Balancing Institutional Support and E-tutor Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Work–Life Balance among E-tutors in a Fully Online University

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Abstract

Part-time tutors form the core teaching workforce in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. However, the interplay between organizational support, work–life balance, and job satisfaction among this cohort remains under-examined. Grounded in Perceived Organizational Support (POS) theory and the work–life balance literature, this study explores how institutional support influences tutor satisfaction directly and indirectly through work–life balance. A structured survey was administered to 134 e-tutors at Open University Malaysia, a fully online university, measuring perceptions of support, work–life balance, and overall job satisfaction. Data were analyzed via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), assessing both measurement and structural models. Results revealed that institutional support alone did not have a significant direct effect on satisfaction ($\beta = -0.126$, $p = .053$). Instead, support significantly enhanced work–life balance ($\beta = 0.428$, $p < .001$), which in turn strongly predicted tutor satisfaction ($\beta = 0.823$, $p < .001$). The full mediation effect (indirect $\beta = 0.352$, $p < .001$) underscores that support measures must translate into tangible balance improvements to impact satisfaction. Predictive relevance analyses (PLS predict) further confirmed the model's robustness, with lower RMSE values and positive $Q^2\_predict$ scores across all indicators. These findings highlight the critical need for ODL institutions to design targeted support strategies—such as flexible scheduling, workload management, and accessible resources—that foster sustainable work–life balance. Implications for policy, professional development, and future research on ODL workforce well-being and instructional quality are discussed.

Keywords: Open & Distance Learning, E-tutors, Work-life Balance, Job Satisfaction, Institutional Support

Introduction

Perceived organizational support (POS) theory asserts that when employees believe their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being, they reciprocate with enhanced job satisfaction, greater affective commitment, and reduced turnover intentions (Eisenberger et.al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, Kurtessis et al., 2017). As a result, work–life balance—has emerged as a critical mediator in organizational behaviour research, linking supportive workplace policies to positive job and life outcomes (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003, Kossek et al, 2011). Allen et.al., (2000) conducted a comprehensive review of work–family conflict studies, highlighting flexible scheduling and workload management as promising interventions, while Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) further elaborated on how work–life balance contributes to employees' overall quality of life and well-being.

With the rapid expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) globally, institutions increasingly rely on part-time instructors to deliver curricula   to its learners (Keegan, 1996; Latchem & Jung, 2010). Unlike full-time faculty members, these part-timers often juggle multiple roles—academia, professional work, and personal obligations—while maintaining tenuous ties with their institution (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Research on higher education adjunct faculty suggests that institutional support mechanisms such as structured orientation, mentoring, and clear workload guidelines enhance teaching satisfaction and retention (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Doll, 2019), yet these insights have not been fully explored in ODL contexts.

Moreover, part-time instructors face unique challenges related to scheduling constraints, technological demands, and limited access to campus resources—factors that can negatively impact work–life conflict and reduce job satisfaction. The interplay between POS and work–life balance may be especially critical for these part-time instructors, as institutional policies must translate into tangible benefits to impact satisfaction. To date, to the best of our knowledge no study has systematically examined how institutional support influences both work–life balance and satisfaction among part-time ODL instructors, leaving an important gap in the literature.

Addressing this gap is critical not only for theoretical advancement in organizational support models but also for practical policymaking in ODL institutions. By understanding how support mechanisms translate into tangible work–life improvements for part-time instructors, university administrators can design targetted interventions to enhance instructor engagement and improve learner outcomes. Furthermore, examining this relationship contributes to broader discussions on workforce sustainability in the digital age, where flexible and remote teaching roles are increasingly prevalent. Insights from this study will inform the development of best practices for faculty support in ODL, guiding resource allocation, professional development programs, and technology integration. Moreover, highlighting the lived experiences of part-time instructors underscores the need for equity in institutional policies, ensuring that all educators receive the support necessary to thrive. This research thus has the potential to shape both academic discourse and institutional strategies, ultimately benefiting tutors, learners, and the wider educational community.

At Open University Malaysia (OUM), this type of research takes on particular urgency. This university relies heavily on part-time instructors—known as e-tutors—to facilitate learning

for more than 30,000 of its adult learners across diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes locally and abroad. Prior to 2020, the university relied on face-to-face sessions at its learning centers and online instruction on learning platform. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, however, accelerated the university's transition to a fully online university. As a result, e-tutors have seen their workloads grow significantly compared to what their predecessors had to contend with before 2020: these e-tutors have had to master new technologies, engage more frequently with students on the online course forums, and shoulder additional academic duties—such as grading assignments, exam papers entirely online, besides conducting online classes.

Drawing on POS theory and work–life balance research, we therefore examine (1) whether institutional support enhances e-tutors' perceived balance between work and personal life, (2) whether such support directly increases e- tutor satisfaction, and (3) whether work–life balance mediates the link between institutional support and tutor satisfaction. By testing these relationships within the context of the university's e-tutor population, we aim to inform both theory and practice—guiding the design of support mechanisms that alleviate e-tutors' day-to-day challenges and, in turn, foster higher satisfaction and engagement.

Finally, insights from this study will help OUM tailor its support strategies to safeguard tutor well-being, sustain high-quality instruction, and ultimately enhance student learning experiences.

Literature Review
Perceived organizational support (POS) theory posits that employees reciprocate the care and value they receive from their organization with positive job attitudes, including increased satisfaction, commitment, and reduced turnover intentions (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In higher education, POS has been linked to improved teaching attitudes when faculty experience recognition, resource availability, and responsive leadership (Cha & Carrier, 2016). However, most evidence derives from full-time and campus-based adjunct samples, leaving unanswered the question of whether these supportive practices translate similarly for part-time e-tutors who lack a physical campus presence.

Work–life balance, defined as the harmony between professional and personal roles (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003), frequently mediates the relationship between support and well-being. Meta-analyses and reviews have highlighted that policies such as flexible scheduling and workload management mitigate work–family conflict and enhance job outcomes (Allen et al., 2000; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Among educators, Collie, Shapka & Perry (2012) found that a supportive school environment coupled with social–emotional learning strategies reduced stress and improved satisfaction, underscoring the importance of balance in teaching contexts.

Empirical work further demonstrates that balanced work–life arrangements are strong predictors of job satisfaction across occupations. Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) conceptualized the impact of role compatibility on overall quality of life, while Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) showed that better balance among teachers correlates with lower exhaustion and higher job

fulfilment. These studies collectively suggest that POS interventions must yield tangible balance improvements to effectively boost satisfaction.

Moreover, research beyond the education sector corroborates the fundamental POS-satisfaction link. In healthcare, Laschinger et al. (2001) found that nurses who perceived strong organizational support reported higher job satisfaction and lower burnout. Among corporate employees, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) demonstrated that POS positively correlates with job performance and affective commitment. Similarly, studies in the service industry confirm that customer service agents who receive recognition and resource backing exhibit improved work attitudes and reduced turnover intentions (Shore & Wayne, 1993).

Work–life balance's positive relationship with job satisfaction also extends across diverse professional contexts. For instance, in the IT sector, Lockwood (2003) reported that flexible work arrangements improved software developers' satisfaction and productivity. Manufacturing workers who experienced supportive scheduling practices similarly reported better work–family balance and higher morale (Valcour, 2007). In the public sector, supportive leave policies and shift flexibility were linked to enhanced employee well-being and job satisfaction (Thompson & Prottas, 2006).

The interplay between organizational support and work–life balance has likewise been documented in other fields. In financial services, Chung and van der Lippe (2020) found that perceived support for flexible work significantly improved employees' ability to manage family responsibilities, which in turn increased job satisfaction. In academia, faculty members who experienced departmental support for workload adjustments reported better balance and higher teaching satisfaction (Waxmonsky & Earp, 2015).

Despite these findings, there is limited research on how institutional support, work–life balance, and satisfaction are connected for part-time e-tutors in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) environments. These tutors deal with specific challenges such as constant online interaction, the need to handle digital tools effectively, and having little access to on-campus resources. These conditions may reduce the impact of traditional support systems. So far, no study has tested whether institutional support improves e-tutors' work–life balance and, in turn, their job satisfaction. This study addresses that gap by examining the following:
H1: Institutional support is positively related to tutor satisfaction.
H2: Institutional support is positively related to work–life balance.
H3: Work–life balance is positively related to tutor satisfaction.
H4: Work–life balance mediates the relationship between institutional support and   tutor satisfaction.

This study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how to support part-time tutors more effectively by applying the perceived organisational support (POS) and work–life balance frameworks in the ODL setting.
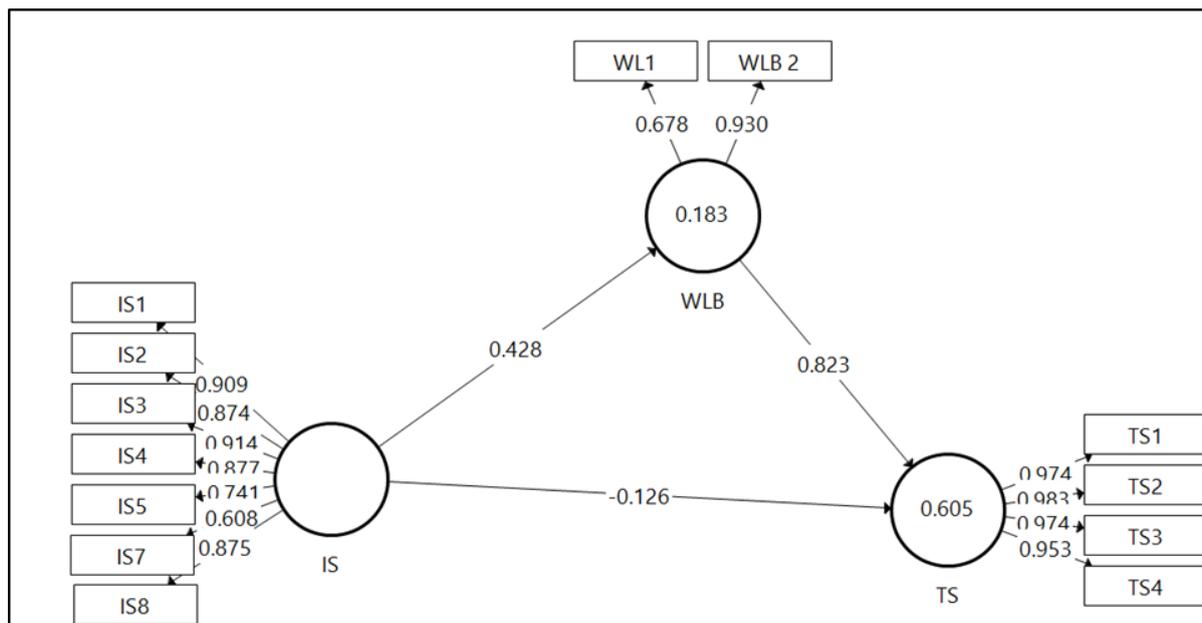
Figure 1: Research Model
Notes: IS= Institutional Support, WL= work life balance, TS= Tutor Satisfaction

Methodology
This study adopted a quantitative approach to investigate the relationships among institutional support, work–life balance, and tutor satisfaction within an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context. Data were collected at OUM which transitioned to fully online delivery post-2020, placing greater demands on its part-time e-tutors. Institutional Support (IS) was assessed using eight items from the survey instrument, reflecting actual support infrastructure experienced by e-tutors at the university. Tutor Satisfaction (TS) was measured using four items reflecting a sense of belonging and pride within the university community. Work–Life Balance (WLB) comprised two items to capture perceived compatibility between tutoring and personal life. All constructs utilized 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A purposive non-probabilistic sampling method was employed. Out of 750 distributed surveys, 134 were returned (18 % response rate). After data cleaning, these responses were analysed using the SmartPLS software. This software was chosen for the data analysis and hypothesis testing because of its strong emphasis on structural equation modelling (SEM) and its ability to manage complex multivariate datasets. As recommended by Liengaard et al. (2021), SmartPLS allows for a rigourous evaluation of measurement and structural models, ensuring a rigorous examination of our proposed hypotheses and delivering a comprehensive multivariate analysis.

Data Analysis
Respondents' Profile
This survey obtained responses from 134 e-tutors at OUM. The study achieved an 18 % response rate. Employment status was found to be varied: 24% were self-employed, 11.6% worked in the private sector, 23.3% were public-sector civil servants, 4.6% public-sector non-civil servants, 17.8% served as full-time lecturers at private universities, 19.4% at public universities and approximately 1% expatriates. Tenure as an e-tutor ranged broadly, with 5% under one year, 17.9% between one and five years, the largest group (25.4%) between six and ten years, 17.9% between eleven and fifteen years, 13.4% between sixteen and twenty years,

and 20.1% with over twenty years of service. Gender distribution was nearly equal, with 50.7% male and 49.3% female respondents.

Measurement Model
We evaluated the measurement model following Hair et al. (2017). As shown in Table 1, all indicator loadings exceeded the 0.60 threshold (Institutional Support: λ = 0.608–0.914; Work–Life Balance: λ = 0.678–0.930; Tutor Satisfaction: λ = 0.953–0.983), confirming each item's strong alignment with its intended construct. Internal consistency was good: Cronbach's α ranged from 0.730 (WLB) to 0.980 (TS), and composite reliability (CR) from 0.793 to 0.985 — well above the 0.70 benchmark. Convergent validity was also established, with every construct's average variance extracted (AVE) exceeding 0.50 (IS = 0.697, WLB = 0.662, TS = 0.943), indicating that each construct explains the majority of its indicators' variance. Note that item IS6 was omitted from the model diagram because its factor loading fell below the 0.60 threshold and was therefore removed from the measurement model.

Discriminant validity was assessed via the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios, following the criteria established by Henseler et al., (2015). See Table 2. While the IS–TS (0.231) and IS–WLB (0.630) ratios are comfortably below even the strict 0.85 cut-off, WLB–TS was found to be 0.894. This value nonetheless falls below the widely accepted 0.90 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015), supporting the conclusion that all three constructs are empirically distinct. Together, these results confirm that our measures are both reliable and valid, providing a solid foundation for testing the structural relationships.

Table 1
Construct reliability, validity & item loadings

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Institutional Support	IS1	0.909	0.925	0.941	0.697
	IS2	0.874			
	IS3	0.914			
	IS4	0.877			
	IS5	0.741			
	IS7	0.608			
	IS8	0.875			
Tutor Satisfaction	TS1	0.974	0.980	0.985	0.943
	TS2	0.983			
	TS3	0.974			
	TS4	0.953			
Work-Life Balance	WL1	0.678	0.730	0.793	0.662
	WLB2	0.930			

Notes: CA =Cronbach Alpha CR=Composite Reliability AVE=Average Variance Extracted

Table 2
Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios

	IS	TS	WLB
IS		0.231	0.630
TS	0.231		0.894
WLB	0.630	0.894	

Structural Model

We evaluated the structural model using PLS-SEM with 5 000 bootstrap subsamples (Hair et al., 2017). Before testing hypotheses, we verified that all Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were below 3.3, ruling out collinearity issues. The model explains 18.3 % of the variance in work–life balance (WLB) and 60.5 % in tutor satisfaction (TS), indicating explanatory power. Path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and 95 % confidence intervals are reported in Table 3. A non-significant direct path from institutional support (IS) to in tutor satisfaction (TS) (β = –0.126, t = 1.937, p = 0.053) led us to reject H1. By contrast, IS→WLB (β = 0.428, t = 3.962, p < 0.001) and WLB→TS (β = 0.823, t = 8.586, p < 0.001) were both highly significant, supporting H2 and H3. Mediation analysis confirmed a fully mediated effect of IS on TS via WLB (indirect β = 0.352, t = 3.986, p < 0.001), thereby accepting H4.

Table 3
Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	β	t	p	2.5 %	97.5 %	Decision
H1: IS → TS	−0.126	1.937	0.053	−0.259	−0.009	Rejected
H2: IS → WLB	0.428	3.962	0.000	0.236	0.621	Accepted
H3: WLB → TS	0.823	8.586	0.000	0.542	0.935	Accepted
H4: IS → WLB → TS	0.352	3.986	0.000	0.193	0.518	Accepted

Note: Significant at p<0.05

Predictive Relevance of the Model

The model's out-of-sample predictive accuracy was evaluated with PLSpredict (Shmueli et al., 2016). As Table 4 shows, the PLS-SEM approach consistently yields lower root-mean-square errors than a linear-model benchmark (all ΔRMSE values are negative), indicating better predictive performance across every indicator. Also, each Q^2_predict value is positive (ranging from 0.009 for TS1 up to 0.124 for WL1), confirming that the structural model has predictive relevance and is not simply overfitted to the calibration data. In practical terms, these results suggest that our PLS-SEM model can reliably forecast future levels of tutor satisfaction and work–life balance, providing a good basis for data-driven policy and intervention design.

Table 4
PLSpredict results

Indicator	RMSE PLS	RMSE LM	Δ (RMSE)	Q^2_predict
TS1	0.940	0.957	−0.017	0.009
TS2	0.915	0.926	−0.011	0.012
TS3	0.915	0.935	−0.020	0.021
TS4	0.927	0.935	−0.008	0.021
WLB2	0.841	0.851	−0.010	0.081
WL1	0.971	1.010	−0.039	0.124

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Discussion
Our findings reveal that institutional support on its own does not directly improve tutor satisfaction (β = −0.126, t = 1.937, p = .053), suggesting that high-level commitments—such as policy statements or broad funding allocations—must be translated into tangible, day-to-day improvements before e-tutors feel their benefits (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). By contrast, support initiatives that directly eased workload pressures—namely, flexible scheduling and streamlined administrative procedures—had a clear impact on work–life balance (β = .428, t = 3.962, p < .001), which in turn exerted a very strong effect on overall tutor satisfaction (β = .823, t = 8.586, p < .001). These results echo meta-analytic evidence showing that work–life balance is among the most powerful predictors of job satisfaction in diverse fields (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007).

The mediation analysis further demonstrated that work–life balance fully channels the influence of institutional support into tutor satisfaction (indirect β = .352, t = 3.986, p < .001), while the direct institutional support→tutor satisfaction path remains non-significant. This pattern aligns with organizational studies indicating that perceived organizational support enhances employees' attitudes principally by reducing work–family conflict (Valcour, 2007; Cha & Carrier, 2016). In other words, institutional resources and recognition must first alleviate the practical tensions between work and personal life before they can foster genuine satisfaction.

Finally, our PLSpredict results underscore the model's practical utility: across every indicator, PLS-SEM predictions produced lower RMSE values than linear model benchmarks and yielded positive $Q^2\_predict$ scores, confirming robust out-of-sample predictive relevance (Shmueli et al., 2016). This level of predictive accuracy suggests that other ODL institutions can reliably use our structural model to forecast how specific support measures will improve their e-tutors' balance and satisfaction—informing data-driven decisions on resource allocation and policy design.

Implications

The results of this study offer several clear implications for policy and professional development in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) settings. The key finding—that institutional support improves tutor satisfaction only through its effect on work–life balance—suggests that support strategies must directly address the day-to-day pressures e-tutors face. General policies are not enough unless they ease tutors' workload and help them manage the demands of teaching alongside other responsibilities.

One key area is flexibility in scheduling. Many e-tutors manage multiple responsibilities, including full-time jobs and family commitments and as a result, strict deadlines for marking, uploading feedback, or attending online meetings may cause avoidable stress. Therefore, institutions should consider introducing staggered grading windows and flexible submission timelines for final grade marks. Besides, having an option for e-tutors to select their preferred time slots for synchronous sessions or administrative check-ins will be beneficial. Flexibility does not mean lowering standards—it means making room for tutors to meet expectations without unnecessary strain.

Institutional handbooks and contracts ought to spell out how much time e-tutors should devote to core activities—whether that's facilitating online discussion forums, marking assignments, or handling paperwork. However, when these expectations are not spelled out clearly, e-tutors may "over-extend", leading to the risk of burning-out. Clear, transparent workload guidelines not only benefit e- tutors; they not only get to better organize their schedules and safeguard personal time, but institutional administrators also have a sounder basis for evaluating whether the assigned duties are reasonable or need adjustment.

It goes without saying that that excessive or unclear administrative tasks takes valuable time away from online teaching and forum interaction. Therefore, it is vital that institutions review their internal processes. Automating grading portals, attendance reporting, and communication channels, where possible, will remove unnecessary steps. For example, automated reminders for upcoming deadlines, pre-formatted grading rubrics, or auto-generated feedback templates can reduce repetitive tasks and help e-tutors focus on online teaching and assisting their learners.

Support must be available when it is needed—not days later. Tutors frequently encounter time-sensitive issues, such as learning portal access errors, system failures during grading, or unclear instructions from the institution. Therefore, institutions should establish dedicated support channels. For instance, a WhatsApp hotline during peak grading periods with guaranteed response times. A quick resolution signals that the institution values tutors' time and effort.

Institutions should allow and accept feedback from e-tutors through avenues such as focus groups or surveys. In doing this, tutors can report their concerns related to work. Tutor suggestions and insights for improvements or enhancements to the course design, course assessment, or even the learning management system can also be gathered. Having the opportunities to contribute and share their perspectives in decision-making processes will reinforce the tutors' sense of inclusion and sense of belonging to the institution.

Another area of concern is the digital well-being of e-tutors. Institutions should pay more attention to addressing this issue. To promote digital well-being, institutions can provide training on time management, stress management, and also promote mental health awareness.

Additionally, small rewards can make a big difference. To acknowledge and encourage ongoing development, institutions could introduce micro-credentials linked to specific skill modules—like badges for mastering time management, engaging students online, or utilizing new digital tools. Tying these credentials to small performance incentives, tutor awards, or eligibility for future contracts sends a clear message that growth is valued.

Conclusion
This research sheds new insights on how institutional support, work–life balance, and satisfaction are connected for part-time e-tutors in OUM. A major finding from this study is that institutional support alone does not directly improve the tutors' well-being. In fact, support initiatives that directly eased workload pressures was to seen to have had a clear impact on work–life balance which in turn exerted a very strong effect on overall tutor satisfaction. Another finding from this study is that work–life balance fully channels the influence of institutional support into e-tutor satisfaction while the direct institutional support→tutor satisfaction path remains non-significant.

With regard to the first finding from this study, institutional policy statements must be translated into tangible, day-to-day improvements before e-tutors can feel their benefits. These results support earlier findings by Grzywacz & Carlson (2007) that work–life balance is among the most powerful predictors of job satisfaction in diverse fields. The second finding from this study aligns with earlier organizational studies by Kossek *et al.*,(2011), Thompson & Prottas(2006) indicating that perceived organizational support enhances employees' attitudes principally by reducing work–family conflict. In other words, institutional resources and recognition must first alleviate the practical tensions between work and personal life before they can bring about genuine satisfaction.

Based on the findings of this study, Open and distance learning providers cannot rely on policy statements alone. To ease e-tutors' workload, these policies must translate institutional commitments into tangible action on the ground. Embedding support within routine operations—through staggered scheduling windows, clear grading protocols, and expedited student-contact channels—ensures that help arrives where and when it's needed, without adding another bureaucratic step.

OUM should also consider professional development programmes for e-tutors that extend beyond the staple offering of online pedagogy and facilitation. Including hands-on training in

new digital platforms; such programmes will allow them to become confident and more efficient in managing online tasks. Practical training in time-management techniques can help e- tutors become better at handling demands. In addition, having sessions focused on stress management can support their overall well-being.

Another initiative for OUM to consider is providing avenues for networking and peer-sharing. Such an initiative will allow e-tutors to exchange ideas and share experiences, share learning materials, discuss time-saving tips and better ways to manage workload. it will help reduce feelings of isolation among tutors. At the same time encourage the sense of belonging in them.

Future Research
The findings of the study point to areas for further investigation into how institutional support, work–life balance, and overall tutor satisfaction interrelate in an ODL environment. In particular, the complete mediation we observed—whereby support only enhances satisfaction by first improving tutors' work–life balance—suggests that simply offering resources is not enough; institutions need to understand how e-tutors actually experience and make sense of those resources.

Future research might distinguish among different forms of support—such as help with technical issues, prompt administrative response, official recognition of achievements, opportunities for peer collaboration, and the provision of digital tools—to see which best safeguards e-tutors' well-being. For instance, does on-demand LMS troubleshooting relieve anxiety more effectively than periodic training seminars? Or might a public commendation from senior leadership have a greater impact on motivation than the rollout of a new grading interface?

A longitudinal study following the same cohort of e-tutors across several semesters could be carried out. But paying close attention to peak periods like assignment grading deadlines. This could inform out how their perceptions of institutional support and work-life balance change over time. Regular check-ins can help institutions spot early burnout indicators and refine their assistance before issues worsen.

A qualitative study using in-depth interviews, focus groups or reflective journals will show how e-tutors value and interpret each form of support. This approach highlights day-to-day challenges—such as feelings of isolation or the emotional effort involved in online teaching— and identifies which kinds of recognition and resources tutors find most helpful.

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