

The Employment Issue of PhD Graduates in the Humanities in Iran: Barriers and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

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Iran has seen significant growth in the establishment of universities and student enrollment in various fields of study over the past two decades. However, this increase in higher education has been accompanied by unemployment among a growing number of higher education graduates, with doctoral graduates in the humanities experiencing a higher unemployment rate than other fields. Therefore, the aim to this research was to understand the barriers to employment and the conditions that lead to unemployment among PhD graduates in humanities. Our main question in this research is to explore the reasons and conditions that prevent the employment of PhD graduates in the humanities. We used a qualitative approach and grounded theory method. Participants were sampled purposively with different genders, fields of study, universities, and graduation dates. A total of 44 interviews with participants who had graduated at least a year ago and did not have a suitable job or income were performed. Data collection was performed through semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory coding. After analyzing the data, 7 main categories were explored, which include: Relationship governance, Ideological contexts, University massification, Humanities isolation, Market/university mismatch, Limitations in humanities entrepreneurship and Dysfunctional policymaking. And finally, the central category of structural and institutional barriers was constructed. The findings showed that one of the most important factors in the employment of PhD graduates in the humanities is the policies and decisions of the government and its affiliated institutions.

Keywords: Employment barriers, PhD graduates, humanities, Relationship governance, structural and institutional barriers.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the relative supply of university graduates to the labor market in Iran has significantly increased, largely due to a growing demand for higher education (Ebrahimi et al., 2013). The number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education grew by over 300% from 1970 to the early 21st century (Erdem, 2012; Wolf, 2002). Consequently, higher education has gradually transformed into a mass phenomenon (Danassia et al., 2023). One of the most critical characteristics of the massification of higher education in Iran is the disconnect between the rising university enrollment rates and the country's employment capacity. As a result, the Iranian higher education system now faces the pressing challenge of a large population of unemployed graduates (Salehi Amiri, 2013). According to data from the Statistical Center of Iran (2020), the highest number of doctoral-level enrollments across academic disciplines occurs in the humanities. Based on the Labor Force Survey (2023), the number of employed individuals with higher education degrees stands at 6,995,062, of which 660,900 are employed in the fields of arts and humanities (Statistical Center of Iran, 2023). Employment statistics reveal that 49.34% of graduates are employed, while 50.66% remain unemployed (Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2024). Therefore, this study aims to understand the underlying barriers to the employment of doctoral graduates. More specifically, the main research question concerns identifying the structural and contextual factors that hinder the employment of PhD graduates in the humanities. One of the key questions explored in this study is: What conditions do humanities PhD graduates perceive as barriers to their employment?

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative-interpretive approach, employing a constructivist grounded theory methodology. The study's fieldwork was conducted across 13 universities: University of Tehran, Alzahra University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Shiraz University, University of Isfahan, Mashhad University, Yazd University, Kashan University, University of Gilan, University of Mazandaran, Ahvaz University, Birjand University, and Khorramabad University. The participants consisted of PhD graduates in the humanities who had completed their degrees at least two years prior, had not secured employment in a field relevant to their specialization, and had experienced unemployment while actively seeking work. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation and snowball techniques were used to recruit participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth insights into the participants' conditions and actions. A total of 44 interviews were conducted. The duration of each interview ranged from approximately 1.5 to 2 hours—and in some cases up to 4 hours—depending on factors such as the participant's availability, willingness to engage, emotional state, and sense of responsibility. Data were analyzed using grounded theory coding procedures. First, a preliminary review and segmentation of each interview were conducted, and initial conceptual codes were assigned to meaningful statements (open coding). Similar initial codes were then grouped into categories (focused coding), and their relationships were explored. In the final step (theoretical coding), recurrent and significant categories were selected and integrated into a core category and theoretical model.

Findings

After analyzing the data, 7 main categories were explored, which include: Relationship governance, Ideological contexts, University massification, Humanities isolation, Market/university mismatch, Limitations in humanities entrepreneurship and Dysfunctional policymaking. These were consolidated into the central category: "Structural and Institutional Barriers." The barriers faced by PhD graduates in securing employment can be understood through the lens of both structural and institutional obstacles. This means that macro-level decisions and institutional frameworks significantly hinder participants from achieving their employment goals.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the employment barriers and the formation of unemployment among PhD graduates in the humanities using a qualitative grounded theory approach. The findings indicate that, from the participants' perspective, unemployment is a phenomenon shaped by the convergence of multiple structural processes. These processes create various

employment challenges for the graduates. Interview results and literature review highlight that PhD graduates in the humanities experience the highest unemployment rates compared to other disciplines. They not only face greater difficulties in securing employment, but also endure longer waiting periods to enter the labor market. Ad hoc policymaking, the replacement of long-term planning with short-term decisions, and weak strategic planning have led to the massification of humanities education and a growing disconnect between universities and the labor market. Consequently, the humanities face increasing marginalization, and entrepreneurship within this field remains underdeveloped. Structural and institutional barriers play a significant role in connecting dysfunctional policies, uncoordinated decision-making, the isolation of the humanities, and the sector's dependence on government employment. These barriers also reflect a misalignment between academic training and market needs. Moreover, the role of institutions and structures in promoting nepotism, undermining meritocracy, and emphasizing ideological conformity over professional qualifications in academic recruitment is clearly evident due to institutional incoherence.

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