Is work from home (WFH) feasible for university language educators in the post COVID-19 era?

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of work from home (WFH) on language educators in Malaysian universities gauging specifically their perceptions on its advantages and disadvantages during the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed-methods research design was employed involving 152 language educators. The results revealed that although the overall mean scores were rather neutral, language educators were more inclined toward positive effects of WFH, most notably in terms of saving commuting time and being closer to family. However, the negative effects were missing colleagues and feeling glued to the computer. The results also shed interesting insights into Malaysian language educators' high confidence in focusing on their tasks and using tools to fulfill their teaching and work-related responsibilities. The outcome from this study is a guiding model that not only informs the literature on the feasibility of WFH in the higher education context but also highlights pertinent areas of concern for its future planning and implementation.

Practitioner Notes

1. The study informs the literature on the work from home (WFH) policy and practices in the Malaysian higher education contexts which is similar to those within Southeast Asia.
2. The study ventures into an underrepresented domain by sampling university language educators during the COVID-19 pandemic to substantiate the feasibility of WFH beyond the pandemic.
3. The study provides university management with a viable WFH policy that can be folded into the fabric of institutional practice.
4. A model is proposed to guide university leaders/educators in planning, implementing, and continue assessing future WFH policy.
5. Future studies are encouraged to assess the effectiveness of the proposed model across different learning and cultural settings.

Introduction

As governments established required quarantines and social distancing procedures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, many sectors were experiencing unprecedented disruptions. Due to the outbreak, many employees and employers had to work remotely or work from home (WFH) for the first time and were not well-equipped (Galanti et al., 2021). In Malaysia, though not a full lockdown, the movement control order (MCO) introduced on March 18, 2020. Non-essential sectors including education in which schools, universities and colleges were required to close (Chuah & Mohamad, 2020; Toquero, 2020). The MCO was extended with different sets of requirements depending on the numbers of COVID-19 cases but in general, most students and educators were largely engaging in remote learning for almost two years. The escalated need for remote learning means that educators were required to WFH. Although the transition to remote teaching may appear more convenient for university educators, it is important to note that issues related to institutional support (Afrianty et al., 2022) and increased stress due to the challenges of remote teaching (Miguel et al., 2021) remain prevalent. This warrants a closer examination on the views of university educators with regards to the effects of WFH implementation, and this in turn helps inform the feasibility of WFH in the post COVID-19 era.

While WFH policy is applicable to many contexts of the teaching profession, language educators tend to encounter different scenarios due to their workload and roles (Brumen et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2021). Given that language teaching and learning is largely skills-based, teaching a language remotely requires a different adaptation as practical activities could not be done as effectively as in-person teaching (Ashadi et al., 2022). For example, the study by MacIntyre et al. (2020) involving 600 language teachers demonstrated how they were coping with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regards to WFH implementation. Though majority of them were applying different coping strategies, one key point is that they were experiencing both positive and negative effects of WFH.

Literature

Among the frameworks, models, or theories about WFH in the literature, the study by Ipsen et al. (2021) was selected because it exemplified one of the most robust WFH studies across disciplines. This study has provided valuable insights into the advantages and disadvantages of WFH from the European perspective. Advantages include work-life balance, work efficiency and work control while disadvantages include home office constraints, work uncertainties and inadequate tools. To contribute to the existing WFH literature from the Asian perspective, this study aims to address the research gap by investigating the specific challenges and concerns faced by language educators in Malaysian universities while working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Advantages of work from home

Firstly, the concept of work-life balance (WLB) implies achieving a harmonious state between one's professional and personal spheres, where they mutually complement each other to bring about harmony in one's life (Clark, 2000). While various studies have shown that WFH resulted in varied outcomes in relation to WLB (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020; Irawanto et al., 2021; Nakrošienė et al., 2019), a more positive influence of WFH on WLB was found in the Malaysian context. For instance, Malaysian corporate employees were more inclined towards teleworking (Quoquab et al., 2013) and the family factor contributed a "large effect on the WLB" (Husin et al., 2018, p. 43) among lecturers. In this study, WLB refers to the extent to which the Malaysian language educators can enjoy the home atmosphere, change routines, and have more time for their family life during the compulsory WFH. This includes saving commuting time and spending it meaningfully with their loved ones. One item from the original survey, "I have a chance to break my old habits and change my routines" was excluded because it was less relevant in the sociocultural context of the study.

Secondly, with reference to Grzywacz and Carlson's (2007) role theories, WFH can flexibly reduce an individual's role conflict in performing different roles such as an employee and a parent. Hence, it is hypothesised that the work efficiency (WE) can be improved among individuals when they work from home. WE also encompasses achieving better concentration and getting more time to work (Wong et al., 2020). Not only could they be more focused on their professional tasks, but also be more efficient or productive because WFH helps employees to integrate their work better within their family lives. In more recent studies, family to work enrichment was positively related to work effectiveness (Othman et al., 2021) and functional flexibility of WFH had a positive effect on job satisfaction and work performance across industries (Zamani et al., 2021). (Husin et al., 2018) further reiterated that Malaysian lecturers performed their work well during WFH. Therefore, the WE of this study refers to the extent to which the language educators can focus on their tasks and work productively without interruptions during WFH. A related item, "I am more productive working at home", was added to the questionnaire to achieve an equal number for each construct.

Lastly, as emphasised by Madikizela-Madiya and Le Roux (2017), the contemporary higher education is preoccupied by the "culture of suspicion" (p. 190) whereby institutions relentlessly prescribe how lecturers should carry out their duties. More "control, supervision and accountability" (Nixon, 2015, p. 8) are still apparent in the Asian context. When WFH became inevitable, it is hence hypothesised that lecturers could then enjoy more work control (WC) over the day outside campus offices. Greater WC improves work efficiency (Ipsen et al., 2021), and remote workers exhibit greater work effort compared to office-bound employees (Rupietta & Beckmann, 2018). In the Malaysian context, an effective WFH could be associated with a greater control over work among lecturers (Othman et al., 2021) and freedom in making job-related decisions (Zamani et al., 2021), this would in turn lead to higher job satisfaction (Badri, 2019). Hence, WC of this study refers to the extent to which the language educators can have more control over the day during WFH. This not only includes freedom in deciding when to eat or rest, but also free from constant supervision. An item, "I can control my work efficiently", was added to the questionnaire to achieve an equal number for all constructs under study.