**Title page: Adding University to work and life: The work-life balance and well-being experiences of women who combine employment, HE learning and care of the family**

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Abstract

In this article, we considered women's experiences of undertaking Higher Education (HE) study (Foundation Degree in Early Years (EY)) drawing on research based in the North of England, UK. The study, informed by a social constructionist approach, explored ten women's experiences of work-life balance and well-being alongside Higher Education (HE) study through semi-structured interviews. A focus group explored women's personal perceptions of work-life balance and well-being. The findings were analysed thematically and we argue that the formation of a third sphere of commitment (HE study) disrupted WLB and created some disequilibrium, which impacted upon the women's well-being. The women underwent a transformative process as initial academic inexperience and lack of belonging in University was replaced by confidence and student identity. This transformation was made possible through personal adaptations, diverse strategies and motivation that indicated individual and collective resilience. One noticeable strategy involved the overlapping of commitment spheres, including HE study taking place at home. While being challenging to manage, this contributed to an important cultural shift as study became normal for households, creating the 'learning family'.

## Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) is frequently explored from the viewpoint of 'employment', with 'life' often interpreted as family (Gables *et al*., 2006). Work and family represent significant areas of demand, but it is also important to consider leisure and education (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008; Dex and Bond, 2005; Kossek, 2016). This paper draws on a study of women undertaking higher education at a post-1992 University (i.e. previous polytechnic or technical Higher Education Institutes accredited with University status) in the North of England and their experiences of work-life balance (WLB) and well-being. The University has a significant proportion of Widening Participation (WP) or non-traditional students, including more mature adult, work-based learners. The women were initially Early Years (EY)

Foundation Degree students, attending a course created in response to the Post-1997 New Labour Government's WP agenda and commitment to expand sector skills and knowledge (Harvey, 2009; Higgins *et al.,* 2010). This development was influenced by European initiatives to challenge inequality in educational achievement (Longhurst, 2011). The choice of foundation degree students enabled consideration of the added WLB complexity from, not two, but three commitment areas (employment, the family and, least familiar, Higher Education study). Emery *et al.* (2017), Boyd *et al.* (2016) find limited research attention to such WLB complexity. Furthermore, Ooms (2011) identifies limited understanding of foundation degree students' well-being experiences. This research was qualitative and influenced by social constructionism and feminism, utilising semi-structured interviews (10) and a Focus Group (FG). Whilst the paper connects to a specific group of women, WLB and well-being has global significance as the initial international review of literature demonstrates. The review begins with a consideration of WLB, well-being and EY foundation degrees.

*Work-Life Balance*

Work-life balance (WLB) is a prevalent contemporary Global North term that reflects the combination of roles and associated spheres of commitments (e.g. employment and family) which must be addressed by the individual within their available time (Emery *et al.* 2017; Gambles et al. 2006). Achieving WLB is associated with success and individual well-being (Greer and Peterson, 2013; Ward, *et al.,* 2010), yet conceptually WLB has been debated since its initial use in 1965 (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971). WLB concerns the intersection and inter-relatedness of essential requirements for daily living (employment and domestic) and the ability of individuals and / or households to manage (Ammons, 2004; Kossek, 2016). WLB is often family focused, leading Gables *et al*. (2006:3) to refer to 'work-family reconciliation' and 'work-family conflict'; the former being focused upon achieving greater equality in WLB opportunity through European and International policy, and the latter being the persistent pressure from demands. Family type is important as younger dependent children and older relatives with care needs represent significant demands and compromised well-being amongst carers (Gables *et al*., 2006). Huffman *et al*. (2012) asserts that demands can be intrusive or compatible, linking with a Conservation of Resources approach to well-being whereby demands either represent Work Interference with Family

(WIF) or Family Interference with Work (FIW). Amstad (2011) identifies strain in both directions causing negative workforce experiences (absenteeism, intention to quit and burnout) and personal well-being (marital dissatisfaction and dysfunctional family life). This is affected by household composition which represents both demands and potential support, and personal choices and individual circumstances such as income and ability to purchase services (Wattis, *et al.,* 2012).

WLB concerns the interaction (cross-over) of aspects of life which take time, creating imbalance and disharmony (Taylor, 2002). Mellner *et al*. (2014) identified boundary blurring between home and employment for home workers, including the regular extension of working hours. 'Spill-over' was used by Geenhouse and Beutell (1985) to show the negative consequences of the demands from employment that influenced the family / home, creating negative implications for WLB. Learners often experience blurred boundaries, as studying at home creates an intrusive demand with potential negative implications for WLB and well-being (Lowe and Gayle, 2007). Similarly, Ammons and Markham, (2004) identify negative WLB implications from spill-over as one part of life invades another. Families experience compromised well-being when employment dominates the home. Jarvis and Pratt (2005) find that spill-over has both tangible (working at home) and intangible (invasive thoughts and worry) effects, which is also a feature of learners' experiences (Yorke and Longden, 2010).

WLB definitions are dominated by the dual aspects of work (employment) and life (family) (Lewis and Cooper, 2005). However, this is overly simplistic and fails to include leisure and education (Sargent, 1991). Emery *et al.* (2017) argue a dualistic definition excludes other significant commitments. Learning is often framed as undertaken instead of employment, yet when Lowe and Gayle (2007) and Yorke and Longden (2010) researched work-based learning they found learning to be an additional workload. The term 'balance' is debated as creating a false sense of harmonious well-being (Gambles *et al.,* 2006; Taylor, 2002),

indicating a positive 'well-balanced' outcome, aspirational yet difficult to achieve (Greer and Peterson, 2013). The term WLB is extensively used and commonly understood across the Global North, and is frequently embedded in employment policy. However, in reality, WLB remains elusive, with studies often finding 'imbalance' (Bloom, 2016). In the UK WLB policy and practice is based on potential economic benefits (Stanworth, 1999; Taylor, 2002), also reflected in the findings of Crompton *et al's* (2008) European study that links WLB with a happier workforce, reduced absenteeism, increased retention and productivity.

WLB discourse in the Global North began as women's employment grew (Christensen and Alfred, 2013). Women's WLB experiences and associated well-being are often more negative than men's, as increased employment does not coincide with proportionate decreases in domestic responsibility (Christensen and Alfred, 2013; Crompton, 2006; Dex, 2003; Greer and Peterson, 2013; Hochschild, 1989; Oakley, 1976). Williams (2000) located tension within gender identity, through the masculinisation of employment and feminisation of domesticity, causing women to be more family centric. Sargent (2002), found that women returning to education experienced a significant barrier in their reduced time for children, which created guilt.

*Well-being*

Well-being is a contested, socially constructed term, dependent upon wealth, social inequality and personal perception (Dean and Coulter, 2006; Ward, *et al*., 2010). Objective well-being tends to utilise the language of 'economic' indication or standard of living, concerned with material needs (Haworth and Lewis, 2005). Whilst, subjective well-being (SWB) concerns the global self-assessment of people's lives, through the consideration of health, job and leisure activity (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). The Global North uses a subjective, quality of life based definition, whilst the developing world remains survival focused (Deneuline and McGregor, 2010). Deeming's (2013) rigorous analysis of the 'National well-being programme' (ONS, 2010), identified well-being inequality based upon socio-economic factors. Women generally feedback more positively about well-being compared with men, yet face more stress from multiple demands (Taylor, 2011). Despite UK policies challenging inequality (Equal pay Act, 1970 and Equality Act, 2010), structural and systemic gender inequalities are deeply embedded within social norms (Dex, 2003; 2005).

From a social class perspective, low pay restricts well-being and the middle classes fair better with greater consumption and leisure choices, which has implications for Widening Participation students, most of whom are often employed within lower paid work.

Subjective well-being (SWB) concerns people's global self-assessment considering health, job and activity, such as general happiness measuring individual experiences of life (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016; Waldron, 2010). This is important when considering the effects of learning upon well-being because subjective concepts, like activity and accomplishment, have a positive impact on learners, despite time depletion (Orton, 2011). SWB is understood through experience measures, involving self-reporting of well-being at a particular time (Dolan and Metcalf, 2016) and Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), which measures individuals' descriptions and perceptions of a typical day (Kahneman *et al*., 2004). The subjectivity of well-being is connected with individual perceptions and can be understood from a social constructionist viewpoint.

*Intersection between WLB and Well-being*

WLB impacts upon well-being positively, whilst disequilibrium creates compromise. Warren (2010) argues that the complexity of many demands coupled with a shortage of time has negative implications for well-being. Similarly, Huffman *et al.* (2012) found reduced well-being due to excessive demands adversely affected daily coping ability. Women are more likely than men to compromise personal well-being for their family (Wajcman, 2008). Bittman (2008) asserts that increased Sunday employment has reduced the potential for distinct family time, creating negative consequences for WLB and well-being. Lowe and Gayle, (2007) argue women undertaking study alongside employment and family responsibilities sacrifice personal time and experience compromised WLB and well-being. However, Bakker et al (2017) find that, whilst WLB and well-being are adversely affected by multiple demands, personal attributes of optimism and self-efficacy create positive outcomes, linked with motivation and flourishing. Furthermore, Orton (2011) links well-

being with learning, asserting that extending individual capabilities increases wellness, whilst employment and activities such as reading, writing, or community participation facilitate personal growth. Consequently, WLB and well-being concerns not only demands but personal coping strategies (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001).

*Early Years Foundation Degrees*

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) established Foundation Degrees in 2000, in response to the Dearing Enquiry (1997). Dearing (1997) reported that increasing UK economic competitiveness by expanding participation in HE was essential for global economic success, which included updating those already in the workplace. Furthermore, Dearing examined the age and socio-economic profile of the UK population to find that exclusion from HE reflected inequality and wasted opportunities, making Widening Participation significant on numerous levels. Harvey, (2009) and Higgins *et al.* (2010) identify Foundation Degrees as significant in the Widening Participation of non-traditional learners into University. Foundation degrees value workplace experiences, through combining employment with learning (Longhurst, 2011). In the EY sector the focus was on achieving minimum standards (Yorke and Longden, 2010) and addressing the Post-1997 UK New Labour Government's WP agenda, alongside developing sector specific knowledge (Harvey, 2009; Guile and Evans, 2010).

This literature review briefly outlined WLB and well-being, focusing upon the distinct experiences of women. This article aims to articulate the experiences of a group of women with complex combined demands influencing WLB and well-being, who managed through strategy and motivation. The following provides an overview of investigation.

## Methodology

Informed by a social constructionist approach facilitating a critical review of taken-for-granted knowledge (Burr, 2015; Gergen and Gergen, 2003), the study used qualitative methods. Feminist approaches influenced researcher stance and interactions with women participants (Letherby, 2003; Mason, 1996; Ramazanoglu et al, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). Ethical

approval was granted by the University's ethics committee. Key ethical issues included the personal nature of disclosure and power connected to the researcher being University staff. Participants' names were removed by agreement and process consent was employed throughout, facilitating regular confirmation of the wish to continue (Olesen, 2011). Olesen (2011) argues feminist researchers should build mutually beneficial experiences and demonstrate a participatory approach, which formed the guiding principles for this study and aimed to achieve an open dialogue.

**Research Setting and Participants**

The research setting was a modern post-1992 University in an industrial town in North West England, with a high proportion of WP student. The participants were women, initially members of the FD Early Years (a 2 year full-time programme, requiring an afternoon and evening class each week), employed in private / public nurseries, charities, schools, and children / family centres and with varying family responsibilities (See table 1. Participants names changed). The women were not generally sponsored by employers but as the qualification was sector endorsed they were accommodated to attend University. The Programme Leader acted as a gate-keeper who facilitated participation, creating a convenience or opportunity sample. The 10 interviewees were randomly selected and covered a range of circumstances, including mature students and those with or without dependents. The number of participants was based on those available from 2 cohorts of 23 and 18 students and was based upon the principle of convenience, with an element of self-selection and volunteerism. The focus group consisted of 4 participants who had previously been interviewed and later volunteered to be involved further. Gray (2009: 575) defines such a pattern as a 'non-probability sample strategy', linked with locating a respondent

group who are available and willing to participate. Although respondent numbers were relatively small, the depth and rigour of the qualitative process offered a unique insight into a group of students with simultaneously common and distinct experiences (Creswell, 2009; Flick, 2009). TABLE 1

**Data collection and analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a flexible guide of 'issues and questions' to accommodate participants (Gray, 2009: 373) and the researcher approach favoured listening to respondents' views (Henn et al, 2006). Interviews lasted between forty and sixty minutes and focused on the women's experiences of work-life balance, responsibility for household tasks, support from home and work, leisure activities, impacts of HE study on everyday life and how they managed their time. O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015: 80) describe interviews as 'active interactions', creating findings through exchanges. An 'informal conversational style' that is 'non-directive', with interviewers taking a 'passive role', proves least restrictive and encourages idea development (DeMarrais, 2004: 53).

In addition to the ten interviews, a focus group (Gill et al., 2008), encouraging rich qualitative findings through interpersonal interaction (Parker and Tritter, 2006), took place with four women. The rationale for including a focus group was to expand on the key themes identified through thematic analysis of the interview data and to explore whether the experiences had changed for some women. The focus group lasted sixty minutes and was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Kleiber (2004) identifies FG as an inquiry method that extends and initiates new understanding through social interaction and discourse, rather than consensus. This FG

lasted 60 minutes; it followed the interviews and included 4 available participants who knew each other. The FG created a new discussion which enhanced the key themes and as such developed the ideas further. The women were further along with their study than at the point of the interviews, which led to new insights. The FG questions were based on the interview comments so valuing the women's experiences openly and linking with feminist approaches whilst providing an opportunity to check authenticity (Letherby, 2003). Gill et al. (2008) find benefits in smaller, pre-existing groups who have increased confidence and fewer inhibitions. Egalitarianism is possible within FGs as participants express views and feel valued as experts (Kleiber, 2004). Parker and Tritter, (2007: 26) find success in 'single handed' FG facilitation within academic settings, in which just one researcher proves less intrusive.

Rich qualitative findings, based on a structured Thematic Analysis (TA), require an integrity and openness achieved through not picking themes to suit preconceived notions (O'Reilly and Kiyimba; 2015). Holliday (2016) describes thematic review as moving from chronological into significant themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) identify 6 phases of Thematic Analysis (TA): **'**Familiarising yourself with the data'/ 'Generating initial codes'/ 'Searching the themes' / 'Reviewing potential themes'/ 'Defining and naming themes'/ 'Writing up'**.** This approach was methodical, however, from feminist perspectives, controversy relates to the potential distancing from the participants' 'voice', as findings become owned by researchers during analysis. Skeggs (1997) asserts this reflects power through interpretation, as researchers make findings fit into their categories. This thematic analysis sought rigor and was guided by Feminist approaches, treating the women's expressed experiences with respect. The following section provides some key findings thematically.

**Findings**

This section is based around three main themes and related subthemes, outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 2

**Trio of spheres of commitment**:

HE study became a third sphere of commitment for the women, alongside family/household and employment, creating disequilibrium in previously manageable everyday demands. As time was redirected towards study the women experienced difficulty adjusting and accommodating the trio of spheres of commitment. The women described time shortage as employment, family needs and the newer demand of HE study all required time. The women outlined the challenges of continual activity, for example Megan described returning from employment to study:

> *'…it is hard coming home from working all day and then doing more work'*

This time pressure was made worse through limited academic confidence, making study time unproductive, as Pearl illustrated:

> *'…when I am studying and I am thinking I don't have a clue what I am doing and I am completely lost'*

This exemplified HE study as a new and unfamiliar commitment sphere that increased WLB challenges.

WLB is often reflected through overlap. Here, the women described thinking about study at work and /or devoting uncontracted hours to the workplace, indicating-dedication to EYs. Overlap was also evident as the women studied in the home space to reduce travel time and childcare requirements. This reflected practical solutions but also tension, as overlapping spheres created emotional responses. Sometimes HE study was prioritized over the family, leading Simone to describe missing her children and wanting to give them more time and attention. Angela identified changed interactions, as she talked to her children less and

renegotiated her boundaries with them. Others commented upon being absorbed in study and forgetting to address household needs. The women raised concerns at the intrusion and possible dominance of study as books, notebooks and other materials took over the home (e.g. kitchen table). This clash in space use meant the women continually tidied before meals to protect their work. Additionally, household demands formed a distraction and some women were unable to study in an untidy home. Separation was sometimes favoured, and two women disclosed having dyslexia, thus finding home study challenging, Karen:

> '*…well I am dyslexic so it really blows my mind….the neighbours put music on and I am thinking please be quiet. I need silence!*'

Conflicting emotions were evident; annoyance, as interruptions created by family and friends reduced study time, was experienced alongside guilt at less time for others.

Reduced leisure time was evident as weekends, frequently representing the only non-work (employment) days, became much like every other weekday to accommodate study. The women described rising early to study and Pearl commented: *'I can't afford to have a weekend'.* The women reflected upon greater autonomy at weekends prior to starting University, but study reduced chances for rest and time for others. Some women tried protecting part of the weekend, for example Jane studied Saturdays, leaving Sundays free, but experienced difficulty and quoted her husband's complaint: *'we could be doing Sunday things',* (for example, days out). Reduced free time meant limited leisure and time for relationships, leading Jane to comment:

> '*…I have put friends on hold….*"

Pam commented:

*'What's 'me time'? The only me time is study time'*

Furthermore, what little family time the women had was subsumed by an inability to relax, as the women described being 'edgy' and preoccupied, creating pressure and self-reproach.

Negative implications for WLB and well-being, due to expanded commitments, included restricted self-care. Jane described: '*no living…'* as study deadlines dominated. The women reflected upon physical and emotional challenges, for example, gaining weight because of limited exercise and poor eating habits. The weekly University study day was described as long and tiring, as other commitments were accommodated before and after. The women moved from one role to another, worrying about unmet demands, leading to stress and physical symptoms, such as headaches. However, the study day was also valued and motivational, facilitating theory development and time with tutors and peers.

The women's demands took time and energy and a typical day involved going from childcare, to work, to domestic chores at home and later study. Each sphere demanded time, creating shifts of paid work, housework and a third shift of HE study. Jane described concern as her sick daughter needed care, making study '*…later and later'*. The women often worked evenings creating overlap between sleep and study. Jane stated:

*'I have got up at 3 in the morning and wrote stuff down…I have been burning the mid-night oil for a month now…'*

The women described problems switching off to sleep due to the invasiveness of study, as less relaxation created problems unwinding and sleeping, Wendy commented:

*'… you are going over things in your head and you have weird dreams…'*

This created an increased sleep focus, for example Jane commented:

> '*… I have never appreciated my bed so much'*

At the end of their degree, the women reflected back on increased illness and feeling run down. Pam commented:

> '*I am just so tired ...I feel like a wrung out dish cloth…'*

The women described stress at home, including confrontations with husbands and guilt at less time for children. Pressure of study flowed into other life spheres, adversely affecting employment, but there was a lack of support as their study was often misunderstood at work. Despite pressures, the women were committed and wanted success, leading them to form strategies to manage.

**Adaptation and personal strategy**

To manage the trio of spheres of commitment, the women adapted through personal and household strategies, influenced by familial diversity and personal attributes, reflecting support offered alongside individual responsibility. Some women struggled with responsibility and accepting help; one described being like 'wonder woman', meeting commitments through her own resources and planning. Time management became a significant new practice to accommodate not only HE study, but home and social life. For example, Jane described planning:

> *'...what I have had to do this year, is a proper time-management plan…..on a Friday evening I think I will do that, that and that and then that time is study time and I have stuck rigidly, and that is how I have got through'*

Time management was a common significant change for the women yet depended upon predictability, and unforeseen demands such as a sick child formed an unplanned priority and disruption.

Some women prepared for university by reducing their employment and creating distinct study time. Others changed their work pattern upon realising they were over-committed and unable to cope. Angela described her WLB as 'fantastic'; she worked part time to facilitate study and 'got used' to less money. However, circumstances influenced options, as reflected in Karen's reaction to working fewer hours:

> *'Oh God yes…..lottery win please…well we just couldn't afford to…. no choice involved….. I don't fancy being homeless….if I want the mortgage paid I need to work….'*

Hence diverse circumstances were evident and, whilst some women reduced employment, others were unable to and so needed support. Furthermore, decisions about employment were not just monetary, as the women were committed to the teams and children and families they supported.

Adaptation involved support from family / household, employers / workplace, tutors and peers. Jane described organizing 'whole' family support prior to commencing her degree. Support options were influenced by household types and typically those with younger children generally had more demands and less help, whereas older children could help. Meanwhile, lone parents experienced restrictions without another adult. Household attitudes and the willingness of family members to help influenced both support and the women's acceptance of their situation. Their sense of personal responsibility meant the women often did not expect help. For example, Pam excused her children from housework,

describing their inexperience in managing household demands and her daughter's 'own demands' (a student, working part-time). Gaining help often entailed compromise, for example, Karen's household shared tasks but she expressed frustration as the house was not always to her standard. Obtaining support was complex and whilst it might be assumed husbands chose not to contribute, Wendy challenged this by describing her husband's situation:

> *'He does do housework… when he gets the time, but he works long hours and it is hard for him as well'*

In contrast, one woman described her husband 'not wanting' to understand, which she attributed to 'the difference between men and women'. Some women illustrated the benefits of sharing household tasks, for example Pam described her son's contribution:

> *'It is teaching things…perhaps if I had not been studying [my son] wouldn't have picked the pan up and started to cook…So because I have been studying it encouraged him to cook'*

Workplace teams offered morale and practical support, such as additional study time and childcare, creating loyalty and commitment. Jane was very positive about her team and felt appreciated. However, others felt misunderstood and received limited workplace flexibility and / or acknowledgement. Even when flexibility was permissible it proved difficult due to staff shortages and reluctance to place additional pressure upon teams. Much workplace support was informal and derived from colleagues rather than employers. The University peer group proved essential and was developed through a social connection – e.g. having 'fun' and enjoying one another's company - which bonded groups. Pearl attributed increased confidence to this group, and Pam described the interaction: 'It lifts you up'. The

women depicted a network of mutual encouragement, providing informal study skills, support, books and resources. This reflected co-operation rather than competition which proved motivational.

**Motivation**

As the trio of spheres of commitment created work-life imbalance and compromised well-being, the women demonstrated motivation and determination to succeed, which they discussed during the FG:

> Jane: *'I think everyone of us is motivated, we are motivated people'*
>
> Pam: *'You have to be'*
>
> Jane: '*Yeah, I think we really are…and we have had some knocks, but we have all picked ourselves back up again and got on with it*'
>
> Pam: '*But isn't it good to be knocked back…because it does make you think…Well I have learned so much'*

This demonstrated understanding of the importance of motivation, but also indicated the development of resilience, as problems encountered were resolved. The women attributed motivation to positive attitudes towards University and academic development.

Motivation was based on the benefits of education for the family, workplace and future life, which created an essential buffer against self-doubt. Intrinsic satisfaction and motivation came from becoming more knowledgeable and skilled in the EYs sector, as the care and development of children was valued. The women wanted to improve practice and HE study provided greater understanding and competence to achieve this. They changed their own practice and creating shared knowledge for colleagues, thus improving the workplace. University was viewed as a highly valued second chance in formal education, improving

personal and professional prospects. Personal circumstances and family commitments prevented the women studying earlier increasing the value of education. The women overcame attitudinal barriers, one describing her mother actively preventing her studying social work:

> *'…my mum was like education is really, really good but this is not going to be your life, your life is going to be getting married and having a family… she was very traditional…'*

This exemplifies social expectations that excluded some women from University and overcoming such barriers required motivation, increased confidence and individual growth, possibly interpreted as resilience. Karen compared previous doubts and current confidence:

> *'…the first time that I realised I had got through an assignment without saying 'I can't do it'…I thought oh my god! What an achievement…'*

This motivation was encouraged through family, workplace and peer support. Angela described her supportive family as *'fantastic',* contributing to chores, giving space for study, with her older son offering mutual support, himself at University. Others described emotional support, for example, Charlotte expressed her partner's encouragement: *'look you can do it…'* University peers proved a very significant motivator, associated with confidence building and academic development; Jane described the students:

> *'We have stuck together through thick and thin*'

**FIG 1**

Figure 1 depicts the interrelatedness of the main three themes. Beginning with the trio of commitments forming a significant demand, (both individually and combined / overlapping), they created work life imbalance, the marginalization of leisure and compromised well-being. However, the women reacted through

personal and household strategies, based upon motivation, to improve their lives and opportunities, which reflected resilience. This pattern will form the discussion that follows.

## Discussion

In this research, the trio of spheres of commitment represented a distinctive situation compared with many dual-focused WLB studies (employment and family / household). The presence of three conflicting commitments reflected a complexity not extensively researched and, consequently, not well understood (Hall *et al*., 2013; Emery *et al*. 2017). The three demand areas, and their intersectionality, form an entirety that is difficult to understand from the traditional model of separate commitment spheres. Hence, policy aimed at worker protection through employment hours only accounts for a third of actual commitments, making the long hours potentially unrecognised. Limited consideration of WLB through these three commitment spheres meant the complexity the women faced was not previously contextualised, restricting understanding and potential support.

Combining demands and developing strategies to manage, such as studying in the home space, can be understood in terms of overlap / 'Spill-over', which are often associated with negative WLB outcomes (Jarvis and Pratt, 2005). Restricted free time and flexibility was created through the addition of HE study, leading to shift-like patterns. A key tension was time shortage, paralleling Wajcman's (2008) findings that linked role expansion and consequential time allocation as central to WLB discourse. A significant influential factor was that the women already experienced restricted free time as they managed employment and home responsibilities, meaning the addition of HE study created increased imbalance. This reflected similarity with experiences recounted by Lowe and Gayle (2007); Yorke and

Longden (2010), who argued adult learners combining employment and learning experienced reduced free time and subsequent stress. Reduced leisure was generally accepted to meet demands, yet less family leisure time created guilt amongst the women and was prioritised over any 'Me time'. This compromise, whilst accepted to manage the situation, had negative implications, reflecting similarity with Cassidy's (2005) findings that reduced leisure opportunities depleted well-being through fatigue and stress.

The women experienced a dilemma around prioritising demands, yet their maternal role and primary responsibility for the domestic sphere remained dominant. Risman (2017) asserts that gendered inequality continues to restrict women throughout the Global North and in this research the women frequently changed their own patterns to accommodate domestic responsibility, despite household support. This restricted the redistribution of domestic tasks, whilst responsibility for the family remained on the women's shoulders, which was detrimental to their WLB and well-being experiences. Oakley, (1976); Schober and Scott (2012) found women struggled to discard gendered responsibility for family (particularly children). Throughout this research, this dilemma posed significant difficulty for the women: despite study offering familial benefits, the personal nature of University led to an uncomfortable perception of self-interest.

Descriptions of daily life reflected the pressure from varied demands, displaying a reduced objective well-being that included feeling overwhelmed and experiencing negative emotional and physical responses (Deeming, 2013; Huffman *et al*., 2012). Conservation of Resource (COR) considers management of commitments through strategies including reducing demands and gaining support to maintain well-being (Huffman *et al*., 2012). Some women reduced employment commitment, whilst others with limited options drew from

their own resources with potential negative effects. The women's limited options to manage demands reflected influential social factors, including reduced choices to work fewer hours and/or purchase domestic services. Social determinants influenced well-being by restricting opportunities, due to lower income and social expectations (Deeming, 2013; Deneuline and McGregor, 2010; Taylor, 2011).

However, well-being is complex and socially constructed (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016), influenced by social attitudes and personal perceptions. The women, in undertaking HE study, experienced a positive, transformative process meaning that, whilst objective well-being was compromised, subjective well-being was often bolstered, creating motivation to overcome challenges (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2016). HE study provided new opportunities and increased self-esteem, aligning well with measures advocated in 'Five ways to well-being' (Government Office for Science 2008), including 'connecting with others', 'curiosity', 'taking notice' and 'giving'. Additionally, compromised objective well-being was linked with diverse roles, including family roles (e.g. mother, wife/ partner), the employee role, and additional student role. However, expansion theory views role expansion as creating valorisation and, benefits of 'multiple roles' (Nordenmark, 2004, 117). Grönlund and Öun (2010) found role expansion provided a buffer against stress as it boosted self-worth. From a capabilities perspective well-being was enhanced as the women experienced increased confidence, knowledge and ability (academic and practical) (Deneulin and McGregory, 2010). Personal perspective influenced well-being as the women choose to study at University, enhancing choices, possibilities and personal attributes, providing fulfilment and improved prospects (Orton, 2011; Sen, 2001). Personal, positive attitude meant those with greatest demands were not necessarily the most negative about their situation and well-being experiences.

Resilience became evident as the women adapted to their new situation and continued studying despite WLB pressures. The women's resilience was influenced by prior experiences or new strategies developed in response to HE study as a new commitment sphere. Tilford (2017: 106) found resilience developed within people responding to adversity, characterised by 'self-efficacy, self-esteem, positive emotions [and] hardiness'. In this study the women continued studying alongside other commitments and resilience developed and grew, positively influenced by managing previous challenges, including changed family circumstances, long-term illness and additional demands from dependents. Many of the women had observed the development of resilient familial behaviour amongst hardworking parents who formed role models. Resilience for the women was both individual and group based, as cooperation and encouragement was evident within the group through peer support. Abel (2016) considered resilience from the perspective of communities managing difficult circumstances who developed coping strategies based upon mental strength and putting events into perspective. The women gained much support and motivation from student peers, reflecting a cooperative approach, showing similar traits with how Sargent et al (2002), and McGivney (2001; 2002) associate positive learning environments with the continuation of widening participation students in education.

Finally, as mothers studied at home to manage conflicting demands, they formed role models for children, creating an important transformation which we refer to as the 'learning family'. The term 'learning family' describes a change initiated through children observing and becoming interested in University and education. Reay *et al*., (2006; 2009 a; 2009 b) assert that the achievement of a degree by a family member normalises this practice which proved important for the women in this research. The term 'learning family' is used to

capture this change and draws upon similarities between changes Evans *et al*. (2006) identified as a 'learning workplace', whereby employees engaging in learning become positive role models for others. The learning workplace was created through viewing and becoming interested in work-based learning and the opportunities offered, reflecting similar traits to the 'learning family', albeit within a different environment and group. Therefore, whilst restricted choices caused blurred spheres to overcome WLB challenges, role modelling meant children displayed interest in their mother's study, assessments, and potential outcomes. The long-term benefits to the family represent an important justification to personal compromise amongst the women and a critical motivator.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The trio of spheres of commitment created WLB pressure and compromised well-being. However, strategies based upon short-term sacrifices to achieve long term goals created a positive transformation. The complexity of WLB in circumstances such as these has formally received limited academic scrutiny, thereby restricting understanding and policy development. Further complexity can be seen as objective well-being diminished whilst subjective well-being was maintained and grown through the high personal value ascribed to HE study. Motivation proved critical to success, being based upon improved future prospects and personal growth, influenced by individual and group-based resilience, as support from peers reflected cooperation. The gendered aspect of the participants meant the women remained responsible for the domestic sphere, subsequently merging study into the home space to meet demands. Consequently, a significant shift in family expectations was seen through the normalisation of learning as mothers became role models and the 'learning family' emerged. Small participant numbers and their common background (Early

Year) could be viewed as a limitation to this research, but the depth and rigour of the qualitative process offered unique insight.

Recommendations: Whilst contemporary UK education policy, like much of the Global North, has recognized the importance of widening participation (Atkins and Ebden, 2014; Longhurst, 2011), WP students still struggle to manage practical demands and establish their student identity, creating vulnerability within a University setting. Consequently, collaboration between employers and University to more fully consider adult learners' support needs and wider lives is important. Furthermore, peer support is clearly valuable and should be encompassed within practice through time allocation and encouragement of collaboration, effectively challenging competitive educational traditions. WP should be recognized for the wider implications as learners form family role models potentially creating an important cultural shift and increased social inclusion through educational opportunities to create social mobility. Finally, WLB policies generally have proved insufficient to accommodate the complexity of modern life. Here, measuring hours of employment or time at university fails to take account of the combination of diverse commitments. Moving forward, further research around WLB complexity, resilience through collaboration and shifts through role modelling is recommended to expand understanding.

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Table 1: **The participants, demographic, employment and family background**

| The women | Participated in FG | Workplace | Hours of Employment | Year of Study | Family situation | Age | Background |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Pam** | / | Private nursery owner | 30 | 2 | Lone parent with 3 children:18, 17,12 (White British) | 40-45 | Worked in EY many years and built up her own business. Very positive attitude towards learning and WLB |
| **Jane** | / | After school and pre-school Charity | 35 | 2 | Married 2 children: 9, 14 (White British) | 40-45 | Reduced hours in final year, combined two roles / one is managerial. Positive attitude of employer support. Very positive about education |
| **Simone** | | Play school at a church | 10 | 2 | Lone parent 4 children Daughter 18, twin boys 12, son 15 (White British) | 40-45 | Son with additional medical needs, / serious skin complaint. |
| **Angela** | | Nursery | 10 | 2 | Lives with partner and 2 college / university age sons (White British) | 40-45 | Reduced hours to dedicate time to study / very supportive family. Positive WLB |
| **Karen** | | Nursery | 40 | 2 | Lives with partner and 3 'adult children' | 45-50 | Supportive family / has dyslexia and a son with autism |
| **Pearl** | / | Primary School | 37.5 | 2 | Lives with husband/ has a 12 year old son not currently living with her (Black African) | 25-35 | WLB was improved due to getting a car. Positive about professionals she worked with. Often did unpaid overtime |
| **Wendy** | / | School & After school | 18 | 2 | Lives with husband and 2 sons (4, 11) (White British) | 25-35 | Reduced hours by FG. Has dyslexia. Younger son recently diagnosed with autism. |
| **Charlotte** | | Nursery | 40 | 1 | Lives with partner who works away and son aged 3 (White British) | 25-35 | Often responsible for household, but very positive about WLB. Supportive parents and workplace |
| **Sarah** | | Nursery | 40 | 1 | Lives with partner (White British) | 18-25 | SENCO / additional workplace responsibilities |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Megan** | Nursery | 40 | 1 | Single lives with parents<br>(White British) | 18-25 | Positive about WLB / supportive employers.<br>Been studying since school |

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| **Table 2: Key themes and subthemes** |
|---|
| **Trio of spheres of commitment:** The addition of HE study alongside paid employment and family / domestic responsibilities creates WLB disequilibrium, impacting upon well-being.<br>**Sub-themes:** Overlapping spheres, time pressure, reduced leisure and free-time, emotional responses and accumulative demands |
| **Adaptation and personal strategy:** Responses by women and their households to the new situation<br>**Sub-themes:** Time management, support, shifting strategies and individual responses |
| **Motivation:** The driving force is influenced by HE study's short term and long term positive effects<br>**Sub-themes:** Personal motivation, HE study being a second chance, feeling supported, / role models and future focus |

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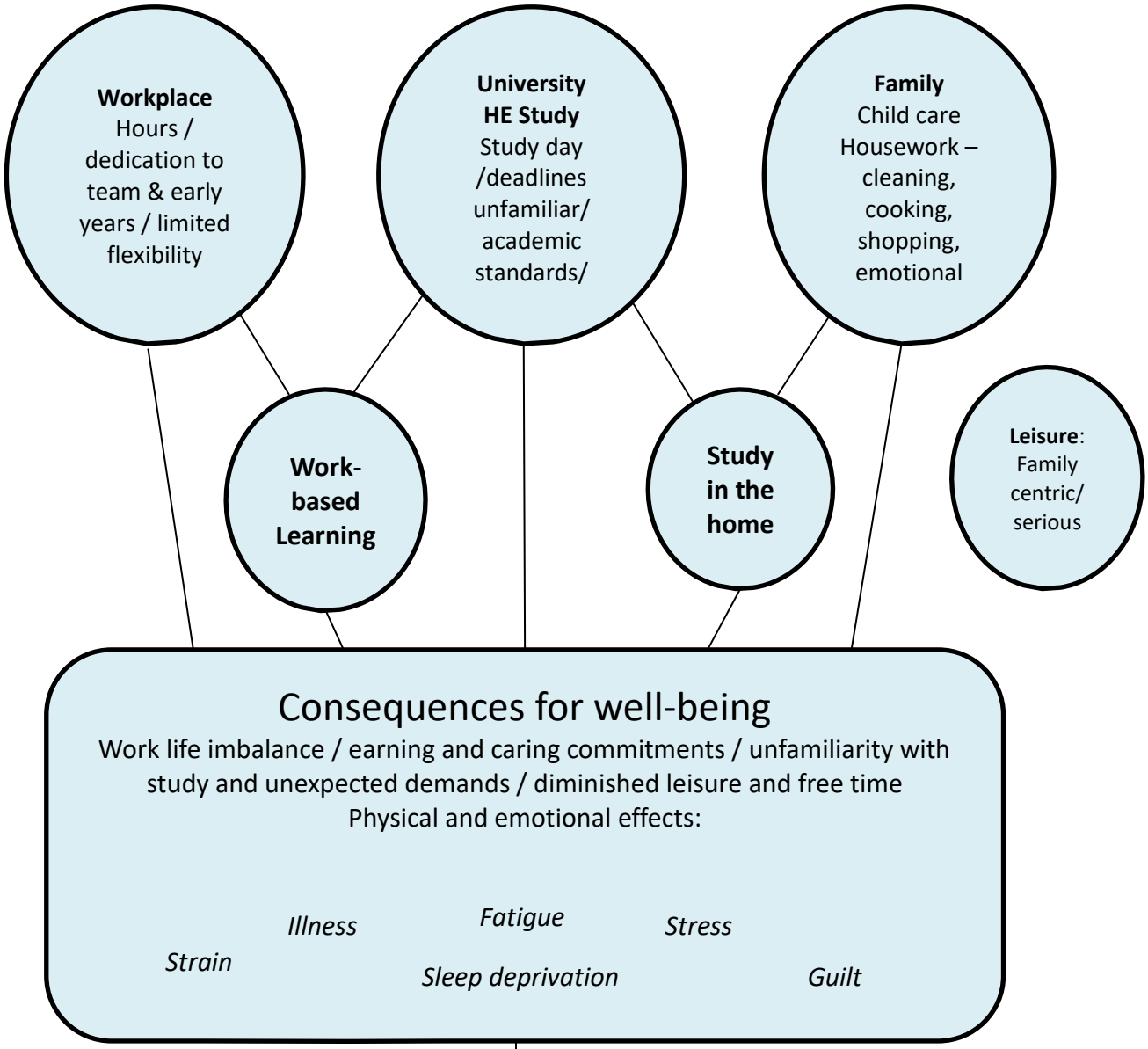
**Figure 1: The trio of spheres of commitment, consequences for well-being, adaptation and motivation**



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