



East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

[eajis.eanso.org](http://eajis.eanso.org)

Volume 8, Issue 1, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-529X | Online ISSN: 2707-5303

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5303>

EANSO

EAST AFRICAN  
NATURE &  
SCIENCE  
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

## Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Ugandan Universities: A Study of Multiple Role Conflicts

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.8.1.3185>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

20 June 2025

**Keywords:**  
*Role Conflict,*  
*Mid-level*  
*Administrators,*  
*Ugandan*  
*Universities,*  
*Burnout,*  
*Work-Life Balance.*

This qualitative study explores the experiences of mid-level administrators in Ugandan public universities, focusing on role conflicts arising from their multiple responsibilities. Grounded in Role Conflict Theory, the research explores time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflicts among 20 administrators at Makerere and Kyambogo Universities. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the strain-based experiences of mid-level administrators regarding their workload? How do time-based constraints affect their workplace responsibilities? What behavioural challenges arise when executing multiple roles? This qualitative study adopted a constructivist approach, focusing on participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). It targeted mid-level administrators (e.g., deans, bursars, heads of sections, etc) due to their multifaceted roles. Twenty participants were purposively selected for their expertise. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face and online during the COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews were audio-recorded, with brief notes for follow-up. Pseudonyms ensured confidentiality. Thematic analysis categorized data into time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based themes, aligned with Role Conflict Theory. Findings reveal that extended work hours, heavy workloads, and challenges in switching roles lead to stress, burnout, and work-life imbalances. Gender, marital status, and age influence these experiences, with female and younger administrators reporting higher strain. The study recommends enhanced training and resource support to mitigate role conflicts. Implications for university administration and future research are discussed.

### APA CITATION

Mbabazi, F., Eduan, W., Ocheng, M. K. & Eduan, S. A. (2025). Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Ugandan Universities: A Study of Multiple Role Conflicts. *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 8(1), 454-464. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.8.1.3185>.

### CHICAGO CITATION

Mbabazi, Faith, Wilson Eduan, Mary Kagoire Ocheng and Stella Amero Eduan. 2025. "Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Ugandan Universities: A Study of Multiple Role Conflicts". *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 8 (1), 454-464. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajis.8.1.3185>.

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Mbabazi, F., Eduan, W., Ocheng, M. K. & Eduan, S. A. (2025) "Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Ugandan Universities: A Study of Multiple Role Conflicts", *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 8(1), pp. 454-464. doi: 10.37284/eajis.8.1.3185.

#### IEEE CITATION

F., Mbabazi, W., Eduan, M. K., Ocheng & S. A., Eduan "Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Ugandan Universities: A Study of Multiple Role Conflicts", *EAJIS*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 454-464, Jun. 2025.

#### MLA CITATION

Mbabazi, Faith, Wilson Eduan, Mary Kagoire Ocheng & Stella Amero Eduan. "Experiences of Mid-Level Administrators in Ugandan Universities: A Study of Multiple Role Conflicts". *East African Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 8, no. 1, Jun. 2025, pp. 454-464, doi:10.37284/eajis.8.1.3185.

## INTRODUCTION

University administration involves diverse roles requiring various skills to manage academic environments effectively (Adu-Oppong, 2014). In Ugandan public universities, administrators include senior officials (e.g., vice-chancellors, registrars) and mid-level personnel (e.g., deans, heads of departments) (Duze, 2012). These roles form a critical framework for university governance, overseeing budgets, personnel, and policies while fostering coordination through teamwork (Adu-Oppong, 2014). Effective administrators must demonstrate skills such as active listening, decision-making, and critical judgment to maintain performance standards (Ogunsaju, 2001).

Mid-level administrators face challenges like managing growing student populations, adopting technologies, and meeting workplace expectations (Smethers, 2020). The decentralized structure of universities increases role complexity, granting autonomy to academic units (Aniagboso, 2019). These administrators are tasked with achieving institutional goals efficiently despite high workloads (Nwafor, 1998). Research highlights burnout due to intense demands, low recognition, and limited financial support (Mamdani, 2019; Muriisa, 2018; Shen, 2018; White-Lewis, 2022). This study investigates the experiences of mid-level administrators in Ugandan public universities, focusing on their multiple roles and associated conflicts. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the strain-based experiences of mid-level administrators regarding

their workload? How do time-based constraints affect their workplace responsibilities? What behavioural challenges arise when executing multiple roles?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Role Conflict Theory, which posits that individuals managing multiple roles face conflicts due to competing demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn & Rosenthal, 1964). The theory identifies three conflict types:

- Time-based conflict: Time allocated to one role disrupts another (e.g., work reducing family time).
- Strain-based conflict: Stress from one role impairs another (e.g., work stress affecting personal life).
- Behavior-based conflict: Behaviors from one role negatively impact another (e.g., workplace frustration influencing family interactions).

These conflicts, including intra-role (within a role) and inter-role (between roles), are relevant to administrators juggling academic and personal responsibilities (Beauchamp & Bray, 2001; Gale, 2008; Tubre & Collins, 2001). The theory explains how role conflicts lead to stress and reduced performance.

Recent studies highlight increasing administrative workloads in universities, driven by tasks like documentation and policy implementation (Kinman & Wray, 2020; Tight, 2010). Academic administrators, often also lecturers, face competing demands from teaching, research, and administrative duties, leading to stress and health

issues (Shah *et al.*, 2018; Shaiful *et al.*, 2017). Role conflict occurs when time spent on one role reduces availability for another, creating tension (Borman *et al.*, 2003; Jex & Britt, 2008). Administrative roles, though secondary to academic duties, often take precedence, sidelining teaching and research (Dill, 1982; Light, 1974; Winter & Sarros, 2002). Senior academics increasingly handle administrative tasks, reducing time for core duties (Bamberger & Hasgall, 1995; Dogan *et al.*, 2020). These roles require significant care, contributing to mental fatigue and emotional exhaustion (Li & Zhu, 2019; Liu, 2020; Sestili *et al.*, 2018). In Uganda, understaffing and resource constraints exacerbate role conflicts (Mamdani, 2019). Role theory explains work-life balance challenges, where multiple roles create incompatible expectations (Fuegen *et al.*, 2004). Expansionist perspectives suggest multiple roles can enhance well-being if supported structurally (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted a constructivist approach, focusing on participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). Conducted at Makerere and Kyambogo Universities, it targeted mid-level administrators (e.g., deans, bursars) due to their multifaceted roles. Twenty participants were purposively selected for their expertise. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face and online during the COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews were audio-recorded, with brief notes for follow-up. Pseudonyms ensured confidentiality. Thematic analysis categorized data into time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based themes, aligned with Role Conflict Theory. Transcripts were coded immediately, with direct quotations reflecting participants' voices, de-identified for anonymity.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings are organized into three themes addressing the research questions. The findings demonstrate that the time allocated to their official contract to

perform their roles was insufficient. Most of the participants complained that while the stipulated time was between 8 am and 5 pm, they were overwhelmed by many responsibilities, and at times, they had to carry office workloads home. This implies that midlevel administrators cannot perform several roles at a given time, because a certain role is incomplete during official working hours. As such, midlevel administrators opt to work beyond official working hours and are prevented from doing other roles outside work. For example, the comments of the participants from both universities note that they did not do enough for official work, failed to save time for personal investments, failed in social life, and did not get time for their families. As stated by participants (P5, P6, P7, P10, P16) For instance; Participant 5 “... *I spend most of the time here sometimes I can even fail to attend the meeting of my Sacco's sometimes you find you are tired you can't meet other obligations*” (P5, personal communication, 2021). Participant 6 “.... *I fail to get time to do my projects because much of the time I am concentrating on work....*” (P6, personal communication, 2021). Participant 7 “..... *Some of us are getting to retirement without our development reasons, we are always occupied from Monday to Friday....*” (P7, personal communication, 2021). Participant 10: “*I can't balance work and social life! We miss functions and work on weekends. We are fully engaged even on public holidays*” (P10, personal communication, 2021). Participant 16 “*Even the family misses you, you leave when they are still in bed, then when back in the evening, you find some others gone to bed*” (P16, personal communication, 2021).

Furthermore, participants also demonstrated that the roles of midlevel administrators are relatively broad and require a higher degree of care and patience. This leaves their frame of mind in a constant state of tension; they end up sacrificing the time they have for other social activities or obligations outside work. Participants note that they fail to attend to obligations outside work, they attend to work

outside their budget activities, and because of deadline pressures, they end up leaving workplaces at night (P1, P2, P4, and P5) For instance; Participant 5 “... I spend most of the time here sometimes I can even fail to attend the meeting of my SACCOs sometimes you find you are tired you can't meet other obligation” (P5, personal communication, 2021). Participant 1 “A lot, even actually a day is not enough because you come here in the morning, students are there and you have not budgeted for them, then you have to go to the meeting, it's a lot” (P1, personal communication, 2021). Participant 2 “I can be here from 9 am to 5 pm, approximately ten hours sometimes; we can leave here at night” (P2, personal communication, 2021). Participant 4: “I can say between 8 am to 4 pm, sometimes I go beyond work hours to meet the deadline” (P4, personal communication, 2021). These revelations indicate that midlevel administrators work beyond stipulated working hours. They were exceeding working hours to meet targets and deadlines because of having multiple tasks allocated to them and thus, missed out on other obligations. This uncertain situation among midlevel administrators breeds negative sentiments and mental discomfort. The work overload and multiple roles and responsibilities were exhibited by midlevel administrators. It is part of the job expectations for midlevel administrators to accomplish their university core tasks, though participants demonstrated that they are expected to fix everything, all tasks are loaded onto them, and they are expected to go to the extent of not opening a PC to work. This may cause emotional challenges with potential emotional exhaustion and burnout (P5, P8, P11 and P16) Participant 11 says; “All people think I can fix everything, they load all on me. Sometimes I don't have the energy to open the computer or to work” (P11, personal communication, 2021). Participant 1 explains “Sometimes, not always, but sometimes you feel overwhelmed. Now, the period we're going into, we get admission letters, issue them, you have work, and at the same time, students want to register. So,

*you feel there are so many things to handle in one day, and they are all important because all those admission letters are going to be kept here, and you have other things to do, and like you have to register students, you have to record minutes so you have to be overwhelmed.”* (P1, personal communication, 2021).

Findings from this study also demonstrated that midlevel administrators conflicted their employee roles with family roles. This was because, in addition to their described roles, there are also other unstated responsibilities embedded in the stipulated administration duties. Yet each role work imposes demands on time, energy, and commitment, which can be exhausting and hectic. For instance, Participants 16 and 8 expressed that time pressures of administrative work make it impossible for midlevel administrators to perform other duties outside their responsibilities. In their words, “...Even the family misses you, you leave when they are still in bed, then when back in the evening, some others have gone to bed” (P16, personal communication, 2021). Similarly, Participant 8 argued that continuously, they continuously exceed the time that is stipulated in their contract to meet deadlines. “....I even exceed sometimes I live at 8.00 pm, though my appointment letter indicates from 8-5 pm....” (P8, personal communication, 2021). The Expression Participant 5 advances indicate that co-workers still follow administrators through phone calls outside working hours to inquire about unfinished tasks; “...so when am home some people call me asking some questions here and there, but I don't take work at home so...” (P5, personal communication, 2021).

Strain-based Multiple Role Experiences of Midlevel Administrators. As postulated in role conflict theory, Strain-based conflict occurs when one role affects performance in the other domain. For example, an individual may have so much work that they fail to take care of his/her family responsibilities. This is a common occurrence among university midlevel administrators,

especially in the peak seasons of their work, which at times raises conflicting demands in their other roles. Findings from this study revealed that participants experienced strain in the execution of their duties. The workload was too much and it interfered with other roles outside the work at the university. Resource constraints, such as limited time, further exacerbate these conflicts (Hecht, 2001). For instance, Participant 19's expressions revealed that because of the multiple roles they have to handle as administrators, other roles outside the university stressed them to the core; *"Yes, I have especially with the crash program of school, family, and work. It wasn't friendly at all, you find that you have so much to do, before you internalize the first stressor, that another one comes. You keep pushing and pulling through, and you see that you don't get anywhere, you address anything, and you are still stressed, and nothing is moving. I know I have burnout, whereby even the brain couldn't think anymore"* (P19, personal communication, 2021). Participant 1 Strengthens the revelation that *"At one time, you can get overwhelmed, especially when it is peak season here, we leave at 10 pm, so the activities you find you are not in touch with properly, too. So, that peak season is always where I find challenges, so you find you cannot connect well with other activities"* (P1, personal communication, 2021). Similarly, participant 9 indicated that midlevel administrators accumulated fatigue at work because of having multiple roles, and as such, they need to relax, exercise, and build strength at home because, unlike work, home chores cannot be delegated. *"You are fatigued and tired, you have to prioritize relax, network, walk around, and entertain people, this helps build strength for home. Home is private, you don't delegate..."* (P9, personal communication, 2021). Additionally, it was apparent that midlevel administrators are strained by being expected to fix a lot of things. They encountered multiple roles during work that they did not have on schedule. Participant 1 expressed that a day is not enough for work. While they arrive for scheduled work, other roles come

along the way and they attend to them as well; *"... A lot even actually a day is not enough because you come here in the morning students are there and you have not budgeted for them, then you have to go to the meeting it's a lot."* (P1, personal communication, 2021). Further, Participants demonstrated that, though they expressed having mechanisms for handling such strain-related role conflicts arising out of their multiple roles, they prioritized their work more, arguing that it pays them. For example, Participant 2 expressed that minimizing issues both at work and home keeps an administrator organized; *"It is good to minimize issues at home and then minimize issues at work. If you have issues, they will disorganize you and you won't work"* (P2, personal communication, 2021). Similarly, Participant 3 indicated that priority is given to the work that pays them, even though there is private work; *"At one point you find you are not so much efficient especially this work here. I give my office at least 100% because this is what pays me yes, I have others but it's my priority because it helps me when am seated."* (P3, personal communication, 2021). Further, these issues raised by participants, revealed that the failure to draw a straight line between multi-administrator roles and other roles demonstrates an ambiguous nature of duties which emotionally affects midlevel administrators' execution of their roles. Participant Part 10 confirms this; *"You are attached in school, you end up having two or three bosses, they give you assignments interchangeably, and sometimes they give assignments at the same time and expect you to deliver"* (P10, personal communication, 2021). Midlevel administrators, besides having multiple roles at work, expressed having multiple roles to attend to outside work, such as family, church, and clan meetings, among others. Participants demonstrated that they were torn between their jobs and handling other chores. For instance, Participant 14 shared that; *"I have a family, I am husband, I lead a fellowship at church, leadership in my clan and the Social work association, country coordinator East African Social Work Association Any family*

roles as a mother, to take care of children and taking care of the husband, when I come back and go to check in kitchen, finding out how food tastes, if they have showered or ironed..." (P14, personal communication, 2021). Similarly, Participant 7's expressions indicated that the work overload and multiple roles experienced by midlevel administrators overlapped with other activities outside work. *"They cannot balance, but you try to. I reach home at 9:00 pm, so you find a situation that you cannot balance so I try to do the home issues during the weekend, like Saturday and Sunday..."* At one time, you can get overwhelmed, especially when it is a peak season here, we leave at 10 pm" (P7, personal communication, 2021). To cope with conflicts that come with multiple roles of midlevel administrators, participants in the study revealed that they adapt to cope with the demands of the job. They argued that this adaptation causes them to respond better to the demands of the other roles. For instance, Participant 3 notes, *"Outside activities most especially affect positively my work because I borrow information, I can see how to handle"* (P3, personal communication, 2021). In the form of coping, Participant 3 expressed that they give much attention to the job because it pays them. At one point, you find you are not so efficient, especially with this work here. I give my office at least 100% because this is what pays me, yes, I have others, but it's my priority because it helps me when I am seated (P3, personal communication, 2021).

**Behaviour-Based Role Conflict of Midlevel Administrator.** As guided by the Role Conflict Theory, behaviour-based conflicts happen when behaviour transferred from one domain affects the role in the other domain. For example, if a person has fought at his/her home, this may lead to transferring anger to the work domain. This study, therefore, sought to find out the experiences of midlevel university administrators regarding this issue. Findings revealed that midlevel university administrators experienced difficulty in switching from one role to another. For example, switching from an administrator to a lecturer to a counsellor

role was not easy, and this led to participants behaving in the same way but in different roles. For instance, Participant 11 notes that the demands of different roles are different and administrators release this but fail to adjust *".... Switching between administration and counselling is a challenge and leads to role conflict. It is not easy to change behaviour from one role to another..."* (P11, personal communication, 2021). Similarly, participant 16 confesses that *"Being an administrator and counsellor, I find it difficult to switch from tough administration to a counsellor who should be understanding and accepting."* (P16, personal communication, 2021).

Further still, expressions of study participants showed that it is difficult for mid-level administrators to switch from one role to another and change their attitude as well. For instance, participant 14 said this is frustrating: *"It is sometimes frustrating and tiring. People expect me to act as if I am in the other role and yet you are doing a different role"* (P14, personal communication, 2021). Participant 19's expressions also revealed the difficulty administrators have in switching between roles; *"it is difficult to separate your behaviour between roles because you are still the same person, so one role is affected"* (P19, personal communication, 2021). Participant 18 also indicates that it is an urgent issue that can affect their attitude at work. *"When one has issues at home, let's say a child is sick, it interferes with the attitude at work..."* (P18, personal communication, 2021). Midlevel administrators also experience emotional exhaustion because of multiple roles at their place. The accumulated stress and anger are at times displaced to family members or work colleagues who are naive to their routine. For instance, participant 19 said, *"I become aggressive with my daughter. I expected her to understand what I was going through. I broke down; I felt I had no will to continue with my studies. I felt a bit of depression because it is too much for one person to handle, and you have deadlines to meet."* (P19, personal communication, 2021). Participant 11

expresses similar concerns that they displace their stress into other people; *“I feel emotionally overwhelmed; you find yourself carrying emotions to other people”* (P11, personal communication, 2021).

Additionally, participant 9's comments indicate that emotions carried forward from other roles affect their performance of their job. If I have a home and maybe I have had a disagreement with my hubby, or if I leave a baby not well, my performance is affected. (P9, personal communication, 2021). Findings also show that midlevel administrators experienced that role conflicts can lead to a sense of uncertainty, stress, and dissatisfaction. While multiple roles sparked the aforementioned, participants noted that it was the family that suffered most because university tasks are carried home; on the contrary, home tasks do not affect work. Participant 13 notes: *“Yes, sometimes I feel overwhelmed; sometimes you jump out of the meeting before the end to join another one so that I'm available for both. I feel burned out, and I feel mentally exhausted. Work interferes with family, and most of the time, family suffers most. I carry work home and have no time for my family. Family affecting work is usually rare, especially when a family member is sick, but it's rare”*. (P13, personal communication, 2021).

To add weight to the failure to adjust and switch roles Participant 17: reveals how they carry work home and end up neglecting family; *“....Sometimes, I come from work with a lot of work, and I fail to give time to my son because I have to finish.”* (P17, personal communication, 2021). Participant 10 indicates that unless a child is sick, they do not carry emotions to work and vice versa; they juggle multiple roles of their work quietly. *“Being a man, I try not to think about a home unless I'm called that the child is sick, I don't mix family emotions with work and vice versa”* (P10, personal communication, 2021). From the expressions above, the researcher can take the view that the administrators transfer behaviours from one domain

and affect the role in the other domains. The experiences of midlevel administrators demonstrated that they transfer especially work-related emotions to their home and to colleagues. This affects their work performance but also their family is not spared, which is quite unfortunate. The findings of this study revealed that University administrators had difficulty in finding the right balance between work and private life. Regardless of age, gender, or marital status, all participants shared experiences of leaving work past official working hours, they did not find time to attend to private work, and missing out on their social work because certain roles were incomplete during working hours. This, in turn, caused them stress with the consistency of this stressor; chronic job burnout is a possible outcome. The results of this study are consistent with other studies like Amofo *et al.* (2014), Barck-Holst *et al.* (2021), and Garcia *et al.* (2020), who investigated factors associated with burnout and identified long working hours and not finding the right balance between work and private life a significant causes of Job burnout. Similarly, in this study, long working hours were cited as a work-related stressor that can contribute to burnout. Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that the job responsibilities of university administrators are relatively broad and require a higher degree of care and patience from them. This leaves their frame of mind in a constant state of tension; they end up sacrificing the time they have for other social activities or other obligations outside work. This is in line with previous studies like Gilbert *et al.* (2019), Lok *et al.* (2019 and Hecht (2001) who posited that role conflict occurs when an individual's capacity is hampered while trying to fulfil more roles. They add that the inadequacy of resources like time makes it impossible to fulfil their mandate and end up stressed. Similar to this study, university administrators had complex and multiple roles that did not fit within the time allocated; moreover, they complained of being understaffed. Findings also revealed that Men and women experience burnout. Negotiating Personal and

Professional Lives reveals that multiple roles affected them in their work in many different ways. Male participants in this study revealed that they spend most of their time at the university working. Their female counterparts indicated a lack of enough time in the day to complete their tasks, missed their families, and were generally they are expected to fix everything. This may imply that female administrators thought much about administrating and the home, while males provided at home and concentrated at work unless there was an emergency. In line with other studies, Livingstone & Judge (2008) hold that Women who hold traditional role orientation tend to think that the family role is a priority over work. He further notes that these two roles require equal attention, and this increases guilt if they are not able to meet the demands. Erlanson *et al.* (2013) support this, noting gender-specific burnout patterns, while Huri *et al.* (2016) suggest women may exhibit lower burnout risk in some contexts. The research also agrees with Erlanson (2013), who opines that men suffer from specific types of burnout. For example, women have burnout manifested through emotional exhaustion, and for men, it is through a sense of depersonalization. Like in this study, gender was affected, and they reacted, though females seemed affected more. On the contrary, Huri M *et al.* (2016), who analyzed the distribution of responses based on gender, noted that women presented a significantly lower risk of burnout. Further findings in this study revealed that university administrators who were married experienced work-family role conflicts, unlike their unmarried counterparts, though the unmarried experienced a host of strains of role conflicts and burnout. This implies that the challenges of role conflict and burnout do not discriminate, though the extent is higher among married as compared to unmarried administrators. Other findings from the study revealed that university administrators who were below forty years old indicated that compared to those above forty, time is not enough to complete their tasks either.

However, those above forty were calm and organized and acknowledged that though there were role conflicts, they were manageable given creativity and proper coping mechanisms to adapt to changing circumstances. This finding is in agreement with earlier research (for example, Bar-Zasid, 2003; Lauderdale, 1982; Maslach, 2001; McNeely, 1992) which postulates that young employees, particularly those under 30, are more prone to burnout than older employees. These researchers suggested that older workers are more stable, mature, and balanced in their perspectives about work-life balance. Like in this study, university administrators above 40 years of age showed similar attributes. More, findings in this study revealed that university administrators had a lot of work and failed to take care of their other responsibilities. Participants revealed that the workload was too much and interfered with other roles outside the work in the university. The results proved the Role conflict theory by Kahn & Rosenthal (1964) and Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) that when an individual is engaged in multiple roles, such as mother/father, manager, and teacher, and these are all demanding, they impact their performance of their jobs. In this study, university administrators experienced these occurrences, especially in the peak seasons of their work. During this season, other domains are impacted. In line with other studies, Afifah *et al.* (2015) and Amilin (2017) revealed that role conflict negatively affected accountants' performance and was negatively associated with auditor performance, respectively. Further, the Results showed that university administrators' roles were ambiguous. The failure to draw a straight line between the administrator's roles and other roles and other duties affected administrators emotionally. The findings concur with a study by Pepper & Giles (2015), who noted that, given the breadth and depth of their roles and responsibilities, academic deans most often work in an environment replete with role conflict and ambiguity.

In a related study by Azoulay (2020), researchers observed that educators feel emotionally exhausted due to having to handle work and academic as well as other duties at work that are outside their scope of work. In addition, the findings of this study showed that university administrators had difficulties switching from one role to another. For example, switching from an administrator to a lecturing role and then to a teacher was not easy, and this led to participants behaving in the same way but in different roles. This concurs with confirmations by Kahn & Rosenthal (1964) and Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) that behaviour-based conflicts happen when behaviour transferred from one domain affects the role in the other domain. The results of this study are in agreement, as university administrators confirmed that displacing their emotions spills over from domain to domain.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Findings on the behaviour-based strain theme revealed that most participants were below forty years old, experienced difficulty switching from one role to another and reported gender role conflict in various roles. For instance, switching from an administrator to a lecturing role was not easy, and this led to participants behaving similarly across different roles. Mid-level Administrators in Uganda face numerous challenges due to stress, burnout, and work-life imbalances. Institutions should improve training programs, clarify roles, expectations, and responsibilities, and provide resources to alleviate role conflicts. Future research could investigate coping strategies and techniques to manage and address stress effectively and promote work-life balance.

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