

EVALUATION OF COMPETENCE LEVELS OF HEALTHCARE MANAGEMENT GRADUATES BY EMPLOYERS

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ABSTRACT

The competencies and skills that healthcare management graduates must have need to be constantly updated due to the dynamism of the healthcare industry. Understanding employers' perspectives on graduates' professional competencies, which provide employment opportunities for healthcare management graduates, can provide valuable insights to both universities and students. The aim of this study is to determine how the professional competency levels of healthcare management graduates are evaluated by employers, to identify the key attributes sought in graduates. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 participants identified using a criterion sampling method. The research group consisted of human resources managers working in private hospitals. A qualitative research method was employed in the study, and analysis of the data revealed five themes. The findings can provide guidance for curriculum updates in universities and employment processes in hospitals.

KEYWORDS

Employment, healthcare management, professional competence

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare management, a specialized discipline within management science, incorporates finance, strategic planning, human resources management, information technology, and quality control. Its objective is to organize healthcare institutions effectively, ensuring the delivery of services with high effectiveness, quality, efficiency, and sustainability [1]. It is also defined as the process of planning, organizing, mobilizing, and controlling financial and human resources for the supply of health services to protect and improve the health levels of individuals and societies [2]. A high-performing and effective healthcare system also requires effective healthcare management [3]. Those responsible for implementing this effective management are healthcare managers.

A healthcare manager is defined as someone who graduates from faculties/schools of universities offering undergraduate education in departments such as "Healthcare Administration," "Healthcare Management," "Healthcare Institution Management," "Healthcare Administration," or "Healthcare Facility Administration." Their title is Healthcare Manager / Healthcare Administrator [4]. The job description of healthcare managers was made in 9 articles in the Official Gazette (Türkiye) dated May 22, 2014 [5].

It is important that healthcare managers have the qualifications to perform their duties. Because central examinations are required for employment in public institutions, these qualifications are even more critical for the private sector, which offers a wide range of opportunities for healthcare managers. The aim of this study is to evaluate the general situation of healthcare management graduates, who will be employed in the private sector, in Türkiye by human resource managers.

HEALTHCARE MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYMENT

The number of universities offering undergraduate education in healthcare management has increased over the years. Correspondingly, the number of graduates has also risen significantly. While the number of graduates was 581 between 2012 and 2013, it increased nearly fivefold by 2022, despite a slowdown in its growth rate by 2018 [1]. However, in a study conducted with 255 healthcare management graduates, it was found that 58.8% of the graduates were not employed, while approximately 41% of those who were employed were employed in their field, with an employment rate of 66.7% [5]. For students currently enrolled in or graduating from the healthcare management department, it is essential to know what the actual competence needs of the sector are, considering the low employment rates. To accurately identify these needs, evaluations from human resources managers who provide employment in the field are crucial.

METHODS

A qualitative research method was used in this study and was planned as a case approach. The purpose of qualitative research is to reveal experiences and understandings [6]. A case study involves the comprehensive investigation of various factors related to a situation, such as the environment, individuals, duration, or events, aiming to determine their effects on the situation and how they are affected by it [7]. Case studies also seek to include multiple perspectives, making it possible to highlight areas of consensus and conflict [8].

As the research aims to determine the competencies of graduates, human resources managers, who play a key role in the employment of graduates, have been consulted. Since recruitment processes in public hospitals proceed through centralized exams, only human resources managers working in private hospitals were included in the study. Interviews were conducted with 10 human resources managers working in private hospitals. Since 10 in-depth interviews are considered sufficient for homogeneous populations [9], the study was limited to 10 participants, as data saturation was deemed to have been reached. Participants included in the research were determined using criterion sampling, as a purposive sampling method that focuses on similarities and narrows the differences [10]. The information on the research participants is seen in Table 1. The interviews were conducted between January and May 2023.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Üsküdar University Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee on December 30, 2022.

TABLE 1: INFORMATION ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant Code	Gender	Experience
P1	Woman	20 years
P2	Woman	5 years
P3	Man	13 years
P4	Woman	5 years
P5	Woman	15 years
P6	Woman	10 years
P7	Man	7 years
P8	Man	15 years
P9	Woman	20 years
P10	Woman	15 years

DATA COLLECTION

The literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical background and develop questions for one-on-one interviews. Based on this review, researchers created a semi-structured interview form with the questions. The questions included are as follows:

1. Which areas within hospitals do you employ healthcare management graduates the most?
2. What are the competencies most needed in the field of healthcare management?
3. Considering the competencies of healthcare management graduates, what are their strengths and areas that need improvement?
4. As a healthcare manager, what can you say about the future of the healthcare management profession?

General information about the study was provided to the participants before the interviews, and appointments were requested. They were informed that voice recorders would be used as data collection tools and that the interviews would be listened to only by the researchers and that confidentiality would be ensured by encrypting their names. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations and dates determined by the participants. The duration of the interviews ranged from 20 to 40 minutes. With participants' verbal consent, the interviews were recorded using audio recording devices.

DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained in this study. The audio recordings were transcribed into written format by the researchers on a computer after the interviews. The audio recordings were listened to and read again by the researchers to increase the reliability and validity of the transferred data. NVivo 14 software was utilized for analysis. The raw data sets were imported into NVivo 14, and content analysis was conducted. Initially, the data sets were read, and elements relevant to the purpose of the research were coded in the "codes" section of NVivo 14. Different codes were then grouped under specific categories. These categories were examined in terms of conceptual similarities and differences, related ones were grouped together, and main themes were identified.

RESULTS

After analyzing the participants' statements, five themes have been identified. These themes are as follows: graduate employment unit, required professional competencies in graduates, strengths of graduates, weaknesses of graduates, and perspectives on the present and future of the profession.

RESULTS OF THE GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT UNIT THEME

Given that graduates can play critical roles in managing and improving the complex structure of the healthcare sector, the units in which graduates are employed after graduation are important both for hospitals and for graduates to achieve their career goals.

All participants expressed that graduates were employed in any administrative unit within the hospital as needed. However, some participants have stated that it is necessary for graduates to work at the lowest administrative levels of healthcare institutions to have the competence to take on critical roles, and therefore, the highest employment rate is in inpatient services units. When participants responded to questions about employment, they also expressed their opinions about the career paths of the participants. Some participants criticized this situation by expressing their belief that especially new graduates can assume managerial roles without experience. Another topic mentioned by the participants in this context was promotion. They stated that health management graduates could take part in higher levels because of their achievements. Sub-themes, codes, quotations and the number of participants expressing their thoughts on the **sub-themes (N)** and their **frequencies (F)**, are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: INFORMATION ON THE GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT UNIT THEME

Sub-Themes	Codes	Quotations	N	F
Patient services unit		"We honestly see starting inpatient services as more appropriate since it is the foundation of the job." (P3)	9	16
All administrative units in the hospital		They can be employed in all administrative levels involving management. In reality, they are. They could. There's no obstacle to this." (P6)	10	19
Career path of graduates				
	Experience	"When they graduate from university, people seem to think as if they'll just 'put me in the chair as a manager.'" (P1)	6	21
	Promotion	"So, the hierarchy goes like this: patient advisor, counter team leader, patient services supervisor, assistant manager of patient services, manager, and up to the level of directorship. Moreover, lateral transitions are also possible." (P9)	9	28

RESULTS OF THE COMPETENCIES REQUIRED IN GRADUATES THEME

The success of healthcare management graduates in obtaining positions and contributing effectively to the sector, increases with the competencies they have. These competencies are important not only for the individual employment of graduates but also for various issues such as the efficient operation, sustainability, quality, policy development, improvement of healthcare service delivery, and enhancement of public health in healthcare systems. Participants have expressed these competencies in two different ways: as individual and professional competencies.

Participants emphasized individual competencies they seek in graduates as self-confidence, discipline, self-awareness, patience, and openness to learning. The most frequently mentioned topics by participants were openness to learning and self-awareness. Codes, quotations and the number of participants expressing their thoughts on the codes and their frequencies, are shown in Table 3.

TABLE:3 INFORMATION ON THE INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCIES SUB-THEME

Sub-Theme	Codes	Quotations	N	F
Individual competencies				
	Discipline	"What will set you apart from others? Well, it will be your self-confidence." (P6)	4	8
	Self-awareness	"Let them do their internships in that direction in order to specialize, get to know themselves, and let us get to know them." (P9)	4	14

	Patience	"Patience is necessary. They will see the rewards of these in the later stages. Patience, communication, and dedication are the criteria that should be present in people who want to do this job." (P8)	6	12
	Confidence	"What will set you apart from others? Well, it will be your self-confidence." (P6)	3	13
	Openness to learning	"They should be open to self-improvement, open to learning, constantly following innovations in terms of technology and science because the system is constantly renewing itself in some way. It is very important for us that they have these competencies." (P4)	8	14

Participants also mentioned computer knowledge, leadership qualities, teamwork proclivity, knowledge of legislation, knowledge of foreign languages, following innovations, management skills and communication elements as the professional competencies that graduates should have. The most frequently mentioned issue under this sub-theme was communication skills. Codes, quotations and the number of participants expressing their thoughts on the codes and their frequencies are shown in Table 4.

TABLE:4 INFORMATION ON THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES SUB-THEME

Sub-Theme	Codes	Quotations	N	F
Professional competencies				
	Computer skills	"If their computer usage is good, if they can use Excel, Word, PowerPoint effectively, then it will take them just a few days to learn another program." (P5)	2	2
	Teamwork	"I think the most important thing is to be someone with a high sense of teamwork." (P2)	5	7
	Leadership trait	"If they are going to work in management, they need to strengthen their leadership qualities a bit." (P10)	4	7
	Regulatory information	"They should know the healthcare system, they should know the Ministry of Health's strategic plans, that's very important. There is a guideline for private hospitals, you know. All healthcare management graduates should know this." (P7)	6	8
	Foreign language	"There are very few healthcare management graduates who can actively use a foreign language they know. So, I think foreign language proficiency is a very important competency." (P6)	6	11
	Innovation tracking	"They need to be very open to innovation." (P5)	7	12
	Management skill	"Management is essentially a matter of character. Not everyone can be a manager; it requires having the skills to manage people." (P9)	8	26
	Communication	"Communication is everything; the healthcare sector is a service sector that requires communication with patients, with staff. Everyone is	9	32

		<i>working with people. Since they are not working with machines, they should try methods to improve their communication." (P8)</i>		
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RESULTS OF THE STRENGTHS OF GRADUATES THEME

Knowing the strengths of healthcare management graduates and their ability to use these qualities are important for them to be effective and successful professionals in the sector. Participants discussed the strengths that differentiate healthcare management graduates from other candidates and expressed their views on sub-themes as sectoral motivation and familiarity, suitability of course content, and technological knowledge. Sub-themes, codes, quotations and the number of participants expressing their thoughts on the codes and their frequencies, are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5: INFORMATION ON THE STRENGTHS OF GRADUATES THEME

Sub-Themes	Quotations	N	F
Course content suitability	<i>"A person graduating from healthcare management becomes proficient in many ways in every field. They learn to do calculations, analyses, the human resources process... It's already a separate course shown over two terms. Patient rights, patient services, quality processes are all part of the curriculum, so someone graduating from healthcare management can already work in all these areas." (P4)</i>	7	11
Sectoral motivation and familiarity	<i>They come with an advantage. When you graduate from a very specific field like healthcare management, you've essentially already made a decision to pursue a career in healthcare. Yes, they might not have decided on the specific field, but they've decided to be within the healthcare sector and they start focusing on this field. That's why their motivation towards the sector is high." (P6)</i>	8	17
Technology knowledge	<i>"Now, if we come to their strengths, I can definitely say technology." (P3)</i>	5	6

RESULTS OF WEAKNESSES OF GRADUATES THEME

It is important for people to be aware of their weaknesses for continuous self-improvement and a more effective career management. People who are aware of their weaknesses and try to strengthen these areas will both experience how to cope with difficulties professionally and increase their personal satisfaction. In this context, participants expressed the aspects of healthcare management graduates that are open to development under the headings of education-based deficiencies, individual deficiencies and the weakness in sector-university cooperation.

Participants mostly focused on the lack of career goals and lack of self-awareness as individual deficiencies. They also expressed the graduates' negative view to patient services, lack of concentration and lack of communication. Among the education-based deficiencies, the participants mostly focused on the lack of internship experiences and mentioned the following topics: insufficient foreign languages, lack of field knowledge, misdirection of the academy and insufficient technology knowledge.

The last topic mentioned by the participants regarding the weaknesses of graduates was the weakness in sector-university cooperation. Sub-themes, codes, quotations and the number of participants expressing their thoughts on the codes and their frequencies, are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6: INFORMATION ON THE WEAKNESSES OF GRADUATES' THEME

Sub-Themes	Codes	Quotations	N	F
Individual deficiencies				
	Lack of career goals	"As far as I see, there are no people in the current environment who have high promotion goals." (P10)	4	10
	Lack of self-awareness	"Unfortunately, we are not in a good situation overall. In other words, we lack communication skills, foreign language skills, a previous internship and knowing what we want to start an institution." (P6)	3	10
	Negative view to patient services	"You know, it happens like this, I am a graduate of healthcare management. "For example, they want to start directly as a manager, not inpatient services, or they want to start directly as a manager." (P3)	6	9
	Lack of concentration	"Environmental conditions, technological advancements, work focus, individualization processes, and economic downturns are all distracting factors. We can clearly observe this in the people who come to us." (P2)	1	2
	Lack of communication	"Unfortunately, we are generally not in a good state. We lack communication skills, foreign language proficiency, prior internship experience, and clarity on what we want when applying to an institution." (P6)	4	8
Education-based deficiencies				
	Misdirection of the academy	"Because, unfortunately, our friends who receive training also have theoretical conflicts with the training they receive in some things. There are certain differences between what he sees in theory and the education he receives at school. To give an example, someone who does not come into contact with a patient, does not really see him with his own eyes, but only tries to do what he hears and what is explained to him. More precisely, a managerial candidate. Because he doesn't see this, because he hasn't experienced it, he can be kind of stunned at that moment. He may not be able to choose his answers correctly. Experience is very important for this." (P8)	5	6

	Lack of field knowledge	"Now, it is very unlikely that a person in an institution can be told that you are actually suitable for purchasing, that is, a new graduate with no experience/no internship experience can make such a determination and evaluate him/her in that field." (P6)	7	11
	Lack of internships	"At least one internship experience. For example, they say that it coincided with the pandemic and we could not do an internship. So, of course, this situation becomes less preferable." (P10)	6	13
	Insufficient technology knowledge	"I took numerous courses, from finance to cost accounting. However, we could have learned more about technology. For example, emerging fields like artificial intelligence were never covered. The curriculum could have included more technology-focused courses." (P4)	2	2
	Insufficient foreign language	"There are many deficiencies in the field of foreign languages. So maybe this is the general problem of our country." (P1)	6	11
Weakness in sector-university cooperation		"This is why education at university is important. If the managers working in the field have a voice in those universities, they can tell them about the real life in the field." (P9)	5	8

RESULTS OF THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OUTLOOK OF THE PROFESSION THEME

In order to make a situation assessment regarding the employment of healthcare management graduates, perspectives on both the current problems faced by healthcare management graduates and the expectations and opportunities for the future of the profession are important. With this information, it will be possible for graduates to strengthen their current positions in business life and shape their decisions regarding career paths correctly. This situation was also expressed by the participants, and the last theme determined was about the present and future outlook of the profession. In this context, participants expressed their opinions under the headings of excess quantity, positive progress, suggestions and low wages. Codes, quotations and the number of participants expressing their thoughts on the codes and their frequencies are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7: INFORMATION ON THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OUTLOOK OF THE PROFESSION THEME

Sub-themes	Quotations	N	F
Excess Quantity	"There were serious problems in finding experienced and educated managers in the sector. But it was few at that time. In other words, it was a handful of people who did this job properly. But now there are thousands of graduates, thousands of people." (P6)	5	7
Positive Progress	"In other words, the future of the healthcare management profession is very bright, it is a right professional group, and the successful healthcare management graduates will continue their lives as mid-to-senior level managers in hospitals in the future. Those	9	29

	<i>who fail will continue their processes as technical personnel at a certain level." (P7)</i>		
Suggestions	<i>"Analytical thinking and stress management, especially in the health sector, whether it is a graduate or student of health management, is very important. Candidates should be develop their solution-oriented aspect rather than problem-oriented aspect." (P3)</i>	6	14
Low wages	<i>"Unfortunately, we are financially lower than other sectors." (P4)</i>	4	5

DISCUSSION

As a result of this study, it was determined that healthcare management graduates are employed in all administrative units in hospitals, but especially new graduates are preferred primarily in the patient services unit so that they can master hospital processes.

Consistent with our research findings, when we look at the results of a study conducted with 255 healthcare management graduates, it was determined that 35.3% of healthcare management graduates working as civil servants and 34.8% of healthcare management graduates working as contracted personnel worked in the secretary position [5]. It is believed that working in the patient service unit will help new healthcare management graduates learn about the hospital, observe, and obtain experience quickly. Patient services need more staff often. The human resources managers we interviewed said the patient services unit is seen as a human resources pool, that other administrative units try to fill personnel shortages with people from the unit, and that healthcare management graduates are preferred. Inexperienced and new graduates should view the patient services unit as an opportunity to gain experience and demonstrate their skills.

In this study, the most wanted individual competence in a healthcare management graduate by the participants was determined as openness to learning. At the same time, patience, self-awareness, discipline and confidence are among the individual competencies mentioned. The most frequently mentioned topic within the scope of the theme of competencies sought in graduates was communication. Management skills, innovation track, knowledge of foreign language, regulatory information, teamwork, leadership traits and computer skills were also mentioned as professional competencies sought by the participants. Similar to our research, a gradual weight evaluation ratio analysis study determined the performance criteria for health institution managers, including learning, human relations and communication skills, decision-making, and teamwork [11]. Within the scope of another study carried out to determine the qualifications sought in the field of medical accounting expertise in Turkey, advertisements containing the phrase "medical accounting specialist" were searched on five different career sites. When the 24 job postings were examined, communication and teamwork, up-to-dateness, openness to innovation and learning, management and leadership, self-confidence, automation and mastery of office programs were among the sought-after qualifications [12]. In another study investigating the employability skills of healthcare managers, a survey was conducted to a total of 38 managers working in senior healthcare management positions in New South Wales regarding the employability skills of new graduates, and the topics such as teamwork, written and verbal communication skills and self-awareness were rated by the participants. was among the topics mentioned. In parallel with our study, this study also stated that the most important employability criterion for new graduates is communication skills [13]. In another study where focus group interviews were held with middle and senior managers, communication skills and relationship management were among the basic duties that managers should fulfill [14]. In the light of this information, it can be said that healthcare management graduates' being open to learning and having strong communication skills will positively affect employment rates.

This study's participants indicated healthcare management graduates' strengths are sectoral motivation, familiarity, course material fit, and technology expertise. A study of 150 students in health institution management and health

institution management found that 50% were satisfied with their departments and had high expectations and motivation for the department and courses [15]. Research in Italian public health schools found that motivation was one of eight critical qualities [16]. According to other studies [17,18], healthcare management students were satisfied with their departments. Similar outcomes as our study. Thus, student happiness with their departments and employer evaluation of high sectoral motivation in graduate employment overlap.

Participants in this study assessed healthcare management graduate employees' individual and education-based limitations. The inability to know oneself and lack of career goals were the most common personal flaws. Other topics included an unfavorable opinion of patient services, poor communication, and lack of concentration. Similar to our study, a study examined the relationship between healthcare management graduates' self-efficacy and their employment status, finding that those with a profession had higher self-efficacy [5]. In light of these results, it can be said that it is a disadvantage for graduates to want to become managers immediately without gaining experience. Strong communication skills are indispensable features in this professional group that deals with people. At the same time, knowing oneself and having realistic career goals will increase one's motivation in business life.

Lack of internships was the most common education-related deficiency. A survey of 145 healthcare management students found that they believed a good internship would boost their business performance [19]. A qualitative study of 12 healthcare management graduates in Turkey found that healthcare management education needs a quality application process and that there is a lack of practice [20]. Participants reported a lack of field knowledge, foreign language abilities, misdirection by the academy and lack of technology knowledge. In another study of 86 healthcare managers in the Western Mediterranean region, human resources management, financial management, and accounting were the most obvious deficiencies of healthcare managers trained in health institutions, as well as information technologies, health law, quality accreditation, financing, health economics, and health policy. In the same research, "managers who receive healthcare management training are sufficient to find solutions to the problems encountered in the field." 53.5 percent of managers said they agreed. Managers added, "The involvement of people who have not received healthcare management training in hospital management causes waste of resources and managerial deadlocks." Key findings include 32.6% agreeing and 33.7% strongly agreeing [21].

The opinions of most human resources managers, to whom we asked their opinions about the present and future of the profession, were positive, and the most frequently mentioned topic in this theme was the positive progress of the healthcare management department. Apart from this, the topics of excess quantity and low wages were among the other issues mentioned by the participants. In another study in which the educational and academic structure of the healthcare management department was examined in line with our study, it was stated that the biggest shortcoming of the department was the inability to plan for the future and the lack of appropriate employment of graduates, and it was stated that the necessary measures should be taken to reduce the current quotas and avoid overcrowding rather than ensuring a quantitative increase [22]. This result appears to coincide with the important issues emphasized by the human resources managers in our study.

CONCLUSION

Healthcare management graduates have many hospital career options, according to our study. As a career starter, the patient services unit can provide experience. Hospital human resources managers appreciate healthcare management graduates who are open to learning and have good communication abilities. Hospital management needs to adapt to rapid change in every field. Healthcare management graduates are also preferred over other graduates due to their sector understanding and education.

It was emphasized that on-site internships throughout university education should be more efficient and successful. Active internships will help graduates learn about the field and plan their careers. To gain a large proportion of health tourism, Turkey must immediately address graduates' foreign language skills. In university departments, hiring qualified academics

with healthcare management experience will solve the problem of misdirection by the academy. Healthcare management schools should consider these and other proposals to boost graduate employment and quality.

Authorship Declarations

Authors declare that they contributed to the drafting, design, collection and interpretation of the necessary study of the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declared that they have no conflict of interest with any person or institution related to the study.

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