

Original Article (Qualitative)

# Exploring the Components Organizational Roots and Psychological Consequences of Professional Marginalization in Higher Education

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**Abstract**

The present study aims to examine the psychological–organizational roots and consequences of professional marginalization in Iranian higher education—a hidden yet influential phenomenon that undermines the human capital of universities and affects their scientific and social functions. A qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological strategy was employed. Participants included 18 faculty members and academic experts from several public universities, selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through inductive coding with MAXQDA 2020 software. The findings indicated that professional marginalization in universities is reproduced more by institutional structures and culture than by individual failures. Centralized bureaucratic structures, quantity-oriented culture, formalistic evaluation based on scoring, and a numbers-driven system indifferent to the social impact of knowledge were identified as the main organizational factors contributing to this phenomenon. These conditions lead to consequences such as a sense of meaninglessness, existential burnout, professional isolation, reduced collegial interactions, decreased self-confidence, disintegration of academic identity, and decline in the social status of academics. Overall, professional academic marginalization is a structural and lived experience in Iranian higher education, necessitating reconsideration of university structures, academic culture, and evaluation systems.

**Keywords:**

professional marginalization, higher education, organizational and psychological roots, centralized bureaucratic structures

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## Extended abstract

### Introduction

In the modern tradition, the university is not merely an educational institution; it serves as a space for cultivating rationality, professional identity, and the meaningful engagement of individuals in scholarly life. However, contemporary experiences indicate that universities are increasingly trapped within bureaucratic structures and rigid disciplines, resulting in the overshadowing of meaning and humanity by rules and institutional frameworks. This situation leads to a growing gap between individuals and their professional roles—a phenomenon referred to in higher education literature as academic professional marginalization, which operates as a silent process eroding motivation and gradually undermining professional identity (Kovtunen et al., 2022). In its authentic sense, the university should be a home of thought and a space for self-cultivation, where students are regarded not merely as future professionals or skilled laborers, but as seekers of meaning and truth (Salimi, Ghobadi & Aminibagh, 2025). However, when higher education is reduced to a rule-bound, compliance-oriented mechanism, professional identity is weakened and intrinsic motivation declines, ultimately leading to the withering of the spiritual life of academic professions (Pride, Began, MacLeod, & Sibbald, 2024). In contemporary Iran, higher education faces challenges such as the dominance of quantitative metrics, increasing bureaucracy, and weakening human relationships—conditions that particularly facilitate the emergence of professional marginalization in public universities and institutions affiliated with formal authorities (Salimi, Mohammadi Lalabadi & Aminibagh, 2025). In this context, mechanical evaluation systems, limited participation in decision-making, and dehumanized interactions contribute to mental and psychological disengagement of students and faculty from their desired professional identity (Karabulut & Özdemir, 2020). Feelings of ineffectiveness, perceptions of educational injustice, and reduced agency are among the key psychological roots of this phenomenon (Maringe & Morley, 2023). Given these considerations, it must be acknowledged that the multi-layered investigation of academic professional marginalization in Iranian public universities is a complex issue—a problem-driven yet impactful phenomenon arising from the intersection of rigid bureaucratic structures and the psychological vulnerability of young students, resulting in a deep disconnect between individuals and their future professional roles. In this situation, students not only lose a sense of belonging and confidence in their professional identity, but also experience motivational erosion, distrust, and psychological silence within institutions that should be centers for fostering thought, meaning, and commitment. This issue is not an individual problem but a structural challenge whose consequences extend beyond the qualitative decline of higher education, negatively affecting human capital efficiency, collective mental health, and the future social capital of the country.

Therefore, understanding the organizational and psychological roots of this phenomenon is an urgent necessity; if universities fail to nurture professional identity within the student experience, human capital risks withering even before entering the professional arena. Accordingly, the primary research question of this study is: How does professional marginalization emerge in Iranian public universities, and what organizational and psychological mechanisms contribute to its persistence and intensification?

### Theoretical Foundations

Professional marginalization represents the link between restrictive organizational structures and the psychological state of faculty and researchers, functioning like an underground current that slowly erodes scholarly spirit and identity. Feelings of meaninglessness, existential burnout, professional isolation, and chronic frustration constitute the psychological

pillars of marginalization (Sadeghian et al., 2025). Although faculty members continue to attend classes and laboratories, they often perceive themselves as detached from the active flow of knowledge production; their voices are not heard in decision-making processes, and perceptions of injustice undermine both their self-confidence and academic identity. Moreover, a quantity-oriented culture fosters hidden anxiety, disillusionment, and self-doubt among academics. Researchers may no longer perceive themselves as agents of knowledge, but rather as cogs in an administrative machine, expected to act solely for survival and career advancement rather than for truth or societal service. In such an environment, the academic psyche becomes trapped between scholarly passion and administrative compulsion, rendering marginalization seemingly inevitable (Pride, Beagan, MacLeod & Sibbald, 2024).

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological strategy was employed. Participants included 18 faculty members and academic experts from several public universities, selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through inductive coding with MAXQDA 2020 software.

### **Findings**

Indicated that professional marginalization in universities is reproduced more by institutional structures and culture than by individual failures. Centralized bureaucratic structures, quantity-oriented culture, formalistic evaluation based on scoring, and a numbers-driven system indifferent to the social impact of knowledge were identified as the main organizational factors contributing to this phenomenon. These conditions lead to consequences such as a sense of meaninglessness, existential burnout, professional isolation, reduced collegial interactions, decreased self-confidence, disintegration of academic identity, and decline in the social status of academics. Overall, professional academic marginalization is a structural and lived experience in Iranian higher education, necessitating reconsideration of university structures, academic culture, and evaluation systems.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of the study indicated that professional marginalization in higher education is a multi-layered and structural phenomenon, fueled by exhausting bureaucracy, incomplete decentralization, the sanctification of metrics, and the superficialization of the academic mission. This phenomenon has its roots in organizational mechanisms that replace synergy with conformity, meaning with numbers, and participation with obedience. The consequences of this situation manifest as a range of psychological and professional harms, including scientific alienation, chronic existential fatigue, the breakdown of collegial bonds, and a sense of professional powerlessness. The findings of this section of the study shown considerable alignment with previous researches. In particular, the results are consistent with the studies of Minez (2022), Choudhary (2023), and Novak et al. (2025), which demonstrated that rigid bureaucratic structures, lack of transparency, and the dominance of a score-oriented logic create conditions conducive to feelings of exclusion and professional marginalization in universities. A clear alignment is also observed with the analyses of Maringe and Morley (2019), who emphasize that formal and inflexible university policies, disregarding the human and identity dimensions of actors, lead to professional alienation. Tomas et al. (2023) further corroborate these findings.

Based on the findings of the present study, practical and managerial recommendations are proposed in an integrated and concise manner as follows. In response to scientific alienation,



it is recommended that university research policies be redesigned to promote academic independence, diversify research topics, and emphasize the meaning and societal impact of knowledge, enabling actors to restore their identity connection with science. To address persistent existential fatigue, university management should adopt a supportive approach by balancing workloads, clarifying professional expectations, and providing psychological support services to prevent chronic burnout among staff. Regarding the disruption of collegial connections, it is advised to strengthen collaborative structures, interdisciplinary projects, and team-based reward systems to revitalize the social capital of the university.