping practices, where time management often functions as a compensatory strategy when employment demands or work-life imbalance intensify role strain (Pearlin, 1983). These findings demonstrate that perceived academic emergency response efficiency is not determined by a single factor but emerges from the interaction between structural conditions and individual coping strategies. This reinforces the need for integrated institutional support systems. Work-study challenges often depend on the nature of employment demands and personal circumstances. These findings emphasise the need for skill-based interventions, such as time management training, and more flexible employment arrangements to enhance students' emergency response confidence (Joseph Jeyaraj, 2023; Isnainy & Zainaro, 2024). Future research could explore context-specific strategies, recognising that demands may vary across different professional environments.

Lastly, the unmatched ‘come-and-go’ mobility of certain students who commute between China and Malaysia for teaching is an added complexity. Role conflict worsened among these students since they travel frequently, cannot stay in the country because of visa limitations, and experience challenges in online classes while being in face-to-face courses (Beech, 2015). Due to this trend in mobility, universities need to create more flexible and adaptable support systems to meet the needs of students who only study at certain times of the year or a combination of both. This is critical because it enables them to stay engaged and be ready despite other logistical barriers.

Even though this study was carried out at a private university in Malaysia, the issues that it uncovered, such as rigid work hours, lack of time, and the importance of institutional support, are not limited to the particular setting. International students studying in diverse higher education systems might face issues when juggling employment with part-time studies (Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022; Trotter et al., 2022; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The findings can offer knowledge that may be relevant to institutions worldwide, especially those that assist working postgraduate students dealing with complicated role demands.

Implications

The implications of the findings for institutions of higher education that assist working postgraduate students are clear. Considering that aspects of time management practices proved to be key themes that influenced perceived academic emergency response efficiency (PERE), universities must focus on incorporating organised, skills-based training in time management into postgraduate programmes. These measures could enhance the readiness of students to handle unplanned academic requirements and reduce role strain experiences.

Moreover, institutions ought to consider flexible academic policies that take into account the employment constraints of students, especially when students are involved in shift-based, inflexible, or transnational work arrangements. Insofar as possible, collaboration with employers in promoting flexible work arrangements can also lead to the reduction of structural role conflict and enhance the preparedness of students towards academic emergencies.

The issues are particularly important to international and transnational, part-time students whose work and study responsibilities frequently go beyond institutional and national boundaries. On the whole, the results point to the fact that effective support of postgraduate students requires the concerted effort of institutions and employers to consider both individual coping mechanisms and institutional factors affecting academic activity and well-being.

Limitations Of The Study

This study is subject to a number of constraints. To begin with, since the data were collected at one single point in time, the results are associated with what individuals went through during a certain time frame and situation. Second, the generalisability of the results is low because the study involved a small qualitative sample of part-time master’s students in one private institution in Malaysia. The study offers a detailed understanding of the lived experiences of the participants, but the findings might not necessarily provide full validation of the lived experiences of working postgraduate students in a different institutional or national context. Third, the findings are based on self-reported accounts, which can be affected by social desirability bias or recall bias. Besides this, the emphasis on students perceived ability to

respond to academic emergencies, instead of their actual responses, implies that the findings do not represent actual behaviours in reality. It might be further understood through observational or longitudinal studies to determine the responses of students in practice.

In addition, despite the fact that purposive and maximum variation sampling were adopted, the relatively small sample might have resulted in the absence of certain viewpoints. Moreover, the peculiarity of the 'come-and-go' pattern of some participants, with full-time work in China and interrupted short study blocks, may indicate the possible lack of applicability of the findings to students who permanently live in Malaysia. This type of seasonal mobility can also pose specific difficulties in sustaining long-term engagement and access to institutional support.

Future Research

Future studies should examine how mobility patterns affect long-term academic engagement and how universities can now be more attentive to providing responsive assistance to transnational part-time students (Beech, 2015). To understand how students' responses to the requirements of academic activities change over time, future research could use longitudinal designs and introduce elements of observation or behavioural data to supplement students' own experiences.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that work-life balance, the type of employment, and time management practices influence the preparedness of students for academic emergencies. The qualitative results indicated that flexible work schedules and proper planning provide an opportunity to manage crises effectively, whereas inflexible scheduling and poor work-life balance contribute to distress and decrease students' ability to balance competing requirements. Structural constraints are caused by employment conditions, while time management practices are a valuable coping tool that can assist students in staying in control of conflicting roles.

Students in challenging professional roles and those who had unpredictable work schedules found it difficult to balance academic and work-related responsibilities, which were identified using thematic analysis. Educational schools can contribute towards mitigating these problems by instilling time management training in academic programmes and encouraging more flexible working and studying schedules. The findings emphasise the importance of the systemic level of support that improves individual coping as well as institutional support that helps the success of students in managing multiple role demands. Part-time students can be seen as more involved in their academic activities and more responsive in disruption-prone periods since adaptive approaches and flexible policies are implemented. Addressing these needs in a coordinated process helps institutions to serve learners in combining professional life with academic needs in a more effective way.

Though this study was undertaken in the context of Malaysian private higher education, the findings provide a wider perspective on any institution that seeks to assist transnational or working postgraduates. The unique mobility patterns among students travelling across China and Malaysia bring to light the dilemma faced when it comes to balancing professional working commitments and studies in national contexts. These trends indicate greater challenges among international students juggling jobs and part-time education. Personalised academic assistance,

workplace cooperation, and systematised time management training might be applicable to other countries. With consideration of perceived academic emergency response effectiveness, this study offers insight into the process of managing the conflicting responsibilities of work and study among part-time postgraduate students.

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- Ethics Statement:** This study adhered to recognised ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifiable information from transcripts and reporting. Data collection was conducted by the first author in his capacity as a doctoral student at a private university under the guidance of academic supervision. In accordance with the University's institutional research ethics guidelines, formal ethics committee approval was not required for this minimal-risk study involving voluntary adult participants.
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