

Experiences of Academic Members About their Professional Challenges: a Content Analysis Qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Background: University faculty members of different disciplines in any country, by giving better quality services, will further accelerate the development of their respective countries. This study aims to explore the experiences of faculty members about their professional challenges. **Aim:** In this qualitative study, which was conducted in 2013, fifteen faculty members in the departments of clinical and basic sciences of Mazandaran university of Medical Sciences in northern Iran were chosen for semi-structured in-depth interviews by purposive sampling method. All tape-recorded data were fully transcribed and content analysis was performed. **Results:** After immersion and data analysis, three main themes were emerged including: "Imbalances in academic members' tasks in different areas", "Weakness of evaluation and promotion system" and "Failure to provide the infrastructure educational facilities". The main themes and sub-themes are explained by the help of participants' direct quotations. **Conclusions:** This study suggested that it is better to take effective measures to improve the faculty members' situation and therefore increase their efficiency, effectiveness and productivity.

Key words: Faculty members, Content analysis, Qualitative research, professional challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, faculty members are valuable assets to any community, play a very sensitive and fateful role in training experts and the result of their efforts is the development of human societies. In other words, faculty members make up the main body of each university and certainly are more important than the programs, activities, equipment and materials of an educational system. Universities of Medical Sciences need motivated professors, as one of the pillars of education, to teach students to be effective in promoting the level of community health (1, 2).

Faculty members have extensive duties in the area of education, research, medical services, executive activities and individual development. Promotion and performance evaluation is essential to gain necessary skills in order to play an effective role in any area (3, 4). A number of the world's most prestigious universities have identified three main tasks for the faculty members: education, research and service activities. In this way, in the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and Kansas State University, activities are implemented such as to promote the development, success and satisfaction of faculty members which in turn help to promote the university's mission (5, 6). For this reason 50-70% of academic members' tasks are attributed to education and 10-40% is specified to the areas of research projects and services. At the

University of California – Davis, six main tasks are considered: teaching, research, patient care, management, professional development and empowerment of faculty members (7). The University of Minnesota Medical School also adds civil sphere to these tasks (7). Furthermore, some of the Medical Schools consider the portfolio as a valid instrument for the evaluation of a faculty member's performance. A portfolio of a faculty member can include a description of his educational philosophy and goals, responsibilities, performance standards, course details, teaching techniques, activities and professional development (7).

In Iran's Universities of Medical Sciences, the integration of education and treatment plus the expanding scope of Sciences leads to the multiplicity and complexity of faculty duties which cause major challenges in the field of performance measurement of faculty members (8). It has shown that occupational stress on the number of faculty members at public universities is higher than the average (9). Increase of stress factors among faculty members of medical universities who are directly engaged in giving health care services to patients or are engaged in the education of students who will in turn undertake similar responsibilities in the future is far more disturbing (4, 10).

To the best of our knowledge, few studies conducted about the challenges encountered by the fac-

ulty members of professional medical universities; even though the authors' experiences are indicative of the faculty members' concerns about an increasing amount of their tasks and imbalances of description of responsibilities (11). Therefore, this study established to explain the views and experiences of faculty members of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences toward their professional challenges. Since quantitative research approaches cannot identify the depth of attitudes (12), thoughts, and details of participants' beliefs, this study adopted a qualitative approach based on interviews in an effort to present a wider view.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative research conducted from February to July 2013 to investigate the experiences of faculty members of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences using conventional content analysis approach. At first, sampling was based on purposeful sampling method and then was continued with a maximum variation. To achieve this goal, faculty members with differing academic levels (from instructor to Professor) in both basic and clinical sciences were included. Sampling was continued until data saturation. Inclusion criteria were to be a faculty member with at least 5 years of working experience. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth.

The main question in this research was: "When you evaluate the tasks assigned to the faculty members, what challenges do you see?" The following information was used in order to achieve a deeper exploration of main question (e.g., can you please explain more, or can you please explain it more clearly, and ...). Interviews lasted on average 50 (60-90) minutes in length and were conducted in person at the participants' workplaces and at their convenience. Data was collected until the limit of 15 samplings was reached and until no new theme emerged. Interviews were initially recorded with a digital recorder and in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, the recorded interviews were played again while simultaneously crosschecking with the transcription.

In order to collect accurate and reliable information, a systematic clear-cut method (7-step method) has been applied to process the data (13).

Step 1) The interviews were typed by using the Microsoft Word 2007 software and were organized for qualitative content analysis.

Step 2) Decision has been made about analysis unit. Analysis unit in this study has been considered all the interviews that have been large enough so as to consider all cases and small enough to be taken into account in the analysis process as a background for meaning unit. Before encoding, all the text has been read several times so that the researcher got familiar with the data thoroughly. Also the subjects that crossed the researcher's mind have been written beside the interviews.

Step 3) In this stage, designing for codes' develop-

ment and the categorization has been done. The categories should have been created by a priori method from raw data. Through this method, the researcher finds the capability of distinguishing between the categories by using continuous comparison. In qualitative content analysis, the categories have certain boundaries. The categories should have internal consistency and external consistency as much as possible and based on the differentiation between the categories; they should have the ability to define each of the category.

Step 4) Encoding has been done with respect to text sample. The best test to disclose and stabilize categories' definitions are data encoding based on a sample of data gained from the participants. A sample of the text has been converted into code form and then encoding stability has been controlled. It's worth to mention that in encoding process, explicit and implicit content has been considered.

Step 5) In this stage, all text has been encoded. When regarding encoding, a part of the written text had been agreed upon, all text was encoded. During encoding process, the researcher continually checked encoding to ensure the codes consistency among the research team members.

Step 6) In this stage, data stabilization has been dealt with. After encoding all the text, encoding stability has been controlled again. Human error such as exhaustion and or mistake in perception threaten encoding .Also the individuals' understanding of the classes and encoding rules might have changed over time and resulted in lack of stability. Codes control is a continuous process during content analysis.

Step 7) In this stage, the encoded data has been concluded and the classes have been created. In this manner that the researchers' concentration on the analysis has been at a higher level than that of the codes and based on embedding the primary codes in the potential and primary themes.

Each of the themes has been named and then in the themes review stage, a set of the proposed themes has been organized and those lacking sufficient informational content have been removed. And finally, the essence of each of the themes has been identified that has been named as the basic themes. Then the researcher has proposed some semantic structures based on the data conclusion. In this stage, the domains' specifications and dimensions have been determined .The categories relations have been identified, the themes internal concepts have been disclosed. And in the end, the researchers reached a common satisfaction with the data meaning and what has been manifested in the form of classes, content and their names.

In this study, careful measures were taken to guarantee the consistency and accuracy of the collected data, including: validity, reliability, credibility and transferability. To ensure the validity of the findings, enough time to collect the data was considered by the researchers as numerous back and forth were performed in order to preserve their long-term engage-

ments. Collecting a maximum variety of samples (faculty members from both clinical and basic science departments, with different academic levels, backgrounds, working history and activities) was tried in order to guarantee the data's accuracy. To ensure the credibility of findings from research participants member check method, immersion and prolong engagement with the data. Also to ensure the accuracy of the data requested from the peer check (people who had experience conducting qualitative research) to investigate the initial interview and coding and conceptually categories.

In terms of ethical considerations, permission to conduct and record the interviews was obtained from the University Chief Officers. All participants were informed about the purposes and methods of the study. They were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could refuse to participate at any time. Moreover, the participants were reassured that their responses would be kept confidential and that their identities would not be revealed in research reports or in published findings. Finally, informed consent was obtained from each individual who agreed to participate in the study. The Ethics Committee of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences approved the study protocol.

3. RESULTS

The results of the data analysis were summarized in three main themes: "Imbalances in different areas of activity", "Weakness of evaluation and promotion" and "Failure to provide the infrastructure required in attracting students". These themes can draw a better picture about the career challenges faced by the faculty members (Table 1). The findings of this study provide evidence to the perspective of the participants where a number of the latter's detailed answers to follow.

Sub-themes	Main themes
Excessive educational tasks	
Improper valuation of educational activities	
Quantitative-oriented in research	Imbalances in academic members' tasks in different areas
Lack of opportunities for personal development and self-renewal	
Lack of criterion for judgment and evaluation	Weakness of evaluation and promotion system
Lack of proper implementation of laws and regulations	
The weakness of the system and the administrative process	Failure to provide the infrastructure educational facilities
Obsolete equipment and facilities	

Table 1 – Emerged main themes and sub-themes

Imbalances in academic members' tasks in different areas

Excessive educational tasks

Participants in this study said that "Excessive educational tasks" presented them with professional challenges. In this regard one of the participants expressed:

"Our teaching time in faculty is time consuming and makes us tired. So now that the number of complementary courses has been increased also, two semesters of students are taken, number of units of learning are very high compared to previous years, even if we don't take in account theses units. Well, I think it's a bit too much, gets a bit boring, professors are under a lot of pressure".

And another participant said:

"Now if even though you don't want do some courses, they impose it on you, because no one is available every time and due to lack of teachers or whatever, you are obliged to take a series of units. Which is far more than our abilities: they expect more from us and load us with more that we can handle".

Improper valuation of educational activities

In this study, a number of participants expressed that "Improper valuation of educational activities" to be another challenge of their profession. In this regard, one of the faculty members said:

"I feel importance of teaching is not recognized and not dealt with accordingly, while you're thinking about going to class for two hours, talking about a highly specialized topic, takes a few hours to gather specialized content, because we're spending a lot of time at home for our work. It's not something that's limited to the time and day that we're here, after for example it is counted for the 0.25, then for a paper they count for 5, this score is not fair."

Quantitative-oriented in research

One important aspect emerging from the experiences of the participants was "Quantitative oriented research" in this regard. One participant expressed:

"What happened is that the amount of papers became important to us, such that makes some to cut from their instructional time as they begin to gather research evidence, while we cannot have a professor and say because he does research and produces good papers but is less good in teaching or give less lecture then he is Okay! Or has high lecture time, but does not do research, it is okay! No, that's a problem too."

Lack of opportunities for personal development and self-renewal

"Lack of opportunities for personal development and self-renewal" was another sub-theme which emerged in the study. In this regard, one of the participants stated:

"One of the problems is that we as faculty members are very involved in teaching issues and research so we find ourselves lost a bit. You see, right now, for example, in many places faculty member goes on vacation, does some sporting activity, attends to the family, whereas I think we're particularly not advanced in this respect in Iran, if we want to teach and at the same time do research in a pretty good

manner".

In this regard, another participant stated:

"The University must provide an opportunity for, even make it mandatory, sending faculty to acquire new knowledge and new skills, of course, there's sabbatical, but due to the sheer volume of work and multiple tasks actually, we do not get the opportunity to do this".

Lack of evaluation and promotion system & Lack of criterion for judgment and evaluation.

The participants raised the themes expressed in different formats. Some of the participants expressed that "Lack of criterion for judgment and evaluation" posed challenges for them. In this regard one participant stated:

"In my opinion, emolument and other incomes of every academic member must be considered based on the quantity and quality of their activities, which exists in most parts of the world. Based on, how many students does a university teacher have? How many papers does he write? Where did he publish his article? What was the paper's quality? But it does not matter, for example I am a full professor with a certain pay check and commitment and I'm quite busy with plenty of activities but the problem is that the administration makes no difference with another full professor who gets equivalent pay and privileges but with no or much fewer activities".

Also, another participant stated:

"One of the drawbacks of the evaluation is; everyone gets same promotion, this is not acceptable, whereas I believe that someone for example, who is in mathematical science, chemistry, certainly doesn't do research as same as in medicine, because sciences have differences".

Lack of proper implementation of laws and regulations

Another sub-theme which emerged around the challenges of professional faculty members was "Lack of proper implementation of laws and regulations". In this regard, one of the participants stated:

"Regulations may exist but it's so hard to carry them out, because for example one of the regulations stipulates that when a professor does not get a promotion within three years, who has this kind of problem, and when executed, it's not well implemented."

"Failure to provide the infrastructure needed to attract students" is another theme which emerged from the participants' statements, containing two sub-themes: "The weakness of the system and the administrative process" and "obsolescence of the equipment and facilities".

Failure to provide the infrastructure educational facilities &

The weakness of the system and the administrative process

From the perspective of the participants in the study, "The weakness of the system and the administrative process" is a challenge faced by the faculty members. In this connection, one of the participants

in the study stated:

"A lot of our time is wasted on everyday issues and general administration procedures, namely general office work, it takes too much of our time. Because, there is no proper office procedure so that we could carry out the tasks in the administrative channels, or a certain expert has no aptitude necessary or is not able to solve budgetary problems, makes us spend time and energy for its own sake, namely, in one hand we have a shortage of teaching time because of the large curriculum and on the other hand, we have got a lot of the day to day office chores and must follow it up ourselves and eventually it takes our time".

Obsolete equipment and facilities

"Obsolescence of equipment and facilities" was another sub-theme which emerged in this study. In this regard, one participant stated:

"Right now, I think, in our college one of the major problems we have is, we've got students without considering the structures and contexts that we need to provide them for teaching to be good and appropriate; most important is equipment that gets broken and it takes too much time to fix. The more Ph.D. and graduate students, greater is the pressure on us".

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the faculty members' experiences and to recognize the challenges of their profession, while using qualitative research methods. We had a naturalistic view away from pre-judgments, regardless of the limitations of empirical paradigm for gathering data. Putting together the experiences and various profound interviews as a means of attaining the goal of this study has proven to be an appropriate method for this research. Participants in this study expressed a lack of balance between the different areas of learning, research, executive, personal development and other assigned activities as their main professional challenges. Themes such as: excessive educational tasks, improper valuation of educational activities, quantitative-oriented in research and lack of opportunities for personal development and self-renewal as well, were pointed out.

Studies show that academic members are involved more in educational tasks compared to the two categories of research and administrative services. In addition, from the perspective of faculty members, obligation to prepare and publish papers based on promotion codes and in other words, the pressure from the executive legal structures, pushes to the non-observance of professional ethics which adversely affects work quality and can lead to an increase in non-scientific efforts to increase the number of articles, less work in providing guidance and advice to students, undertake research and educational activities outside their capacity (14) In this regard, Suchan also argues that if all essence of academic work is measured by the quantity and number of papers published in journals, then this can cause the appearance of unethical behavior on part of faculty in academic

research work such that some professors who have more articles use it as an excuse to devote less time to teaching which will consequently reduce the performance and feeling of the group. Insistence on the number of articles published will lead to reduce the levels of scientific and scholarly work of faculty members who aim at making new discoveries and who want to help save humanity's knowledge (15).

This study is consistent with other studies indicating that the faculty members' benefit from professional development opportunities is low to medium (16). Providing opportunities for growth and improvement is an important aspect of quality of life for faculty members, which improves their morale, enhances their skills, reduces their work stress and thus improves the quality of their work (17, 18). It appears that a better balancing of the faculty members' various activities will translate itself into its increased participation in the scientific community.

The study's findings show that a lack of a proper evaluation and promotion system, inappropriate three evaluation criteria and the lack of proper implementation of laws and bylaws, the different nature and measure of faculty members in different disciplines, that this study is consistent with other studies (19). The lack of written sources, financial, technological means and working with colleagues who do not have sufficient merit are considered as professional challenges by faculty members who believe that good work by the administration, staff and experts is of utmost importance to the faculty's proper operation.

In conclusion it appears that increasing the efficiency, effectiveness and efficiency in various sectors of the university by eliminating excessive troublesome paperwork and procedures will enhance the motivation of its experts and administrative staff and hence an increase in faculty satisfaction (20).

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we have reported common cases among the faculty members. Obviously, according to this approach, the results of this study can be considered as a preliminary study. More studies in the future among the faculties of core and clinical sciences, especially in the specialization fields, will see emerge more aspects of this subject.

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