



Dental Students' Satisfaction with Academic Advisors: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Academic counseling is a relationship between academic advisors and students and an effective approach to preventing students' academic failure and improve the educational system at the university level. Students' satisfaction with academic advisors could affect the quality of academic counseling.

Objectives: The present study aimed to investigate the influential factors in dental students' satisfaction with academic advisors.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted using conventional content analysis on 17 students of the School of Dentistry of Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Iran who were selected by purposive sampling in 2019. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, which were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by qualitative content analysis.

Results: Two main themes were extracted, which were the academic advisor's image and students' expectations. Four main categories and 12 subcategories were also obtained. The main categories were the academic advisor's characteristics, academic advisor's position, student-advisor communication, and students' needs.

Conclusions: According to the results, several factors may affect the satisfaction of dental students with academic advisors, such as the advisor's characteristics, communication between advisors and students, and general attitudes toward academic advisors in the educational system. These findings should be addressed in strategy planning in order to increase students' satisfaction with academic advisors.

Keywords: Satisfaction, Dental Students, Academic Advisor, Content Analysis

1. Background

Students who are admitted to universities need guidance and counseling in their field of study so that they could properly use this academic opportunity. The difference between the learning style at high school and university has rendered academic counseling a key topic in universities (1). Provided by academic advisors, academic counseling is a dynamic and purposeful relationship based on the participation of the advisor and students in using efficient methods to meet students' needs (2). The purpose of counseling is to guide students in improving their educational goals and achieving their life ideals (3).

Depending on the description of the assigned tasks, student guidance and counseling are partly the duty of university faculty members (4). An advisor is on the first level of communication between students and the educational system and plays a key role in laying the basis for scientific advancement and solving the educational, re-

search, personal, social, emotional, and welfare problems of students. Previous studies show that academic counseling leads to the greater efficiency of the educational system and the reduction of students' academic failure (5, 6).

The counseling process could lead to students' satisfaction with academic education and encourage them to achieve higher educational goals and increase their diligence. On the other hand, students' interaction with the university environment increases their sense of belonging to the educational system (6). Studies in this regard show that academic counseling improves academic performance (7) and increases the average of students' semester courses (8), while the lack/inadequacy of academic counseling adversely affects students' academic achievement and causes a sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction in students (9). Therefore, academic advisors play a pivotal role in advancing students' academic goals.

Despite the positive effects of counseling on students' academic performance, students may not have a positive

attitude toward academic advisors and do not refer to these professionals or pay little attention to their counseling (10); this issue might have a negative impact on their academic performance. Studies conducted by Geledar and Birjand (2010) and Sum et al. (2012) have shown students' dissatisfaction with academic advisors and the limited referrals of students to advisors (11, 12). Furthermore, Zare et al. (2014) reported that while the majority of students consider academic counseling to be necessary, only 8.9% of these students are satisfied with their academic advisors (13).

Given the importance of academic counseling and students' satisfaction with academic advisors, further investigations are required in this regard. Since satisfaction is a personal and subjective experience that cannot be evaluated quantitatively, qualitative research could yield more reliable results.

2. Objectives

The present study aimed to explore the influential factors in dental students' satisfaction with academic advisors at Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Iran.

3. Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using conventional content analysis. In this method, data are directly obtained from the participants, and predetermined categories or theoretical perspectives of the researcher are not imposed. In other words, the codes and categories are extracted from raw data using an inductive method (14).

Sample population included the dental students selected from the School of Dentistry at Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences in Kermanshah, Iran. The students who had a minimum experience of one semester in regular contact with academic advisors and provided informed consent were enrolled in the study. The students who were unwilling to participate in the study were excluded. The dental students were selected via purposive sampling with maximum diversity in terms of gender and semester so that both male and female and senior and junior students would be invited to participate in the study (15). Sample size was determined by data saturation (16).

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, which began by asking the following questions: "Please describe your experience with an academic advisor.", "Please explain about your attitude toward the academic advisor.", "Please describe students' satisfaction with academic advisors.", and "In your opinion, how should we increase students' satisfaction with academic advisors?". The inter-

views continued with detailed questions to probe the participants' response. The duration of the interviews was 30 - 60 minutes, and each interview was carried out in a quiet room at the School of Dentistry at Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences and recorded during April - November 2019.

In total, 17 dental students were interviewed. Data saturation was achieved after the 14th interview, and the last three interviews were performed to ensure data saturation. Notably, the last author, who is experienced in qualitative studies, was responsible for conducting and supervising the interviews. The first 10 interviews were conducted by the last author while the second author, who was a dental student, was present during the interviews to be able to continue the interviews if necessary. The last seven interviews were conducted by the second author.

Data analysis was performed using the multi-step method proposed by Graneheim and Lundman (17). Initially, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and prepared for content analysis. At the second stage and before starting the coding process, the transcribed texts were read several times for familiarization. A design was considered for generating codes and categories at the third stage. The codes and categories were extracted through an inductive process by open coding. The interview texts were read line by line, and the relevant codes were identified. The fourth stage involved the differentiation of the extracted categories through constant comparison. A consensus in coding was reached in the fifth stage through peer check, member check, and constant comparison. After completing coding and assuring its accuracy, concepts were identified in the sixth stage.

To ensure the reliability and rigor of data analysis, prolonged engagement with the data, peer check, member check, and external check were used as the key strategies of the study (18). The transcripts and the extracted codes were reviewed several times, and the research team debated the results of data analysis during its weekly meetings. In addition, five participants reviewed the transcripts and analyses and provided feedback. The research data and their analyses were also distributed to another qualitative researcher, who was not involved in data collection, for external critical evaluation.

The study protocol was approved by Ethics Committee of Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences (ethics code: IR.KUMS.REC.1398.1188). All the participants were assured of the anonymity of the study and the confidentiality of the recorded interviews, and informed consent was also obtained from the students.

4. Results

In total, 13 female and three male dental students were enrolled in the study (mean academic semester: 8 ± 52). A total of 199 codes were extracted from the interviews and summarized in two main themes, which were the academic advisor's image and students' expectations. Moreover, four main categories and 14 subcategories were extracted (Table 1).

4.1. Academic Advisor's Characteristics

According to the interviews, the characteristics of academic advisors may affect students' satisfaction. Three subcategories were obtained from this category, which are explained below.

Character and behavior: Our participants believed that characteristics such as reliability, patience, a non-judgmental attitude, kindness, and listening to students were associated with a positive personality in advisors, which increases students' satisfaction. In this regard, one participant stated:

"In my opinion, the personality and behavior of academic advisors and their positive attitude toward students are most important. A good advisor must have the appropriate behavior" (participant 3).

4.1.1. Knowledge and Skills

According to the interviews, academic advisors should have adequate of knowledge of academic counseling, as well as the necessary skills to apply their knowledge to help students. One participants remarked:

"A good advisor must be both scientifically strong and able to solve students' scientific problems, while also having the experience and skills of counseling. That is, being able to convey various concepts well" (participant 1).

4.1.2. Accessibility

Most of the participants expressed that easy access to the advisor is a key factor for the students who seek counseling. They believed that limited access to the advisor may frustrate and dissatisfy students. In this regard, one participant said:

"I wish we did not have to go to the advisor's office several times to finally manage to see him. We lost a lot of time. It is not acceptable" (participant 2).

4.2. Attitude Toward Academic Advisors

The second category described the importance of the current attitudes toward academic advisors, which may influence advisors' position and students' satisfaction. This category had three subcategories, which are explained below.

4.2.1. Students' Attitude Toward Advisors

According to the interviews, the students' positive attitude toward academic advisors could affect their position, while negative attitudes may have a negative impact in this regard. One of the participants stated:

"I think the advisor increases the student's interest in their field of study and future career. I would like to be in contact with my advisor, but some of my friends say that the issue of academic advisors is only an 'empty vessel'. They are not on good terms with their advisors" (participant 11).

4.2.2. Advisors' Attitude Toward Themselves

The participants considered advisors' positive attitude toward themselves to be associated with their better performance, which could, in turn, increase students' satisfaction with their academic advisor. In this regard, a participant commented:

"I think if academic advisors have a positive attitude toward themselves, they will serve students better, and students will be satisfied with them as well" (participant 13).

Attitude of the educational system toward advisors: Some of the participants believed that the educational system should have a positive attitude toward academic advisors to strengthen these professionals. They also assumed that if the educational system emphasizes the role of academic advisors, they will be motivated to perform better to satisfy students. A participant stated:

"I think the motivation of academic advisors is a very important matter. The educational system should encourage academic advisors so that they would be more willing to interact with students and students could be satisfied with their performance" (participant 9).

4.3. Student-Advisor Communication

This category addressed various aspects of student-advisor communication that may affect the satisfaction of students with academic advisors. The three subcategories are explained below.

Students' familiarity with the academic advisor: According to the interviews, the familiarity of students with the tasks of academic advisors could affect their satisfaction. On the other hand, unfamiliarity in this regard may lead to confusion. One of the participants commented:

"Actually, I am not familiar with my advisor and what he intends to do for me. I only know his name and title, which are available on the educational website, so I cannot say I am satisfied with him" (participant 5).

Quantity and quality of communication: Some of the participants stated that the frequency of communication could influence their satisfaction with academic advisors.

Table 1. Extracted Themes, Categories, and Subcategories

Themes	Categories	Subcategories for Satisfaction with Academic Advisors
Academic advisor's image	Academic advisor's characteristics	Characteristics and behaviors; Knowledge and skills; Accessibility
	Attitude towards academic advisor	Students' attitude toward advisors; Advisors' attitude toward themselves; Educational system's attitude toward advisors
Students' expectations	Student-advisor communication	Students' familiarity with academic advisors; Quantity and quality of communication; Time and type of communication
	Students' needs	Educational and professional; Information; Emotional support

Accordingly, communication should not be limited to the beginning of each semester, and a friendly atmosphere could also facilitate communication. One participant remarked:

"I think communication is very important. When a student can visit her advisor regularly (weekly or monthly), communication will be built. Also, warm and friendly communication helps students feel comfortable with the advisor and get help to solve their academic problems" (participant 14).

4.3.1. Time and Type of Communication

Some of the participants believed that academic counseling should start from the first semester so that students could benefit most. Furthermore, the students preferred face-to-face and individual counseling sessions over group/virtual counseling. In this regard, one of the participants said:

"Face-to-face communication is perfect, but the advisor can also use a messenger like WhatsApp to communicate more with students. Also, every student must have individual sessions with their advisor from the first semester" (participant 12).

4.4. Students' Needs

The final category was students' needs. Accordingly, when the academic advisor focuses on the students' needs, the satisfaction of the students with the advisor's performance is likely to improve. This category had three subcategories, which have been explained below.

Educational and professional needs: According to the interviews, advisors should guide students about their education and future careers through measures such as the continuous supervision of students, helping students choose their lessons, and helping students solve academic problems in order to improve their academic performance. In this regard, one participant remarked:

"Advisors should constantly monitor their students, and if they notice a drop in a student's educational performance, they should attempt to solve the problem by finding the root cause" (participant 14).

Information: Some of the participants believed that they need to have updated information about their field of study and expect academic advisors to provide such information. One participant stated:

"Advisors should inform students about various issues in different fields, as well as the time of holding congresses and conferences" (participant 10).

4.4.1. Emotional Support

The participants stated that students expect academic advisors to support them emotionally and help them with mental and emotional problems. The other issues raised in this regard were helping students to manage stress, overcome emotional problems, and improve self-esteem. One participant commented:

"Advisors should help students overcome their fears and stress of academic courses and clinical lessons" (participant 17).

5. Discussion

The current qualitative research aimed to explore the satisfaction status of dental students with academic advisors at Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences. Four main categories were extracted from the interview data, including academic advisors' characteristics, attitudes toward academic advisors, student-advisor communication, and students' needs. Our findings are consistent with the previous studies in this regard (19, 20). The category of academic advisors' characteristics highlights the direct impact of personal traits on student satisfaction. Within this category, the participants emphasized the character and behavior of advisors as an important influential factor in their satisfaction. Agreeableness helps students trust advisors and seek their help. In fact, advisors should be a role model to students. This is in line with the study by Mousavi et al. (19). Therefore, it could be concluded that personal characteristics should be considered in selection of advisors by educational managers.

Knowledge and skills constituted a subcategory of the first category, emphasizing the importance of the ade-

quate knowledge and skills of academic advisors to provide appropriate counseling and increase student satisfaction. Obviously, lack of knowledge and skills decrease students' motivation to communicate with advisors. In a study, Seyedmajidi et al. (2013) reported that the responsibility of academic counseling should be assigned to those who have acquired the necessary scientific qualifications (7). Therefore, attention to improving the knowledge and skills of academic advisors should be prioritized by education official.

Academic advisors' accessibility to students was the last influential aspect on satisfaction from the students' perspective. In the study by Al-Ansari et al. (2015), advisors' accessibility in the same department was an important factor in assessing the academic advising and support system of Saudi dental undergraduate students (21). Therefore, it seems that the educational system should consider the criterion of accessibility in the duty description of academic advisors.

Attitudes toward academic advisors were the second extracted category in the present study, which addressed the attitudes of students, advisors, and the educational system toward academic advisors as an influential factor in student satisfaction. According to our findings, the positive attitude of students, academic advisors, and the educational system could positively affect student satisfaction. Consistently, previous studies have also highlighted the impact of positive attitudes toward academic advisors (22, 23), and 21.4% of academic advisors believed that the current status of academic advisors is not desirable (23).

While we did not assess the importance hierarchy of positive attitudes toward academic advisors, Asadollahi et al. (2011) have mentioned that the attention of the educational system to academic advisors could improve the status of advisors and create a positive attitude toward these professionals (24). Accordingly, the positive attitude of the educational system to provide academic advisors with the necessary skills and knowledge could motivate advisors to perform appropriately in helping students, which consequently leads to the positive attitude of students. Therefore, special attention should be paid to the position and importance of academic advisors in the educational system, as well as in developmental programs.

According to the results of the present study, student-advisor communication affects student satisfaction. Accordingly, students' familiarity with advisors, the quality and quantity of communication, and the time and type of communication could influence student satisfaction. Since student-advisor communication is a purposeful process through which the advisor must be responsible for the educational counseling of students (2-4), the role of the advisor is pivotal in establishing and guiding the com-

munication. The advisor should have the necessary skills and knowledge to establish proper communication. In purposeful communication, the advisor should become familiar with students to build the base of communication. Furthermore, providing students with a comfortable atmosphere and friendly communication in a regular schedule (preferably face-to-face sessions) can strengthen the relationship and lead to student satisfaction. As reported by Ramezanzade Tabriz et al. (2017), an effective measure in this regard would be holding communication and counseling workshops for academic advisors so that they could establish effective communication with students (20).

The current research indicated students' educational, professional, emotional, and information needs should be met by academic advisors since this factor could positively affect student satisfaction. This is consistent with a previous study in this regard (12, 13). The issue addresses students' expectations, which should be deeply recognized and acknowledged. Satisfying the educational, professional, and information needs of students seems to be a reasonable expectation on students' end. Meanwhile, emotional needs may necessitate more specific counseling services which is not within the scope of academic advisors' duties. Therefore, students should be provided with careful explanation about academic advisors' duties to modify their expectations. However, every advisor has the duty to meet the educational and professional needs of students and provide them with proper access to information.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

Our study only evaluated dental students' views of satisfaction with academic advisors, and the academic advisors' opinions were not assessed. Further studies are required to address this limitation.

5.2. Conclusion

According to the results, dental students' satisfaction with academic advisors is influenced by several variable factors, such as academic advisors' personal characteristics, their knowledge and skills, and students' expectations. This finding must be considered in developing educational programs to enhance academic counseling.

Footnotes

Authors' Contribution: Study concept and design, A. G., and L. R.; Analysis and interpretation of data, L.R., and S. S.; Drafting of the manuscript, L.R.; Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content, A. G., and L. R.

Conflict of Interests: A. G. and L. R. were faculty members and S. S. was researcher of Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences.

Data Reproducibility: The data presented in this study are openly available in one of the repositories or will be available on request from the corresponding author by this journal representative at any time during submission or after publication. Otherwise, all consequences of possible withdrawal or future retraction will be with the corresponding author.

Ethical Approval: The study was approved by ethic committee of Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences Kermanshah Iran, code: IR.KUMS.REC.1398.1188 (Link: ethics.research.ac.ir/IR.KUMS.REC.1398.1188).

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Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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