






Working-class postgraduates' perceptions of studying while working at a selected university



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Dates:

Received: 6 Apr. 2022
 Accepted: 28 Oct. 2022
 Published: 15 Nov. 2022

How to cite this article:

Rockman, D.A., Aderibigbe, J.K., Allen-Ile, C.O., Mahembe, B., & Hamman-Fisher, D.A., (2022). Working-class postgraduates' perceptions of studying while working at a selected university. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 20(0), a1962. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v20i0.1962>

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Orientation: The life of working-class postgraduates can be exhilarating and daunting, juggling the commitments of full-time employment and postgraduate studies. Insofar as can be established, little, if any, research has been conducted on exploring the experiences of such students in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. An in-depth investigation is necessary to assist management and academic institutions to support such students.

Research purpose: The purpose of the study was to understand the selected working-class postgraduate students' perceptions of studying while working simultaneously, as well as explore the experiences, challenges and coping mechanisms of the cohort of students.

Motivation for the study: The severe financial challenges, psychological burnout and other obstacles that working-class postgraduates face, which often impair their ability to perform optimally in both their career and studies, motivated the research. Therefore, recommendations can be made to management and institutions of higher learning to assist such students.

Research approach/design and methods: The study was positioned in the qualitative research paradigm and used explorative single case study research design and semi-structured interview approach to collect data from the research participants. Four-stage content analysis method was used to analyse the interview transcripts, because the focus was on understanding the content and contextual meaning derived from the transcribed texts. Seven themes were identified, namely, development and growth, applicability of knowledge across school and work, time management and planning, drive and ambition, struggles and sacrifices, support systems/services and work-study balance.

Main findings: The results indicate that time management skills and planning, drive and ambition, work-study balance and support from employers and family are significant coping factors that promote working-class postgraduates' success in their careers and studies.

Practical/managerial implications: Given the positive role that time management skills and support play in ensuring professional and academic success, the researchers advocate for professional and institutional interventions. Such interventions could be in the education, training and development domain that can ameliorate the effects of conflicting demands of work and postgraduate studies.

Contribution/value-add: Initiating the conceptualisation of a coping mechanism model that combines effective management with high motivation and goal setting can stimulate additional empirical-related research towards validating the conceptual model.

Keywords: coping mechanisms; psychological well-being; self-motivation; time management; working-class postgraduates; work-study balance.

Introduction

Employees' aspiration for growth comes with inherent demands. These demands may comprise full-time employment, postgraduate studies, parenting commitments, and social and religious responsibilities (Pace & Sciotto, 2022; Sharma et al., 2021). If these demands are not adequately managed, they can create an imbalance in the lives of working-class postgraduates (Jeske & O'Mahony, 2019). According to Johnson et al. (2009), a major consequence of this imbalance is stress and possible burnout, as a result of students studying and working simultaneously.

Globally, several individuals are combining work and education because of the rising cost of living and tuition fees (Ang, 2008; Sharma et al., 2021). Ang (2008) explained that many students

are obliged to financially support themselves while studying, because working while studying enriches the working postgraduates' learning experience, as they acquire relevant and meaningful industry experience while learning the theory. This resonates with the views of Hamman-Fisher and McGhie (2021) who regard the workplace as an integral part of the students' learning. In other words, the workplace facilitates for the application of the theory to resolve real-world problems.

Working postgraduates also bring many advantages to their organisations. According to Beqiri and Mazreku (2020), employees who pursue postgraduate studies optimise their workplace performance and productivity by transferring the knowledge and skill they acquire in the classroom to their jobs. Globally and locally, the very purpose of education, training and development is to enhance the performance of employees and organisations (Beqiri & Mazreku, 2020; Meyer, 2016). Moreover, Chaitra et al. (2016) asserted that employers in the 21st century have high-performance benchmarks and expectations of their employees. Given this, it is imperative that employees pursue formal education, such as postgraduate studies, so they can add value to their organisations.

However, despite the personal and organisational advantages, many companies encounter challenges when implementing policies geared at better school and work-life balance for working-class postgraduates (Ojo et al., 2014; Sharma et al., 2021). As a result of the difficulties encountered in implementing appropriate work-school policies, many working-class postgraduates experience tremendous challenges during their tuition period (Evans & Donnelly, 2018). Thamrin et al. (2019) in their study found that working-class postgraduates have not necessarily developed healthy coping strategies. They often 'go with the flow', focusing on whatever is most urgent. According to Baca (2017), working-class postgraduates find it very challenging to balance multiple tasks, prioritise tasks and manage their time effectively. Thus, this study explored the experiences, coping strategies and perceptions of working-class postgraduates about the challenges of studying while working. Therefore, the overarching research question is: What are the working-class postgraduates' perceptions of studying while working simultaneously?

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to understand the selected working-class postgraduate students' perceptions of studying while working simultaneously, as well as to explore the experiences and challenges of working-class postgraduates and their coping mechanisms to meet work and academic demands at a selected university in the Western Cape. The study therefore investigated the following specific objectives:

1. To explore the selected working-class postgraduates' perceptions on studying and working simultaneously.
2. To examine the challenges faced by working-class postgraduates at the selected university and how they overcome these problems.

3. To identify the positive and negative effects of studying while working.
4. To introduce a positive coping mechanism model for work-study balance.

Literature review

Working-class postgraduates' perceptions of working while studying

According to Tumin et al. (2020), working-class postgraduates tend to spend less time on academic activities and more time on their jobs. The researchers explained that the work experiences and practical knowledge from the cohort of students trigger their motivation to complete their academic qualification. The students accomplished this while concurrently enhancing their career possibilities (Tumin et al., 2020). Likewise, a study undertaken by Abenoja et al. (2019) revealed that working-class postgraduates are inspired by self-development, financial support, intrinsic drive and motivation.

Adult students are motivated by learning theory and its application simultaneously in the workplace. This resonates with the economic theory that advocates that working and studying simultaneously produces a smoother school-work transition, which positively benefits the student (Nilsson, 2019). According to Sanchez-Gelabert et al. (2017), adults who work and study concurrently gain industry-related skills at their respective workplaces, which cannot be solely obtained at university. The skills range from hard skills to soft skills. Hard skills may entail writing a business report, and soft skills may comprise team working skills and displaying empathy, among other skills (Barbanchon et al., 2019).

Challenges faced by working-class postgraduates and how they overcome them

Numerous studies examined the reasons why individuals are working and studying concurrently (Evans et al., 2014; Sanchez-Gelabert et al., 2017). According to Evans et al. (2014), many working students are compelled into the arrangement to fund their studies (Evans et al., 2014). One of the reasons is that tuition discounts offered at universities are marginal as most cover only around 12% – 20% of tuition fees (Tumin et al., 2020). As a result, nonworking students cannot afford to pay their tuition fees. In addition to the difficulties encountered in the search for tuition fees, these students often struggle to balance the pressures from their studies and work leading to poor health and lack of concentration on their studies (Abenoja et al., 2019). The students are likely to fail completing their degrees on time because of stress, fatigue and the inability to meet deadlines for the submission of assignments (Chinyakata et al., 2019).

Effects of working while studying

Various scholars have identified both the positive and negative consequences that working postgraduates face.

According to Tumin and Faizuddin (2017), financial stress is a significant contributor to the poor mental health among working students. Mounsey et al. (2013) emphasised that often the students suffer from depression, burnout and acute anxiety. In a study conducted in Australia, it was found that as a result of work demands, many working postgraduates fail to attend classes regularly and are disengaged from the university resources and activities that could enhance their academic success (Devlin et al., 2008). Hovdhaugen (2015) believed that the aforementioned negative stressors in turn have a negative impact on working postgraduate students' academic performance and contribute to their ultimate dropout of formal education.

Contrary to the above, as already mentioned, working while pursuing postgraduate studies also has many positive results. Tymon (2013) suggested that the study-work arrangement enables students to experience the real world while undertaking formal studies. The study-work framework compels students to work more strategically and efficiently to achieve work and study success. Perna (2010) argued that despite the numerous challenges that working-class students have to endure, they are motivated to improve the quality and standard of their lives through education.

The aforementioned negative and positive influences on working-class postgraduates resonate with the findings of a study conducted as far back as 2007. Lowe and Gayle (2007) explored the factors that influence both full-time and part-time students who work at the same time as reading for a degree. What was significant is the finding that students working full-time and part-time have different learning experiences and needs. In line with the views of Sanchez-Gelabert et al. (2017), they too identified that it is critical for working-class students to have support from others to succeed. Lowe and Gayle (2007) noted that students' academic success is mostly attributed to the support they receive from family, fellow students and employers. On the contrary, Sanchez-Gelabert et al. (2017) recommended that support from the academic institution should be provided. This can take the form of hybrid face-to-face or distance learning and the provision of assistance using the institution's virtual platforms, reconstructing the timetable, revitalising the curricula and making available academic personnel. Given this, support structures are critical ranging from family, employers and the institution to advance the success of this group of students.

Coping with the effects of working while studying

Baca (2017) proposed two coping mechanisms to assist working-class students with time management. The author recommends that the working-class postgraduates cultivate competencies related to self-control and boundaries. Duckworth and Seligman (2006) suggested that an individual with self-control can restrain their impulses to realise a longer-term goal. According to Bulger et al. (2007),

establishing flexible boundaries was found to help with the creation of structure in students' lives. Kuhnle et al. (2010) believed that students who understand and appreciate the happiness that accrues from a healthy work-study balance should exercise self-control and implement the necessary restrictions and boundaries in their lives.

Methods

The study was located within the qualitative research paradigm because its aim, objectives and questions were explorative in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative research approach was appropriate to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to a social, human phenomenon or problematic situation. This was the case in this study because the researchers sought to explore the feelings, experiences and challenges of working-class postgraduates (Seeley, 2015).

Research design

The study applied explorative single case study research design and used semi-structured interview approach to collect data from the research participants. The primary reason for applying explorative case study research design was because there is a paucity of literature on the phenomena under investigation. Hence, the researchers were interested in gaining insight into working-class postgraduate students' perceptions, experiences and coping strategies while studying and working simultaneously (Fouché & Schurink, 2011; Saunders et al., 2009). The researchers envisioned that such an understanding would contribute towards constructing a work-study coping mechanism model and could also possibly trigger further research interest in the variables that would emerge from the data analysis (Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to become aware of the relevant theories and variables applicable to the study in a statistical way (Saunders et al., 2009).

Research participants and sampling techniques

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling method. As such, the researchers targeted the employee population undergoing postgraduate studies while executing official work duties and responsibilities at the time of the investigation. Following the views of both Saunders et al. (2009) and Nieuwenhuis (2016), the study's researchers adopted a non-probability convenience sampling technique because the study conformed to an exploratory research design with a small sample variation in the population. The study reached saturation when the participants provided similar responses to interview questions and offered no new insights into the phenomenon. The researchers upheld Nieuwenhuis' (2016) view for explorative investigations that data should be collected until the saturation point in the data is reached from the participants' responses. Fusch et al. (2015) explained that data saturation is reached when further coding does not occur.

Specifically, a sample of five postgraduate students (two males in the age range of 30 – 39 years and three females in the age range of 18 – 29 years) participated in the study (see Table 1). According to Zainal (2007) and Nieuwenhuis (2016), a small sample is appropriate for exploratory case study research designs because the emerging data will provide interest and possibly pave the way to further research on the phenomenon.

The data were collected from February 2020 to 20 March 2020, which was before the COVID-19 lockdown period. The researchers reviewed the university postgraduates' class timetable and ascertained that nearly all postgraduate classes were conducted in the evenings. As a result, the researchers approached working postgraduate students visiting the library for their interest to participate in the study. The students who were willing to participate in the study were selected. Hereafter, interviews were arranged, and working postgraduate students' consent was documented to participate in the study. One participant (Participant 5) was working part-time, and the remaining four participants were full-time employees. Three participants were completing their studies part-time, and two participants were completing their studies full-time. Table 1 presents a concise biographical makeup of the participants.

Data collection method

The interview questions were guided by 13 open-ended questions derived from the study's primary and sub-research questions that were observed in the literature. The researchers formulated questions to capture the perceptions of working-class postgraduates about studying while working simultaneously, their experiences, challenges and coping mechanisms to meet work and academic demands, and their recommendations to others. Rather than presenting the research questions to the participants linearly, the semi-structured interview method permitted the researchers to navigate between questions when necessary and explore new matters that emerged (Saunders et al., 2009).

While an inductive approach was employed, constructing the 13 interview questions from the literature ultimately linked the study to the existing body of knowledge. Additional probing questions were asked during the interview to find answers to the research questions and objectives of the study (Saunders et al., 2009). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010) and Saunders et al. (2009), this method of collecting data assists with formulating a proposed model. Given the above, the researchers asked the research

participants the following questions: (1) What motivates you to continue studying, while working? (2) What are your personal views on studying and working simultaneously? (3) Can you explain if you started studying first and then took up employment or vice versa? (4) What are the reasons for working while you are studying? (5) Can you describe what challenges you experienced with working and studying simultaneously? (6) What effect does your job have on your academic performance? Can you provide me with some examples? (7) What effect does your studies have on your job? Can you provide me with some examples? (8) How do you overcome challenges? (9) How do you feel about working while studying? (10) Are there any advantages for you to study while you are working? (11) How do you manage your time? (12) What suggestions would you like to give working postgraduates? (13) Do you have any recommendations to improve student's academic performance while working?

The researchers started the fieldwork after obtaining ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee. Combined with assurances about anonymity, the interview questions were given to the participants before the scheduled interview to prepare their responses in advance (Saunders et al., 2009). The interviews were for one and a half hours and took place face-to-face in one of the faculty offices at the research site. Although the researchers documented the participants' responses, each interview was recorded to capture the participants' responses accurately. As Saunders et al. (2009) recommended, the researchers transcribed the interview notes and recordings before the following scheduled interview meeting. This approach was taken to avoid confusion about the data of the research participants.

Data analysis and coding

Bengtsson's (2016) content analysis method was used to organise and elicit meaning from the data collected. From this, inferences were made from interview texts to make sense of the phenomena. According to Berg (2001), this method of qualitative analysis was appropriate because the focus was on the content and the contextual meaning derived from the transcribed interview texts. Bengtsson's (2016) content analysis process comprises of four stages, namely, the decontextualisation stage, the recontextualisation stage, the categorisation stage and the compilation stages.

The first stage adhered to the processes of open coding (Berg, 2001). It comprised of reading through the transcribed texts to gain a general understanding of the data. Thereafter, the text was divided into smaller meaning units. Bengtsson (2016)

TABLE 1: Biographical information of participants.

Participants	Age group (years)	Gender	Nationality	Degree/Diploma	Occupation	Full-time/Part-time
P1	30 – 39	Male	South African	BCom Honours – Industrial Psychology	Head: Human Capital (full-time)	Part-time
P2	18 – 29	Female	South African	BCom Honours – Industrial Psychology	HR Administrator (full-time)	Part-time
P3	30 – 39	Male	South African	Postgraduate Diploma in Computer and Media Application	Operations Manager (full-time)	Full-time
P4	18 – 29	Female	South African	Master's in Industrial Psychology	Learning and Development Assistant (full-time)	Part-time
P5	18 – 29	Female	South African	Master's in Information Systems	Admin Assistant (part-time)	Full-time

described meaning units as the smallest unit that provides some understanding that the researcher requires. It may represent a group of sentences or paragraphs containing a part related to each other that answers the question(s) highlighted in the aim of this study, which was to understand the selected working-class postgraduate students' perceptions of studying while working simultaneously, as well as to explore the experiences and challenges of working-class postgraduates and their coping mechanisms to meet work and academic demands at a selected university in the Western Cape. Each identified meaning unit was labelled with a code. Although this was an inductive study, the codes as labelled on the theory are found in the literature (Berg, 2001). It is this specific procedure that Berg (2001) described as the 'open coding process'. The codes enabled the identification of concepts around which the data could be assembled into blocks and patterns (Bengtsson, 2016). A coding list, with the meaning of the codes, was constructed to simplify the analysis process (Bengtsson, 2016). In this study, the codes were determined from the theory found in the literature. It required the researcher and the supervisor to perform the coding process repetitively, starting on different pages of the text each time to increase the stability and reliability (Bengtsson, 2016; Berg, 2001).

The second stage, titled the *recontextualisation phase*, required a review to ascertain whether all aspects of the content were covered in relation to the aim. To accomplish this, the original responses were read alongside the final list of meaningful units to establish commonalities. Coloured pencils were used to distinguish between each meaning unit in the original transcript. As Bryman et al. (2014) suggested, unmarked texts were examined at the analysis stage to determine whether they provided some answers to the research question. The researchers then proceeded to record the responses to each question.

The third stage, which is the *categorisation stage*, required assigning the data to created categories and condensing extended meaning units (Patton, 2002). The data were coded by assigning it to the 13 categories, based on the 13 interview questions (see Table 2a–d). Responses that were similar in different questions were coded, and a new unified heading (theme) was created. In the final stage, the *compilation stage*, seven themes emerged because of the coding process (see Table 3). These themes were determined from an objective standing. As Bengtsson (2016) suggested, the researchers immersed themselves into the data to identify the hidden meanings in the texts. For each category or theme, the researcher used appropriate meaning units presented in the text as quotations. As a result, the researcher was able to present coded responses in categories (see Table 2) and seven themes (see Table 3). To finalise the themes, the researcher reviewed the literature to determine if the findings were reasonable and logical.

The theme *development and growth* emerged by combining professional development categories identified in question 1 and *professional growth* identified in question 4 (see Table 3).

Six other themes emerged because of the coding process. These are (1) applicability of knowledge across school and work, (2) time management and planning, (3) drive and ambition, (4) struggles and sacrifices, (5) support systems/services and (6) work–study balance (see Table 3).

Establishing trustworthiness of data and themes

The study applied the following four criteria for ensuring trustworthiness of data and themes as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1985): credibility (truth value of findings), transferability (application of findings), dependability (consistency of findings) and conformability (neutrality of findings). The *criterion of credibility* is concerned with whether the data obtained from participants and the data analysis process are trustworthy and believable (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The researchers recruited unknown postgraduate students of different faculties from the university library as research participants. The researchers further established the credibility of the research data by the length of the interview (one and one-quarter hours), limited contact with research participants before the interview (during recruitment at the library) and after the interview (students contacted the researchers for the results), and the interviewees eligibility to pose questions during the interview and about the investigation. Furthermore, each interview was recorded and transcribed. The engagements and transparency with the interviewees enhanced mutual trust and improved the credibility of the data collected.

The *criterion of transferability* refers to the replication of the results and findings in different settings. As many students at the research site are working-class postgraduates, the data obtained from the sample are applicable to them (Nowell et al., 2017). Concerning the criterion of dependability, the researchers' methodological steps and decisions over data collection were guided by scientific procedures to promote the trustworthiness of the study's findings. The *criterion of dependability* represents adherence to a logical research process, decisions and methodology. The study was reviewed and approved by the host department – the Department of Industry Psychology, the Faculty Higher Degrees and Research Committee and the University's Ethics Department (Ethics clearance no: HS19/9/25). The panels aforementioned examined the study for suitability in terms of the research strategies chosen and ethical considerations for an inductive study that would yield rich information from research participants (Nowell et al., 2017). Finally, according to Guba and Lincoln (1985), *confirmability* describes the researcher's analyses, interpretations and findings. Bias in this study was minimised by the researcher's awareness that his current working and studying arrangement could flaw this analysis. As a result, the supervisor also analysed the data, and cross-checks were administered. As recommended by Bengtsson (2016), bias was minimised by triangulating the findings with the literature. Bengtsson (2016) informed that the criterion of conformability is achieved when credibility, transferability and dependability are upheld. It can be implied that because the researcher was able to achieve this, the study can be deemed to aspire to the principle of conformability.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee, Office of the Director, Research and Innovation Division, University of the Western Cape (HS19/9/25).

In addition to obtaining ethical approval of the study from the university, the following ethical principles, namely, debriefing, informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality, were upheld in this study. Firstly, in applying the principle of informed consent, the researchers discussed the study with the participants and then requested their consent by signing a consent form to show their willingness to participate in the study. Secondly, the principle of voluntary participation helped the researchers to assure the participants of their freedom to express themselves without any coercion and the liberty to withdraw at any point they wanted to. Thirdly, the researchers managed the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' personal information and research data by instructing the participants to hide any means of personal identification such as names and identity numbers and by keeping the data collected strictly for research and education purposes only. Concerning debriefing, at the end of the fieldwork, the researchers

reiterated the intention of the research to the participants to debunk any misconceptions and anxieties they might have about the study and its findings.

Results and findings

The overview of interviewees' coded responses is provided in Table 2. Specifically, the table presents the relationship of each research question to each variable and theme. Moreover, Table 3 shows the final and original coding frameworks that emerged during the data analysis and coding processes.

Table 3 further shows the research participants' detailed explanations of their coping mechanisms and experiences concerning working and studying, as presented next to the themes derived from the final coding framework.

Development and growth

The theme 'development and growth' was derived from Question 1 that uncovered working postgraduate students' perceptions of working while studying and Question 4 that elicited suggestions and recommendations from students who are working while studying.

TABLE 2a: Interviewees' coded responses.

Primary question 1: What are postgraduate students' perceptions of working while studying?			
Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional development Career development Family benefits Prosperous future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicability/practicality Work-study balance Prioritise/planning Time management Motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work experience Practicality Career advising/curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial strain Professional growth Goal setting Continuous learning

TABLE 2b: Interviewees' coded responses.

Primary question 2: What are the challenges faced by working students when working while studying and how do they overcome these problems?			
Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor time management Work/study balance Poor quality of work Stress Work demands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time management Poor prioritisation Social life sacrifice Procrastination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisational support Work demands Poor mental state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sacrifices Support system Drive/courage Balance Schedule change

TABLE 2c: Interviewees' coded responses.

Primary question 3: What are the positive and negative effects of working while studying?		
Question 9	Question 10	Question 11
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accomplishment Applicability Overwhelming Planning Goal-oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Applicability Experience Knowledgeable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diary Schedule Time management Planning Role switch Workload management

TABLE 2d: Interviewees' coded responses.

Primary question 4: What are some suggestions and recommendations for students who are working while studying?	
Question 12	Question 13
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lecturer expectation Time management Workload analysis Adhere to deadlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workplace expectations Relationship with lecturer Support network/group Familiarity with course content

TABLE 3: Seven themes that emerged from the coding of the data.

Themes	Code original coding framework
1. Development and growth	Professional development Career development Family benefits Prosperous future Career advising/curriculum Professional growth
2. Applicability of knowledge across school and work	Applicability Work experience Practicality Knowledgeable
3. Time management and planning	Prioritise/planning Time management Schedule change Poor quality of work Diary Schedule Workload analysis Adhere to deadlines Work demands
4. Drive and ambition	Drive/courage Goal setting Continuous learning Motivation Goal-oriented Accomplishment
5. Struggles and sacrifices	Stress Social life sacrifice Procrastination Financial strain Overwhelming Poor mental state
6. Support system/services	Relationship with lecturer Support network/group Familiarity with course Lecturer expectation Organisational support
7. Work-study balance	Work-life balance Role switching Balance Work-study balance Workplace expectations Workload management

Of the five participants, four participants reported that their motivation to study while working was because they perceived that it would lead to personal and professional development. They stated the following:

- 'I suppose it's just professional development and more about me developing my career or developing myself from an educational perspective ...' (Participant 1).
- 'So, the praise motivates me, you know, and also, I want to better myself ...' (Participant 2).
- '... a future where your family benefits ... And then that's part of your personal development as well ...' (Participant 3).
- '... personal development and knowing how I can grow ... the positive impact it can have on the life of me and my family ...' (Participant 4).

The participants' responses resonate with McLennan and Keating's (2008) belief that working while studying enables

working postgraduates to advance their careers, in addition to Govender and Wait's (2017) perspective that personal growth is an outcome of studying while working. The commonality in responses of four of the participants reiterated their belief that working while studying leads to growth. More particularly, both professional growth and personal growth are consequences of studying while working.

Applicability of knowledge across school and work

The theme of applicability of knowledge emerged as a result of participants' responses to Questions 2, 3, 9 and 10. These four questions aimed to understand the challenges, coping mechanisms, and positive and negative perceptions that would emerge from working postgraduate students.

Four of the participant's responses were aligned with the theory and practice dilemma in the industrial and organisational psychology literature (Hamman-Fisher, 2021). It was vital for them to learn the theory in the classroom and then be able to apply it in the workplace. This was emphasised as beneficial because it enhanced their learning. Four participants report the following:

- '... you can sort of deem and see applicability in that environment more so than someone that's not in a working environment who has never been before ...' (Participant 1).
- '... Yeah, so obviously working and studying I mean I'm getting the practical experience and learning the theory behind it. So, it obviously broadens my thinking box or helps me to think better ...' (Participant 2).
- '... I'm able to link the practical and the workplace with my actual studies ...' (Participant 3).
- '... It is a bit overwhelming. It's very overwhelming. But I think it's more because of the type of person I am because I am an overachiever. So, I not only want to achieve in my academics and my master's but in the workplace as well ...' (Participant 4).

However, Participant 4 also stated that the effort to excel at school and work is 'overwhelming'.

Time management and planning

According to Baca (2017), many working-class students experience psychological problems and academic challenges because they have not developed time management and planning skills. From Question 2, which probed personal views; Question 5, which explored the challenges; Question 6, which drew academic performance; Question 11, which investigated time management; and Question 12, which asked for suggestions from working postgraduates about the time management and planning theme, the five participants responded to the questions as follows:

- '... Look, it's juggling time, hey ... It obviously will impact all other aspects of my life, so, personal life, my family ...' (Participant 1).

- 'I live by a diary. That's it (laughs). I stick strictly to a diary. Everything goes in my diary, because if it's not in there, I'm going to forget about it ...' (Participant 2).
- '... I really just have to set aside time so I normally, you know, use my diary and I kind of just set aside time to say, this is the time that I need to study, and these are the times that I need to do work ...' (Participant 3).
- '... I wouldn't say that I had an extremely negative impact, but it's more an accumulation of small things. So, there is a stress component, so I didn't, for example ... have a breakdown or I never encountered that, but there's a lot of little things, like stress, fatigue, time management, pressure from both angles ...' (Participant 4).
- '... The biggest one is time management. Because you know you're at work from half past eight to half past four, go home, then you have to start working on your thesis, you have to do a lot of research, data collection ...' (Participant 5).

Drive and ambition

The theme of drive and ambition emerged from Questions 2 and 8. Question 2 explored why students work and study simultaneously, and the purpose of Question 8 was to gauge which constructs would emerge to describe how working-class postgraduates overcame challenges. Three participants explained as follows:

- '... it depends on which mode I am in, if it's like hectic stuff going on at work, and I have assignments due here at campus, if I have a test, obviously at that point I would feel tired and a bit stressed or whatever. But normally when I get over the peak, I feel good about myself. I mean, I've accomplished something ...' (Participant 2).
- '... I felt like quitting in that time, point in time, I felt like just not handing in this assignment, but my father-in-law told me that "You might feel like quitting. Just don't quit." So, you push through, you, this, you go through, you break through, because you need to break through barriers ...' '... So, I started an IT degree or diploma, in my first year of my studies I dropped out and was always, I always had the desire for the technical software ... I always wanted to upscale myself technically ...' (Participant 3).
- '... my education has always been important to me. And I knew from the beginning from my undergrad that I wanted to do my PhD ...' (Participant 5).

Struggles and sacrifices

Curambao et al. (2015) stressed the mental, emotional and physical toll of working while studying. Hence, Question 8 was constructed to understand the underlying challenges that working postgraduates face. The responses to Question 8 were similar to those received for Question 6. Students narrated their struggles and sacrifices as follows:

- '... working late, working weekends, studying weekends, studying late, it just is what it is, just sacrificing and then also sacrificing personal time ...' (Participant 1).

- '... it really affects my academic performance, because I don't have enough time to do a proper job ...' (Participant 3).
- '... Sometimes I have put my academic, my thesis at the back end and put my family first. But I've seen the consequences of that ...' (Participant 5).

Support system/services

The theme support system/service was derived from Questions 7 and 8. Three participants' responses to Questions 7 and 8 correspond with the views of Lowe and Gayle (2007), which argue that students' success depends on the support they receive from the organisations they work for and their families. Two participants expound as follows:

- '... No effect, actually, my work, it's actually really lenient. They support my studies ...' (Participant 2).
- '... I think that having that support system around you much earlier, I think that helps and also just promote for me ...' (Participant 3).
- '... my family understands at the moment that this is important to me. And they might not be okay with that fact. But we try to balance it out as well as we can ...' (Participant 5).

Work-study balance

Lastly, the work-study theme was drawn from Questions 2, 5 and 8:

- '... I think it's just you've got to prioritise, and you've got to plan and don't wait for the last minute ...' (Participant 1).
- '... time management and make sure you set aside time for certain things, you need to share, you need to share your time between social life, work life, study life, but it all needs to be balanced ...' (Participant 2).
- '... that is challenging, being able to integrate everything, I did time management training once ...' (Participant 3).
- '... my family understands at the moment that this is important to me. And they might not be okay with that fact. But we try to balance it out as well as we can ...' (Participant 5).

Discussion

The research findings are discussed about the research objectives and questions aligned to the literature of specific constructs on the working postgraduate student phenomenon. The use of the qualitative research method was twofold. Firstly, it was to understand the selected working-class postgraduate students' perceptions of studying while working simultaneously. Secondly, it explored working-class postgraduate students' negative and positive experiences and their coping mechanisms to meet work and academic demands. It was essential to understand how the participants perceived studying and working simultaneously, what they considered the challenge and their coping mechanisms employed to study and work simultaneously. Table 2 shows the summary findings for Questions 1 to 13 related to the study's primary and sub-research questions.

Objective 1: To explore the selected working-class postgraduates' perceptions on studying and working simultaneously

Understanding the selected working-class postgraduates' perceptions of studying and working was essential. As Chinyakata et al. (2019) reported this as a common phenomenon that has arisen because of the high cost of living and tuition fees, exploring this cohort of students would provide insight into their situation. The theme that has emerged in this regard is development and growth.

Development and growth

Participants reported that they developed personally, and in their careers, because of studying and working concurrently. The finding correlates with the views of Perna (2010) that working students are motivated to improve the quality and the standard of their lives through education (Perna, 2010). Govender and Waite (2017) argued that students enrol in the work and study arrangement for two reasons, namely, to improve the quality of their personal lives and to enhance their career opportunities. According to Maslow's (1954) motivation theory, learning provides the opportunity for growth and development to achieve personal fulfilment.

The implication that studying and working concurrently improves students' chances of career success and their personal lives is essential. In the South African context, it means that because students are working and studying, they are employable and promotable and can improve their living standards. Hamman-Fisher (2021) and Govender and Waite (2017) found that learning theory and practice simultaneously allows students to develop the knowledge and skills for the workplace, thereby making them employable. This arrangement of working and studying simultaneously could contribute to lessening the high unemployment rate in South Africa (Graham et al., 2019; Pauw et al., 2008). It, therefore, implies that by working and studying simultaneously, students could improve their employment and career prospects and realise their aspirations.

Objective 2: To examine the challenges faced by working-class postgraduates at the selected university and how they overcome these problems

There is substantial evidence from the research study data to support a relationship between the challenges of working postgraduate students and their academic and career success. The study data were further supported by the indication that coping strategies such as time management, support systems/service, work-study balance, and drive and ambition are employed to overcome the challenges that working-class postgraduates experience. Hence, the following four constructs, namely, time management, support system/services, work-study

balance, and drive and ambition, are discussed below in working postgraduates' challenges.

Time management

The participants specifically proposed efficient planning as a strategy to overcome their limited time challenges. Nasrullah and Khan (2015) emphasised that good time management contributes to students' academic success. According to Mohamed et al. (2018), students with good time management skills also benefit from reduced stress. This theme encapsulates the working-class postgraduates' need to develop and maintain good time management skills, as evidenced in the participants' responses.

In addition, the participants also noted how challenging it is to cope with an extremely busy schedule. Hence, they suggested that balancing family time, socialising and prioritising studies are critical. Martinez et al. (2013) likewise found that doctoral students are not only forced to balance their school, work and life commitments but also find the situation extremely challenging. In other words, the study's findings and the literature suggest that there is a link between time management and work-life balance to achieve academic success.

Support system/services

Participants 2, 3 and 5 recognised the value of having a support system or network. There is consensus among the participants that support from employers and family can diminish the stress associated with studying and working simultaneously. Their views concur with DeFauw et al. (2018), who found that students perform well when they perceive they are surrounded by caring and empathetic peers or groups. They argued that a support group can be beneficial in providing emotional strength and keeping working students motivated and accountable for their goals (DeFauw et al., 2018). Similarly, Tang et al. (2013) affirmed that family support is often a strong motivating factor in students' pursuit of higher education. According to Lowe and Gayle (2007), student's success is dependent on the nature and quality of the support they receive from both their families and the organisations they work for. The theme highlights that the study has key implications for the work-family field theoretically (i.e. increasing the understanding of the nomological social support and work-family conflict) and practically (recognising the types of support policies and structures that employers should develop and implement).

Drive and ambition

The participants revealed that they were driven to achieve their goals. One participant reported that from the outset they aimed to have a PhD qualification while working. According to Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2003), it is not unusual to observe that individuals who perform well academically are motivated to achieve higher levels in their studies. Jewel (2014) also reported that working-class

students' ambition is apparent in their workplace. Moreover, individuals' ambition is inherent in their core beliefs about their ability. As a result, ambitious individuals will shape their life's main events and performances to deliver their desired outcomes. Almomani and Theeb (2016) suggested that a commitment to goals can stimulate investment in an individual's future. It is now forcing working-class postgraduates to grapple with inevitable challenges that require a resolution.

Objective 3: To identify the positive and negative effects of studying while working

The literature identified both positive and negative implications for studying and working simultaneously. While Agyapong and Owusu-Ansah (2012) reported that pursuing studies while working full-time can be overwhelming, Watts and Pickering (2000) argued that there are benefits that can be derived from such an arrangement. In this regard, two themes are presented under this objective: struggles and sacrifices and the applicability of knowledge across school and work.

Struggles and sacrifices

Many students in developing countries, like South Africa, are under enormous stress to acquire a university education (Matheuw, 2018). However, this study stresses that university education is accomplished when students work while studying and are responsible for their tuition. Participants in the study expounded on the long work hours and personal sacrifices they must make to work while studying. One participant explains that they experienced severe negative consequences when prioritising family responsibilities above studies. The current findings resonate with Evans et al. (2014), who also found that working students make enormous personal sacrifices to study and work concurrently. The authors explained that working students must engage in their studies on weekends and give up precious time with their families. The findings suggest that failure to make studies a priority could have detrimental consequences. It implies that working-class postgraduates have to sacrifice the time they ought to spend with their families to be able to cope with their studies.

Curambao et al. (2015) highlighted working students' mental, emotional and physical anguish in their study and found sleep deprivation a common problem among working students. Working-class postgraduates feel that they do not have enough time to attend to all their commitments. Likewise, Baca (2017) cautioned that the responsibility of academic demands' family commitments and work commitments can lead to burnout, extreme exhaustion, depression and a lack of motivation. As a result, Baca (2017) reported that students become more assertive and communicate that additional time is required to complete academic and work demands and time management skills.

Applicability of knowledge across school and work

Most participants in the study shared that working and studying simultaneously is advantageous because they acquire knowledge in their studies and apply it in their workplaces. In other words, they overcome the challenge of first learning theory and later transport the understanding and application of it, after graduation, to the workplace (Govender & Wait, 2017; Hamman-Fisher, 2021). This study's findings corroborate Frean's (2007) finding that motivation for combining work and studies is the acquisition of transferable skills. The infusion of learning theory and applying it simultaneously is one way of responding to the criticism levelled against university graduates (Augustyn & Cillié, 2008; Schreuder, 2001).

Participant 3 believes that the study-work arrangement can link theory and application, which may not have been accomplished with the traditional style of education. This finding correlates with another study that posits that learning is enhanced when connections are made between theory and practice (Hamman-Fisher, 2021). What is also significant about this theme is that the data reflect that working-class postgraduates developed skills, such as time management, when engaging in theory and practice at the same time. This echoes the view of Lave (1996) who reasoned that applying theory to a real-life situation is more effective than abstract formal classroom learning because knowledge is learnt and skill is cultivated. Moreover, Hamman-Fisher and McGhie (2021) reported that the working class find jobs more easily because employers use work experience and educational level as recruitment criteria. In addition, Watts and Pickering (2000) argued that the skill students cultivate in the workplace is fundamental to their academic journey and career progression. Hence, this study's findings suggest that working and studying provide more than financial assistance. It is an education, training and development experience that opens doors for employment and promotion.

Introducing a positive coping mechanism model for work-study balance

The research participants were all in agreement that time management and planning are the antidotes to procrastination. Moreover, the research participants acknowledged the importance of time management and how effective it is when juggling postgraduate studies and work commitments alongside personal life matters. In line with Nasrullah and Khan (2015), they affirmed that time management is strongly related to academic success. Nasrullah and Khan (2015) provided a useful framework for time management. They proposed that the three dimensions of time management are long-range planning, short-range planning and time attitude. Long-range planning is concerned with the efficient execution of routine tasks over a long period of time, for example, knowing how long it would take to complete certain daily tasks at work or at home. Most individuals have mastered this type of time management. On the other hand, short-range planning is concerned with carrying out specialised tasks with

precision. Furthermore, time attitude refers to how individuals must place emphasis on tasks that yield the best results.

In addition, this study discovered that working-class postgraduates' motivation is linked to development, growth and employability. The research participants shared that, despite the burden that working and studying in tandem yields, the ability to apply new knowledge across both school and work contexts is highly beneficial. The research participants' responses also highlighted the pivotal role of clear goals and strong motivation. They suggested that, in order to cope, their motivation levels should be greater than the challenges they face. It was found that motivation can be more easily sustained if support is readily available across all the relevant domains (school, work, life). The participants placed great emphasis on the support that they receive from both their institutions and their families and peers. They also mentioned that setting expectations with family members and employers is essential for minimising disappointment and frustration on both sides. Kember's (1999) early coping mechanism model supports the above findings.

Kember's (1999) early coping mechanism model for students consists of the following three elements: sacrifice, negotiation and support. The model was later elaborated on to include four main variables: work, family, social and self with each interacting with the three elements (Kember & Leung, 2004; Kember et al., 2005). This model is highly relevant to the findings of this investigation. For example, Participant 5's report on sacrificing family time in lieu of service of her academic commitments would be classified as 'family/sacrifice' in the model. Meanwhile, the 'social/sacrifice' interaction, wherein social relationships or activities are neglected to accommodate classes and tests, was evident in Participant 2's response. Participant 5 also experienced the 'family/negotiation' interaction, which involves reaching an agreement with one's family members about one's new academic responsibilities.

In terms of understanding the coping mechanisms adopted by the five participants, it can be said that their coping mechanisms are strongly linked to their motivation and ambition and their final goal(s). All of the participants were highly motivated and extremely clear on their reasons for working and studying simultaneously. Moreover, they all utilised whatever coping mechanisms or resources were available to achieve their individual goals. They moved adaptably between accessing support, negotiating terms with employers or family members, and making sacrifices in their personal lives, depending on which options were available to them. This was always done in service of their broader goals and ambitions. In this regard, Participant 3's statement is noteworthy: 'It's short-term sacrifices for longer-term things'.

These findings imply that, ultimately, the participants' ambition and drive outweigh the difficulties they encounter as working students. Working and studying concurrently is not mandatory, nor is it imposed on anyone. The decision to pursue this path lies entirely with the participants and, as

such, is a reflection of the strength of their desires and convictions. In view of the previous findings, the researchers devised the coping mechanism model to assist the participants in finding success in their combined academic and professional pursuits. This model was developed with close reference to Kember et al.'s (2005) coping mechanism strategies and Nasrullah and Khan's (2015) work on time management and motivation. Figure 1 shows a work-life demands coping mechanism model as postulated in this study.

Implication

This proposed model of coping mechanisms for working-class postgraduates is designed to bring about an optimum balance between work and study demands. The model flows in both directions:

- Firstly, working-class postgraduates need to comprehend the key dimensions of time management, as mentioned by Nasrullah and Khan (2015) and discussed earlier: short-term range, long-term range and time attitude.
- Understanding how to organise time according to these dimensions will enable the smooth application of the three coping mechanism strategies proposed by Kember et al. (2005), namely, sacrifice, support and negotiate.
- Applying these strategies can facilitate the attainment of the specific goals that working-class postgraduates have, without their personal lives, family lives, social lives and work responsibilities being adversely affected.

Motivation lies at the top of the diagram, because it drives goal setting and provides the impetus or need for effective time management in the first place. On the contrary, if working-class postgraduates dismiss or fail to apply the dimensions of time management, the entire flow of the model is disrupted. In such cases, working-class postgraduates rely solely on their motivation when pursuing their goals, which,



FIGURE 1: Proposed work-study-life demands coping mechanism model.

in the absence of good time management, can have a negative impact on well-being, relationships and responsibilities. Despite the same results being achieved, the costs in the case of poor time management can be high. Therefore, the balancing of effective time management with strong motivation and goal setting, as proposed by this model, is the ideal coping strategy for working-class postgraduates.

Recommendation

The following five recommendations are intended to address the issues raised by the working-class postgraduates:

- Working-class postgraduates should prioritise tasks from most important to least important. This will help them determine how much time, energy and attention should be allocated to each task that needs to be completed.
- Setting more realistic expectations can enable peace of mind for working-class postgraduates. If employers and family are aware of the expectations that working-class postgraduates have set, then cohesion can be fostered with family, friends and employers.
- Familiarising themselves with the course they have enrolled in – including its specific requirements and contents – is a crucial exercise that working-class postgraduates often overlook or undervalue. Adequate pre-reading and content familiarisation can provide working-class postgraduates with an advantage, reducing the time spent on trying to understand the course material.
- Working-class postgraduates should form alliances with their classmates. The literature stresses that individuals who belong to support groups typically cope much better than those who do not. A support group should be established at the beginning of the semester, in the form of a collective study group, for example, wherein group members share information with each other if one or more members are unable to attend a particular lecture.
- Where possible, working-class postgraduates should link up or network with their counterparts who have successfully completed the journey of simultaneous working and studying, to gain insights and possible mentorship.

Future research

Future research could undertake a quantitative investigation of the phenomenon and statistically test certain relationships among variables involved. Moreover, given the high adoption rate of blended learning/e-learning in South Africa, future research could also explore whether blended learning is better suited to working-class postgraduates than the face-to-face lectures.

Limitation

The researchers acknowledge challenges of a small sampling size. Therefore, caution should be exercised when transferring the findings to other settings. The transferability principle applies when the participants in the setting share inherent characteristics with research participants, such as other

working postgraduates. Concerning the generalisability of the study's findings, as the study was qualitative, the principle of generalisability is not applicable because the researchers only sought to understand phenomena involved.

Conclusion

Given the study's findings, the researchers conclude that working and studying simultaneously is highly demanding and challenging. Nevertheless, time management skills and planning, drive and ambition, work-study balance and support from employers and family are significant coping factors that promote working-class postgraduates' success in their careers and studies. Hence, the study reiterates that effective time management and planning are the most critical skills to possess when working and studying simultaneously.

Acknowledgements

The authors of this study would like to acknowledge all the research participants and appreciate the invaluable information provided in the course of the field work.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

D.A. Rockman designed and developed the research concepts, writing and compilation of reports, data collection, analysis and presentation of results. C.O.K. Allen-Ile and J.K. Aderibigbe supervised all the activities mentioned earlier. B. Mahembe edited the manuscript while D. Hamman-Fisher contributed partly to the research methods and discussion sections of the manuscript.

Funding information

This research project received no funding from any public, private and non-profit organisations.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agencies of the authors.

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