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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perception Of Academic Pharmacists Regarding Their Career Growth: A Qualitative Case Study From Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objective: Academic pharmacists are involved in the teaching and training of future pharmacy practitioners and occupy key positions in research related to drug discovery, pharmacy practice and as well as therapeutic outcome in patients. This study is tried to explore the prominent factors that influences the choice to be an academic among pharmacists as well as their career growth in academia. **Methodology:** A semi-structured interview guide was used as an instrument raising questions to join academics, possible opportunities and hindrances in career growth and job turnover intentions. **Results:** Mixed factors like second career choice, passion, and challenging nature of the profession were stated as reasons to join academic pharmacy. Research and salary structure were cited as opportunities for career growth by junior academic pharmacists although they joined academics simply to earn postgraduate qualifications. Irrespective of professional experience all the academic pharmacists stated lack of authority and power in taking decisions. Conversely, senior academic pharmacists showed no job turnover intentions but cited salary as major obstacle in their career growth. **Conclusion:** Factors like second career choice due to personal reasons and challenging nature of the profession were cited as main reasons to join academia. Although junior faculty joined academics for short-term but they viewed salary and research as opportunities for career growth. A revision of salary structure with additional perks and freedom to work will benefit the institute in terms of more productivity and stimulate faculty retention.

Keywords: academic pharmacist; career growth; Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

As per World Health Organization (WHO) worldwide dearth of healthcare workforce is estimated to be more than 4 million.[1] Pharmacist being the core loop in the healthcare chain also falls short of demand both in the

developed and developing countries. [2]-[4] A wave of establishment of new pharmacy schools to meet the workforce shortage is seen in many countries around the globe. [5]-[7]

Academic pharmacist being the most important element to nurture future practitioners inculcates not only the technical skills but also fosters empathy and care, thus enable a prospective graduate to be a better resource person for patients and other healthcare providers. Academic pharmacists are either full-time or part-time faculties in an educational setting involved right from teaching to research and administration.

Thus a career in pharmacy academics is productive and competitive not only in terms of scientific discovery but also transform future practitioners to be competitive for education, research, practice, professional organizations and policy development.[8]-[9]

Within last decade pharmacy education in Pakistan evolved to provide world class graduates and in context to that 28 pharmacy institutes earned accreditation by the Pharmacy Council of Pakistan (a professional body responsible for the development of pharmacy education in the country).[6] Similarly the conversion of four-year Bachelor of Pharmacy (BPharm) Program to five-year Doctor of Pharmacy (Pharm D) opened new avenues of jobs opportunities in academia as well as pose additional responsibilities on the academic pharmacists. Only few studies have been conducted in the developed countries with regard

to attracting and retaining faculty[10] and job satisfaction among academic faculty.[10]-[13]

Reasons to join academics as well as career growth among academic pharmacists in developing countries are an unexplored area. This study tried to exercise unique contribution in two ways. First the study attempted to view the reasons to join academics among the pharmacists of Pakistan as well as their perception about career growth. Secondly, this study used qualitative methodology contrary to previous studies[1]-[13] which explored the issues of job satisfaction by quantitative approach. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to have an understanding of factors that influences the choice to be an academic among pharmacists in Pakistan

METHODOLOGY

As no study has been done on academic pharmacists in Pakistan, this exploratory study adopted a qualitative approach to acquire an in depth understanding of the reasons to join academics and their feelings regarding career growth as academic pharmacist. The present study was conducted at the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences of a private university in Karachi, Pakistan.

Study Instrument and its Development

A semi-structured interview guide was used as an instrument raising questions to join academics, possible opportunities for career growth, hindrances in career growth, and job turnover intentions. The interview guide was developed on the basis of an informal discussion with junior and senior faculty members and the previous literature available in this area.

Sample size and Sampling Strategy

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted since they are the most practical and convenient way for busy professional group.[14]-[15] To be precise, semi-structured interviews generally trail a preset conduit while allowing the respondents to discuss information relevant to the topic.

Respondents via snowball sampling technique were recruited from pharmacy institute of

Karachi, Pakistan. Initially key informants were identified on the basis of information rich understanding of the issue. Then, these key informants recommended the potential respondents for the study, which in turn, suggested more respondents for the study. In this technique which is also known as chain referral technique¹⁶ former participants were asked to identify and recommend later participants. The interviews were conducted from January 2009 to March 2009 at the respective institute of the participants. Prompting and probing was done during the interviews to develop more thorough understanding of the issues; although there was a closing key component at the end of each interview.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried on till the point of saturation of qualitative data was reached. All the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim and along with supplementary field notes the contents of the transcript were confirmed by each respondent. Finally the principal investigator evaluated the transcripts for the emergence of themes which were verified by engaging the research partner (a psychologist) from the Institute of Applied Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan.

Ethical Committee Permission

The principal investigator sought permission not only from the Vice Chancellor of the university but a consent from each respondent.

RESULTS

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of the typed interview transcripts facilitated the emergence of initial themes. The principal investigator and the research partner from the Applied Psychology Department, University of Karachi, separately did the analysis of the interview transcripts followed by generalization and abridgment of themes. Both the principal investigator and the research partner discussed the analysis to identify common themes and as well as to fine-tune the inconsistent and contradictory observations. This was then followed by formulation of

summary statements i.e. categories for each theme. Finally the statements were again scrutinized to assure that no vital issue was unnoticed and the composition of categorical contents was appropriate.

All the respondents were from a privately funded university; although the demographic characteristics of the respondents are depicted in [Table/Fig 1].

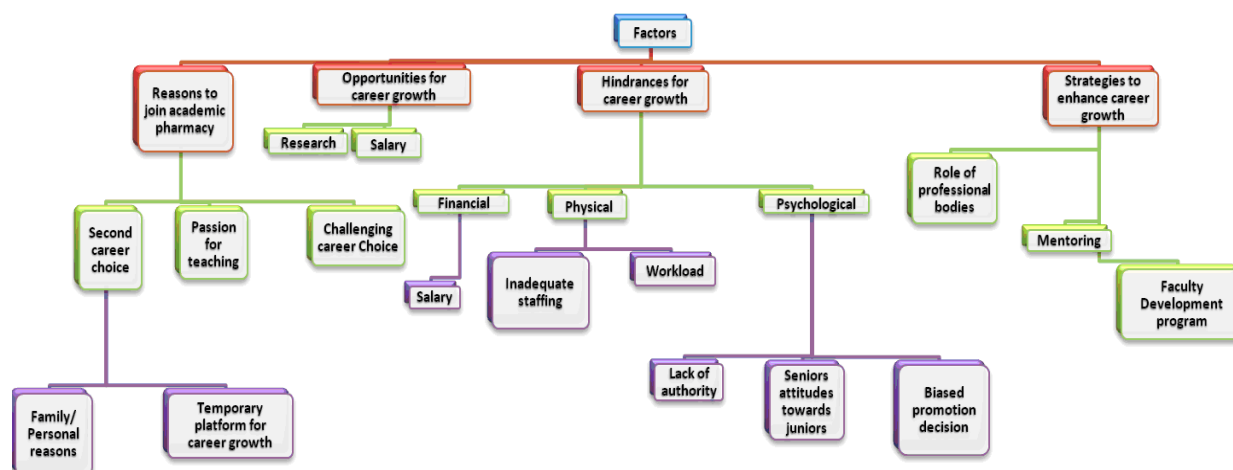
[Table/Fig 1]: Demographic Characteristic of Academic Pharmacists

CODE	Gender	Experience (years)	Designation
Academic Pharmacist 1 (AP 1)	Female	15	Associate Professor
Academic Pharmacist 2 (AP 2)	Female	10	Assistant Professor
Academic Pharmacist 3 (AP 3)	Female	4	Lecturer
Academic Pharmacist 4 (AP 4)	Female	16	Associate Professor
Academic Pharmacist 5 (AP 5)	Female	12	Assistant Professor
Academic Pharmacist 6 (AP 6)	Female	13	Assistant Professor
Academic Pharmacist 7 (AP 7)	Male	4	Lecturer
Academic Pharmacist 8 (AP 8)	Female	2	Lecturer
Academic Pharmacist 9 (AP 9)	Female	4	Lecturer
Academic Pharmacist 10 (AP 10)	Female	13	Assistant Professor
Academic Pharmacist 11 (AP 11)	Female	3	Lecturer
Academic Pharmacist 12 (AP 12)	Female	12	Assistant Professor

The main themes identified were influencing factors to join academic pharmacy, opportunities for career growth, and hindrances in career growth as well as strategies to enhance career growth. Pictorial representation of the themes is shown in [Table/Fig 2].

THEME 1: REASONS TO JOIN ACADEMIC PHARMACY

Mixed reasons were cited by respondents with regard to joining academic arena. Most of the pharmacy academicians adopted this as second career choice simply due to “personal reasons” as well as “platform for growth”. Some of them opted this for “passion” while a couple of them cited this “challenging”.



Second career choice

Personal/Family reasons

“As family is my priority I think academics is the best suitable option for females. I joined teaching thus to give more time to my husband and children. It is an out and out lie. I cannot say that my personal interest or love for teaching makes me join pharmacy academics; more correct to say personal reason or family reason”(AP1).

“I need more time for my family which is not possible with an industry job. My children are in growing phase. They need more time and attention and care than previous years” (AP4).

Temporary platform for career growth

“I want to upgrade my professional qualification with in-service status and this can be done with an academic position in some degree awarding institute. Therefore, I preferably joined my alma mater. For me academics is merely a temporary platform or one can better use the word ‘roadway’ to enhance career skills” (AP 7).

“I joined academics to achieve Masters Degree in pharmacy. Academics is a short-stay place for me; just to upgrade my qualification which in turn is now essential for career growth”(AP 8).

Passion for teaching

“I passionately admire the idea of being a teacher. This passion for teaching now gives me courage to stand and control a class of even 200

at a stretch. My passion is simply the result of strong emphasis on my education during childhood days (AP 10).

“As simple as that..... I joined teaching because I feel immense enthusiasm whenever I see my teachers coming and teaching to me. I can only say it is an inherent passion for teaching that makes me join pharmacy academia (AP 11).

Challenging career choice

“As teaching is infusing my knowledge, capabilities, and skills into my students I consider not less than a challenge for me” (AP 9).

“I consider teaching a worthwhile career..... as challenging as getting married. Jokes apart a teacher is not only providing academic support but personal guidance and is always on toes for students. We as pharmacy academicians are playing a pivotal role in making future pharmacists; be it hospital, community or retail or even academic itself; isn’t this challenging?(AP12)

THEME 2: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER GROWTH

Most of the respondents favored “research” as major opportunity for career growth in academics while only a very few opined in favor of “salary”.

Research as major opportunity for career growth in academics

“Neither the job in industry nor in hospital will quench my thirst for research. A nurturing atmosphere for research is only possible in academics. For early-career researchers like me research is the best opportunity for career growth” (AP 9).

“In academics there is a stimulating environment for research which serves as a cornerstone for career growth and professional development of academic pharmacists.

I thoroughly enjoy my position as pharmacy academic mainly because of my liaison with research; rewarding not only for myself but for peers, junior colleagues and students in terms of publication” (AP 10).

Salary

“I joined academics as the handsome salary package and future prospects in terms of annual raise are highly gratifying for me. I must say that in academics still the salary structure is better than jobs in other pharmacy field (AP 12).

“What I am getting here in my institute as lecturer (junior faculty) is much better than my classmates earning in hospital or industry. I know with my higher qualification perks will be increased and the chances of promotion and salary raise will be much appreciative than in the industry and hospital” (AP11).

THEME 3: HINDRANCES IN CAREER GROWTH

When the respondents were asked about the hindrances in career growth some cited financial reasons while others mentioned psychological and physical factors as obstacles in career growth of academic pharmacists

Financial

Financial impediments such as low salary and limited perks or fringe benefits were cited as major deterrent in career growth of pharmacy academics

Salary

Salary is a big financial constraint for many pharmacy academics. I joined academics purely due to my family reasons but all in all I feel dejected as there is no life or health insurance. Not even any paid holidays.....sometimes hamper my will to pull on in academics” (AP1).

“When I was in the industry I enjoyed all benefits. In academics there is lack of individual bonus incentive program as the annual payout or annual salary raise is not determined by evaluation of individual’s performance Salary constraints and negligible fringe benefits are major obstacles in career growth of academic pharmacists..... meager salary with no fringe benefits sometimes makes me feel to leave academics and join industry again” (AP2).

Psychological

Psychological reasons such as lack of authority, seniors’ attitude towards junior faculty members as well as biased promotion decision were quoted as hindrances to career growth in pharmacy academicians.

Lack of authority

“Even after fourteen years of length of service and holding the post of Chairman I sense lack of authority to address and tackle the departmental problems in my way. The power is delegated to me in papers only. All the control is in the hands of chief executive officer of the university” (AP1).

“To enhance learning attitudes in students I do not have any authority to incorporate new measures. A junior faculty does not have any authority in any matter” (AP8).

Seniors’ attitudes towards junior faculty members

“Due to a junior faculty member even my innovative ideas are not a mere concern for my senior colleagues. The atmosphere is not supportive for junior faculty members” (AP7).

“The faculty environment is stern and not at all professional for juniors due to lack of communication between juniors and seniors. Even after two years in institute and having

similar interests with seniors I failed to develop congenial relationship with my seniors. I failed to acquire research grant as it is always focused on seniors. I joined academics for temporary phase and the lack of professionalism among seniors for their juniors is compelling me to complete my masters as early as possible” (AP8).

Biased promotion decision

“I joined academics after an industry job of ten years. The working atmosphere for females seems to be quite flexible in academics and in return the female is paying the price of not being promoted on time like their male colleagues. In private pharmacy academic settings it is a norm but it is not possible in the publicly-funded pharmacy colleges” (AP5).

Physical

Workload and inadequate staffing were cited as physical hindrances in the career growth of academic pharmacists

Workload

In my opinion junior faculty is a clear cut case of unfair treatment. More credit hours and administration work without administrative support is a culture of our institute. With no authority juniors in our institute are struggling with enormously heavy schedules” (AP8).

Inadequate staffing

Since five years we have very few appointments in our institute. This makes the present staff drained and heavily burdened. We are trying to get new faculty but academics is not considered a lucrative career option” (AP1).

THEME 4: STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE CAREER GROWTH

Role of professional bodies to improve recruitment opportunities, mentoring and faculty development program were the strategies to enhance career growth of academic pharmacists.

Role of Professional bodies

“The legitimacy of any professional body lies in safeguarding the interest of profession and professionals. No doubt PPA has done a lot and

we as pharmacists are ready to cooperate with PPA. As a very senior pharmacist I think PPA will do more by having an alliance with the educational institutes and to conduct workshops and seminars on different aspects of pharmacy (AP 1).

Mentoring

“Mentoring of junior faculty with an assigned senior faculty member is a good way to foster congenial relationship. This in turn helps not only in professional growth such as research productivity but also have a positive impact on personal development” (AP8).

Faculty Development Program

“Short-term and long-term career growth of academic pharmacist lies in faculty development program. This must be conducted once a year and will emphasize on responsibilities and capabilities of seniors as well as orientation of juniors to new environment. The net result is increased job satisfaction in seniors and stress-free environment for juniors” (AP4)

DISCUSSION

The current study provides a first comprehensive analysis of the factors for considering career in academics as well as hindrances and opportunities in the career growth of pharmacy academics in Karachi, Pakistan.

Reasons to join academics

Multiple factors emerged as reasons to join academics which include ‘personal’ as well as ‘passion’ and ‘challenging nature of the job’. Interestingly in this study some senior female academics cited family and personal reasons as main reasons to join academics. The present finding is in concordance with Bickel (2000) that women rather than men take into account family, parental and occupational responsibilities in their career decision.¹⁷ Likewise in a study done by Kirk in 2004 teaching was seen as a fulfilling profession in women of Karachi, Pakistan.^[18] This is nurtured by the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the current study where a very large majority of academic pharmacists were female.

To maintain equanimity in between family and career is an ardent task for senior female academic pharmacists. On the contrary in this study junior pharmacists preferred teaching either because of their passion or the challenging nature of job. Previous studies also highlighted commitment, passion, and desire as major attributes of a good and successful teacher.[19]

An interesting factor which persuaded some faculty members to opt teaching as a short-term career goal is only to acquire postgraduate and doctorate qualifications. This paved their way to earn higher salaries later in their career as industrial and hospital pharmacist. Moreover due to upsurge of new pharmacy institutes in Pakistan there seems to be stiff competition among the available workforce. Not only that but the hiring of medical doctors by industries in their marketing departments also raised additional difficulties for the pharmacists to acquire jobs in industries merely on bachelor's qualification.

Opportunities for career growth as academic pharmacist

In this study young academic pharmacists considered research and salary as the main prospects for career growth in academics. This finding correlates well with the findings of Trotman *et al* in which junior dental faculty were drawn to research because of its challenges and demanding nature.[20] Likewise in a study on job turnover intentions among pharmacy faculty good salary and research prospects were cited as most frequently selected reasons to remain with their institutes.[21] Thus research prospects can be taken as the driving force to pursue career in academics both in short-and long-run.

Hindrances for career growth as academic pharmacist

Monthly income and lack of fringe benefits in academics were cited by many academic pharmacists as obstacles in the career growth but still these factors do not account for 'turnover' as these pharmacists did not show any intentions to leave the institutions. These findings correlated well with the previous studies in which salary was not the sole contributory factor in faculty

turnover intentions.[22]-[23] Still the revision of present salary structures supplemented with perks like free health insurance will be a morale booster for the present pharmacy academics.

An interesting finding of the current study is the lack of cordial relationship and communication gap among the senior and junior faculty members. This in turn will be detrimental to the progress of the department which may be reflected as lack of perseverance towards teaching and research and in turn may lead to leaving the institution. In a study conducted by Ambrose *et al* (2005) issue of collegiality is the single most frequently cited issue in faculty leaving.[24] A junior faculty forum is advocated which makes junior young academics feel their presence as well as to foster intellectual interaction among senior and young academics.

In the current study female academic pharmacists also raised concern regarding their promotion as the decisions were biased towards males. Similar reasons were cited in previous study with regard to promotion decisions.[25]

Multiple strategies were cited to enhance the career growth of academic pharmacists. In context to that professional bodies and associations will join hands with the academic institutions and industries and hospitals to conduct workshops, seminars, symposiums enlightening the status of pharmacist, creating more job avenues, as well as continuing education programs for the senior and junior faculty. Nurturing and training of junior faculty under a programmed supervision of senior faculty member can demonstrate not only better ties but more productivity towards teaching and research.

The need of faculty development programs was also highlighted by most of the academic pharmacists. This not only refurbishes and enhances the knowledge of faculty members but may also create a positive impact on the teaching behavior. As inquisitiveness and drive are indispensable and vital for faculty development and promotion[26] administrative support from the higher authorities of the institute is

mandatory for the effective implementation of faculty development programs.

Conclusion

Factors like second career choice due to personal reasons and challenging nature of the profession were cited as main reasons to join academia. Although junior faculty joined academics for short-term but they viewed salary and research as opportunities for career growth. A revision of salary structure with additional perks and freedom to work will benefit the institute in terms of more productivity and stimulate faculty retention.

Limitations

As this study is confined to only one private pharmacy university in Karachi, Pakistan the generalization of the findings cannot be possible due to different set of issues in government-funded universities. Moreover the current study is of preliminary qualitative nature and due to non-probability sample selection approach i.e. snowball sampling the findings necessitate for a probability sampling with a quantitative approach to have a more detailed view of the issues. One of the limitations which should be highlighted is the nominal presence of male academic pharmacist in the study.

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