

# Effective Strategies for the Establishment of Integration Model for Succession Planning and Career Progression Path of Iranian Azad Universities Administrators

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## ABSTRACT

This research was done to provide effective strategies for the establishment of integration model for succession planning, career progression path of Azad Universities administrators from the perspective of higher education administrators and professionals based on the systematic theoretical design of Strauss, and Corbin grounded theory. Accordingly, using a targeted sampling method, semi-structured interviews were made with 22 middle and executive managers of universities, authors in the field of succession planning and career progression path, and key scholars on human resource management and higher education, and the data were extracted from the interviews. The approach used in this study is a mix approach and hence, for developing the comprehensive research model, qualitative and quantitative approaches (in combination with one another) were used. For selecting sample volume, snowball method was used and finally, the research model was developed based on the opinions of 22 experts. In the second stage, the presented research model was tested by using SPSS 20, Lisrel8.8 and results indicated that the relationships and components of the proposed model are significant. During a three-step coding process (open, axial and selective), the data analysis revealed seven main categories as the effective strategies for the establishment of integration model for succession planning and career progression path of governmental universities administrators, which included acquaintance, participation of university administrators, organizational learning, trust-making, futurism, academic independence and systemic insight.

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## 1 Introduction

Unusual retirement expectations in all sectors of the economy, and the aging workforce, known as the Tsunami Silver, as well as a significant reduction in the workforce will bring numerous outcomes such as turning of about 10,000 people from the post-World War II (1945-1939). The generation, known as the baby-boomers to the aged 65 years old in 2030, the seniority of managers and their impending retirement and finally, turning of 25% of the workforce to people over 55 and over (Rothwell, [17]).

In such circumstances, the number of people entering the world of work will probably be less than the retired ones. In the broadest sense of the word, organizations are the foundations of the current com-

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munity and management is the most important factor in the life, growth, or death of organizations. The manager directs the process from the status quo to a desirable situation, and he is trying to create a better and more effective future at any moment. On the other hand, in addition to suggesting, some viewpoints about the retirement plans, the talent shortage of survey yearbook found that on average, 35% of employers are facing challenges in filling in their posts due to a shortage of available talented resources. Such a shortage of labor has been unprecedented since the start of the global recession. Changing demographics, technology evolution, and a world exposed to political, economic and social shocks and impulses have created a global environment in which, the shortage of talents is seen a rule rather than an exception. As the wheels of the economy, the wheels of skills become smaller and slower (Rothwell, [18]).

Many organizations are developing and implementing organized succession programs to confront such challenges aimed at guaranteeing the continual of the talents required to maintain the economic growth and continuity of the organization. This occurs while many other organizations experience carrier progression path individually, which include the employees development. The succession planning is a process to ensure the existence of proper source of successors for present and future key positions, so that the individual career path is managed for optimizing the organizational needs and individual ambitions and objectives.

Therefore, the organization can utilize the employees, who have developed their skills for key activities in organization due to their desires to get higher key positions, and thus the organization can take advantage of activities by this group of staff. Furthermore, the successful succession planning can reduce the staff turnover, as the employees, who have desire for good future career in the organization, are less likely to leave their jobs.

The carrier progression path planning plans help people to discover their job goals and provide them reasons to confirm their success and progress, or keep their skills up to date to apply more responsibility on people as a recruitment and employment capability in a new economy so that they can remain competitive in a dynamic labor market. Development is the path and the way to reach the goal in both succession planning and carrier progression path-planning models, but with the difference that the ways to reach the goal is different in the two plans.

The carrier progression path planning is usually from the bottom up or from the individual to the organization, while the succession planning is usually from top-down or from leaders and managers to the individuals. The former shows people the reasons and the reasoning for progress and development, while the latter forms the efforts of organizational leaders to identify the organization's talent needs and systematic development.

Given that each of these succession-planning plan and carrier progression path planning programs have their own effectiveness in organizations, nevertheless, their integration is of paramount importance. Thus, implementing the integration of these two plans in business organizations, and especially in higher education institutions and state universities, will be more effective. As, the career progression path plans provide individuals with goals to develop by themselves, and thus, leading to improved procedures and procedures.

On the other hand, the succession planning will provide the organization with ways and means, by using, which, the organizations would focus on meetings that their talents need them over time, which

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will provide a path for development activities. Rothwell [19] describes the level of integration and interdependence of these two as follows:

Without a career progression path planning, succession planning is a wish list; also, without succession planning, the career progression path planning appears to be a road map with an unknown destination. Therefore, using the career path development and succession planning plans, the leaders of the organization attempt to align the retirement plans with the requirements of the workforce as well as make efforts to maintain the talents and resist against the strategy of "shortage of available talent". Another possible need for a strategy of preservation and retention is attention to the increasing number of free agent workers in the workforce who have little loyalty to a single organization. To keep up with lower supply and more demand for more talented employees, the leaders need to act proactively by adopting and deploying long-term talent-finding programs, which are integrated with strategic business plans.

Finally, the goal of career progression path planning and succession planning programs is to focus on the gaps between "what is" and "what should be". The career progression path planning pays attention to individual goals in comparison with available roles and competencies. Succession planning focuses on fulfilling the needs of the organization at all levels as well as on the future talents' needs. Integrating these two concepts brings together the individual interests and organizational needs, and provides a systematic approach to identify, develop and keep the staff for key posts.

The only constant matter in the future of universities is the issue of change. It is imagined the imminent changes in the management and leadership of universities "as an opportunity to bring more diversity, new energy, and new ideas for faculty members and the management of universities". Employees are considered as the most valuable assets of successful organizations (Heuer, [15]), and higher education leaders need to realize the need of investment in the future of universities through investing in the university staff.

Today, in higher education, succession planning and the planning for integrating those two are much more necessary than a decade ago, which reasons can be attributed to the withdrawal of staff from universities due to retirement and the fact that higher education leadership requires complex relationships that must be provided through a variety of internal and external stakeholders. Every higher education institution can develop their leadership inner talent treasury by accurately finding and identifying of potential successors. This is done by using a succession management and planning process.

Research shows that 51% of human resource professionals do not know succession planning and talent finding activities well, and only 21% of them implement this program officially. Studies suggest that no priority has been given to succession planning in most institutions of higher education (Bisbee, [10]; Rothwell [20]). In his research on succession planning and knowledge transfer, It is found that all four universities participating in his research had no official succession planning programs. Rothwell [20] reviewed the strategies of succession planning in higher education and his findings revealed that among the six universities in his grounded theory research, only one university had an official succession-planning program.

The second university showed that there has been a formal, but unwritten, succession-planning program at the university. It turned out that these universities had almost a development and growth pro-

gram, but not a succession-planning program. However, due to the lack of academic managers because of aging and retirement, the concept of succession planning is finding a room for itself within the universities. In addition, over the past ten years, some research has been done on succession planning in higher education, including Cembrowski [11], Heuer [15], Geller [13], Bisbee [10, 13]. Unfortunately, at the national level, this issue has been less considered in the field of higher education. Thus, the issue has been somehow ignored except in some studies conducted by Ghiassi Nadoshan [7] etc. On the other hand, studies and research conducted on the integration model of these two concepts at the international level are very few.

At the national level, no research has been done on the integration model of career progress path planning and succession planning of the managers of Iranian state universities. The existence of such a study vacuum made the researcher to perform this research with a topic of designing an integration model for career progress path planning and succession planning at public universities. The goal was to identify and explain the advantages of succession planning and career progress path planning. The integration of succession planning and career progress path planning of managers of Iranian governmental universities, the need for integration, the integration model for succession planning and career progress path planning and, ultimately, the practical steps required to successfully integrate the succession planning and career progress path planning for managers of Iranian state universities. To achieve these goals, the following questions were designed to direct the research to draw a conceptual model and aim of this study is:

- What is the integration model of succession planning and career progress path planning for managers of Iranian state universities?
- What are the effective strategies for the establishment of succession planning and career progress path planning for managers of Iranian state universities?

## 2 Materials and Methods

William J. Rothwell et al. [20] introduced the topic of integrating the succession planning and career progress path planning for the first time with the publication of a book in 2015, entitled as "Career Progress Path Planning and Succession Planning Management". On the other hand, given that there is little research abroad and almost no domestic research within the field of integration, and considering the fact that there is no fundamental theory in this regard, then, the researcher was driven to the grounded data theory to gather the required data. Indeed, in this methodology, instead of testing a previously existing theory, it is dedicated to new theorizing.

They believe that in this type of research, the researcher tries to begin the research by referring to the key information providers and by influencing the depth of the system of meanings and their expectations. In this way, they approach theoretical approaches, expectations, problems and issues well as prescriptions and solutions. Finally, all relationships and dimensions are organized in a theoretical model. Therefore, in this qualitative research, based on the systematic design of the grounded theory, the interviewees' perceptions about the effective strategies for establishing an integration model of succession planning and career progression path of the managers of public universities was addressed. The unit of analysis in this study included the following four groups:

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Group 1: Experts and professionals in the field of succession planning and career progression path

Group 2: Human resources officials at universities and higher education institutions

Group 3: Higher education experts and professors in universities

Group 4: Authors in the above areas

The data of this study were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 15 of the above mentioned key people working at state universities in Tehran, which were selected through theoretical (targeted) sampling method. Sampling was continued until the theoretical saturation in the collected data would occur. Theoretical saturation refers to a stage in which no new data arise in relation to the issue, and where the relationships between the categories have been established and confirmed (Strauss [1,2]). The duration of the interviews was between 30 and 55 minutes, which were done in person by using open-ended questions type.

The items discussed were recorded in audio form and then implemented. The stepwise method and Strauss and Corbin [1,2] analytical techniques were used in data analysis. Thus, the concepts were taken into consideration as the unit of analysis at the levels of the text of the whole interview, paragraphs, phrases and sentences. By segmenting the interview text into the elements containing message within the expressions or paragraphs, it was attempted to extract open codes. Due to the large number of extracted concepts, the open coding was carried out in two stages, in which the concepts were placed in the form of larger categories. After this stage, we tried to classify the basic concepts in the form of large conceptual categories, which were finally categorized into 25 main categories.

To ensure the validity of the research, namely, the accuracy of the findings from the perspectives of the researcher, participants or readers of the research report, the strategies of member checking, peer review, participatory and reflectivity of the researcher were used. In this regard, some of the participants in the first phase reviewed the obtained categories and expressed their opinions about them. In addition, four of the experts and professors reviewed the findings and commented on them. At the same time, the help of participants were used in analyzing and interpreting the data, and it was tried to proceed the interviews by relying on asking open questions, coding with an open mind and with regard to the research questions to prevent biases as far as possible.

### 3 Results

Through open coding, 960 concepts were obtained. By classifying these concepts, 45 sub-categories were formed, which were classified into 25 main categories in the axial coding step. During the selection coding process and the integration process to integrate and refine the theory, the texts of the interviews were reviewed several times. Followed by determining the main category (merit nurturing) and using it to bring categories closer, the expressions and ideas illustrating the relationships between the main and the secondary categories were considered.

Accordingly, the relations between the main categories and the paradigm model of integration pattern of succession planning and career progression path planning of the managers of state universities were formed.

Finally, the revealed categories were classified in the form of six dimensions of the paradigm model, with the relationships between them, as causal causes (6 categories), the major category (merit nurturing), strategies for deployment of integration model (6 categories), intervening environment conditions (5 categories), underlying features (4 categories) and outcomes (2 categories). Figure 1 shows the process of data management and model evolution in three stages of coding (open, axial, and selective).

Although the main category of merit nurturing is due to casual causes and under the influence of intervening environmental conditions and underlying features, but, in the meantime, one should not ignore the agency, human functionality and the actors, since the actors can facilitate the merit nurturing process with their own interventions and strategies. In fact, individual and group actors act as catalysts and change agents.

Data analysis revealed seven main categories as the effective strategies for the establishment of integration model for succession planning and career progression path of governmental universities administrators from the perspectives higher education administrators and scholars, including familiarization, academic managers' participation, organizational learning, trust making, futurism, academic independence and systemic insight.

#### **4 Familiarization (Introduction)**

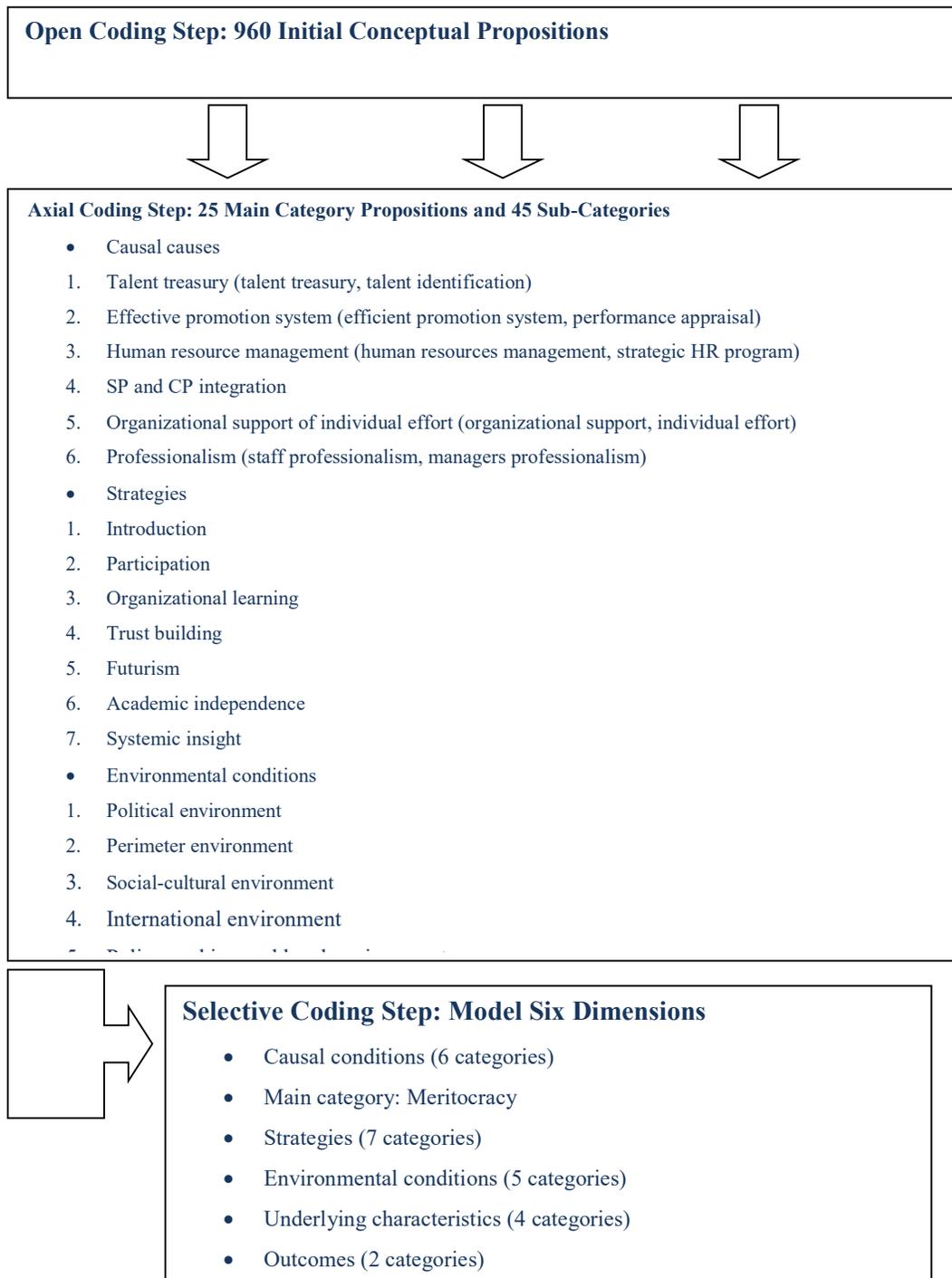
As today's universities are dealing with issues such as growth and development, globalization and internationalization, and ultimately with competition, succession planning and career progression path need the boosting and educating talented managers and staff who can encounter with the facing challenges and resolve them. On the other hand, senior executives of universities should focus on improvement and prosperity of their future employees as well.

However, one of the most important issues that university administrators have to do nowadays is to design an integrated model of succession planning and career progression path to train the future successors. Unfortunately, the clear and evident problem in our universities is the lack of familiarity or limited familiarity of senior university executives with this issue. The first strategy is to familiarize and educate all academic stakeholders (senior executives, executive directors, staff, etc.) with the issues of succession training and career advancement path. Since, still in our organizations, in general, and in universities and higher education institutions, in particular, the academic stakeholders are hardly familiar with the aforementioned issues.

However, with a positive thinking, if there is a limited familiarity at all, the importance and necessity of the topics have not been realized. Rothwell has compared these issues with life insurance and believed that we all know about the importance and necessity of the life insurance, but we do not stick in practice. Almost, most of the key experts have confirmed the validity of the aforementioned claims in their interviews. One of the interviewees, answering the question about the level of senior managers' familiarity at his university with these issues, said as such with an ironic language:

No, at contemplation and thinking meetings that were held two months ago at the university, we talked with the chairman and university assistants about the succession planning who unfortunately had no knowledge of the issue. After brief explanations in this regard, they were reluctant to imple-

ment it. One of the interviewees responded to the question that "Is an integrated model of succession planning and career progression path at his university operated and implemented?" as follows:



**Fig. 1.** Data management and model evolution process in three stages of coding

These discussions have never been implemented at university at all, and if the managers are familiar with these topics, it has been only at theoretical level. Another interviewee expanded the discussion beyond the university and said:

University is a sub-system of the macro system of society. Our community has not shown any interest, tendency or even belief in such discussions. The society does not follow this debate methodologically. Given my work experience at the Ministry of Science and teaching work at university, I did not see such programs. Higher education cannot guarantee the implementation of these programs in terms of its centralized system and strict linkages. In Iran, unfortunately, instead of succession, we have alternative planning. The last resort is one of the interviewees who was a specialist in the field of higher education management with no positive perspective of implementing this discussion at his university, who suggested that:

I see it unlikely. Maybe those who are in charge can answer this part better. Bu, to my knowledge, as a faculty member of the university, with more limited information about the staffing and management departments, it seems to me that there is not such a succession planning program, or if it exists, it is at theoretical level and so-called a series of legal documents. But I take it unlikely that there will be any executive path and implementation process to consider a successor for each manager.

## 5 Participation of University Administrators

The second strategy that facilitates the leading process of merit nurturing overall to outcomes is the participation of university administrators in the overall process of implementing the integration model of succession planning and career progression path (from the elementary stage, i.e., familiarization and clarification of the subject up to its final stage, i.e., implementation). The most successful integration programs of succession planning and career progression path are those with a high level of support from senior directors and executives of the organizations. This support can be simply realized in organizations with well-defined hierarchical structures, in which a number of senior managers and executives does the ultimate authority and decision-makings. In some cases, some interviewees not only asked for the participation of senior executives in the implementation and deployment of the integration model, but also demanded the full participation of all academic stakeholders at all levels of management (senior, middle and operational). One of the key experts suggested that:

The important component in the integration model of succession planning and the career progression path is the issue of integrated support of different management levels of a system, and especially the head of the university, for this plan. That is, the practical commitment of managers exists in the academic system. The practical commitment of CEOs is to operationalize the succession planning. Another interviewee referred to the supportive role of the chief executive officer and stated:

The first and most important role in the implementation of the integrated model of succession planning and career path is the support from top CEOs and their commitment to pursue the program. Certainly, senior managers have a very decisive role in this regard. Since, change always occurs top-down, and hence, it requires the support and commitment the higher levels. One of the interviewees responded to the following questions as comes next:

- What is the role of the board of directors or CEOs in establishing an integrated planning system of succession and career progress path?
- Are they considered as the facilitators of this issue?

Since the general policies and vision of the organization are developed at the head of the pyramid, the board of directors of the university plays a special role in its formation. Finally, one of the keystones, in response to the above questions, raised the argument beyond the support of CEOs and stressed on the supporting and participatory culture of the university administrators:

Naturally, when you have that decision-making or participatory and supportive planning approach of the directors, it means that your managers will draw the participation of other people in the decision making process and operationalizing the plan. In fact, they actually do the job of succession nurturing. Practically, they provide a platform for growth, experimentation and so on. Of course, this is not just for the benefit of people, but it would also be for the benefit of the manager. In this sense, the manager puts a person once, twice, or three times in the process of the decision-making; after several times, when the person himself acquires the skill of making decisions, there would be no need for the manager to interfere, and the manager can delegate the authority. When a manager makes delegation, for him, this means the abandoning of his repetitive, routine and frustrating tasks to win a time opportunity or period time for addressing the issues matter more to the organization. It means instead of doing repeated things such as signing the day-off leave, and so on, he would think about the macro policies of the university or the organization. Indeed, he will observe the competitive environment around and find the policies and strategies for the organization or university to act better in this dynamic and uncertain environment. Finally, it can be concluded from the above statements that the decision making by senior managers based on the decision making of all academic stakeholders, is the most important approach of the higher education. The heads of universities should create a system of decision-making based on collective wisdom in the universities administration and utilize the intellectual and cognitive abilities of the entire system. On the other hand, by engaging the professors, students and academics in decision-makings, they will develop incentives in them, which is the actual realization of participatory management in the university administration.

## 6 Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is the third strategy that facilitates the outcomes. This major category is formed of two subcategories of learning organizations and knowledge management. Organizational learning occurs in an organization that is a lifetime learner. Therefore, learning organizations are organizations in which the individuals continually increase their abilities to achieve their desired results. In this type of organizations, new thinking patterns grow; thoughts, decision makings, and collective and group decision-making become prevalent. In such organizations, all stakeholders will learn how to work together to teach and learn. The main duties of universities and higher education institutions include the generation of knowledge, knowledge transfer (training of expert human resources) and providing specialized services to the community. Optimized performing of each of these tasks is subject to do basic, functional, and developmental research as well as preparing researchers capable of doing such research (Samiee Rad and Ghasemi, [4]). Hence, one of the tasks of the university is to generate science, its development and finally distributing it. This process is referred to as knowledge management. One of the key contributors suggested in this regard:

A very important discussion in my opinion is that the university organization [must] always something to learn and avoids the routine approach. We need always feel like that staying in this organization will have some new knowledge and insights for us that we can use. Another interviewee referred

to the close relationship between knowledge management and the realization of succession planning in universities and stated that:

With the realization of knowledge management in the organization, the implicit knowledge will be passed from the managers of the organization to their future successors, and doing so, the knowledge and intellectual capital will be preserved in the organization and the capabilities of intellectual capital would increase within the organization.

## **7 Making Trust**

Identifying, selecting and fostering future leaders through the process of succession planning is a major task in most organizations. Leadership competence is one of the main factors in this process. Due to the continuous change and complexity of today's organizational environment, the leaders' response to change, dealing with predictable trust and managing cultures are as the key features for future leaders. The chief executive officers (CEOs) of organizations are responsible for the success of their organizations and create the confidence in their businesses. The issue of trust, trust making, and distrust are of the most important issues in the implementation of succession planning. Most interviewees stated that the fear of losing job is the most important factor, which will cause the resistance of employees against succession planning, and finally, this leads to the loss of trust and confidence between the managers and staff of the university. For example, some of the interviews mentioned that:

The most important thing that concerns employees is the future of the job. Thus, they resist the exercise of succession planning; otherwise, nobody denies the finding of an employee and using his expertise. Answering the last question of the interview, one of the keynote speakers stated as follows:

Question: Do the senior executive managers of universities pay serious attention to the integration issue and try to establish it or not? In other words, is the establishment of this system not equivalent to "nurturing a snake in our bosom"?

Succession planning requires building trust and culture making, and the most important step in this area is the employing and appointment based on competencies and qualifications. All of this suggests that as long as the organizations and universities do not assure their people and employees that any type of succession planning and career progression path programs will not cause them to lose their jobs, and as long as they cannot make trust among their employees, talking about succession planning and career progression path would be useless.

## **8 Futurism**

Futurism is one of the most important strategies that facilitates the leading of general approach of merit nurturing process to the outcomes. Futurism and future thinking in the academic field are in close connection with career progression path, strategic human resources planning, human resources management and, finally, the important issue of succession planning. The higher education system is a scientific and academic system and cannot be limited due to its nature. On the other hand, the academic environment and the environment around the university are in a very turbulent state. In these circumstances, individual and self-centered decisions cannot be made without considering the decision-makings of the consultants. Nowadays, universities need macro-strategic planning to confront with the challenges facing them in this turbulent environment. The realization of this requires a collective futurism coupled with management, decision making and participatory culture. One of the interview-

ees believes that succession planning is synonymous and consistent with futuristic attitude to human resources and suggests that:

When you talk about succession planning, it means you have a futuristic view of the human resources; a kind of futurism and future thinking in the human resources system. At the end, he continues. There is a deep link between succession planning and futurism. Such a futurism that can direct the individual career path, directing his career prospect. One of the interviewees considers the entire succession planning process close and companion with the future and suggest that futurism and future thinking are an integral part of succession planning and career progression path. In my opinion, succession planning means that the university administrators at different levels determine their future successors, and provide required training and improvement programs for these successors so that they will take managerial positions in the future.

## 9 Academic Independence

The academic independence strategy, as a general category, is consisted of two sub-categories of academic autonomy and academic freedom. It is believed that academic independence and autonomic management of the university have been defined by the academics themselves. Thus, the demos of [the stakeholders] of academics are responsible for [control and direct] the university by themselves and control the academic system and make the relevant decisions within the university. These decisions include various dimensions, such as educational and curriculum planning, certification system and certificate of graduation, quality assessment and accreditation, and finally, the allocation of resources. It is stated that academic independence can be explained with two distinct approaches:

1. Reason-oriented approach
2. Causal approach

This approach addresses the concept of academic autonomy and argues for its essential necessity. The main logic in this approach is that the specialized complexity and even the mysteriousness of knowledge and learning at high level requires that the university would have sufficient independence and the outside institutions and authorities such as the government will not interfere with its administration. Academics, faculty members, and the chiefs made from them are the only competent authorities for the planning and management of knowledge and learning at higher level. Even the boards of directors and board of trustees of the universities are not expected to be involved in their scientific management. The most important feature of the university is the never-ending attachment to search for truth and loyalty to it, and critique is the most important function of the university. Such a critique cannot be done under the circumstances that the university is reduced to an instrument for religious and political ideologies and the intellectual arm of the ruling class. Scientific research and criticism entails complete academic independence. For the same reason, it is said that the best universities are the freest and most independent ones. However, the causal approach, which examples can be seen in scholars such as Lott, Tasker and Packhman, focuses on the historical and structural origins and sources of academic independence. In other words, it addresses the objective factors of university autonomy (and not its subjective reasons). For example, this approach suggests that the university, itself, is indeed one of the sources of power. As assets and capital as well as political decision-making are considered as the most important sources of power, university is a source of power due to its ability to produce meaning, generate thought, knowledge, and technology. Grove et al. [14] defined scientific freedom as follows:

Scientific freedom means the members of the scientific community, i.e., academic or research faculty and students are independent in their scientific activities and interactions and no pressure and domination will be imposed upon them from the beliefs, views, and political, professional and religious organizations. Therefore, the meaning of scientific freedom will be that the faculty can do research and produce knowledge, although their processes or research products will not necessarily be pleasant for the university administrators such as the department's director, the head of the faculty and university, etc. or the government or ideological, professional or religious organizations, and the like. In addition, the scientific bodies should be free to transfer, disseminate and promote their knowledge, freely teach, free in choosing methods and resources based on the standards agreed upon by the scientific community. In research and education, scientific and professional services, they should not be obliged to specific advocacies; they should be able to freely publish their articles and books, and the results of their studies or present them in communities and the society. They should be able to participate in ICT, and freely criticize and review the opinions and ideas. In such circumstances in which the universities have sufficient independence, have the necessary authorities in making decisions and decision-makings and the academic freedom flows at colleges and universities and among the members of the faculty, one can claim that the ground is favorable and proper for implementing an integrated model for succession planning and career progress path of the managers. All academic stakeholders, away from any kind of political, social pressures, etc., must be able to engage in their academic activities in the academic environment and can manage the integrated management of the university by themselves. Almost all participants in the interview somehow had conviction in the concepts of academic independence and academic freedom and believed that the foundation for implementing the integrated model for succession planning and career progress path of managers is the realization of academic autonomy and scientific freedom in the scientific and academic community.

## 10 Systemic Insight

The last strategy is to have a systemic thinking and insight among the scientific community and academics. The concept of the system represents a complex subject, which has been formed of certain elements associated with each other. This relationship is created either through interacting relationships or by interdependent relationships of elements with each other. The system is in an environment with which it interacts. The basis of the concept of the system relies on the fact to create a whole, which complexity is far more than the complexity of its elements. That is, it has special properties. From the perspective of Yamani [8, 9], the concept of academic ecosystem represents the university as a system and the relations of its constituent elements and the interactions between the university and the environment. The quality of the university is created within the context of the academic ecosystem. Identifying the academic system and the relations of its constituent elements in the environmental context helps to understand the quality of academic activities and its difficulties. Finally, it should be noted that the relationship of the academic system with its environment is fundamental.

As mentioned, the university, as a dynamic and vibrant system, is interacting with the surrounding environment, since otherwise; it will experience collapse and destruction. Therefore, in such a systemic place, the realization of an integrated succession planning and the career progression path of academic managers should be looked through a systemic lens. If a university chooses to operate such a program, and feels the need for such a program, it should systematically perform the followings:

- Determining the maps in the succession planning and career progression path program

- Setting of a statement of mission
- Writing the policy guidelines
- Clarifying the processes
- Identifying the target groups for action
- Determining the roles in the successor fostering program for CEOs, senior manager and others
- Ultimately, setting the priorities of the program

One of the interviewees considered the designing of an integrated model of succession planning and the career progression path subject to the systematic and strategic nature of the program, since he believed otherwise, the right people will not be selected for proper posts at the right time. He said:

Therefore, a higher education attitude should be able to combine this personal development approach with this professional training, and can employ the right people with the right qualifications and expertise, attitudes and understanding at the right time and place so that they can consider and do their tasks, which we refer to them as role expectations. Then, the first thing that matters in the succession planning process is that the issue is a systematic organizational approach, which needs to provide conditions that the people will involve in the process not based on stress, relationships, apprehension, but in safe, stable and comfortable conditions. Therefore, the succession planning must follow a path to identify new forces and capabilities, and when it identifies the people with the potential to grow and bloom, it needs to provide the requirements for their growth and prosperity. In addition, when an organization identifies the right people and provides them with the needs for their growth and blooming, in fact, it will gain the necessary power to promote and improve the competencies. When an organization has the proper merit, it would have the ability to maintain competitive advantage compared to its competitors.

## 11 Conclusion and Discussion

With numerous reviews and in-depth evaluation of the texts of interviews, it can be seen that the main category is the establishment of the integration model of succession planning and career progression path of managers of Azad Universities is merit nurturing, which involves all the stages of merit pursuit, merit seeking, merit choosing, and ultimately, meritocracy.

The evaluation and analysis of the findings of qualitative section (Figure 1), shows that the causal circumstances of talent treasury, efficient promotion system, human resources management, integration of succession planning and career progression path, support individual and professional efforts directly lead to merit nurturing in governmental universities, which success lies in the strategies (human agency and academic actors). Facilitate the process of deploying and implementing the integration model of succession planning and the career progression path for managers of public universities. These strategies include factors such as familiarization, participation of university administrators, organizational learning (knowledge management, learning organization), trust building, futurism, academic or institutional independence (academic freedom, academic Independence), and systemic insights. These strategies, on the one hand, are influenced by contextual and immediate effective factors and the context providing the strategies for establishing an integration model, i.e., organizational structure, organizational culture and atmosphere, management stability and resistance to change. On

the other hand, they are under the influence of interfering environmental factors of the political environment, surrounding environment, socio-political environment, international environment, policy-making and legal environment. However, members of the scientific community, senior managers of the university, executive directors, educational or research faculty and staff should be independent in their activities and interaction so that they can fulfil the process of establishing the integration model in a free scientific environment and without any threats and limitations. Finally, the strategies for establishing an integration model interact with intervening factors and underlying and environment conditions, which will lead to individual outcomes and organizational consequences. Individual outcomes include individual development, motivation and satisfaction, while organizational outcomes involve organizational maturity, resources conservation, organizational justice, organizational readiness and mega entropy. Considering the abovementioned and for more effectively realization of integration strategies for succession planning and career development path at governmental universities, the followings are suggested:

- The issues of academic independence and academic freedom need to be on the agenda of the policy makers of universities, since they facilitate the implementation of the integration model of succession planning and career progression path of the managers of public universities.
- The design of policies should be such not to impede the trust between the university staff and administrators.
- An institution to monitor the integrity status of succession planning and career progression path of the managers of public universities should be established in the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.
- Evaluation centers (ACs) need to be established at public universities to evaluate the efficient performance of the university staff and executives.
- Identifying the top talents and creating an efficient and up-to-date talent pool should be more and more considered by the academic policy makers.
- A certain, clear and integrated model for succession planning and career progression path must be operated in the universities.
- Provision and allocation of financial resources to universities should be done with the goal of merit nurturing.
- The government policies about university administrators should be such that the managers have assurance of their management stability so that they can design and plan long-term and strategic plans for realization the integrated programs of succession planning and career development path.

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