Working while studying at university: The relationship between work benefits and demands and engagement and well-being

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ABSTRACT

We tested a role-conflict, depletion, and enrichment model, in which work-based benefits (enabling resources, psychological rewards, and psychological involvement) and work-based demands (time-, strain-, and behaviour-based demands, and hours worked) were antecedents to work–university conflict and work–university facilitation, which, in turn, were antecedent to students' academic engagement (dedication and vigour) and well-being (general and context-specific feelings about university). We also tested whether conflict and facilitation acted as mediators in the relationships between benefits and demands and the outcomes of engagement and well-being. The hypotheses were tested using 185 university students (77% female; mean age = 22.7 years) who were working while studying. Work-based benefits (enabling resources, rewards, and involvement) were associated with higher work–university facilitation; more time demands and fewer psychological rewards were associated with more work–university conflict; facilitation was associated with more engagement (dedication) and general well-being; and conflict was associated with more negative feelings towards the university. There were no mediation effects. Working while studying is related to students' engagement and well-being, although modest effects were explained by role-conflict theory.

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There is a growing trend in Australia and other countries for university students to combine their studies with paid employment. In 1971, in Australia, 20% of those studying at tertiary level were at the same time employed in full or part-time paid work (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2009). This increased to 54% in 2001 (ABS, 2009) and 72% in 2007 (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008). Similar patterns occur in other countries, such as New Zealand (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005) and the USA (Butler, 2007). While some of this desire to work while studying is driven by the need for increased discretionary spending, most is in response to increased costs associated with tertiary study and reduced financial support from governments (Devlin et al., 2008). Anticipated outcomes of this increased reliance on working to support study are reduced engagement with university study and life and elevated distress about making ends meet (Devlin et al., 2008; James, 2002). However, there is little understanding of the mechanisms underlying how paid employment might affect student engagement and well-being. Contributing to this literature, we test a theoretical model based on depletion and enrichment aspects of role overload and conflict where benefits and demands from one role (paid employment) are considered as antecedents to facilitation and conflict with a second role (university student), which, in turn, affect engagement and well-being in the second role. See Fig. 1.

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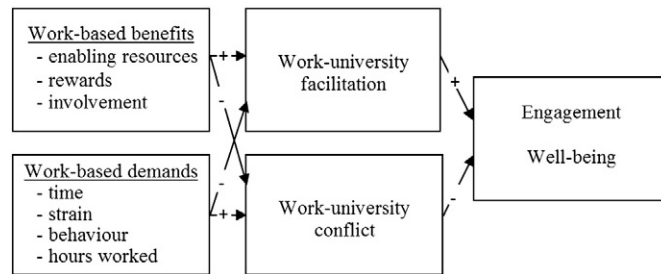 *E-mail address:* p.creed@griffith.edu.au (P.A. Creed).

Fig. 1. Work-based benefits and demands are associated with work–university facilitation and work–university conflict, which, in turn, are associated with student well-being and engagement.

1. Work-to-university role conflict and facilitation

Role conflict and facilitation effects from a role-conflict theory perspective have been researched largely in relation to work-to-family and family-to-work influences, although some researchers have assessed the effect of other non-work roles, such as community, religion, and leisure on work and family outcomes (e.g., Kirchmeyer, 1992; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992). Role conflict and facilitation are also of interest to educational planners and policy-makers. Here the concern is that multiple roles and role overload will have negative effects on student outcomes, including student engagement, well-being, and ultimately academic performance, career progress, and later life achievements. There is also an interest in the sorts of activities in non-educational settings that will benefit the individual in their student role (Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007).

Early studies in the work–family domains focused on the negative effects of role conflict, whereas, in more recent years, there has been a focus on the facilitative aspects as well (Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007). Conflict, which occurs when participation in one role (e.g., work) adversely affects participation in a second role (e.g., university; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), is primarily viewed as detrimental to the person (Peeters, Wattez, Demerouti, & de Regt, 2009); for example, spending time at work can interfere with educational activities and learning. On the other hand, facilitation, or the enrichment of one role by participating in another, is considered a positive process advantaging the individual (Zimmerman & Hammer, 2010); for example, skills and responsibilities learned in the work role can enhance performance at university.

Role-conflict research is based on the premise that work and non-work domains are largely independent and compete for the limited resources of the individual (Gareis, Barnett, Ertel, & Berkman, 2009). This "scarcity hypothesis" suggests that managing multiple roles will inevitably lead to role conflict (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Work-to-family conflict is considered to be influenced by three specific variables: time-, strain-, and behaviour-based demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Time-based conflict occurs when multiple roles compete for the individual's time; strain-based conflict occurs when stressors (e.g., anxiety and irritability), which are generated in one role, are transferred to the second role; and behaviour-based conflict occurs when behaviours (e.g., assertiveness, dominance), which are functional in one role, are applied inappropriately in another (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Facilitation, on the other hand, reflects "the extent to which experiences in one role improves the quality of life in the other" (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, p. 73). Role-to-role facilitation is enhanced by being exposed to enabling resources, psychological rewards (Voydanoff, 2004), and by being involved (Allis & O'Driscoll, 2008). Enabling resources are skills and abilities learned in one domain that aid performance in another. Psychological rewards reflect status enhancement and privileges gained in one domain that aid performance in another. Involvement is the satisfaction and enthusiasm generated in one domain that spills over to motivate and energise in other roles. The facilitation perspective considers that participation in one role is enhanced and made easier by engagement in another role, especially when the other role is meaningful and satisfying (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

There are two specific, competing theories related to multiple role research. The first, and most widely used, is the depletion model (Buda & Lenaghan, 2003; Lenaghan & Sengupta, 2007), which proposes that people have fixed levels of physical and psychological energy to expend, and that resources used in one role deplete those available for another role. In the work–family domains, negative effects for both work (e.g., Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Michel, Mitchelson, Kotrba, Le Breton, & Baltes, 2009) and family (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Ford et al., 2007) have been identified as a result of cross-role competing demands. Applied to students, this model suggests that working will reduce the resources available for study, producing work-to-university conflict.

The second model, of enrichment (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974), proposes that engaging in multiple roles provides benefits for individuals that outweigh the negative effects of cross-role demands. This model assumes that individual resources are abundant and expandable, and, as such, allow individuals to not only meet demands across multiple domains, but also to draw on resources from one domain to enhance engagement in the other (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). While most research in the work–family area has focused on conflict (Eby et al., 2005), there is evidence that benefits from one role (e.g., a supportive partner at home) do spill over to the other (e.g., less strain at work; Zimmerman & Hammer, 2010). The enrichment model suggests that engagement in the work role would energise the student and facilitate outcomes in the academic setting, such as engagement and positive well-being.

Despite calls for examining conflict and facilitation together (Butler, 2007; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007), few studies have tested joint work–university conflict and enrichment models with university students. Most research has focused on the conflict aspects of multiple roles, which parallels work–family research, and has focused on health outcomes. Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009)