

Explaining Faculty Members' Experience about the Process of Attending to an International Conferences: A Mixed Methods Research

Soleiman Ahmady¹,
Zohrehsadat
Mirmoghtadaie², Siamak
Zarei-Ghanavati³, Saeed
Eslami Hasan Abadi⁴,
Shadi Sheibani⁵, Hamid
Hoseinikhah⁶, Maryam
Keykhaei⁷, Shima
Sheybani^{8*}

¹Department of Medical
Education, Faculty of
Medicine, Shahid
Beheshti University of
Medical Sciences,
Tehran, Iran

²Department of E-
learning in Medical
Education, Virtual
School, Center of
Excellence for E-learning
in Medical Education,
Tehran University of
Medical Sciences,
Tehran, Iran

³Department of
Ophthalmology, Faculty
of Medicine, Mashhad
University of Medical
Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

⁴Department of Medical
Informatics, Faculty of
Medicine, Mashhad

University of Medical
Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

⁵Internal Medicine

Specialist, Mashhad, Iran

⁶Department of Cardiac
Surgery, Faculty of
Medicine, Mashhad
University of Medical
Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

⁷Mashhad University of
Medical Sciences,
Mashhad, Iran

⁸Department of
Anesthesiology, Faculty
of Medicine, Mashhad
University of Medical
Sciences, Mashhad, Iran

*Department of
Anesthesiology
Qaem Hospital
Ahmadabad Street
Mashhad, 9176699199,
Iran

Tel: +989151140314

E-mail:
sheybani@mums.ac.ir

Introduction: Attendance at conferences is considered as a professional necessity for most of the researchers and scientists. Currently, no study has been conducted in Iran to evaluate the pros and cons of attending to the medical international conferences. The aim of this study was to determine the problems and consequences of attendance at conferences, as well as its academic benefits and scientific-professional promotions.

Methods: This mixed-method study was conducted on faculty members' of Mashhad University of Medical Sciences attending to International conferences between January 2014 and 2015 in two separate and sequential phases. The first phase was a qualitative approach, content thematic analysis that was conducted through purposeful sampling based on literature review and interview with key informants' faculty members. The second phase, the quantitative one, was conducted by an electronic questionnaire to collect faculty members' viewpoints for improving the process.

Results: Based on the first phase results, four main themes were indicated to be important in the attendance process: 1 & 2) problems and consequences of the attendance process; 3) scientific and professional promotion due to the attendance; and 4) usefulness and academic benefits. Scientific level of conferences (15.0%) and transport and accommodation (28.0%) were the most prevalent problems and consequences, respectively; whereas familiarity with new topics and ideas (20.0%) was for the promotion one.

Conclusions: According to the quantitative phase results, it seems that International conferences were considered very important for professional developments; however, the problems and consequences of attending to these events overcome to its benefits.

تبیین تجارب اعضای هیئت علمی در خصوص فرایند حضور در کنفرانسهای بین المللی: مطالعه ترکیبی

مقدمه: حضور در کنفرانسها (همایشها) به عنوان یک لازمه و ضرورت حرفه‌ای برای بسیاری از محققان و دانشمندان محسوب می‌شود. هیچ مطالعه‌ای در ایران برای ارزیابی مزایا و معایب حضور در همایشها و کنفرانسهای بین المللی پزشکی صورت نگرفته است. هدف مطالعه حاضر، تعیین مشکلات و پیامدهای حضور در همایش علاوه بر مزایای آکادمیک و ارتقای علمی-حرفه‌ای می‌باشد.

روش‌ها: این مطالعه با روش ترکیبی بر روی اعضای هیئت علمی دانشگاه علوم پزشکی مشهد که در همایشهای بین المللی بین ژانویه ۲۰۱۴ تا ۲۰۱۵ شرکت کرده بودند در دو مرحله مجزا و متوالی انجام گردید. مرحله اول، مرحله کیفی یا استفاده از تحلیل مضمون (تحلیل تم محتوایی) است که از طریق نمونه‌گیری هدفمند بر اساس مرور منابع و مصاحبه با اعضای هیئت علمی (مخبران کلیدی) انجام شد. مرحله دوم، مرحله کمی است که توسط یک پرسشنامه الکترونیک برای جمع آوری دیدگاههای اعضای هیئت علمی برای بهبود فرایند انجام شد.

نتایج: بر اساس نتایج مرحله اول، چهار موضوع اصلی در فرایند حضور در کنفرانس وجود داشت: ۱ و ۲: مسائل و پیامدهای فرایند حضور ۳- ارتقای علمی و حرفه‌ای ناشی از حضور در کنفرانس ۴-سودمندی و مزایای آکادمیک. سطح علمی همایشها (۱۵ درصد) و جا به جایی و اسکان (۲۸ درصد) به ترتیب رایج ترین مسائل و پیامدها بودند، در حالی که آشنایی با موضوعات و ایده‌های جدید (۲۰ درصد)، مهم ترین مزایا بود.

نتیجه‌گیری: بر طبق نتایج مرحله کمی، به نظر می‌رسد که همایشهای بین المللی برای پیشرفت و ارتقای حرفه‌ای بسیار مهم هستند با اینکه مسائل و پیامدهای حضور در این رویدادها بیش از مزایای آن است.

کلمات کلیدی: عملکرد حرفه‌ای، اعضای هیئت علمی گروه پزشکی، روش ترکیبی، همایشها

تبیین تجارب اعضاء الریئة العلمیة فی عملیة حضور المؤتمرات الدولیة : درامه ترکیبی

المقدمه: إن الحضور فی المؤتمرات یعتبر امر غایة فی اللاحقیة فی المجال الحرفی عند العلماء و المحققین. لم یکن هناك الحضور فی مجال تقییم ایجابات و سلبیات الحضور فی المؤتمرات الدولیة العلمیة. إن الیرف من هذه الدراسة تبیین سلبیات و تبعات الحضور فی المؤتمر إضافة الی المحاسن اللاحادیة و رفع المستوى العلمی و الحرفی.

الاصالیة: تم إجراء هذه الدراسة ترکیبیة علی اعضاء الریئة العلمیة فی جامعه مسرد للعلوم الطبیة الذین اشرکوا فی المؤتمرات الدولیة فی عامین ۲۰۱۴ و ۲۰۱۵ علی مرحلتین و بشكل متوالی. المرحلة الأولى المرحلة کیفیة او استخدام التحلیل المحتوایی و الذی تم الحصول علیه عن طریق اخذ العینات بشكل مدروس بناء علی المصادر و المقابلات مع اعضاء الریئة العلمیة. و المرحلة التانیة كانت المرحلة کیفیة الی تم بواسطه استمارات الکترونیة لتجسیع آراء اعضاء الریئة العلمیة لتحسین الإجراءات.

النتائج: كان هناك اربعة مواضيع اصلیة فی عملیة الحضور فی المؤتمر علی اساس نتائج المرحلة الأولى ۱ و ۲ مسائل و مضاعفات عملیة الحضور ۳ الیرتقاء العلمی و الحرفی النتائج عن عملیة الحضور فی المؤتمر ۴ الفوائد اللاحادیة

إن المستوى العلمی للمؤتمرات ۱۵٪ و النقل و السكن ۲۸٪ كان بالترتیب فی اعلى المستویات فی حال كان مستوى المعرفة بالموضوعات ۲۰٪.

الاستنتاج: علی اساس نتائج المرحلة کیفیة نستنتج أن المؤتمرات الدولیة لربما الالتر الکبیر فی مجال رفع و تطویر المستوى الحرفی مع أن التبعات كانت اکثر من الزایا.

کلمات المفتاح: العمل الحرفی، اعضاء الریئة العلمیة الطبیة. الالسلوب ترکیبی، المؤتمرات.

بین الاقوامی کانفرنسون میں شرکت کرنے کے اکیڈمیک کونسل کے اراکین کے تجربے

بیگ گراؤڈ: کانفرنسون میں شرکت کرنا بہت سے محققین اور دانشوروں کے لئے ان کی پیشہ ورانہ زندگی کا ایک ضروری حصہ شمار ہوتا ہے۔ ایران میں بین الاقوامی کانفرنسون میں شرکت کرنے کے نقصان اور مثبت نکات کا جائزہ لینے کے لئے کوئی بھی تحقیق انجام نہیں دی گئی ہے۔ اس تحقیق کا هدف کانفرنسون میں شرکت کرنے کی مشکلات اور اس کے علمی فائدے نیز علمی اور پیشہ ورانہ پیشرفت کا جائزہ لینا ہے۔

روش: اس تحقیق میں مشہدی یونیورسٹی آف میڈیکل سائنس کی اکیڈمیک کونسل کے وہ اراکین شامل تھے جنہوں نے جنوری دوہزار چودہ سے دوہزار پندرہ تک بین الاقوامی کانفرنسون میں شرکت کی تھی۔ یہ تحقیق دو مرحلوں میں انجام پائی ہے۔ پہلے مرحلے میں مضمون کے تجزیے کی روش اپنائی گئی، اس میں اکیڈمیک کونسل کے اراکین کی کتابوں کا جائزہ اور ان کا انٹرویو لیا گیا، دوسرے مرحلے میں انہیں ایک الیکٹرانیک سوالنامہ دیا گیا تاکہ اس سے اکیڈمیک کونسل کے اراکین کے نظریات معلوم کئے جاسکیں۔

نتیجے: پہلے مرحلے کے نتائج کے مطابق کانفرنسون شرکت کرنے سے متعلق چار مسئلے تھے، پہلا اور دوسرا مسئلہ یہ تھا کہ کانفرنسون میں شرکت کرنے سلسلے میں مسائل اور ان کے نتائج تیسرا مسئلہ یہ تھا کہ اس سے علمی لحاظ سے پیشرفت حاصل ہوتی ہے، بیس فیصد اساتذہ کا کہنا تھا انہیں نئے مسائل اور موضوعات سے آگہی ہوتی ہے۔

سفارش: کمی نتائج کی اساس پر بین الاقوامی کانفرنسین علمی پیشرفت اور پیشہ ورانہ ترقی کے لئے نہایت اہمیت رکھتی ہیں۔

کلیدی الفاظ: پیشہ ورانہ، علمی گروہ، اساتذہ، کانفرنسین۔

INTRODUCTION

The faculty members are considered as the key factors of educational structure in any country, and their capabilities have direct influences on the performance of medical education (1). Attendance at conferences is considered as a professional necessity for most of the researchers and scientists and a part of faculty members' professional development process, taking into account within the framework of scientific cooperation (1-3).

Given the experts' scientific and professional needs at centers and universities, the attendance at international conferences is critical for programs of faculty members' promotion especially the newly recruited labor. International conferences help these members in scientific fields to identify their interests and the changes they want to make at regional and global levels during their activities (4). Companionship with other scientists and partners on a global scale provide the opportunity for individuals to think about the existing resources and services which can provide. Furthermore, it will lead to reputation of university or academic center where they work, it will personally promote the individual scientific and occupational resumes. Learning and communication, which are made during the conferences, will be very effective and can dramatically change the individuals' professional ways (5). Moreover, the communication with other scientists and familiarity with technologies are useful for professional empowerment through information exchange (6-10). The attendance at international conferences is affected by individual, familial, professional and organizational factors as the faculty members' behavior (2, 11). These factors affect the faculty members' perception of achievements, limitations and unintended consequences in final usefulness of attendance at international conferences. Final usefulness also indicates the set of expected positive achievements and outcomes in attending the international conferences and leads to the academic and scientific development (12).

According to the literature, need for change of pace, academic networking, educational promotion, and leadership, enhanced self-esteem and socialization, as some defined motivators for faculty members participation to conferences (11, 13, 14). On the other hand, budget problems, timing, health concerns, unstable academic or professional position are considered as inhibitory factors (3, 15). Currently, no study has been conducted in Iran to evaluate the pros and cons of attending to the medical international conferences. The aim of this study was to determine the problems and consequences of attendance at the conference, as well as its academic benefits and scientific-professional promotions.

METHODS

This mixed method study was conducted on faculty members' of Mashhad University of Medical Sciences attending to International conferences between January 2014 and 2015. Faculty members were included in the study if they have accepted our initial invitation. Individuals were excluded if they were decided to discontinue the study. This

study was a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods conducted in parallel and sequential phases

First Phase: Qualitative Phase

The research questions, giving directions to the content of the interviews were formulated following consultation with the supervisor and advisor professors. The interviews were conducted through a semi-structured manner in which the questions were initially raised with simpler and more general issues and then oriented towards more specific ones based on the participants' responses as well as the interaction between the researcher and each participant. The approximate time allotted to each interview was between 60 and 110 minutes, depending on the willingness of participants to continue the interview, their fatigue, as well as the adequacy of the data. Following each interview, they were immediately transcribed along with participants' non-verbal communications such as smiles, sighs, pauses, and the likes. The transcriptions were also reread and reviewed several times and then the data were broken into units of meanings in the form of statements associated with the original meanings. The units of meanings were similarly reviewed several times and, after that, the relevant codes for each unit of meaning were written. Next, the codes were shortened and condensed as much as possible based on the conceptual and semantic similarity of categories. The decreasing trend in data reduction was implemented in all units of analysis as well as categories and sub-categories. Finally, the data were placed in main categories which were more general and conceptual and then the themes were abstracted. If necessary, changes were made in the content and the names of the categories - to reveal their contents. The process of analysis was repeated with the addition of each interview and then the categories were modified. Eventually and according to the responses provided by the participants, a secondary complete questionnaire containing categories and themes was developed and submitted via email to university professors. At this stage, sampling continued until data saturation as long as no new codes emerged in the three final interviews. From another perspective, data saturation meant that no new codes or data were obtained after each interview or observation and all of the conceptual levels had been completed.

Second phase: Quantitative Phase

According to the participants' responses during the interviews in the first phase, the final questionnaire was completed and sent by e-mail to the study participants. In fact, the categories and the themes obtained in the qualitative phase were formulated in the form of a questionnaire and resubmitted to the given professors. This questionnaire was comprised of four domains of existing problems in the conference participation process, consequences of conference participation, scientific-professional promotion due to conference participation, as well as final usefulness and academic benefits of participation in conferences abroad. Accordingly; 9 items were designed in the domain of existing problems in conference participation process, 6 items were associated with consequences of conference participation, 10 items were related to scientific-professional promotion due to conference participation, and 6 items were assigned to final

usefulness and academic benefits of participation in conferences overseas. One open-ended item was also included in each domain upon which the participants could explain each one if they were willing to do so. The questionnaire was studied in terms of face and content validity before sending. Reliability of questionnaire was also approved by Cronbach's alpha coefficient in 30 completed questionnaires. In this phase, members were selected by a purposive sampling method.

Statistical Analysis

In order to analyze the qualitative data, thematic content analysis method was used. The four main stages of thematic content analysis were conducted with some adjustments to find the best master codes. First, the initial level coding process was started after reading the texts for several times through identifying and highlighting sentences and paragraphs in the unit of analysis. Then, a master code was assigned to each unit of analysis and the sub-codes were extracted. In the second encoding stage, master codes with the same meanings were grouped to form up the constructs. After classification; the constructs were put together in the form of a meaningful conceptual model, the relationship between the categories was identified, and the themes emerged. To determine the validity of the themes drawn out, the return process and the review of the collection of separate data were performed to extract the sources of supporting evidence. The qualitative data were also described following encoding the interviews. Finally, a

questionnaire was developed using the codes and submitted to the given professors. Following the collection of data and their entry into a computer with the help of the SPSS Software; mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation were employed for characterization and prioritization of the goals for participation in international conferences.

Ethical Considerations

All of the participants in the given project signed informed consent forms and the researcher was obliged to keep all the data confidential and also publish the research findings anonymously and only with the permission of the Office of Vice Chancellor for Research. In order to observe the ethical considerations during the interviews, the participants were addressed by their chosen nickname. In addition, the purpose of using the tape recorder was explained to them. The participants' permit was also obtained to record their talks and they were ensured regarding the confidentiality of their data during the present study. Furthermore, the right to withdraw from the study at any time was also given to the participants.

RESULTS

The studied was conducted on 47 faculty members (33 male/ 14 female) of Mashhad University of Medical Sciences on the first phase and 30 of them in the second phase. Thirty-five (74.4%) were clinical sciences faculty members while the remaining 25.6% were from the basic science groups. Most of the members had an associated professor degree (46.8%), 36.1% were assistant professor, and 17.1% were professors.

Table 1. Classes of themes in attendance at international conferences

Theme	Classes
Problems in attendance at conference	Attendance criteria Administrative procedures Funding and allocation Visa application process Political restrictions and sanctions Cost-effectiveness Money spending Role of congress in identifying the Iranian physicians Scientific levels of conferences
Consequences of attendance at conference	Missing job promotions and benefits Livelihood examples Transport and accommodation Fluency in foreign language and understanding the lecture Communication with foreign physicians Fluency in foreign language to give presentation at conference
Scientific-professional promotions due to attendance at conferences	Familiarity with new topics and ideas Language improvements Professional skills improvements Familiarity with new ways of teaching Academic position promotion Acquisition of scientific reputation Ability to conduct more articles (ISI and PubMed Indexed) Ability to build more research projects in with international institutes Ability to communicate with the world famous professors Ability to grasp research opportunity (due to new scientific networks)
Final (ultimate) usefulness and academic benefits	Efficiency Implementing the new treatment methods

All the participants have attended to the international conferences at least for two times, having published articles in PubMed and ISI (International Scientific Indexing) indexed journals. According to results, despite the fact that a large percentage of people thought that the attendance at the conference was effective to get new research ideas, they thought that too much spending was needed and its impact on job promotion was negligible. Based on the results of the first phase, four main themes are important in the attendance process: problems in the process of attendance and consequences; the scientific and professional promotion due to the attendance; and final usefulness of academic benefits each which were classified into classes and subclasses (Table 1).

According to the results of the second phase, the low exchange allocation is put in the first place in group of problems; and the communication with foreign physicians is among the main results in group in attendance at the conference (Figure 1 & 2). It seems that the scientific-professional promotion of communication with famous professors is among the valuable indices (Figure 3).

DISCUSSION

The prevailing view among the faculty members at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences was that the main problems in the way of participating in conferences abroad were associated with the allocation of foreign exchange as well as

political restrictions and those related to sanctions and credits (100%). In fact, some university professors believed that the major problems caused by economic issues were related to the devaluation of the Rial against foreign currencies as well as lack of financial transfer because the fields of study associated with medical sciences were not inherently subjected to sanction rules. From another perspective and through dividing the problems into domestic and international ones, most of the university professors who had passed such courses had reported domestic issues, including criteria and rules for allocation, speed and stability of official proceedings, as well as allocation of foreign exchange and sufficient credits as their shared problems.

On the other hand, the bulk of the participants evaluated the three categories examined regarding the cross-border issues of the role of conferences to introduce the levels of Iranian physicians to the world, visa application and admission, and political restrictions positively and assumed that visa application and admission procedure and international sanctions could create alarming limits in the process of participation in conferences overseas.

The given problems were similar to those listed by Zarei (16) associated with sabbatical programs. Dove (17) also mentioned financing as the most important challenge to empowering programs for university professors especially within sabbatical opportunities. Besides, Ahmadi (18)

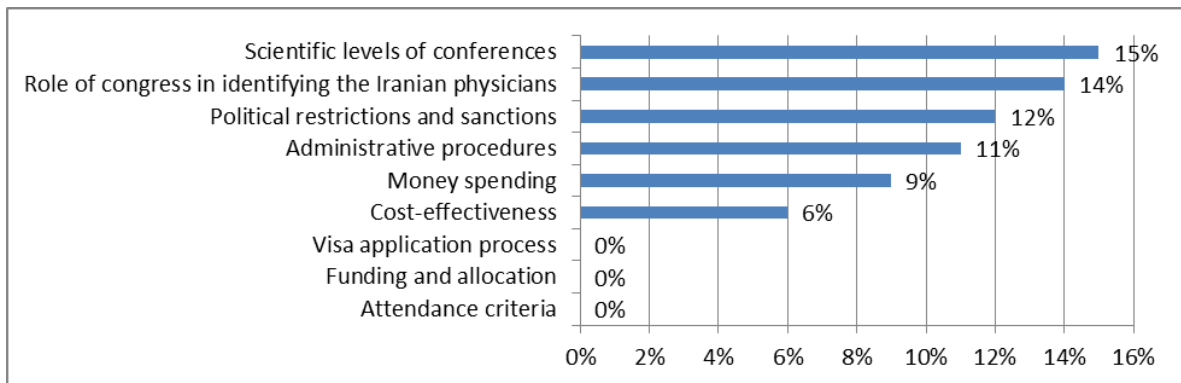


Figure 1. Problems of attendance at international conferences for faculty members at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences

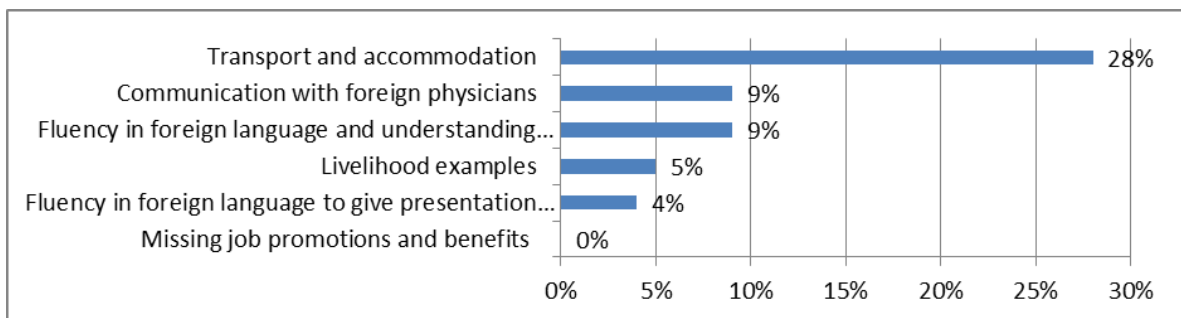
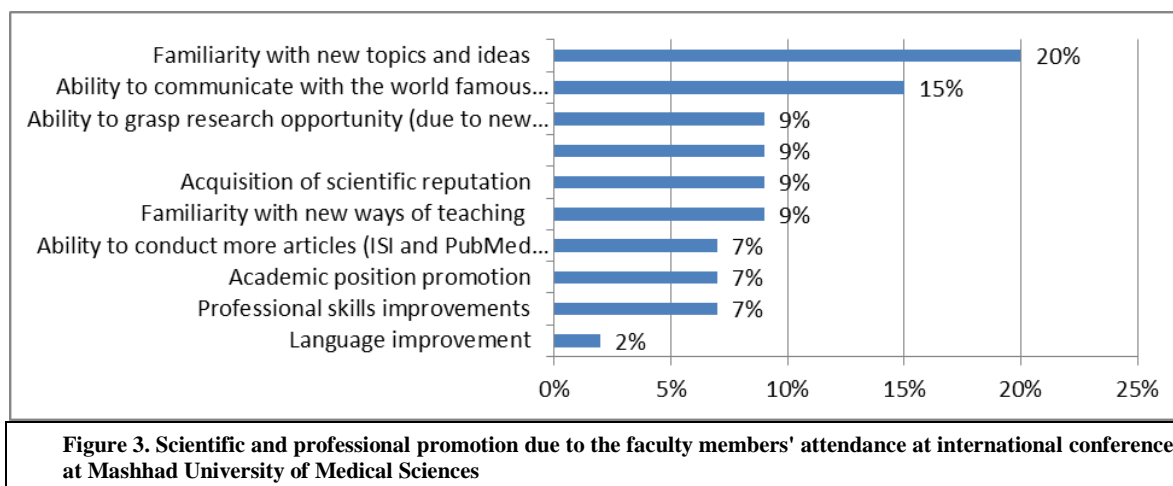


Figure 2. Consequences of attendance at international conferences for faculty members at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences



outlined the problems facing the implementation of the empowerment program for university professors in Iran as establishment of balance between individual needs and organizational ones, method selection and its proper implementation, limited resources, lack of managerial or organizational supports, resistance to changes, absence of follow-up activities, non-participation of faculty members in decision-making meetings, loss of a systemic planning and definite approach in connection with empowering programs for university professors, existence of parallel and fragmented structures in activities related to empowering professors, as well as unstable management in the decision-making process.

Considering the consequences associated with participation in conferences and according to the results obtained in this study, the most significant concerns among faculty members at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences during such conferences was their livelihood (31%). In this respect, most experts believed that participation in international conferences did not have any adverse effects on the loss of current employment benefits for an individual and an institution (18,7,1). In this regard, over 90% of participants reported a considerable level of satisfaction in cases such as accommodations, transportation from hotels to conference venues, language proficiency to deliver and understand speeches, and ability to communicate with other foreign partners during these conferences. Given the negative consequences of participation in empowerment programs for university professors, Zarei (16) listed loss of professional status and current interests as the main concerns among professors participating in sabbatical programs.

Likewise, participation in international conferences can have numerous professional and scientific purposes which in turn lead to the promotion of the professors in academic, national, and international levels (2, 7, and 10). The findings of this study in the area of professional and scientific promotions resulting from participation in conferences abroad from the perspective of faculty members at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences indicated that such programs were effective steps in terms of achieving scientific, educational, skills-based, and communicative goals and they

could also promote university professors in the given domains by 89%. Clearly; empowerment of university professors in each scientific, educational, communicative, and skills-based domain can also have positive consequences for the promotion of the professional status of university professors at different academic, domestic, and international levels. The results of this study similarly confirmed the fact that participating in international conferences with the values of 69% (in a range of group or university) and 65% (in an international range) could have a favorable (excellent, good, or moderate) impact on the promotion of status and reputation of university professors at different scientific levels. Furthermore, Borg (19) summarized the benefits from participating in conferences overseas into increased knowledge of using the techniques in practical applications, creating scientific communities with other professionals in the relevant fields, and improving professional confidence and motivation. In another study, Sima and Denton (20) defined the advantages and objectives of empowering professors such as sabbatical opportunities at the University of Illinois (Chicago, the United States) in the form of activities including learning new techniques, proposal of research projects, investigation, study, writing, curriculum, and presentation. In this regard, most participants argued that sabbatical opportunities had a significant impact on improving their skills and knowledge needed to carry out research. Writing scientific texts and studying areas of interest were also placed on the second and the third ranks by a wide margin, respectively. They also suggested that all these activities except writing were dependent on the location of sabbatical programs (20). In other words, working in a group together with other international partners or even domestic ones, but from another state could significantly help in achieving the "frontiers of knowledge" in the research or proposal development activities. Besides, Kang and Miller (21) showed that schools offering sabbatical opportunities and receiving reports from university professors during and after such programs could gain a higher rate of benefits. In this regard, receiving reports during sabbatical opportunities could build high understanding about its goals among university professors _____

which in turn could lead to more growth and efficiency among individuals. In this respect, Zarei (16) evaluated only four activities including acquisition of knowledge and new ideas, promotion of skills or therapeutic techniques related to the fields of activities, learning new methods of teaching and training, and improvement of language skills. Likewise, he reported that the participants believed that the empowerment programs in each of these four areas had the desirable effectiveness.

In terms of efficiency and usefulness of participating in international conferences, 72% of individuals in the present study were able to create and launch new therapeutic methods. This aspect of usefulness of empowerment programs was also observed in the investigation by Zarei (21).

The unwillingness of university professors to cooperate was the main limitation of the present study; thus, efforts were made to reduce them through adequate explanation, confidentiality of data, and flexibility in data collection. Another limitation of this study was associated with its generalizability including its small sample size, lack of control in the process of data collection, and subjective

reports from the faculty members on the basis of pre-designed programs at certain times to form up a more realistic idea of the strengths and weaknesses of such programs in further research studies. It was also recommended to conduct a comparison between achievements of faculty members participating in conferences abroad with those professors attending domestic ones in the future studies.

CONCLUSION

According to our results, it seems that the majority of the selected university professors considered financial problems and insufficient credits as the main concerns for such programs and also listed livelihood issues during participation in conferences overseas as the most significant negative consequences even though such programs were effective steps in terms of achieving the scientific, educational, skills-based, and communicative goals from the perspective of the faculty members at Mashhad University of Medical Sciences. The ultimate favorable effects of such programs were evident on the ranking promotion of professors, creating therapeutic methods, as well as publication of scientific research articles.

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