Walking the tightrope between work and non-work life: Strategies employed by British and Chinese academics and their implications

Abstract

Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty academics from various disciplines in both UK and Chinese universities, this comparative study aims to offer new insights into how academics in British and Chinese universities maintained work-life balance (WLB) and the similarities and differences experienced between academics of both countries. This study finds that both British and Chinese academics adopted a range of approaches to cope with work-life imbalance, and the approaches fall into three types of coping strategies, namely behavioural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Whilst convergence occurs in coping strategies adopted by the two groups of academics, this study uncovers greater divergence. This can be explained by differing institutional, legal and political arrangements, and cultural values and attitudes to work and life in the two contexts. All of these have practical implications for institutions and managers in both HE sectors.

Introduction

This study explores the experience of academics in balancing work and life, and the strategies adopted to cope with imbalance. Drawing on Ransom's (2007) idea, we define 'work' as formal paid employment, and 'life' as everything outside of this, mainly including family life and other non-market activities such as personal time and recreational activities. Academics are very likely to experience problems in maintaining an effective WLB, and work–life imbalance is among the most frequently reported stressors for academics (AUT 2003; Tytheleigh et al., 2005). This may be attributed to the open-ended nature of academic work (Wortman, Biernat, and Lang 1991) and growing, often conflicting, expectations, pressures and demands (Acker and Armenti 2004; Chandler, Barry, and Clarke 2000; Deem 2003; Menzies and Newson 2008; Ylijoki 2013). As a result, the challenge of balancing work and life has become a recurring theme in studies of academic staff (Beddoes and Pawley 2013).

This comparative study focuses on the HE sectors in UK and China. They are both experiencing significant changes including commercialisation but occurring in divergent external contexts, which we anticipate would affect academics' experiences in different ways. Few China-West comparative studies on work-life issues have been found in the English language literature (e.g. Ling and Powell 2001; Yang et al. 2000), and none of them studied the HE sector. Indeed, in the Chinese HE sector it is striking how little research on WLB has been conducted, although in contrast abundant literature exists in the UK HE sector.

In the West there is a growing body of knowledge about the concepts that underpin different approaches to managing WLB (Doherty and Manfredi 2006). WLB is defined as 'the extent to which individuals are equally involved in, and equally satisfied with, their work role and family role' (Greenhaus and Singh 2003, 2). This suggests that work-family conflict (WFC) could be rapidly resolved by giving equal priority to both roles. Nevertheless, it is well recognised that 'work' and 'home' can hardly be separated with the two domains spilling into each other (Esmile and Hunt 2009; Halford et al. 1997), and WLB is constructed subjectively by individuals (Kossek et al. 1999). Drobnic and Guillen (2011) view WLB as a social construct shaped by both contextual and individual factors. Consequently, people have to manage and negotiate the work and family spheres and the boundaries between them in order to attain balance (Clark 2000).

WLB has become a key issue for social and economic policy makers in the UK (Woodward 2007) and since 1997 the UK government has developed policies to address this issue (Lewis and Campbell 2007). The HE Employers Association has produced a set of

guidelines to assist institutions to develop policies and practices in support of flexible working arrangements (Manfredi and Holliday 2004) and WLB is an important characteristic of an 'employer of choice' in the UK (Gifford 2007). There is, however, limited evidence of this perspective having an impact in China. Furthermore, employment related Government policies and legislation are often poorly enforced at the organisational level (Xiao and Cooke 2012). WLB is often discussed from a culturally embedded perspective of harmony and integration, and 'there is little evidence of a "western" framework being used' (Russell 2008, 6). Most Chinese employers are neither familiar nor welcoming towards formal policies on flexible working arrangements, such as job sharing and flexi-time (Xiao and Cooke 2012). Many employees have little sense of a fair work-life exchange (Ren and Foster 2011). These are significant contextual differences.

As WLB policies and practices are not in place or less well received in the Chinese context, coping strategies are predominantly individually driven (Chandra 2012). Whilst the UK government has made WLB a matter of public policy concern, it still emphasises adults making personal decisions about what constitutes an appropriate balance in their circumstances (Lewis and Campbell 2007). This may involve individuals accessing organisational WLB policies but as importantly, adopting personal coping strategies for maintaining WLB (Sturges 2012). Although our overarching interest lies in identifying and comparing how individual academics in both countries cope with imbalance, it becomes apparent that the organisation has a critical role in supporting individual endeavours.

Our discussion proceeds by first looking at literature on WLB in academia and examining extant models of coping strategies. We then discuss the contextual differences which may help explain the choice of strategies.

WLB in academia

Academic work provides a great deal of flexibility and autonomy that supposedly facilitates the reconciliation between work and family/life (Santos and Cabral-Cardoso 2008). Nevertheless, a considerable number of UK studies highlight academics suffer poor WLB and higher levels of workplace stress than non-academics (Hunt 2006; Tytheleigh et al. 2005). Cooper (2002) concluded a particular problem was the fluid boundaries between work and home, especially when working from home, coupled with a high level of commitment and long working hours. Constant work demands have eroded time and energy for personal life and leisure (Lewis 2003). As a result, academics report as much less positive about their

WLB than other groups such as administrative staff and widespread, rapid changes in HE over the past 30 years are believed to be the main cause (Hunt 2006).

Since 1982 UK HE institutions have been increasingly subject to consumerist pressures typical of a highly marketised environment with students increasingly demonstrating customer-like behaviour and demanding more value from institutions (Woodall et al. 2014). A plethora of government initiatives have had a substantial impact on the context and content of academic work (Hunt 2006). Significant consequences include restructuring, a dramatic expansion in student numbers, and major reductions in funding (Kinman and Jones 2008; Tytheleigh et al. 2005). Academics now face demands for greater accountability, value for money, efficiency and quality, and an increase in remote and autocratic management styles (Tytheleigh et al. 2005).

The Chinese HE system has also undergone radical reforms as it attempts to meet changing economic and social needs and aspirations (Ryan 2010). This has included rapid expansion of enrolments, structural reforms, transformation of curricula, and rapidly increasing joint research and degree programmes (Min 2004; Ryan 2010). These dramatic changes have taken place in the context of an expanding Chinese economy and heightened global competition (Min 2004), which have resulted in long working hours, work overload and work intensifications for many employees (Joplin et al. 2003; Xiao and Cooke 2012). Consequently, Chinese academics experienced stress leading to deteriorated psychological health (Gillespie et al. 2001; Hui and Chan 1996), and they are among the professionals 'most susceptible to burnout' (Zhong et al. 2009, 2). In the research of Lai (2010) some Chinese academics reporting on intense academic pressure explicitly acknowledged a sense of agitation. Fu and Shaffer (2001), in one of the few studies on WLB in the Chinese HE context, identified both work and family-related factors affecting WLB with work-related factors such as working hours having a stronger influence. However, the study neither explores how academics cope with conflicts between the two domains, nor how the contextual issues have impacted WLB.

Coping with work-life imbalance and contextual influences

There is no shortage of theoretical models developed to analyse individuals' strategies for coping with WFC or work-life imbalance. Hall (1972) created a three-part typology of coping behaviour: *structural role redefinition* (altering the others' expectations), *personal role*

redefinition (changing one's role expectation), and *reactive role behaviour* (finding ways to meet the main role demands). This model remains influential but the three types of coping behaviour are narrow in scope as they focus on changing or meeting personal or others' expectations. Furthermore, its currency has to be challenged given significant contextual changes since the 1970s as well as HE transformation in both the UK and China.

Drawing on the job-crafting typology developed by Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), Sturges' (2012) research with young professionals suggests individuals engage in types of physical, relational and cognitive crafting to manage their WLB. She finds individual strategies for WLB 'have some important similarities with job-crafting behaviour, in terms of being proactive, self-initiated and goal-oriented' (2012, 1543). However, as Sturges (2012) pointed out herself, young professionals in the early years of their career did not have children and possibly had family circumstances which gave them greater discretion over their commitment to work. Building on the work of Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1999), Jennings and McDougald (2007) summarised three common individual strategies for managing work-family interface: *segmentation* (actively separating the two domains), *compensation* (becoming highly involved in one domain in order to make up for dissatisfaction in the other); and *accommodation* (limiting their psychological and/or behavioural involvement in one sphere to satisfy the demands of the other). Hyman et al. (2005) classify employees' coping practices into two: *work based* approaches (such as informal shift swapping), and *domestically initiated* approaches (such as support from neighbours and extended family). They conclude that those who can achieve a balanced life usually utilise the mixture of work and home based approaches. Their study also confirms the nature of the sector and job influence both availability of coping strategies, and subsequent choices.

Research conducted in Western cultures that value individualism is not necessarily applicable to countries that are highly collectivist such as China (Phillips and Pearson 1996; Siu et al. 2002). There is a need to understand the role of national culture as globalisation continues to shape and reform the context of HE (Bui et al. 2013). A range of cross-cultural studies highlight differences in how employees and employers in different countries tackle WLB issues. A study conducted by Joplin et al. (2003) across five countries identifies macro-level factors (economic, social, technological and legal) that shape various personal and organisational approaches to coping with work-life imbalance. Further, state policy towards women, work and childcare leads to cross-national differences in terms of WLB strategies

(Crompton et al. 2005; Windebank 2001). Within WLB decision-making, elements of autonomy are moderated by 'a wide range of cultural, institutional and structural factors' (Glover 2002, 263) and these factors have provided part of the explanation as to why there are society-wide similarities in WLB decisions (Ransom 2007).

Evidence shows that the western perspective of WLB is not adequate in explaining work–life/family issues in the Chinese context (Ling and Powell 2001; Ren and Foster 2011), and major coping strategies adopted by employees in China or Asia are significantly different from their Western counterparts (Chandra 2012; Siu et al. 2002; Xiao and Cooke 2012). For example, Chinese employees tend to accept work-life imbalance as a fact of life without feeling the need for the organisation to address it and they adopt various coping strategies of their own (Cooke and Jing 2009), whilst European and American employees take advantage of organisational flexible work arrangements and/or WLB programmes (Chandra 2012). The willingness of individuals to tolerate work-life imbalance reflects the traditional Chinese work ethic in which work and career achievement is prioritised over family life or leisure (Choi 2008; Xiao and Cooke 2012). Further, in China sacrificing family time for work is viewed as self-sacrifice for the benefit of the family or as a short-term cost for long-term benefits, whilst in the US this is often perceived as a failure to care for significant others in one's life (Yang et al. 2000). In China marriage and motherhood are not purely personal choices and decisions, whilst organisations seldom adopt formal policies and practices that help improve WLB. Therefore, for those who have childcare and/or other home responsibilities, employment of domestic labour and drawing on family networks for support appear to play a key role in the personal coping process in Chinese society (Aaltio and Huang 2007; Lo et al. 2003; Ren and Foster 2011; Thein et al. 2006; Xiao and Cooke 2012).

To date there is a large body of literature on WLB coping strategies generally, but less is known about the coping strategies that individual academics have developed to manage their WLB. Our study aims to address the following three key questions:

1) What individual coping strategies have been used by British and Chinese academics to balance work and life?

2) In what ways do the issues of WLB and coping strategies differ between academics of both countries?

3) What are the implications for institutions and HE managers arising from the research?

Methodology

An exploratory, qualitative research strategy was adopted to address the research questions and uncover new insights. This is in common with other recent investigations of employees' WLB coping behaviours and strategies (see Lo et al. 2003; Sturges 2012; Xiao and Cooke 2012). A semi-structured interviewing approach was adopted because the respondents' knowledge, perceptions, and experiences are meaningful properties (Mason 2002). Furthermore, the use of in-depth interviews is normally considered the most appropriate approach for studies intended to explore cultural issues (Hatch 1993; Santos and Cabral-Cardoso 2008; Thein et al. 2006). Nevertheless, this approach is not without limitations. One problem is over time individuals' views may change, perhaps in response to their circumstances changing (Halford et al. 1997). In acknowledging this, the interviewees were given the researchers' contact details and invited to make contact if they would like to share new or additional ideas. We were also helped by being able to return to some interviewees with follow up questions.

The study is part of an on-going WLB research project. This paper is based on interviews with 15 British-based and 15 Chinese-based academics, with each taking between 40 to 60 minutes, and evenly distributed between male and female interviewees. Despite a common academic career, the interviewees vary in age, marital status, family responsibilities, job role, specialism, type of institution, and length of tenure (See Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

The interview was designed in both English and Chinese, and piloted in both the British and Chinese contexts to check that the questions asked were relevant and would generate meaningful responses. We gained access to four universities in the UK and four universities in China. The interviews were conducted in English in the UK and in Chinese in China (with some participants responding in English). During the interviews we took extensive hand-written notes which were transcribed verbatim at the earliest possible opportunity and always within twenty-four hours. The Chinese was translated into English by us. The interviewees were asked about their experiences of balancing work and life. Subsequently, they offered their own experiences, insights and personal stories, and engaged in a deeper discussion with regard to how they attempted to balance academic work with other parts of life. We do not intend to generalise from the thirty interviewees in the study, rather 'they offer perspectives

of a highly selected group of people involved in debates and discussions about paid work and personal life' (Lewis et al. 2007, 363).

The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. For the purpose of this article we have concentrated on two themes: (1) the strategies or approaches utilised to maintain WLB or cope with work-family conflict; and (2) how these strategies in different contexts were developed or formed. Responses to these two themes were then grouped and further discussed at the individual and national levels, developing rich insights into the convergence and divergence in both contexts. Implications for HE managers and policy makers are offered. In the following we present key interview quotes from Chinese and British academics respectively to illustrate individual's WLB coping strategies. We also indicate the interviewee's gender, position, age and marital status.

Individual coping strategies - Chinese academics
The Chinese academics adopted a range of approaches to coping with imbalance or potential conflict between work and life. Managing time effectively and prioritising tasks were often mentioned:

> I feel I've maintained a balanced life. Sometimes I prioritise work over home commitments and other times I prioritise home over work commitments. For example, if my mum is not well and needs my help, I might prioritise eldercare over other things including work. (Female senior lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

Most were confident in their abilities in this domain and had enhanced these skills throughout their academic career. However, relying on different types of external support was recognised as the key to achieving WLB. For some partnered academics, receiving spousal support was seen to be very important in maintaining a balanced life:

> Luckily my husband always supports my work and he actually appreciates my work capability and independence. We haven't got a child yet and both of our parents don't need eldercare from us at the moment. We share house chores but if there is little time, we would employ domestic labour. (Female lecturer, 21-34, married without children)

My wife supports my career and I seldom do house work. I work wholeheartedly in order to achieve my career goal as well as to create a better life environment for my family and my baby daughter… I think it is still quite common that men are career-orientated and women are family-centred in this society. (Male associate professor, 35-49, married with one child)

For those who had young children, grandparent and/or institutional support was a common approach:

If my husband and I are both busy, we will ask our parents to help look after my son. Grandparents are always happy to do so, but they live in different cities and it is not convenient for them to do it often. Now I send my son to the kindergarten within the university campus. In this case I would have plenty of time to focus on my work and academic learning. (Female associate professor, 21-34, married with one child)

Readily accessible family or institutional support partially justified the unpopularity of part-time working arrangements. Job security and status was seen as crucial for Chinese academics and hence working full-time was always preferred. Furthermore, six male academics clearly expressed that they would follow the principle of 'work first' if there was a clash between work and life:

If there is conflict between work and family, I would prioritise work over family life unless something urgent occurs in my family. I haven't taken the 10 days marriage leave because of leading a government-funded research project. My wife was not that happy but she accepted it. (Male associate professor, 35-49, married with one child)

Male academics cited socialising with friends through eating, drinking and doing sports as a useful stress-relieving tactic. Female academics preferred psychological approaches such as talking, relaxing and travelling with family, friends and colleagues. Interestingly, some perceived the social events arranged by their university as helpful in both improving their wellbeing and providing a good opportunity to turn colleagues into friends:

… The organisation arranges some social activities such as free trips to attractions and free meals on public holidays. These activities are a kind of welfare to employees and they also help colleagues get to know each other better. It is good as I've made a

couple of good friends in the workplace I can often speak truth to. (Female lecturer, 21-34, married without children)

Many female academics were able to maintain a balanced life, but this also involved recalibrating career expectations in terms of either compromise or sacrifice. Two female lecturers who perceived low levels of satisfaction with their WLB said they had no choice but:

… reducing my desire for promotion or long-term professional development. Communicating with my husband does work sometimes as he gives me some credible advice. (Female lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

… sacrificing my career advancement for family – this is probably the only way to solve the conflict. There is always a conflict when both you and your spouse put [the] same level of effort into a career. (Female lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

When asked why those approaches were adopted, many considered their own personality and family background influenced how they coped with work-life imbalance:

My parents have influenced me a lot since I was young. They are well organised and well planned. They were strict with me and used to request me to finish homework within a specified time limit. I was always told 'study comes before play'. (Female lecturer, 21-34, married without children)

I think it is my personality that has shaped the way I behave. I'm very ambitious and I have clear goals for my career and I'm determined to achieve them. However, I now feel I should enjoy my life a bit more than before. (Male professor, 35-49, single)

Some also felt they were compelled to learn to deal with any conflict in their life:

As an adult you have to cope! You have to know when and how to adjust yourself and to calm down. (Female lecturer, 21-34, married with a child)

In particular, three male academics attributed their WLB decisions to macro-level influences. One explained:

> I think it is the national economic and social environments that force people to do so. If you don't work hard, you won't be able to earn sufficient to support your family. If you are unemployed, your life is over! We had a baby girl three months ago. I feel I am now bearing a heavy responsibility for contributing financially to this family. I have to earn 'milk powder money'. (Male associate professor, 35-49, married with a child)

Cultural and social factors also influenced behaviour and coming to terms with choices that were considered less palatable:

> Despite significant social advancement the Chinese society still agrees that the man's career is the foremost one and women should take care of home as well as men. I love my job and hope to advance my career. It is not impossible, but it is very difficult at the moment because I need to devote most of my time to our son's education – this is the most important thing in my life at this stage. (Female lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

Most female academics commented that WLB was also about psychological self-adjustment by such as 'persuading self not to think too much' and 'doing things bit by bit and day by day'. Two academics said 'it depends on our own ability in, and attitude towards, WLB' as the organisation could do little to help tackle issues of individual's WLB. Finally, one interviewee summarised how they maintain an acceptable WLB:

> I owe my good work-life balance to a regular daily schedule, a peaceful inner mind and good time management. (Male associate professor, 35-49, married with a child)

Evident from these personal accounts, for Chinese academics the coping strategies appear to reflect enduring Chinese cultural values. Notably, they have a seeming propensity to support traditional gender divisions.

Individual coping strategies – British academics

In comparison to Chinese, British academics used a wider range of strategies to cope with imbalance or potential conflict between work and life, and few gender differences were evident in the British context. Being able to switch off or deliberately exclude work from family life was most frequently mentioned:

I have a 6pm cut off and try not to work after then. I do not do university work at weekends. I try to differentiate between office time and home time. I'm very productive working at home - this is how I completed my PhD. But the context has changed, I now have a child, so the new rule is no work at home. (Male lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

Email more efficiently now, using my smartphone. Also, I deleted the 'iPhone' message so people were not aware that I was sending messages from my telephone. Also, I keep it in working hours, and make no response out of hours to students. I do this by using the delay e-mail send feature. I also switch off e-mail at the weekend so that my telephone does not notify me of messages. (Female senior lecturer, 35-49, married with one child)

Some used smartphones to save time and improve efficiency, whilst they were excluded by others as a way of achieving WLB:

I don't have a smart phone and I would especially avoid using it for work if I did. It is a danger to use it or you would be drawn to checking your university emails anytime. (Male senior lecturer, 35-49, in long-term relationship)

Interestingly, some relocated to create distance from the workplace and the home so as to preserve a distinction between work and life or leisure:

The good thing about living in the countryside is that it is easy for you to forget about your job and your pressure. I deliberately chose to move to this location although the downside is that I have to travel far to work. (Male senior lecturer, 35-49, in long-term relationship.

Learning to manage time, prioritise and focus effectively was seen to be crucial:

… I do lots of research and publish a lot in 3-star journals, but that's not enough. I aim to be a professor which means I need to publish in 4-star journals. I'm under pressure, but I have clear goals, and I plan ahead and organise my work in advance. I'm self-motivated and focused when I work. (Male reader, 35-49, married with two children)

I prioritise and try to work out those things that are important vs urgent. You have to learn to ignore others around you. You must not check your emails all the time. If I do check them I delay my response. (Male lecturer, 21-34, married with two children)

Maintaining a positive outlook was cited particularly by female academics to be useful:

I have learned to be happy not to be able to control everything – attitude change; I'm more realistic than before with regard to my expectation of academia. (Female lecturer, 21-34, in long-term relationship)

… recognising things pass – difficulties come and go. I compare experience to other jobs in the past – I have a lot of freedom in academia which other jobs do not offer. Putting things into perspective can help. (Female lecturer, 35-49, married without children)

Re-considering one's roles beyond the work context helped improve WLB:

My identity is wider than that of 'academic'. I have other identities that describe who I am. I'm only a professor at work. (Male professor, 35-49, married with two children)

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, half of the British academics had experience of part-time working and acknowledged there were some advantages such as: 'limiting the work the university can give me'; 'legitimacy to say no to the things that the university gives me, such as overseas delivery'. In particular, two academics who reduced their contract to 0.8 and 0.4 claimed that this was their key coping strategy:

As a part timer saying no to the very many meetings (course ones, informational, departmental) has been a good rebalancing act. I still have some meetings to attend or organise but these are more in my control. (Female senior lecturer, 50+, in long-term relationship)

Another academic who was undertaking course leadership considered a long term strategy which was to 'step down in two-years and hand over the role of course leader'. Most

academics, including those had never personally experienced part-time working arrangements, identified disadvantages such as 'feeling detached', 'working like full-time' and 'job insecurity'.

In addition, some mentioned that talking to partners at home and friends in a social context was helpful to some extent. Interestingly, two of them explicitly acknowledged that it was helpful their partners and friends were not academics.

Many recognised their family members and increased working experience in academia influenced how they coped with work-life imbalance, for example:

> I have been positively influenced by my partner who has an excellent WLB. With more experience of doing the job, I'm more confident in my ability to deliver [lecture] sessions with less preparation. (Female lecturer, 21-34, in long-term relationship)

> Family – mother and father were and continue to be influential and inspirational. Colleagues influence, too. I've developed the habit of personal reflection and thinking things through… I've gained lots of experience of recognising patterns, such as in the academic year. (Female lecturer, 35-49, married without children)

Significant life events such as marriage and having a child were considered to impact ways of maintaining WLB. Furthermore, many were aware that the rapid decline in working conditions of academics in the HE sector pressurised them to utilise various ways of coping with mounting challenges of WLB. In particular, one argued:

> The current conditions [in the UK HE sector] are very disappointing. We face ever increasing workloads including administrative work, cultures of bullying and harassment, imposition of pointless bureaucratic procedures, and even worse, intrusive and authoritarian management. (Female senior lecturer, 35-49, in long-term relationship)

Discussion

This study aims to explore individual coping strategies for WLB to uncover contextual and institutional differences. The findings suggest that both British and Chinese academics utilised a range of techniques to balance work and life with British academics engaged in a

broader variety than the latter. The techniques found fall into three types of coping strategies, namely behavioural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.

Behavioural strategies

This category describes practical techniques related to creating boundaries and frameworks within which work is conducted. It consists of three main approaches including personal rules, learnt techniques and working rearrangements. Personal rules are the practical embodiment of explicit and implicit values and goals. Both Chinese and British academics established personal rules, however, the content of personal rules was markedly different. British academics had adopted rules, such as 'cut off times' and no work emails on weekends. There is no such a rule among Chinese academics. Instead, the principle of 'work first' was followed but only by Chinese male academics. This relates to both the traditional Chinese work ethic which places work before family life or self-enjoyment (Choi 2008; Xiao and Cooke 2012) and the Confucian value of long-term orientation (Hofstede 2001). It is less common in the UK where the culture is highly individualistic and the informal societal custom is for people to look after themselves and their immediate family (Hofstede 1984).

Similarities occur between British and Chinese academics when it comes to learnt techniques that involve specific skills such as time management and prioritising. Most academics developed these through personal reflection on their own experiences and practice. Some British academics set out to learn how to manage time effectively, for instance through reading or arranging to attend employer initiated workshops. New technologies such as smartphones were used to improve work efficiency. Paradoxically, technology also accelerates the pace of work by increasing the volume of information and communication, and imposing an informal obligation to always be available and ready to respond (Ylijoki 2013).

The third approach is the modification of working arrangements, initiated by either the employer or the employee. They include part-time working and reallocation of work tasks and roles. This approach was most evident among British academics. Two further differences have been identified. Firstly, switching from full-time to part-time working, or reducing work demands was often initiated by the academics themselves in British universities; whilst an employee-driven approach was unusual in Chinese universities where employer-initiated arrangements, such as rearranging teaching timetables in order for staff to undertake research appeared more common. Secondly, whilst working part-time is common in the UK, it is

neither the norm nor preferred in China. Our study suggests reducing the contracted working hours was beneficial for maintaining balance. This echoes the findings of Beham et al. (2012) and Lautsch and Schully (2007) concluding that in Europe working reduced hours is a customary strategy for combining work and non-work responsibilities. Nevertheless, both British and Chinese academics appeared to hold a negative view towards part-time employment which was seen to result in the erosion of both financial and job security. Notably, Chinese academics indicated a strong link between their perceived status and types of employment. Academics in part-time or short fixed-term contracts were not considered as core employees. In practice the interviewees indicated that this meant their interests might be less well protected and training and development opportunities reduced.

Interpersonal strategies

This category describes how individuals draw on social networks and external support physically and emotionally. This comprised spouses/partners, parents/in-laws, and colleagues/friends, which are the three main channels of support identified in this study. Relying on family networks for assistance to achieve WLB was the most common approach adopted by Chinese academics. In contrast, British academics rarely cited this approach. There were also substantive differences in the way that this support was structured. Voluntary, constant grandparent support in childcare is normal and hiring domestic labour to deal with house chores is prevalent in China, which is consistent with previous research. British academics were rarely able to secure free support from extended family on a long-term basis. Instead, paid child care services through babysitters or nurseries were cited as a source of care provision, although they were considered expensive in the UK.

Support from partners was perceived to be available and important by both British and Chinese academics. Our finding is congruent with previous studies (Aryee et al. 1999; Beutell and Greenhaus 1983; Lo et al. 2003; Ren and Foster 2011) which found that support from the spouse can generate positive feelings about and enhance contentment with WLB. British academics cited both emotional and physical support from their partners. Chinese female academics were given much more emotional/spiritual support than physical support from their husbands. Unlike their British counterparts, children and childcare (where they existed) were scarcely mentioned by Chinese male academics but were frequently talked about throughout the interviews with Chinese female academics. These findings echo those of Chandra (2012) and Xiao and Cooke (2012) that in Asia childcare and other home

responsibilities continue to disproportionately fall upon women who also work full-time. China's one child policy has led to a reduction in childcare work for married couples, however, women remain the chief organiser for childcare. Although it was not evident among British female academics in our research, some studies suggest that British women take responsibility for more routine domestic responsibilities irrespective of working hours or the sector within which they work (Hayman et al. 2005; Woodward 2007).

Socialising with friends was another popular approach utilised by both British and Chinese academics to share thoughts, gain empathy or sympathy, and release pressure from juggling work and life. However, there were country specific differences. In the UK socialising with friends outside of work is a personal choice, and as indicated here some British academics preferred not to socialise with work colleagues in attempts to 'switch off'. Also, in China socialisation is initiated by both individuals and organisations. As seen in this study, Chinese universities often arranged social activities such as sightseeing trips, entertainments and meals on public holidays paid by employers as a kind of employee welfare to help employees relax and improve the morale and loyalty to organisations. These social events also enhanced communication between colleagues, and in many cases, friendships and supportive relationships were formed.

Intrapersonal strategies

This category describes the psychological approaches individuals adopt to shape their attitudes and perceptions. Psychological strategies were found to play a significant role in determining how academics managed WLB in this study, but it was less evident in the existing literature. This included 'living' values and beliefs, managing emotions and redefining mindset. Our interviews indicate that there are both similarities and differences between British and Chinese academics with regard to their beliefs in WLB that influenced their choice of coping strategies. Regardless of national context, boundaries between work and life were perceived by academics as increasingly blurred, and they generally believed that effective time and emotion management could help cope with the imbalance and learn to live with an inherent dissatisfaction. However, significant differences occurred between two groups in terms of their attitudes and approaches to cope.

As discussed, Chinese male academics placed greater emphasis on work rather than family and leisure. They seemed more willing to accept sacrifices in their personal life to achieve career goals. In contrast, Chinese female academics placed greater emphasis on their

role in terms of family, and therefore, undertook major family responsibilities especially childcare. This partially supports Zhang et al.'s (2001) study which found a clear career gap with women lagging behind their male counterparts because the burden of house work mainly rested upon women's shoulders. Further, not every academic believed that the university or management was able to tackle WLB issues, rather that WLB is a 'choice' and a 'personal responsibility'. Thus, coping strategies should be personally initiated. They also indicated that no WLB policy was available to staff at the institutional level.

In contrast to the Chinese experience, there was a general feeling that both male and female British academics considered family life as equal to, or more important than, their academic pursuits. For them, WLB means having weekends and/or evenings free for family and children, and setting up and sticking to the 'no work' policy beyond contracted hours. Arguably, devoting insufficient time to their work was perceived to be a possible way of achieving WLB. However, most British academics remained committed to their work and they valued academic flexibility and some freedom to manage their own time. In the study, few gender differences were surfaced in the British context. However, previous research argues that measuring commitment based on long working hours was necessary for career progression in UK HE, operating as a form of indirect sex discrimination (Dickens 1998; Doherty and Manfredi 2006).

Emotion-focused coping (Folkman and Lazarus 1985) was adopted by both Chinese and British academics, particularly by female academics. The way in which people influenced their own feelings and emotions contrasted between the two groups. British academics were more active and positive in terms of managing emotions than their Chinese counterparts, whose approach appeared to be suppression or self-control. This finding echoes ethnographic studies which suggest that greater emphasis is placed on emotional moderation and control in Chinese culture than in mainstream European American culture (Russell and Yik 1996; Soto et al. 2005; Zheng and Berry 1991). Our interviews clearly show that British academics tended to 'think positively' and actively seek ways to change negative situations, whilst Chinese academics felt they were 'compelled' and 'have to' learn to adjust their own mood and cope with conflict between work and life. They attributed this to being raised in such a social environment, particularly influenced by their parents. From birth, children raised in Chinese culture are socialised to control their impulses (Ho 1994), and the inability to moderate and control one's emotions is considered debilitating to one's mental and physical health (Koo 1976). As a result, keeping an inner peace of mind to achieve harmony,

a traditional Chinese/Confucian value, remains prevalent. This was also seen as the key to maintain a balanced life by Chinese academics in this study.

During the process of managing emotions, many academics redefined their mindset. This included changing attitudes towards work (such as ceasing perfectionist behaviours as suggested by a British professor); adjusting career expectations (such as reducing desire for career advancement indicated by some Chinese female academics); changing attitudes towards WLB (such as learning to be happy and realistic mentioned by several British female academics); and rethinking their own identity beyond the work domain (such as husband/wife and father/mother). Significant life events such as marriage and having a child facilitated mindset redefinition, which was more evident among female than male academics.

Conclusions and implications

This paper has made two contributions to WLB research in the HE context. Firstly, we have identified three main coping strategies – behavioural, interpersonal and intrapersonal strategies. Whilst behavioural and interpersonal strategies were similar to those identified in existing models, the intrapersonal coping strategies, side-lined in existing literature, were considered critical by our interviewees. Secondly, these coping strategies have uncovered important institutional and contextual differences, which have implications for HE institutions and managers in both contexts.

Our interviewees described similarities in coping strategies such as being self-initiated and goal-oriented. This might be due to common features and challenges facing academics in both countries such as structural reforms, global-scale competition and market orientation. However, this study indicates greater divergence than convergence in terms of academics' coping strategies in both contexts.

Firstly, behavioural strategies were common in both cultures. However, the segmentation approach, deliberately separating the two domains, gained popularity exclusively among British academics. The key approach for Chinese male academics was the compensation approach, being devoted to one domain in order to offset the insufficiency of the other. Whilst popular in the UK, part-time work is not an option in China, reflecting a structural difference between the two countries. It is less attractive in Chinese society as both men and women need to work full-time in continuous employment mode which is 'closely

related to the poor social security provisions for unemployment and the near absence of family-based state welfare benefits' (Xiao and Cooke 2012, 10).

Secondly, interpersonal strategies such as domestically-initiated approaches, relying on family network for housework and/or childcare, were adopted more frequently by Chinese rather than British academics because they are more readily available as well as being a long-standing tradition. Although socialising was a popular approach in both contexts, there are some notable differences. Chinese academics often socialised with colleagues, in some cases, through institutionally initiated social events, whereas many British academics sought to extricate themselves from work associates out of work hours.

Thirdly, utilising intrapersonal strategies, much less explored in the literature, appeared significant for interviewees in both cultures. Chinese and British academics held or prioritised different values in work and life leading to differing coping behaviours. Women engaged in emotion-focused coping more obviously than men. Further, British academics were more pro-active in terms of seeking ways to manage emotions and their psychological outlook in comparison to their Chinese counterparts.

The relevance of these findings is apparent in the research of Runté and Mills (2004) and Thein et al. (2006). They assert that work-life/family conflict is not an inherently cultural or gender neutral process, and therefore, the resolution of the conflict would be affected by associated cultural contexts and power relationships. Many differences in these coping strategies were justified by differing institutional and political arrangements – such as availability of welfare benefits and flexible or part-time working, and cultural values and attitudes to work and life. They were also warranted by different conceptions of WLB, changing status of men and women, and between East and West. This has also partially justified society-wide similarities in WLB initiatives. For instance, the key coping strategies adopted by Chinese academics – such as relying on family support for childcare and/or housework – has a strong collective nature, whilst the diverse coping approaches adopted by British academics align with an individualistic orientation. Academic flexibility and freedom allows academics greater choices of coping strategies, but with readily available family support and some informal but effective organisational practices, Chinese academics appeared to avoid being mired in so-called 'two greedy institutions' - the family and the university (Currie et al. 2002; Probert, 2005), whilst British academics seemed to be trapped between the 'two greedy institutions'.

The findings of this study have some important implications for HE employers and managers in both contexts. A variety of individual coping strategies, either behaviour, interpersonal or intrapersonal, utilised by these academics not only demonstrate that they were self-prepared for coping with WLB challenges, but also suggest that they needed support from their institutions. For those institutions which feel obliged to and/or are interested in assisting academics to balance work and life, creating a supportive work-family culture is crucial as abundant research supports that it can alleviate work-family conflict and improve employees' well-being. This in turn leads to increased engagement and productivity (Allen 2001; Gordon et al. 2007). A supportive culture is seen as 'deeply concerned and taking care of the well-being of its employees' (Fiskenbaum 2014, 666). Our research suggests this means different approaches to be adopted in the different contexts.

For Chinese universities as well as the HE governing body, one way of achieving this goal is to establish formal and written family-friendly policies and programmes for employees. Apart from existing good practices such as on-site childcare and social events, part-time working arrangements could be considered. Further, academics should be encouraged to use this work mode when needed without a fear of negative career consequences. Ultimately, this requires change not just at the institutional level but also at the level of national policy. For their British counterparts who usually have WLB related polices in place, the key is to increase the variety of such practices tailored to employees' needs and to make them available and accessible to employees. The long hours work culture, which was noted by British academics in this study and other research, should be discouraged by management. Fostering a supportive culture means academics' commitment and dedication to the organisation wouldn't be assessed based on the number of hours they are in the office and whether they make work a top priority (Fiskenbaum 2014).

In the current economic climate, the vision of supporting WLB seems hard to embrace by the UK HE sector. The study indicates that the increasing tendency to commercialise and privatise education has concerned British universities and academics. In order to survive in academia, one has to adapt to external demands and worsened employment conditions, whilst responding to the demands from the non-work sphere concurrently. Even so, some management practices may positively influence employees' attitudes. These practices may include respecting an employee's non-work life, listening to their personal or family-related problems, offering advice on WLB and organising social activities. Just as Fiskenbaum (2014) argues, showing sympathy and support for employees' needs as partners and/or parents

sounds a bit idealistic, but the organisation would benefit in the long run. If the HE sector and universities are really concerned about having a highly engaged and productive academic workforce, they need to consider strategies that will help them achieve this goal.

Future studies investigating coping strategies in balancing work and life should examine not only contextual differences but also gender differences. Irrespective of East or West, coping strategies are not gender neutral (Bray et al. 2001; Fielden and Davidson 1999; Jennings and McDougald 2007), and gender may affect perceptions of coping resources and abilities (Houle et al. 2012), which is evident in this study. For instance, female academics reported instances of managing emotion more often than male. In China, female academics attached more importance to their family role than their male counterparts who followed the rule of 'work first'. Further, a large body of literature demonstrates that female academics face family-related challenges that male academics generally do not and women have to sacrifice more than men (Beddoes and Pawley, 2013; Fox, Fonseca and Bao 2011; Morrison, Rudd, and Nerad 2011; Wilson 2003). With less ability to separate work and life than their male counterparts, career women act as if they are 'acrobats' striving to meet all work and home commitments (Kossek et al. 1999, 110) by engaging in reactive role coping behaviours. Thus, our follow-up research will look particularly into the role of gender in the choice of coping strategies and its implication for women's academic career and family life. Regardless of gender, our interviewees left us with the impression that this balancing act is not dissimilar to walking a tightrope between work and non-work life, with individual strategies and institutional support acting as the balancing tool.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1 Demographic information

Country	Gender	Age band	Relationship status (including children)	Job role	Course/ specialism	Type of Institution	Length of tenure
China	Female: 7 Male: 8	21-34: 5 35-49: 10	Single: 3 Married with child(ren): 10 Married without children: 2	Lecturer: 7 Associate professor: 7 Professor: 1	Business &Management: 6 IT:4 International relations: 2 Language: 2 Media: 1	Research intensive: 8 Teaching intensive: 7	Ranging from 2 to 23 years
UK	Female: 8 Male: 7	21-34: 2 35-49: 12 50+: 1	Single: 1 Long term relationship*: 4 Married with child(ren): 7 Married without children: 3	Lecturer: 7 Senior lecturer: 6 Reader: 1 Professor: 1	Business & Management: 8 Language: 3 Media: 3 Engineering: 1	Research intensive: 10 Teaching intensive: 5	Ranging from 3 to 25 years

* In this study, those who described themselves as in 'long term relationship' are those who were not married but living with their partner on a permanent basis and without children.