




Obstacles to the Educational Leadership Succession Planning in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences: A Qualitative Approach

Leila Neisani Samani¹, Zohreh Sohrabi^{1*} , Shoale Bigdeli¹, Aryan Gholipoor²

Received: 20 Jun 2025

Accepted: 15 May 2026

Published: 27 May 2026

Abstract

Background: Succession Planning (SP) is a human capital strategy for the continuity and promotion of the organization to a higher level and greater productivity. Universities of medical science have not been spared from these transformations; recently, they have faced various management development challenges. Identifying and eliminating these barriers is necessary for academic SP organization. To explain the obstacles to SP in the universities of medical sciences in Tehran, Iran.

Methods: The present study has been designed as qualitative conventional content analysis research. Participants were purposively selected from experts and professionals with managerial and leadership positions, stakeholders, key informants of leadership SP in universities of medical sciences, high, senior, and middle managers in medical science education, and exemplary successful managers in the SP from August 2021 to December 2022. Data collection was done through 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews using Maximum Variation Sampling. The validity and reliability of the data were obtained using Lincoln and Guba's criteria. Barriers to SP of educational leaders in universities of medical sciences were extracted.

Results: Three main categories, 14 subcategories, and 75 final codes were discovered. The main categories were trans-organizational, organizational, and personal obstacles. Trans-organizational factors included a policy of selecting top academic leaders, inadequate support of top managers, and exogenous political and economic obstacles. Organizational factors included human resource (HR) management obstacles, challenging positions, a missing link of documentation of rich leadership experiences, relative incompatibility of organizational culture with the SP, resistance to change, lack of financial resources, and insufficient focus on talent management. Personal factors included the lack of new management competencies, self-centeredness, insufficient motivation, and an inefficient attitude.

Conclusion: The succession process requires flat structures, decentralization, delegation, and mutual trust. It is necessary to review the policies for appointing chancellors of universities and other levels of management of hospitals and public health centers, and to redefine them based on talent management. Therefore, conducting studies on this issue is suggested to obtain definite results.

Keywords: Medical Education, Personnel Management, Leadership, Population Health Management, Policy Maker

*This work has been published under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

Copyright© Iran University of Medical Sciences

Cite this article as: Neisani Samani L, Sohrabi Z, Bigdeli S, Gholipoor A. Obstacles to the Educational Leadership Succession Planning in Iranian Universities of Medical Sciences: A Qualitative Approach. *Med J Islam Repub Iran.* 2026 (27 May);40:54. <https://doi.org/10.47176/mjiri.40.54>

Introduction

The future belongs to organizations that take advantage of all their opportunities to face new challenges (1). Successful organizations seek to recruit, maintain, and develop talents who support their survival by applying appropriate procedures, plans, and strategies. Focusing on lead-

ers' most vital organizational tasks and supporting human resources as the most crucial source influencing unexpected changes can lead the organization to achieve a competitive advantage. Hence, the key benefit of successful organizations is that competent people in positions are

Corresponding author: Dr Zohreh Sohrabi, Sohrbiz@iums.ac.ir

¹ Center for Educational Research in Medical Sciences (CERMS), Department of Medical Education, School of Medicine, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

² Faculty of Management, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Key messages:

↑What is "already known" in this topic:

Universities are facing various management development challenges. Higher education needs new managers with novel capacities to develop leaders based on new paradigms, and apply suitable approaches in training proficient managers facing the complex and rapidly changing environment of higher education. Many personal and organizational obstacles hinder the proper implementation of succession planning.

→What this article adds:

Effective succession planning in Iranian medical universities is impeded by some barriers like centralized structures, politicized and unstable leadership environments, and insufficient managerial soft skills among academic leaders. Iranian medical universities can improve leadership transition processes by considering these hindrances.

vital. Critical for the success of complex organizations in the scenario of dynamic competition arising from the environmental changes of the current world, SP is a human capital strategy for the continuity and promotion of the organization to a higher level and more productivity (2), so that it is one of the essential requirements for the survival and progress of organizations in several frameworks and models (3).

Universities have not been spared from these transformations; recently, they have faced various management development challenges. Higher education needs new managers with novel capacities to develop leaders and managers based on new paradigms, have attitudes appropriate to the requirements, and apply suitable approaches in training proficient managers facing the complex and wide-changing environment of higher education at domestic and global levels efficiently (4).

Because of their unique complexity, multi-purpose enterprise, mission of training committed and competent physicians and paramedics, and providing health services to members of society, extensive international connections, and being affected by the globalization process, universities of medical sciences and medical schools are among the first-rate organizations to establish succession plans (1).

A review of the literature shows that many personal and organizational factors prohibit the practical implementation of SP. There are administrative obstacles, e.g., failing to receive support from top university administrators and cultivate efficient educational leaders, and personal obstacles, such as unwillingness to receive advice, fear of increasing age, retirement, and death, no understanding of the change of ownership, and the value of organizations (5). Challenges to SP implementation were the second theme extracted from 27 articles (16%) in a systematic review (2021) that examined 174 articles on SP in the last decade. The first main obstacle to establishing a succession plan was the managers' inability to translate their ideas from the succession plan to the operational plan (6).

The complexity and challenges of leadership SP depend on the uncertainty of future paths in an educational environment and planning for the unknown; however, they are necessary for continuing academic success and entering the future (7). Researchers have proposed organizational obstacles hindering the proper implementation of succession plans: the unwillingness for a proposed job position, the incompatibility of individuals' skills and jobs, limited development of organizations, ineffective communication, dishonesty, conflict, and uncertainty in the organization about successful implementation. Therefore, identifying and eliminating these obstacles is necessary (5).

Gholipour et al. (2012) examined a diverse set of facilitating or inhibiting factors in developing SP, emphasizing that in terms of the common organizational culture in some organizations, especially dishonesty in providing information, factors such as not trusting each other, and feeling jealousy towards colleagues, along with universal elements such as not receiving sufficient support from top managers, calculating cost and benefit, and lack of general motivation among employees, pose obstacles to SP (8).

Conducting a critical review, Ngcamu (2019) stated that little research had been done on the SP of universities and their challenges. In his review of South African universities, the weak support of the HR department for university administrators, weakness of interpersonal communication, and the destructive contradictions of unethical emails from senior members to the dean of schools, poor management of new university chancellors without previous leadership experience, no access to the primary computer tools, the lack of members of the university management offices in protest of the budget deficit, and the occupation of active positions by retired people without a recruitment call were the obstacles to implementing a succession plan (9).

There is no formal SP in the Iranian universities of medical sciences. Thus, considering the critical status of succession in organizational development and the non-generalizability of the results obtained from other sectors to universities of medical sciences, the present study aims to explain the obstacles to SP in universities of medical sciences in Tehran, Iran.

Methods

Study design

After obtaining the Protection Code of Human Subjects in Medical Research IR.IUMS.FMD.REC.1400.394 from the Ethics Committee of Iran University of Medical Sciences (IUMS), the present qualitative study aimed to explain the barriers to educational leadership SP in Iranian universities of medical sciences. Qualitative research deeply extracts data from the context to describe ongoing events and explain the facts for upcoming phenomena and events. Content analysis is employed as a research method based on the naturalistic paradigm to provide the research objectives and answer the main research questions. In this technique, if the classification of codes and the formation of subcategories are derived directly from the text data, it is conventional content analysis-- an inductive method (10).

Participants

The research population comprised experts and professionals (with one of the two inclusion criteria of having higher education in HR management and lecturing or researching the related courses at universities and being employed in the managerial levels of the HR field of universities affiliated to the Ministry of Health, Medicine, and Medical Education or Science Research and Technology); stakeholders including faculty members of universities of medical sciences; heads, senior and middle managers of hospitals and medical training centers affiliated to universities of medical sciences; key informants of the educational leadership SP in universities of medical sciences; and exemplary successful managers in SP.

Sampling method

Participants were selected via a non-probability purposive sampling with maximum difference examining different individuals with different characteristics to consider all the influencing factors in the phenomenon (11). Accordingly, after obtaining written informed consent and

providing an information sheet, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 16 participants (Table 1).

The first interviewee was an educational leader, the vice-chancellor of a University of Medical Sciences in Tehran, with 29 years of academic activities and informal succession experiences in key positions. According to the first interview data, the researcher invited participants with different demographic and professional characteristics to participate in the study so that more comprehensive data and acceptable results could be obtained. Selecting the second interviewee continued based on the gap in the data of the first interview, and continued until the researcher reached data saturation.

Data collection

The data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. One-to-one interviews were by prior appointment. Because of the sampling coincidence with the COVID-19 pandemic, health protocols were implemented. Therefore, thirteen interviews were conducted in the interviewees' offices face-to-face, and three were conducted virtually through Skype video calls. The researcher recorded each participant's demographic and professional characteristics in the individual profile registration form. After explaining the research subject with an opening question, the interviewees were asked to introduce themselves and their managerial experiences.

The interview questions were open-ended; according to the research objectives, and the cooperation of an expert consultant knowledgeable about the subject and methodology. The main questions were: "In your opinion, what are the obstacles to leadership and management SP in universities?" and "What obstacles have you realized so far in the educational leadership SP?"

The subsequent questions were also asked as the interviews progressed. Also, the interviewer made follow-up statements, such as "Please give an example!" to obtain the interviewees' in-depth opinions. During and after the interviews, the researcher controlled the correctness of each participant's perceptions of their statements through member checking. With the interviewees' consent, the interviewer recorded their voices with a voice recorder,

stored and protected, observing confidentiality and anonymity principles.

Data analysis

Conventional content analysis was used based on the content analysis of Graneheim and Landman (2004). First, the researcher carefully investigated the content of each interview and analyzed it into meaningful components through decontextualization. Then, based on the similarity of semantic units, the research team did coding: the primary codes were sorted according to the conceptual similarity, and new patterns emerged as subcategories and categories with a general meaning by integrating the similarities. Via de-contextualization and re-contextualization, the content was analyzed, and subcategories were extracted based on the research objectives and questions. Also, abstraction and interpretation were two major scientific data analysis tools (12). Each interview was coded before the next one. 690 minutes (20 to 40-minute sessions) of interviews were conducted in 16 sessions. After each interview and before starting the next interview, the interview text was reviewed and analyzed. Data collection and case selection continued until all opinions, knowledge, experiences, and lack of new findings (data saturation stage) were obtained (Table 2).

Data validity and reliability

The data validity and reliability were obtained using the four general criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (12). Credibility was enhanced using the integration of semi-structured in-depth interviews, member checking, and simultaneous analysis by the research team; transferability increased through the thick description, confirmability was promoted through transcription as soon as possible, peers' opinions, and review of the texts typed by the participants; and dependability was enhanced through an inquiry audit.

Results

In this study, 16 expert educational leaders and managers, and the individuals involved in the succession plan in

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees

Characteristic	Level
Education	MD (4) Ph.D. (12)
Professional position	Governance leader of the health system (2) University chancellor (1) Deputy (5) Development office manager (1) Chairman in educational hospitals (1) Eligible top educational leader (1) Department manager (4) Faculty member (1)
The highest work field	International Affairs Unit (3) Ministry of Health and Medical Education (2) Academic Headquarters (4) Faculty/school affairs (7)
Mean and SD of age (years)	51.7±6.63
Mean and SD of employment duration (years)	21.4±7.90

Table 2. A selection of the content analysis and extraction of the SP obstacles

Category		Code
Trans-organizational obstacles	The policy of selecting top academic leaders in the universities of medical sciences Exogenous political and economic factors	dominance of physician leadership in the health system, appointment of staff managers Centralized system of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, unequal budgeting of similar universities by the government
	HR management-related factors Challenging and stressful situation	Lack of qualified faculty members, high management turnover High work stress in key medical education positions, the necessity of educational leaders' accountability in medical sciences universities to legal organizations
Organizational obstacles	Documentation of rich leadership experiences: The missing link	Institutional failure to deliver work and documents during turnover, and no documentation of the common and valuable experiences of managers
	Relative incompatibility of organizational culture with SP	No succession atmosphere in universities, existence of a culture of secrecy in the selection and announcement of candidacy
	Resistance to change	Members and employees compete for key positions, and negative behaviors, such as obstructing the implementation of the plan.
	Lack of financial resources Insufficient focus on talent management	Insufficient budgeting for the establishment of the SP Uncertain outcome of succession for the candidates, an upward trend to realize succession in the universities of medical sciences
Personal obstacles	Lack of new management competence	Inadequate literacy in managerial informatics, holding a key position without administrative experience
	Self-centeredness	Habit of seeking convenience, preference of faculty members for individual advancement
	Insufficient motivation	The existence of high-paying private, professional positions for the medical team and negative experiences of registering positions hinder the action.
	Inefficient attitude	No belief in the top leaders of the medical education system, and fear of losing a position

universities of medical sciences in Tehran province, were invited to participate in the research and be interviewed.

Finally, after combining, reducing, and assimilating the codes, three main categories, 16 subcategories, and 75 final codes were discovered (Table 2).

Trans-organizational obstacles

The policy of selecting top academic leaders in the universities of medical sciences

The direct appointment of the chancellors of universities by the Minister of Health and Medical Education and the appointment of vice-chancellors and staff managers of universities under the supervision of the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education were stated by most of the participants as one of the main policies preventing the succession plan. Physician dominance in the health system in selecting educational leaders and managers at the macro level, academic headquarters, and clinical training programs was also considered a trans-organizational obstacle to SP.

Participant 2: “Physician dominance in the culture of our society and universities of medical sciences is a reason for not performing succession. In my opinion, every plan is affected by the same physician dominance! This phenomenon is an obstacle to choosing a good educational leader...”

The superiority of some selection criteria for educational managers, such as scientometric indicators, especially the H-Index, which sometimes is a prerequisite for candi-

dacy for critical positions instead of expertise and managerial skills, hinders succession.

Participant 3: “...a person with a high H-index is the most eligible. I am afraid I have to disagree with this opinion; we had high H-index professors who taught, but they were not outstanding teachers and could not teach concepts. Therefore, being scientific is not proof of being practical”.

Inadequate support of top managers for the succession plan

The absence of SP at the macro level of the current university system and the senior managers' little attention to affairs beyond the university, according to most participants, hinders the formation and implementation of the succession plan.

Participant 15: “CEOs' support and acceptance of a new and complex strategic plan is perhaps the most important condition for that plan. If they don't value it or don't put this work in the governance priorities, the program will stop”.

Exogenous political and economic obstacles

Most participants believed that the influence of the political and economic climate of the external environment of the universities of medical sciences has a direct impact on the management of the university, as a result, on the succession of their educational leaders.

Participant 7: “Maybe we change people's organizational positions every term! When the top official turns over,

everything changes! Well, a manager knows me now, and after four years, when he/she leaves, no one else will know me!"

Organizational obstacles HR management obstacles

All participants stated. HR management factors, including HR eligibility shortage, high turnover, the generational difference between a manager and his/her successor, multiple responsibilities, traditional management training, and limitations in monitoring and evaluation of leadership, were stated as the most cited organizational obstacles to the succession plan.

Participant 5 *"One issue that can be challenging is the opinion of the faculty members or the managers themselves, that we are not sufficiently eligible and expert individuals for these positions. It is also an enormous challenge— we must choose among ineligible and inefficient individuals"*.

In addition, universities of medical sciences are required to respond in four areas, including students, faculty members, employees, and citizens. Insufficient time for managers at the macro-management level prevents the implementation of the succession plan.

Participant 7: *"We have various plans and programs. Now, for example, we are on many committees! There are so many other plans in this university that one gets exhausted and bored with them. It all has an overlap"*.

The lack of specialized leadership training before assuming most of the key positions and the use of previous inefficient methods for in-service training of candidates for positions were the obstacles discussed in HR training for educational leadership.

Participant 5: *"Anyway, the position I had been appointed to, with receiving no personnel department order, without receiving even a single file or folder. It means I came alone to my office one day and started my job!"*

Lack of formal and organizational assessment of managers, plan evaluation processes, failure to pursue evaluation results and system reform, and insufficient knowledge of top leaders regarding the spirit of the organization.

Challenging and stressful positions

Holding key positions in universities, especially the schools of medicine, nursing, and midwifery, is stressful because of the high-risk conditions of the patient. The avoidance of competent managers from taking on challenging academic conditions reduces the success of the succession plan.

Participant 15: *"... the fields of general surgery, obstetrics, and gynecology, or neurology have their own challenging and stressful conditions, and most of our colleagues are afraid to accept the management of these departments. These departments bear much responsibility, and it is nerve-wracking and stressful because we are dealing with people's lives"*.

Documentation of rich leadership experiences: The missing link

A network of necessary documents containing valuable experiences of educational leaders is not available, and this is an enormous obstacle to transferring leadership experiences in the organization.

Participant 4 argued: *"It has not been seen that the current chancellor of the university gathers ten previous university chancellors, or the deputy minister gathers ten former deputy ministers once a month or once every two months, discussing the problems, for example, in the domain of education and eliciting their experiences"*.

Relative incompatibility of organizational culture with SP

Most participants mentioned issues such as no succession spirit in universities and no preparation of the organizational culture for succession as obstacles to the SP. Participant 8 believed that *"in our organizational culture, there is a fear and concern that if they consider a person for a position, they don't announce it until the last minute"*.

Low compatibility of the current organizational culture in the universities of medical sciences with all aspects of the succession plan, the existence of secrecy in the selection and announcement of the candidacy of a position, and the negative organizational attitude towards the selection of a chosen class of the organization were other cultural obstacles to the succession plan.

Resistance to change

Since implementing new plans is considered a transformation, when the SP is introduced or enforced for the first time as a strategy for selecting leaders, it will face organizational resistance. Employees compete for critical positions, and negative behaviors, such as obstructing the plan's implementation by managers, employees, and even students, may occur.

Participant 8: *"Introducing new strategies has always been a taboo, and I admit it is. I also see it in others: we fear that if any turnover is going to be made and others are informed in advance, they may prevent turnovers and changes and obstruct the flow of implementing new strategies. This matter may have consequences for the person who is going to make changes"*.

Lack of financial resources

The interviewees believed that it is not possible to allocate funds and points to development path candidates to replace key positions in public medical universities. Most of them said that insufficient budgeting for establishing the succession plan prevents its current realization.

Participant 9: *"In a medical school, because many of our deputies are not included in the organizational chart, we have a series of problems in terms of payment, compensation, and administrative benefits"*.

Insufficient focus on talent management

The respondents stated that the upward trend to realize succession in universities of medical sciences is slow, and the readiness of the forces to occupy key positions of concentration is not enough. There is no formal development structure of Iranian academic succession in the universities of medical sciences. The official procedure of empowering talented members is not considered for taking management positions-- sometimes, the recruitment of competent internal talents does not occur because they are not recognized.

Participant 10: *“For selecting leaders and managers, officials consider a certain circle more than they want to do a talent search. Most of them go based on acquaintance; they insist on choosing a manager from those who are in that circle”.*

Personal obstacles

There are barriers to SP academic organizations, evolving in the orbit of individuals. The cases mentioned by the interviewees were classified into four subcategories.

Lack of new management competencies

Holding a key position without managerial experience and the necessary expertise to assume the educational leadership, because of the priority of scientific expertise of selected university managers, naturally leads to the diminution of gained managerial capabilities of educational leaders, especially core leadership competencies for universities of the third millennium.

Participant 2: *“... , the third generation university was one of our goals, or when Dr. X (the chancellor of the university) wanted to issue my personnel department order, he said, ‘I expect you to come and establish a knowledge-based company in your department’. Then the COVID-19 crisis started, which limited our activities and programs: we were worried about moving forward! There was limited time and capacity for me as a head of the department, let alone for the professors!*

Another important point is the insufficient literacy in informatics and media. SP in THE third and fourth-generation universities, parallel with the smartening of the government, requires soft and hard leadership skills.

Self-centeredness

Personal obstacles in this subclass include:

a. Faculty members’ self-centeredness—their preference for personal development activities, i.e., advancement from lecturing to professorship, and the priority of goals and individual needs of the organization’s human resources for employment; and

b. The managers’ selfishness prevents competent personnel from conflicts with the implementation and continuation of the succession plan.

Participant 2: *“The department faculty members were engrossed in their work. In our field of study, everyone wanted to write articles to get points for promotion; they just wanted their comfort. They believed that I should do everything as the head of the department; they didn’t get involved in the department’s affairs”.*

Insufficient motivation

At the lower management levels, the successors’ lack of interest in the position to which he/she is appointed and reluctance to manage affairs and lead the educational flows can prevent the stability and continuity of the succession plan.

Participant 4: *“Maybe a person is not motivated enough to accept a position. Succession and management basically have several components: one, there should be the necessary motivation for doing a job. According to the Hawthorne effect, people are more interested and successful in their jobs when they are more professional”.*

Inefficient attitude

Most participants cited the lack of belief in succession planning among the top leaders in the medical education system as the biggest obstacle to the succession plan. The non-integrated attitude of the university leaders, the fear of losing the position, the belief that the position is for a lifetime, and the sense of ownership towards the position are the selected codes of the above subcategory.

Participant 12: *“...the entire management group does not have the same attitude about seeing the future well or asking people to be trained for the future. The issue is not that a medical school is run by four, five, or seven deputies, a president, and some middle managers. It does not matter how much and how it is run! But the matter is that their attitude is not only to see now but also to see tomorrow, the tomorrows!*

Discussion

The present study demonstrates the barriers to the design, implementation, and continuation of educational leadership SP in Iranian universities of medical science. Data analysis classified the barriers into three categories of extra-organizational, organizational, and personal obstacles. Experts believe that to implement the SP successfully, barriers must be identified and eliminated faster in the organization (14).

Trans-organizational obstacles

The extra-organizational obstacles in this area include three internal subcategories (Table 2). The selection process of school deans and university chancellors, heads of public hospitals, and directors of medical science education boards in the country has been known as a serious obstacle to the SP. They explained it had been the policy of the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education to select staff, key educational leaders of universities is a direct ministerial appointment. In some situations, the university’s chancellor appoints deputies, staff managers, and deans of affiliated medical schools, among the qualified faculty members.

So far, the selection process of university chancellors and staff assistants based on SP has not been reported in universities of medical sciences around the world. In some prestigious universities, such as Harvard, the university association, comprising officials and professors, chooses the university chancellor (15). Therefore, the policies made by the government at the university level are ap-

pointment-based, and, at the school level, selection-based. Governance policies cannot be an absolute barrier to the SP because choosing the chancellor of a university is such that the highest authority of the health system proposes him/her to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution.

Inadequate support of CEOs for the SP is abstracted as a barrier. CEOs can play a prominent role in the successful implementation of SP (16). Zain al-Dini Bidmeshki et al. (2012) identified the commitment of senior managers to SP as the most crucial factor in the progress and establishment of the plan from the perspective of the employees of the higher education system (17).

In the present study, the key informants had not yet experienced a formal SP for educational leaders that had been fully implemented. Meanwhile, literature indicates that the existence of a strategic succession plan, training of people for key positions, and the motivation of macro-management are very important for any organization's progress and success (17).

The content analysis of the interviews showed that the political and economic factors in the external environment of universities affect the SP implementation in universities of medical sciences. Consequently, the economic and political barriers related to such critical conditions affect plans. Institutions outside the organization can impose some political and economic climate on the university, which in various cases is caused by international political pressures, thus preventing the establishment and continuation of excellent management programs (15).

Studies on extra-organizational factors affecting SP in universities of medical sciences are rare. Pourmirza Kalhori et al. (2020) showed that the political and economic arenas are effective on SP. Researchers believe that in the 21st century, concepts derived from globalization will affect any university leadership program (18). Suriya KV et al. (2022) showed that political, cultural, and technological obstacles are influential in the tendency of organizations to establish and implement this plan (19).

Organizational obstacles

This study identified seven subcategories of organizational obstacles (Table 2). In the studies conducted in educational leadership, many organizational factors affect the SP. Parfitt stated the barriers to SP in educational environments: insufficient number of job opportunities, especially in task-oriented organizations such as universities of medical sciences, resistance of the new generation talented employees to accept some educational career missions, instability in selection and reward criteria, and limited evaluation of managers (20). Borborjafari and Ahmadvand (2016) discussed organizational problems that prevent the proper implementation of SP: the lack of desire of an individual for the proposed position, the lack of fitness between the individual's skills and the position in question, ineffective communication, dishonesty, and conflicts and mistrust in the organization (13).

Experts believe that in an organization, human factors play a role more than other factors in maintaining and expanding the level of performance and completing the

organization's mission, and improving quality depends on human factors (14). The senior management's optimistic view of HR and its capabilities can be seen in cases such as the organization's investments in the education and research of faculty members, delegating authority to them, and keeping key HR (17).

Lack of qualified HR to hold key positions is the most significant organizational factor hindering the SP of educational leaders of universities of medical sciences. In most cases, the leading expertise of the faculty members is clinical and non-managerial. Despite the academic capabilities of the educational groups, not all candidates for educational leadership have the core leadership competencies appropriate to the third-millennium university. This problem is visible in small and new departments. In addition, the capacity of academic leadership positions in health sciences is doubled because of the clinical education environment and the provision of services to the people. Succession experts believe that the first element to focus on in the SP is the prediction of required HR (21).

The participants reported a high turnover rate as a challenge in SP. Studies have shown that the instability of the educational system landscape leads to people leaving colleges. The turnover of heads with an interval of three years or fewer favors the instability of the outlook and the tendency of people to leave the organization. Hargreaves (2005) believed that when a flourishing manager leaves, various problems arise in the organization, the first of which is dissociation, and this problem prevents progress and improvement. He believed a manager should stay in a position for five years or more. The transfer of leadership, in this case, causes chaos in the organization (14). It is noteworthy that an increase in rules and regulations, a decrease in reimbursement, and a decrease in financial support for research are observed (22). Shahn and Al-Suliman (2022) found that the managers' most significant challenge is multi-tasking and difficulty balancing academic and administrative duties (23).

The present study showed that the generational difference between the manager and successor is one obstacle to SP. Senior leaders in recent decades have acknowledged that next-generation skills are challenging because of the generational gap, the difference in cognitive-communication skills, language of dialogue, the successor's belonging to the digital era, and the desire for individualism. The only factor that reduced the perception of difference or intergenerational gap was interpersonal relations between the manager and the successor. The report of a project in Australia showed that the increase in the composition of older demographics and academic staff faced incredible challenges (23).

This study showed that traditional training of managers is an obstacle to successful leadership SP. In today's world, due to the changes in the external environment and the health needs of people and institutions providing health services, educational leaders of universities of medical sciences need advanced cognitive-communicative and functional skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork. Hanson (2013) pointed out that the education and training of organizational leaders have been

a cookbook approach-- one topic after another has been presented in order. A review of the literature shows that the traditional methods of developing leaders have been linear and are not effective in facing the global economy and today's complex world (24).

Another organizational barrier is the challenging key positions. The significant difference between tenure positions in universities of medical sciences and other universities in social accountability is the commitment to protect and improve people's health and medical education. University chancellors are required to play a role in health's political and social situations. David et al. (2006) indicated that high incidence of complications such as emotional exhaustion (25.4%) among the deans of medicine and nursing schools and leaders of healthcare centers in the US had a significant correlation with high levels of job burnout; stress; lack of support resources and adaptability, increase in abnormal physical and behavioral symptoms and decrease in job satisfaction of managers and educational leaders (25).

The missing link of documenting the rich experiences of leadership was an obstacle that has received less attention in similar studies in previous years. Research shows that knowledge transfer is very decisive for managers of organizations in reducing productivity loss and weakening competitive advantage. A case study at Kharazmi University of Tehran indicated that the predictive variable of succession had a direct and positive effect on knowledge transfer (24). Documenting experience essay writing, analyzing, organizing, and recording experiences- is a branch of experience management that plays a significant role in the success of organizations; however, a comprehensive and systematic process has not been developed (6).

The participants reported the relative incompatibility of organizational culture with SP. In most academic environments, individuals do not believe in the preference of choosing the elite. SP should focus on the atmosphere and organizational culture. For effective SP, organizational culture must align with each level of the succession plan. Therefore, organizational culture should be evaluated along with planning (20). Gholipour et al. (2012) examined a diverse set of inhibiting factors in developing a succession plan and emphasized that, in terms of common organizational culture, especially dishonesty, mistrust, and jealousy towards colleagues, along with universal factors such as the need for the support of top managers, create obstacles to the development of SP (16).

Organizational resistance in this area can occur at all levels. A systematic review showed that the greatest challenge to SP is from managers on the verge of retirement and who see their tenure close, and the envy of the previous manager to his/her successors is expressed, which is considered as planning paralysis (26).

The sixth element related to HR management was identified as the limitation of supervision and evaluation of managers. SP without evaluation, and the incomplete feedback and monitoring of HR management plans in the long term, can make the succession plan ineffective. In a qualitative study conducted in 11 faculties, the weakness of monitoring and evaluation outside the organization was

a key factor in the failure of the university's strategic plans (27).

The last organizational factor hindering SP in universities of medical sciences is the lack of financial resources. Leadership development requires financial investment and equalizing faculty members' functional units. Mosa-deghrad et al. (2019) aimed to identify the challenges of planning managers of the University, lack of funds, resources, equipment, and physical space, and lobbying in the allocation of funds were among the crucial challenges in strategic planning. If the budget is distributed among the universities of medical sciences across Iran based on the characteristics, many problems may be solved (28).

Personal obstacles

The four themes formed the personal obstacles to the succession plan (Table 2). Many personal barriers prevent the practical implementation of succession programs (14).

The lack of new management skills is an individual factor that confronts the succession plan. Two main challenges expressed in this study are: not being armed with media literacy and informatics, and being ignorant of modern leadership skills. Therefore, with the rapid advances in technology and artificial intelligence, physicians and paramedics must emphasize traditional management methods, such as relying on the high emotional intelligence of physicians and mastery of problem-solving, and acquiring new management and leadership skills appropriate to the complex organization of the University of Medical Sciences and its hospitals. Since we are in the era of cross-product of publication counts and impact factors, educational leaders of health sciences universities urgently need the critical skills of consensus-building, conflict resolution, and high thinking capacity to effectively respond to changes in the work environment. However, these skills are the platform of high emotional intelligence that grows with a strong sense of other-directedness (29).

A preference for personal interests over organizational interests avoids the advancement of the SP. Seeking convenience, trying to promote scientific ranks without accepting educational leadership positions, and practicing selfishness by managers can prevent the retention of competent personnel under the subcategory of self-centeredness from the establishment of the succession plan. Studies in the Ministry of Sports and Youth showed that the personality characteristics of the organization's individuals predicted the adoption of SP so that people with more responsibility and flexibility were more receptive to SP (30).

Insufficient motivation of the organization's people to change and develop hinders the establishment of the university SP. A review of the literature indicates that the best situation for a project manager is that the people involved in the project want the organization's goals to be realized because they feel connected to the project's outcomes. Therefore, the motivation of the individual and the organization is a factor for the progress and success of the project (31). Alhuwalia et al. (2013) reported that one obstacle to SP of university leadership is discouragement and a lack of motivation toward succession (19).

Conclusion, suggestions for further research, and limitations

Barriers of official SP in Iranian universities of medical sciences seem to be considered seriously. It is recommended to review the policies for appointing chancellors of universities, their deputies, deans of medical schools, and senior managers of hospitals and public health centers, and to redefine them based on talent management. Also, it is suggested that the most qualified officials, as educational leaders, be appointed from talent pools developed by the government, such as the extra-organizational areas related to the succession plan, the approved criteria and conditions for the selection of the university chancellor, and other high and senior university managers, and the preference of scientific indicators over the core capabilities of leadership. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct studies on this issue to obtain definite results. Regarding exogenous economic and political barriers, half of the interviewees offered the independence of universities of medical sciences through the autonomy of peer universities in curriculum development, attracting professors and students, and proper budgeting among universities. Centralized structure in the health system, which integrates the treatment and health of people with the education of students, creates mechanisms contrary to the approach of empowerment and talent development. The succession process requires flat structures, decentralization, delegation, and mutual trust.

Organizational and individual factors are barriers to SP, so they are related to each other in most cases. Therefore, to eliminate one or more organizational obstacles, one needs to fix a personal obstacle and vice versa. For example, studies have shown a significant relationship between resistance to change, lack of individual motivation, and negative attitude and fear of change (37). Therefore, the study offers the following suggestions:

- Developing a program at universities to reduce the deterrent effect of organizational and individual barriers against the establishment and acceptance of SP in Iranian universities of medical sciences;
- Developing succession plans for critical jobs in a medical science university;
- Reducing the organizational turnover rate;
- Prohibiting multi-directional management;
- Evaluating managers and selected educational leaders;
- Investing in talent management and the formation of a pool of committed and loyal talent;
- Seeking to popularize the use of advanced methods of training human resources based on the principles of adult learning;
- Encouraging a preventive and trackable succession plan development;
- Creating a cultural background and promoting professional ethics;
- Applying change management strategies to reduce organizational resistance;
- Institutionalizing work delivery and documentation when transferring positions;
- Strengthening stress management skills for successors;

The study limitations are as follows:

1- One interviewing technique was employed to collect the data, and no quantitative tools were used. Access to upstream documents, in most cases, was not possible. However, the researchers tried to increase the data richness by selecting samples rich in information and reliable management understanding, and using semi-structured in-depth interviews and an extensive professional literature review.

2- Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, three face-to-face interviews were prevented.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank the Medical Sciences University of Iran presidency and staff for their assistance with data collection and financial support for the implementation of the study. Also, authors wish to acknowledge the educational leaders and managers of Medical Science Universities participate in the interview in this research.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions

LN contributed to the design, development, and implementation of the study, study conceptualization, interpretation of results, and drafting of the manuscript. ZS contributed to the development and conceptualization of the study, result interpretation, and drafting of the manuscript. MH contributed to the study design, methodology, supervision, interpretation of findings, and revision of the manuscript. SB contributed to methodology, validation of results, and interpretation of findings in the manuscript. AG contributed to the design, conceptualized, and interpreted the data. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Subjects in Medical Research IR.IUMS.FMD.REC.1400.394 from the Ethics Committee of Iran University of Medical Sciences (IUMS). Informed consent was acquired from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. The confidentiality principle was present in all information and the data gathering process.

Funding Support

This study was funded by Iran University of Medical Sciences.

Data Availability

The data of this study were obtained from participant interviews and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI Use Statement

The authors did not use any artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this manuscript.

References

1. Kalhori RP, Laei S, Kavyani E, Malekian F. The Modeling of Succession Management in the Faculty Members of Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences: A Grounded Theory. *Educ Res Med Sci*. 2020;9(1).
2. Torabi N, Karimi F, Nadi MA. Establishment of the Succession Planning System of Management in Universities: Based on the Grounded Theory. *J Sustain Hum Resour Manag*. 2023;5(8).
3. Kazi Enamul H, Chunli Z. Succession planning in higher education: A systematic literature review (2012–2022). *Hum Resour Manag Serv*. 2024;6(1).
4. Davoodi SA, Yaghoobi N. A Framework for Talent Spotting and Succession Planning in Higher Education System. *J Res Hum Resour Manag*. 2018;31(1).
5. Dina AD, Rosmini O, Suzilawati K, Asim N. A systematic review of succession planning in higher education. *Int J Adv Appl Sci*. 2021;8(12).
6. Erin G, Lisa L. Faculty resistance to change: an examination of motivators and barriers to teaching online in higher education. *Int J Online Pedagog Course Des*. 2020;10(1).
7. Ngcamu BS. SP and leadership development in a faculty of health sciences. *Glob J Health Sci*. 2019;11(11):101–.
8. Basri H. Using qualitative research in accounting and management studies: not a new agenda. *J US-China Public Adm*. 2014;11(10):831–838.
9. Benoot C, Hannes K, Bilsen J. The use of purposeful sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: A worked example on sexual adjustment to a cancer trajectory. *BMC Med Res Methodol*. 2016;16(1):1–12.
10. Lindgren BM, Lundman B, Graneheim UH. Abstraction and interpretation during the qualitative content analysis process. *Int J Nurs Stud*. 2020;108:103632.
11. Cohen D, Crabtree B. Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria. *Qual Res Guidel Proj*. 2006.
12. Khodaparast M, Kiakojouri D, Mortazavi Amiri SJ, Jafari Kalarijani SA. Analyzing the dimensions and components of the developed model of competency-based successor training. *J Manag Educ Perspect*. 2024;5(4):193–220.
13. Azar K, Soliemani T. Studying Status of The Successor Program of University Administrators. *Educ Strateg Med Sci*. 2017;10(6):516–.
14. Saadat Talab A, Fatolahy Kuche A, Karimi Tabar H. The Mediating role of Organizational Justice in Succession Planning. *J Res Educ Syst*. 2020;8(25):1–15.
15. Parfitt CM. Creating a Succession-Planning Instrument for Educational Leadership. *Educ Leadersh Rev*. 2017;18(1):21–36.
16. Shahin M, Al Suliman A. Succession planning at a Medical Academic College in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi J Nurs Health Care*. 2022;5(5):107–113.
17. Turner JR, Baker R, Schroeder J, Johnson KR, Chung CH. Leadership development techniques. *Eur J Train Dev*. 2018.
18. Suriya KV, Siti UM, Sathiya KVR. Underlying factors that contributed to job stress in an organisation. *Int J Acad Res Bus Soc Sci*. 2023;13(5):1239–1250.
19. Dickerman J, Sánchez JP, Portela-Martinez M, Roldan E. Leadership and academic medicine. *MedEdPORTAL*. 2018;14:10677.
20. Ministry of Public Service YaGA. HR Planning and Succession Management Strategy for the Public Service. 2017.
21. Mpho MP, Cecile S, Leigh-Anne Paul D. Factors related to succession planning in a government department in Gauteng. *Probl Perspect Manag*. 2016;14(4):145–153.
22. Schmid B, Adams J. Motivation in project management. *Proj Manag J*. 2008;39(2):60–71.
23. Mehdi M, Hosseini SH, Hajipor E, Ozma A. Succession planning system in governmental organizations. *Public Manag Res*. 2023;16(59):194–216.
24. Garcia CL, de Abreu LC, Souza Ramos JL, Dibai de Castro CF, Neves Smiderle FR, dos Santos JA, et al. Influence of Burnout on Patient Safety: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Medicina (Kaunas)*. 2019;55(553):1–13.
25. Khai WK, Alnoor A, AL-Abrow H, Tiberius V, Ganesan Y, Atshan NA. Reactions towards organizational change: a systematic literature review. *Curr Psychol*. 2022;13:1–24.
26. Mirvis DM, Graney MJ, Ingram L, Tang J, Kilpatrick AO. Burnout and psychological stress among deans of colleges of medicine. *J Health Hum Serv Adm*. 2006 Summer;29(1):4-25.
27. Dehbidi VR, Rayat A, Hajizadeh H. The role of personality traits and organizational health. *J New Approaches Educ Adm*. 2022;13(3).
28. Darmawan AH, Azizah S. Resistance to change: Causes and strategies. Proceedings of the 5th ASEAN Conference on Psychology, Counselling, and Humanities (ACPCH). 2020.
29. Babaei MH, Jamshidi N, Jamshidi S, Karimi Meybodi E. Ranking of the factors affecting succession system. *Journal of Communication Research*. 2021;27(4):149–169.
30. Tabatabarian SA, Alizadeh P, Mokhtari Hasan Abad S. Financial autonomy in Iranian public universities. *Rahyaf*. 2024;34(1):39–64.