




## Exploring the Perspectives of Faculty Members and PhD Students on Career Prospects and Professional Development: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Universities are academic centers that induce changes in society and students and professors are the most important elements of both the university and society. Therefore, understanding their views about career prospects is of particular importance. Besides, professional development refers to improving the job position along with increasing responsibility. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the views of PhD students and faculty members of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences about career prospects and professional development using a qualitative study approach.

**Methods:** This study was conducted using a content analysis approach. The participants were faculty members and PhD students of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences in the academic year 2016-2017. They were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. In total, 23 PhD students were interviewed at Hamadan University of Medical Sciences. Each interview lasted from 30 to 45 minutes.

**Results:** The two main themes (concern for the future and meeting individual needs) and four subthemes were extracted from the PhD students' data and two main themes (interest in pursuing studies and the inconsistency and inefficiency of educational and professional systems) and three subthemes emerged from the faculty members' data.

**Conclusion:** Given the insights from this study, managers of the health system are recommended to pay special attention to ensuring students' career prospects through successful planning for training capable human resources, reforming the educational structure fitting the work environment, teaching entrepreneurial skills, and creating effective employment conditions. Besides, faculty members are among the components of the educational structure of the country, and paying attention to their progress is essential to increase their productivity. Therefore, it is important to recognize the factors affecting their job satisfaction and progress and their optimal performance.

**Keywords:** Faculty members' perspectives, PhD students, Career prospects, Professional progress, Content analysis

## Introduction

**E**mployment is one of the most basic life activities and people should choose a job to pay for their living expenses (1). Generally, success in any career or achievement of a goal requires a positive attitude toward that career or goal. Understanding attitudes can be useful both for predicting social behaviors and for interpreting them (2,3).

Concern about career prospects is one of the problems among young people who have graduated and are studying in Iran. This problem is not of course typical of Iran. A study at the University of Minnesota showed that most medical students were concerned about declining physicians' position and income. In the UK, most medical students were unsure about their career prospects, and in France, 60% of medical students believed that the number of the medical staff exceeded society's needs (4).

Besides, professional development or promotion is one of the most important issues among employed people. Career development refers to the stages in which a person's job position and performance change and improve, establishing a better relationship with the organization's management. Many factors are effective in professional development, including individual, family, and community factors, job support, and communication with colleagues, etc., which can facilitate career advancement (5). In medical universities, the process of professional development of faculty members including physicians, paramedics, and other clinical and basic science members has positive effects on improving students' academic level, motivating students, and increasing the efficiency of services offered to society, not to mention

promoting the public health. Therefore, university administrators need to recognize obstacles and problems facing professional development and organizational learning (6).

A review of research showed that a few descriptive and analytical studies have addressed some of the factors affecting job motivation and professional development (7,8). Quantitative studies are researcher-oriented and only reflect part of the reality, while the objective perception of real experiences of people directly involved in the phenomenon and the study of the real world from different perspectives is a more accurate measure of the concept of communication. Given the subjectivity of the perspectives of graduate students and faculty members, there are not adequate qualitative studies for a deeper understanding of the issue. Therefore, a better understanding of the views of faculty members and Ph.D. students about career prospects and professional development can be very useful in education and higher education policy in the country and it can contribute to perceiving some of the challenges and facilitators of job motivation and professional development. Accordingly, the present study aimed to investigate the views of faculty members and Ph.D. students about career prospects and professional development at the University of Medical Sciences.

## Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using a conventional content analysis method. This type of analysis is usually used in studies that aim to describe a phenomenon as well as to obtain direct and explicit information, without imposing predetermined criteria or

theories (9). Since uncertainty about career prospects and professional development is prevalent among Ph.D. students in Iran, this qualitative study attempted to obtain direct and non-biased data from Ph.D. students and related practitioners such as faculty members to help better understand this issue.

The population in the present study included people who had rich information about the subject. To this end, the participants were selected using purposive sampling from among faculty members who had at least two years of experience and also Ph.D. students (who have completed at least two semesters). The data were collected using semi-structured interviews. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted upon the participants' agreement in a private room at Hamadan University of Medical Sciences. The interviews began with demographic questions. The participants were asked to talk about the purpose of studying at the Ph.D. program and working as a faculty member. Some general questions were as follows:

- How do you assess your current employment status?
- What impact will the state of your job market have on your current and future life?
- If people have encouraged you to continue education, what was the reason for their encouragement?
- What are the challenges to your future career and professional development?
- What factors can play a role in facilitating your future career and professional development?

Afterward, the participants were asked if they have any suggestions to improve their future career status and professional development. Additional questions were also asked for more information. For example, in addition to the above questions, the participant was asked to further explain the challenges or facilitators of job motivation and professional development. At the time of the interviews, some explanations were provided to the participants about the objectives of the research project and they were assured of the confidentiality of the information. Besides, informed written consent was obtained from the participants. The transcripts of the interviews were returned to the participants and they were asked to review them for any possible discrepancies. The participants were assured that the information received would be kept strictly confidential. All interviews were conducted individually and face to face by two members of the research team.

To comply with the requirements for ethical considerations, the research objectives and procedures were explained to the participants with the researcher presenting an introduction letter. Besides, oral and written informed consents were obtained from the participants and they were ensured of the privacy and confidentiality of their data. They were also told that they were free to leave the study if they wished so. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded upon the participants' permission and their recorded voices and information were kept in an encrypted file by the researcher.

Upon completing the interviews, they were transcribed verbatim. To ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, the recorded audio of the interviews was heard again and the

transcripts were reviewed. In the next step, the transcripts were analyzed using a conventional content analysis method to extract the related themes and subthemes using the content analysis approach proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (10) with the following steps: (1) Transcribing the interviews and reviewing them several times to come up with a general understanding of the content, (2) Extracting semantic units and categorizing them as subthemes, (3) Summarizing and classifying the themes and labeling them, (4) Clustering the subthemes based on their similarities and differences, and (5) Selecting a suitable label covering the themes. The data were saturated with Totally, 14 interviews with faculty members, and 23 interviewed with PhD students were performed. First, the first-level coding was performed. To this end, the statements containing the information relevant to the

research questions were selected. After the initial coding and to ensure the credibility of the findings, the data were reviewed through the member check, immersion, and prolong engagement with the data. Besides, to ensure the accuracy of the data, they were peer checked by two people experienced in qualitative research by codifying the interviews and reviewing the themes. Since diversity in the selection of participants increases the conformability of the data, the participants were selected with maximum variation in terms of gender, age, and academic positions from different departments of basic and clinical sciences.

### Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the participants' demographic data:

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants**

Demographic variables		Participants	
Variables	Categories	Students	Faculty members
Age (year)	Average	33	43
Gender	Male	27.8%	30%
	Female	72.2%	70%
Marital status	Single	38.9%	10%
	Married	61.1%	90%
Employment	Non-employed	61.1%	-
	Official	33.3%	70%
	Contractual	5.6%	30%
Department	Clinical	50.3%	60%
	Basic science	49.7%	40%

The analysis of the data collected from the Ph.D. students' interviews revealed two main themes including the *concern for the future* (with the subthemes of fear of unemployment and low self-efficacy) and *meeting individual needs* (with the subthemes of socio-economic status and interest in pursuing studies). Furthermore,

the two main themes of *interest in pursuing studies* and *inconsistency and inefficiency of the educational system* (with subthemes of the inefficiency of the university education system and inefficiency of the professional system) were extracted from the data collected from the faculty members as shown in Table 2:

**Table 2. The themes and subthemes related to career prospects and professional development**

Codes	Subcategories	Categories	Themes
Over-enrollment of students, under-employment of faculty members, lack of new job opportunities	Inconsistency between employment and marketplace needs	Fear of unemployment	Concern for the future
The importance of employment for people	The need for employment	Student low self-efficacy	
Not using new technology in education	Lack of skills required for work		
Inconsistency of university courses with workplace expectations	Interest in pursuing studies	Pursuing studies	Meeting individual needs
Promoting knowledge in society, the special place of educated people in the family and society	Earning money, improving socioeconomic status	Socioeconomic status	
Need to earn income to make a living, job security, guaranteeing the future, improving job opportunities	Challenges of the field of study	The inefficiency of the educational system	The inconsistency and inefficiency of educational and professional systems
People's misconceptions of some fields of study, the gap between theory and practice, gender-based admission in some fields, high ratio of students to professors	Challenges of the professional system	The inefficiency of the professional system	
Lack of job independence, lack of job motivation, lack of technology, high workplace expectations, a higher employment rate for people with lower academic levels, lack of infrastructure and facilities			
Lack of priority for professional skills, a higher degree means higher quality	Challenges of professional skills		

**A: The analysis of the students' perspectives**

**Concern for the future**

One of the issues that make people unmotivated is the uncertainty in their career prospects. The Ph.D. students in this study were worried about their career prospects, which originated from two factors: fear of unemployment and low self-efficacy. One of the participants stated, *"The job market in our field is not very good. Currently, due to the increase in university admission capacity, we do not have a good job market and I am very worried about my future. At the moment I do not know at all where I want to be employed"*. Another student stated, *"I have little hope that I will be employed, and this hope is fading as time passes"* (Student No. 1, 30 years old, single, unemployed).

**Fear of unemployment**

The analysis of the students' views indicated

that factors such as inconsistency between recruitment procedures and labor market needs have caused them to worry about the future. For instance, a 29-year-old single, unemployed student stated that he/she was worried about his/her "low self-efficacy". Other students stated that high expectations of educated people in the workplace and the lack of skills needed for work are other factors that have caused them to worry about the future. *"Most of the courses in the master's programs are offered theoretically. When we started our practical project course, we realized that there were many differences between the material we learned at the university and the skills we needed to do things practically. Therefore, the courses were not practical. There should be more focus to incorporate more practical activities into courses and research projects. This is an important challenge for employment that all students face"* (Student No. 2, 32 years old, single, unemployed).

### **Meeting individual needs**

According to the participants, satisfying individual needs was one of the most effective factors for seeking employment. This theme was categorized into two subthemes of socioeconomic status and interest in pursuing studies.

“Interest in the field of study” was highlighted by the participants as one of the important factors underlying academic development and progress, while lack of interest in the field of study causes frustration and fatigue for pursuing studies at higher levels and seeking employment. Furthermore, it was shown that the interest in pursuing studies is promoted by encouragement and support from others and the need of the community for higher levels of knowledge:

“My goal in pursuing my academic studies is to improve my academic level, as well as my social and professional status, which will be improved by higher academic studies” (Student No. 4, 36 years old, employed).

Achieving a higher socioeconomic status was also one of the strongest factors for pursuing studies:

“I thought I would get a better job as I pursue my academic studies at higher levels” (Student No. 3, 33 years old, single, unemployed).

### **B: The analysis of the faculty members’ perspectives**

The two themes extracted from the faculty members’ interview data were the *interest in pursuing studies* and the *inconsistency and inefficiency of the system*.

#### **Interest in pursuing studies**

The most important reasons for the faculty members’ interest in continuing their

education were to increase their knowledge, achieve higher academic ranks, achieve a better social status, desire to be employed in university, encouragement by the family, and having better communication with people, as evident in previous studies in the literature.

Concerning the interest in pursuing studies, one of the professors stated, “*They are always encouraging us to continue our studies, and I advise all students to continue their studies to increase the quality of services that should be provided*” (Professor No. 1)

#### **The inconsistency and inefficiency of the system**

“*Educators train students to increase their theoretical knowledge rather than their expertise and practical skills. What students learn is significantly different from what they actually do in practice*”. This theme was subcategorized into the two subthemes of the *inefficiency of the educational system* and the *inefficiency of the professional system*:

**The inefficiency of the educational system:** According to one of the participants, “*Increasing the student admission capacities at universities has become problematic. There is no balance between student admission and the job market*” (Professor No. 2).

**The inefficiency of the professional system:** One of the participants stated, “*The conflict between education and the workplace makes people inefficient and reduces their self-confidence forcing them to leave their job*” (Professor No. 3).

### **Discussion**

The present study identified different themes from the perspectives of the faculty members and students about career prospects and

professional development. One of the main themes that emerged in this study was the students' concerns for the future. Many students drop out or continue to study desperately after being admitted to university due to dissatisfaction with their field of study. Developing effective programs to optimize the admission procedures for students and ensure their future plays a great role in the development and progress of the country. Besides, providing education for students based on their internal motivations and talents is one of the most important tasks of the country's planners.

Lack of academic and professional motivation in people will lead to worries about the future. One of the issues that make people unmotivated is the uncertainty associated with the future of their job, and the question most frequently coming into their mind is where they are employed after graduation (11). A positive attitude towards job prospects brings job motivation (12).

Admission of students without scientific planning and attention to job capacities in society will lead to feelings of frustration and lack of job motivation in young graduates as suggested by Jamali and Ghalenoei's study (13). It is valuable to know students' views and opinions about their career prospects. It is also necessary to identify the related factors and take effective actions to improve the quality of health professions, program planning, and policies. Furthermore, recognizing the problems faced by students concerning their career prospects is one of the duties of the educational system (14). One of the factors leading to future job worries is the lack of adequate funding and lack of attention to students' problems, which can increase the problems and create various mental and educational disorders for students

and some difficulties for the country's educational system. Such negligence can result in the waste of human resources and a decline in the quality of human resources (15-17).

Another theme that emerged from the Ph.D. students' data was the interest in continuing studies, which can be attributed to several factors including earning a decent income and encouragement and support by others, as highlighted in a study by Nejat et al (18). Parsa et al. showed that the most important reasons for continuing studies among faculty members were to promote knowledge, achieve higher academic ranks, achieve better social status, desire to be employed in university, family advice, and have better communication with people (19).

Moreover, one of the most important conditions for becoming a professional is to put theoretical materials into practice and to have a correct performance. Similarly, Khodaei et al. pointed out the gap between the theoretical knowledge presented in educational systems and the performance required for a profession (20). Therefore, providing a solution and making educational planning to bridge this gap seems necessary.

Another theme that emerged in this study was the faculty members' interest in continuing their studies as one of the important factors in scientific development and promotion that can contribute to promoting the social status and improving their quality of life. Parsa et al. showed that improving the quality of life is positively correlated to the professional development of university professors (19).

The results of the present study suggested that the faculty members' concerns about their career prospects lead to low self-

efficacy in the workplace. This can affect the career prospects of these people. Similarly, the result of a study indicated that the enhancement of the self-efficacy of faculty members in educational settings will increase their professional development and improve the educational level of the university (5). If faculty members have a high level of academic development, then we can expect continuous quality improvement in various activities of the university. The professional development of faculty members refers to the skills and knowledge that are created as a result of personal and professional development and the outcomes of such development are reflected in higher levels of knowledge, promotion of teaching practices, and also promotion of students' learning outcomes (21). Gitlin et al. (22) showed that factors underlying the development of faculty members include participation in projects and gaining experience in educational, research, and management programs. Other studies highlighted regular professional interaction (23), increased participation in programs held based on the teacher-student model (24), and holding briefing and training courses for career development, supporting professional identity, and creating competition as the sources of professional development for university professors (25). Ghorrooneh et al. conducted a mixed qualitative-quantitative study on 283 faculty members of the University of Tehran and concluded that the important components for the development of faculty members included educational, research, personal, service, and organizational development and growth (26). Accordingly, faculty members are expected to develop the capacity to respond to the needs of the community, students, and their social role.

One of the limitations of this study is that its findings cannot be generalized to other settings due to the qualitative nature of the study. Besides, time restrictions and the participants' unwillingness to cooperate in the data collection process can restrict the generalizability of its findings. Accordingly, the researchers tried to conduct the interviews at the time and place selected by the participants. In cases where the audio recording was not permitted, the researchers only took notes. Furthermore, before the interviews, the significance of the study and the important roles of the participants in contributing to this study were explained to them.

### **Conclusion**

Managers of the health system should pay special attention to ensuring students' career prospects through effective planning for training capable human resources, reforming the educational structure fitting to the workplace expectations and requirements, teaching entrepreneurial skills, and creating suitable employment opportunities. Besides, faculty members are among the components of the educational structure of the country, and paying attention to their progress is essential to increase their productivity. Therefore, it is important to recognize the factors affecting their job satisfaction and progress and their optimal performance.

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