

Balancing Teaching, Research, and Service responsibilities: Challenges and Strategies for Academic Staff

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Introduction and Background

Academic staff in Nigerian universities and elsewhere in the world face a constant challenge of balancing the demanding responsibilities of **teaching**, **research**, and **service**. This multidimensional role, while it can be considered to be enriching, it can also present significant challenges that can lead to stress, burnout, and a feeling of being pulled in multiple directions at the same time.

Academics, appear to walk a unique tightrope. On the one side, is the vital mission of teaching – nurturing young minds, shaping future leaders, and imparting knowledge. On the other hand, there's the relentless pursuit of new knowledge through **research** – pushing boundaries of disciplines, contributing to global discourse, and striving for innovation. And then, intertwined with this two, is the commitment to **service** – to our institutions, our communities, and our professions.

It is also worthy of note that this art of delicate balancing is taking place against the backdrop of severe economic hardship, high inflation, and poor salaries that the average university lecturer in Nigeria is exposed to. Universities in Nigeria mostly owned by the Federal and State Governments have been faced with an age long problem of very poor funding, low motivation, poor and dilapidated infrastructure.

The sheer volume of work faced by an average academic in Nigeria is compounded by very high student populations. The number of young Nigerians who want to get admitted into universities across the country continue to increase exponentially in the last twenty years. The staff-student ratio continues to dwindle due to poor funding. Many universities in Nigeria are unable to fill their vacant positions. While the older lecturers are retiring on a yearly basis, universities are unable to fill the vacant positions created by colleagues who are retiring. All of these put together is leading

to very heavy workload, stress, burnout, poor motivation among university lecturers in Nigeria today.

The Challenge of Teaching

Teaching is a core responsibility for academic staff, yet, when it comes to promotion and career advancement it is very often viewed as secondary to research. This can create a sense of imbalance, frustration, and loss of interest in teaching among lecturers. Preparing for lectures, grading, and mentoring students take up considerable time, and they can also be challenging. This can create conflict with the demands of conducting and publishing research and providing community service. The quality of teaching can suffer if academics are overly focused on their publication targets, to the detriment of students' educational experiences. This can lead to a decline in the overall quality of education provided.

The Persistent Pressure of “Publish or Perish syndrome” in the Academia

In the fiercely competitive sphere of academia, the persistent pressure created by the long-standing maxim “publish or perish” continues to exert substantial pressure, and it is influencing the professional trajectories of numerous scholars across the country's university. This unyielding pressure to consistently produce published works, originally intended to maintain and elevate the standard of academic research, has, somewhat paradoxically, given rise to a multidimensional array of challenges (Moosa, 2024).

It is not uncommon to see institutions shifting the goal post by introducing new standards by increasing the number of publications and type of publication outlets. The rapid multiplication of academic journals coupled with the intricate procedures involved in indexing within databases such as Scopus and Web of Science have ushered in a fresh set of obstacles for academics endeavoring to contribute meaningful research to their respective fields. This also introduces another delicate equilibrium between quantity and quality in the realm of academic publishing.

“Publish or Perish” - The Harsh Reality

- The push for publication in high-impact journals is more intense than ever today. Academics are often evaluated, and their worth determined, based on their research output and the prestige of the journals in which they publish.

- Indexed journals are seen as a benchmark of quality and impact, making them a key target for academics seeking promotion and career advancement. This adds another layer of pressure to the already demanding academic landscape.
- The rigorous peer-review process and high rejection rates of these journals increase pressure and can lead to significant stress, affecting the mental health of academics.

Proliferation of Journals

The exponential surge in the quantity of academic journals in recent years in the country and world-wide can be likened to a double-edged sword. On the positive side, it mirrors the ever-expanding frontiers of human knowledge across a wide array of disciplines, thereby providing an increased number of opportunities for researchers to publish their work.

Conversely, this rapid proliferation has led to a saturation that complicates the publication process and raises very serious questions about the quality and integrity of a number of journals. This surge in the number of journals has also given rise to the emergence of **predatory journals**. These journals exploit the publish-or-perish culture by charging authors exorbitant fees without providing the rigorous peer review process that is essential for upholding academic standards. Many of these journals can be described as cash-and-carry journals.

Indexing in Data Bases

Being indexed in reputable databases such as Scopus, Web of Science etc. is often perceived as a hallmark of quality in academic publishing. However, the criteria and processes for indexing have come under increasing scrutiny, revealing potential biases and inconsistencies. The criteria for inclusion in these databases can be stringent and sometimes not entirely transparent. This has led to some accusations of bias favoring journals from certain regions against others.

The emphasis on the impact factor, a metric indicating the average number of citations to articles published in a particular journal can become problematic because it can slant the focus towards high-impact but potentially less innovative research. Also, the process of getting a journal indexed can be lengthy and complicated. This can delay the recognition and accessibility of quality research.

“Publish and Perish” – Our New Dilemma

There is an emerging new mantra for academics “publish and perish” (Jozef Colpaert 2012). This new concept brings to the fore the potential downsides of the relentless push for publication,

emphasizing quantity over quality and the broader impacts of potentially damaging the future of our careers as academics.

The compulsion to publish at all costs might compromise research integrity, as scholars may cut corners, overlook rigorous methodologies, or even engage in unethical practices such as plagiarism to get their work published. The pressure to publish frequently can lead to a focus on quantity over quality, with researchers rushing to publish findings without thoroughly vetting their work and without any consideration for the long-term impact of their supposed finding. This may lead to the death of such academics academically.

Challenges of Balancing Multiple Responsibilities as an Academic

The struggle to balance core responsibilities as a university lecturer is not unique to any institution or country; it is a universal academic predicament. Let's carefully examine some of the inherent challenges in balancing **teaching, research, and service**.

1. Time Scarcity and Competing Demands: This is perhaps the most obvious challenge facing any one lecturer. There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and each of our responsibilities demands significant portions of it.

- **Teaching workload** – This involves Preparing lectures that are engaging, grading student assignments, providing timely feedback to students, mentoring students, holding office hours, and curriculum development. All these are time-consuming and very intensive tasks.
- **Research pressure** - The global academic landscape, driven by the "publish or perish" mantra, creates immense pressure to engage in original research, grant applications to secure funding, paper writing, and conference presentations. This very often affects one's personal time.
- **Service commitments** - Participating in departmental and university committee meetings, administrative duties, peer reviews, and community engagement add substantial demands to an already full plate, and very often consume time we might wish to dedicate to doing other things.

2. Resource Allocation: Sometimes, the way resources (funding, support staff, facilities) are allocated within institutions can inadvertently create an imbalance. If research is heavily

incentivized or better supported, it can leave teaching and service feeling neglected and unsupported. This kind of situation can force university lecturers to make difficult choices about where to direct and focus their already limited energy and resources.

3. Work-Life Imbalance and Burnout: The cumulative weight of these demands can easily erode our personal time, and it can also constitute a real threat to the well-being and sustained productivity of university teachers. The combined weight of these competing responsibilities will not only encroach on the personal time of lecturers, but it can lead them to long hours of work, weekend work, thereby neglecting family, hobbies, and self-care. This increases the risk of mental health issues, stress, and burnout among lecturers.

4. Performance Evaluation Systems: How we are evaluated often plays a significant role in our priorities. If promotion and career advancement decisions heavily favor research output over teaching excellence or service contributions, it can inadvertently incentivize an imbalanced focus, potentially impacting the quality of our teaching and other engagement.

5. Difficulty in Saying "No": Especially for young academics who are aspiring for promotion, there's a strong desire to want to reciprocate. They tend to take on every opportunity that comes their way, and to build what they call a robust CV. This often means they are unable to decline requests for new projects, serve on committees, or collaborations, and this can very quickly lead to an overwhelming workload that could translate to stress and burnout.

Strategies for Balancing Multiple Responsibilities as an Academic

We shall discuss a number of steps that will assist university lecturers in strategic planning and goal setting:

1. Understanding Your Academic Portfolio – it is crucial as a first step to understand your current academic portfolio. Undertake a personal inventory of your responsibilities and how you are currently spending your time.

- **The Time Audit:** This is a powerful, yet often overlooked, first step. For a week or two, meticulously track how you actually spend your time. This isn't about judgment; it's about awareness. You might be surprised to discover where your time truly goes. Are you spending more time on emails than on research writing? Is administrative work eating into your lecture preparation? This is important because It provides a realistic snapshot of your current workload distribution and helps identify hidden time wasters.

- **Aligning with Institutional Expectations:** Take time to understand your university's specific expectations for teaching, research, and service, particularly in relation to promotion and career advancement. Understanding these university benchmarks can help you prioritize where to focus your efforts for career progression.
- **Identifying Your Strengths and Passions:** What aspects of your job truly energize you? Are you a gifted lecturer, a groundbreaking researcher, or a passionate community advocate? Recognizing your strengths can help you lean into them, making your work more fulfilling and potentially more efficient. While we must balance all areas, understanding where your unique contributions lie can guide your approach.

2. Setting SMART Goals - Effectively managing your time is not just about working harder; it is about working smarter. This begins with setting SMART goals for each of the three areas – Teaching, Research, and Service – Establish Specific, **M** measurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound goals (**SMART**)

- *Example (Research):* "Submit one high-quality research paper to a Scopus-indexed journal by December 31st."
- *Example (Teaching):* "Revise and update your course notes and teaching materials for EGC 408 by the start of the next semester for example"
- *Example (Service):* "Attend all departmental meetings and contribute to the curriculum review committee until its completion in October."

3. Prioritization Frameworks - Not all tasks are created equal. Use a framework to help you decide what needs your immediate attention. **The Eisenhower Matrix:** Categorizes tasks into four quadrants:

- **Urgent & Important (Do first):** Crises, deadlines, critical issues.
- **Important, Not Urgent (Plan to do):** Research writing, curriculum development, long-term planning, relationship building. This is where you proactively invest your time to prevent future crises.
- **Urgent, Not Important (Delegate if possible):** Some emails, interruptions, minor requests.
- **Not Urgent, Not Important (Eliminate):** Time-wasting activities, excessive social media.

4. Time Blocking and Scheduling Discipline - Once you have your priorities, the next step is to intentionally allocate time for them. This requires discipline and a commitment to your schedule.

- **Time Blocking:** This is a powerful technique. Dedicate specific, uninterrupted blocks of time in your calendar for different types of activities. Example can look like this:-
 - **Mondays/Wednesdays (9:00 AM - 12:00 PM):** Dedicated Research & Writing Time (no emails, no meetings).
 - **Tuesdays/Thursdays (1:00 PM - 4:00 PM):** Teaching Preparation & Grading.
 - **Friday Mornings:** Administrative tasks, email catch-up, committee work. ((This will help reduce cognitive load by deciding what to work on in advance and protects valuable work time).
- **Daily and Weekly To-Do Lists:** Create realistic lists, breaking down large projects into smaller, actionable steps. Prioritize the most challenging or important tasks early in your day when your energy levels are highest ("eat the frog").
- **Schedule Non-Work Time:** This is critical for preventing burnout. Intentionally schedule personal time, family time, exercise, and hobbies in your calendar. Treat these appointments with the same importance as your work meetings. This helps create clear boundaries and ensures you recharge.
- **Batch Similar Tasks:** Group together similar activities to minimize context switching. For example, answer all emails at specific times (e.g., once in the morning, once in the afternoon) rather than constantly reacting to every new notification. This is far more efficient than constantly shifting focus.

5. Setting Boundaries and the Art of Saying "No"

One of the hardest, yet most crucial, strategies is learning to set boundaries and politely decline requests that don't align with your priorities or current capacity.

- **Know Your Capacity:** Be realistic about how much you can truly take on without compromising quality or your well-being. It's better to do a few things well than many things poorly.
- **The Power of a Polite "No":** It's not rude to decline a request if you genuinely don't have the time or if it detracts from your core responsibilities.

- *Example Script:* "Thank you so much for thinking of me for this, but unfortunately, my current commitments mean I can't take on anything new at the moment. I appreciate the offer."
- *Alternatively, Offer an Alternative:* "I can't commit to leading that committee, but I'd be happy to contribute to a specific task force if that's helpful."
- **Manage Expectations:** Be transparent with colleagues and supervisors about your workload and deadlines. Proactive communication can prevent misunderstandings and reduce pressure. If you foresee a delay, communicate it early.
- **Protect Your "No":** Once you've set a boundary, stick to it. Every time you say "yes" to something outside your priorities, you're implicitly saying "no" to something that truly matters.

6. Integration and Synergy: Making Your Roles Work Together

Sometimes, the lines between teaching, research, and service can be blurred effectively, allowing one activity to feed into another, thereby optimizing your time.

- **The Teaching-Research Nexus:** Look for opportunities where your research can directly inform and enrich your teaching.
 - **Incorporate your research into lectures:** Use your ongoing studies as case studies, examples, or current debates in your courses. This makes your teaching more current, engaging, and personal.
 - **Involve students in your research:** Engage undergraduate or postgraduate students in your research projects. This not only provides valuable learning experiences for them but can also provide you with research assistance.
 - **Develop research-based assignments:** Design assignments that require students to engage with research methodologies or analyze research findings, aligning with your own research interests.
- **Research-Service Connections:** Can your service activities contribute to your research agenda?
 - **Committee work:** Serving on a curriculum development committee might spark an idea for educational research.

- **Community engagement:** Outreach programs could provide valuable data or case studies for your research.
- **Peer review:** While demanding, reviewing papers keeps you current with the latest research in your field and sharpens your critical analysis skills, which are crucial for your own research.
- **Service as Scholarship:** In some disciplines, certain types of service (e.g., editing a journal, chairing a major conference, developing open educational resources) can be recognized as scholarly contributions. Explore these possibilities within your institution's evaluation framework.

7. Leveraging Tools and Support Networks

You don't have to navigate this journey alone. There are numerous tools and support systems that can help lighten the load.

- **Utilize Technology Smartly:**
 - **Calendar apps:** Google Calendar, Outlook Calendar for scheduling and reminders.
 - **Productivity tools:** To-do list apps (e.g., Todoist, Asana), note-taking apps (e.g., Evernote, OneNote).
 - **Reference management software:** Zotero, Mendeley, EndNote for organizing research papers and citations.
 - **Plagiarism checkers and grammar tools:** Grammarly, Turnitin to streamline writing and editing.
 - **AI tools:** Explore how AI can assist with literature reviews, data analysis, or even drafting initial outlines (with careful human oversight and ethical considerations).
- **Delegate When Possible:** If you have research assistants, graduate students, or administrative support, identify tasks that can be effectively delegated. Clearly communicate expectations and provide necessary training.
- **Build a Strong Support Network:**
 - **Mentors:** Seek out senior colleagues who have successfully managed these demands. Their advice and experience can be invaluable.

- **Peer Support:** Connect with colleagues facing similar challenges. Share strategies, commiserate, and motivate each other. Form writing groups or accountability partners.
- **Administrative Staff:** Recognize the vital role of administrative staff and foster good working relationships. They are often key to navigating institutional processes efficiently.

8. Prioritizing Well-being and Avoiding Burnout

All the strategies for time management will be ineffective if you're constantly exhausted, stressed, or sick. Your well-being must be a priority.

- **Prioritize Rest and Breaks:** This is non-negotiable. Regular short breaks during the workday can significantly improve focus and productivity. Ensure you get adequate sleep. Sacrificing sleep for work is a false economy; it reduces your effectiveness.
- **Mindfulness and Stress Management:** Incorporate practices that help you manage stress. This could be anything from short meditation sessions, deep breathing exercises, spending time in nature, or engaging in a hobby you enjoy. Find what works for you to decompress and clear your mind.
- **Physical Activity:** Regular exercise is a powerful antidote to stress and can boost your energy levels and cognitive function. Even short walks can make a difference.
- **Nutritious Diet:** Fuel your body and brain with healthy food. Avoid relying on excessive caffeine or sugary snacks, which lead to energy crashes.
- **Recognize the Signs of Burnout:** Be attuned to your own body and mind. Symptoms of burnout include chronic fatigue, cynicism, reduced motivation, feelings of detachment, and decreased performance. If you recognize these signs, don't hesitate to seek support from a colleague, mentor, or professional counselor. Your health is your most valuable asset.

Conclusions and Recommendations Going Forward

Balancing teaching, research, and service is an ongoing journey, not a destination. There will always be peaks and valleys, busy periods and quieter ones. The key is to develop a flexible yet disciplined approach that allows you to contribute meaningfully across all areas while safeguarding your personal well-being.

- **Be Flexible:** Life happens. There will be times when unexpected demands arise. The strategies we've discussed are tools, not rigid rules. Be prepared to adjust your plan as needed.
- **Embrace Continuous Improvement:** Regularly review your time management strategies. What's working? What isn't? Make adjustments based on your experiences.
- **Celebrate Your Achievements:** Take time to acknowledge your successes in all three areas – a well-received lecture, a published paper, a successful committee project. Recognizing your contributions can boost morale and prevent feelings of inadequacy.

Ultimately, the goal is not to perfectly balance every minute of every day, but to achieve a sustainable equilibrium where you can excel in your academic pursuits and maintain a healthy, fulfilling life. By being intentional with your time, setting clear boundaries, and prioritizing your well-being, you can navigate the complexities of academic life with greater confidence and effectiveness.

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