



Exploring the Components of Professional Ethics in Teaching, from the Perspective of Faculty Members in Iran

ARTICLE INFO

Article Type

Qualitative Study

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How to cite this article

Fallahi A, Nemat Shahrababaki B, Shahoei R, Aala F, Ahmadi S. Exploring the Components of Professional Ethics in Teaching, from the Perspective of Faculty Members in Iran. Health Education and Health Promotion. 2019;7(2):96-102.

ABSTRACT

Aims Professional ethics plays an important role in all professions; however, it has more importance among faculty members of universities. The aim of the current study was to explore the components of professional ethics in teaching from the perspective of faculty members in Iran.

Participants & Methods This qualitative study was conducted in Sanandaj, Iran, in 2017. Using purposive sampling, 15 faculty members of Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences with educational experience were included in the study. Data were collected through individual interviews, group discussions, and field notes; and they were analyzed by conventional content analysis. To confirm the accuracy and strength of the data, acceptability, confirmability, and transferability factors were taken into account.

Findings The results of data analyses yielded four major themes, including “characteristics of professors”, “professors’ capabilities”, “protect of respects”, and “promoting the university”.

Conclusion The results of this study showed that in teaching, there are different aspects in the field of professional ethics of professors.

Keywords Professional Ethics; University; Professors; Qualitative Research

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Article History

Received: September 01, 2018
Accepted: December 02, 2019
ePublished: April 09, 2019

CITATION LINKS

- [1] The study on professional ethics components among faculty members in the engineering
- [2] The attitude of faculty members towards professional ethics at Hamadan University School of Dentistry
- [3] The opinions of preschool teachers about ethical principles
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- [10] The underlying factors affecting the ethical performance of health service providers when faced with disasters: a qualitative study
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- [14] Factors affecting self-care in women with osteoporosis: A qualitative study with the content analysis approach
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- [16] Essentials of nursing research: Methods, appraisal, and utilization
- [17] Three approaches to qualitative content analysis
- [18] Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing
- [19] Qualitative content analysis
- [20] Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness
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- [24] Kohlberg and hidden curriculum in moral education: An opportunity for students' acquisition of moral values in the new Turkish primary education curriculum

Introduction

Professional ethics, as special professional principles and rules [1, 2], is a broader concept than business ethics [3] and includes a series of values, principles, and norms that govern that particular profession [4, 5]. Professional ethics plays an important role in all professions, but its importance in faculty members is more highlighted. Professors, as moral and spiritual examples, not only affect their surroundings, but also have a profound effect on students [1]. Professional ethics of professors includes the areas of punishment and behavior management, processes related to order, rights and responsibilities, ethical freedom, intellectual autonomy, and trustworthiness [6].

On the other hand, the time spent in a university is for the purpose of teaching science and skills, as well as principles and practices of professional ethics [7] that professors who are aware of these principles play an important role in transferring the norms of society, in providing cultural experiences, shaping the behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of students and cultivating ethical virtues during this period [8]. In addition, professional ethics of professors can lead to improved performance of students in class [6]. Compliance with ethical principles is of immense importance in some professions such as medical and scientific careers that directly or indirectly deal with human life [4]. Universities of medical sciences are also responsible for training individuals who adhere to the professional principles and make effort to increase the health of the community [9]. Therefore, professional ethics induce students directly and indirectly and affect their performance [10].

There have been several studies on the importance of university professor's acquaintance with ethical standards and the necessity of their observance. Studies have also explored the viewpoints of students and different occupations about the components of professional ethics [1, 4, 6]. However, conducted studies have not been focused on the components of professional ethics in education from the viewpoints of faculty members of universities of medical sciences [6, 11-13]. What are the components of professional ethics in teaching from the viewpoint of this group of professors? This is the question raised by the researchers.

Considering the extent and depth of the existing answers, it seems that quantitative research has been unable to deeply and comprehensively explain these components. Therefore, the researchers sought to answer this question using the qualitative research method. Identifying the factors influencing the phenomenon from the viewpoint of those who have experienced it through the qualitative method, is necessary for designing educational programs [14]. Qualitative research is used to describe live experiences and give meaning to them and is accompanied by increased insight, understanding

and knowledge of human experiences [15].

Considering the importance of professional ethics for university professors [1], the importance of its training in improving the performance of students [7], the importance of observing and teaching professional ethics at the level of medical universities [4, 9], and the lack of qualitative studies in the field of professional ethics from the viewpoint of university professors, especially the professors of medical universities, and the role of qualitative approach in overall explanation of these views [4, 6, 15], this study was conducted with the aim of explaining the components of professional ethics in teaching from the perspective of faculty members in Iran.

Participants and Methods

Study design: This study, with a contract content analysis method, explains the components of professional ethics in education from the viewpoint of professors from Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences located in Sanandaj in the West of Iran, in 2017.

Participants: Data were collected from 15 faculty members using a purposive sampling method. The Inclusion criteria included having three years of work experience in the field of education in Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences, interest in participating in the study, and exclusion criteria were receiving a written warning from the Ethics Committee.

Data collection: In order to collect data, semi-structured interviews were used along with taking notes and observation. The corresponding author for conducting interviews who had obtained permission from the Research Council of Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences and had coordinated the time and place of interviewing the participants, collected rich information from their experiences. The initial question was "Explain your experiences and insights on professional ethics in the workplace". According to participant's responses, subsequent follow up questions were asked. At the end of each interview, a summary of the interview was created. Interviews took place in the faculty room or a quiet classroom at the university and continued until data saturation was achieved [16]. The data were collected through 9 individual interviews, a 4-person group interview and 2 instances of journaling, and, then, they were analyzed simultaneously.

Data analysis: Conventional content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Conventional content analysis translates into the extraction of objective content that is more than what is written in textual data and it extracts hidden patterns from the content of participant's data [17]. The seven stages of interviewing including thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing,

verifying, and reporting were considered in the study [18]. In the process of analysis, firstly, the texts of the interviews were written down, and then studied several times for obtaining a general insight. Subsequently, specific semantic units were determined, and based on similarity, suitability, and adaptation, were categorized under different themes. Subthemes were also divided into smaller themes and finally the framework was determined. The most diverse samples were in terms of age, sex, field of study, education degree, years of service, and educational background. Duration of the group interview was 90 minute and the average of individual interviews was 35 minutes. MAXQDA 10 software was used to facilitate data analysis in the process of forward and backward, listing and categorizing, repeated comparison of different data, and retrieving quotes [19]. For potency and accuracy of the data, the criteria for accepting data were reviewed by verifying the expressions stated by the participants in the manuscripts, long-term involvement of the researcher in the data, good communication with the participants, and their trust with the researcher. The confirmation of findings was done by reviewers in the sense that some parts of the interviews, codes, and the themes were reviewed by specialists. Confidence in the findings was secured with writing copies as soon as possible, accurate recording of the stages of implementation, integration in the method of data collection, and spatial and temporal integration [17, 20].

Ethical consideration: The present study was approved by the research council of Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, after introducing and explaining the goals and method of the research. Before the analysis, all the information was unnamed and the participants were identified solely through the years of service, gender, and expertise.

Findings

Fifteen faculty members, including 11 males and 4 females participated in the study with an age range between 30 and 56, and years of teaching experience between 3 and 29. Participants were from different departments and fields of study, and their education degrees were Master of Science and Ph.D. Participant’s experience analysis led to identification of 593 initial codes that, after their integration in terms of similarity and matching, 132 codes remained, which were classified into 26 subthemes and 4 main themes including “characteristics of professors”, “professor's capabilities”, “protect of respects”, and “promoting the university”. Table 1 shows the themes and subthemes obtained from analyzing the faculty member’s comments on professional ethics in education.

Table 1) Themes and subthemes derived from analysis of professor's thoughts about professional ethics in education

The components of professional ethics in education from the viewpoint of professors
Professor’s Characteristics
Honesty
Courage
Moods
Will
Justice and fairness
Loyalty and trust
the faith
Critic and critique
Creativity
Progressive
Self-Confidence
Being responsible
Tidy appearance
Professor’s Capabilities
Appropriate communication
Professional competence
Management
Discipline
Power transfer concepts
Teaching method
Being a researcher
Being up to date
Promoting the University
The importance of educating the student
The importance of educational and research-related development of the university
The importance of the student's educational and research-based development
Protect of Respects
Respect and attention to culture
Respect for others

Characteristics of Professors

The “characteristics of professors” themes consists of thirteen subthemes including “honesty”, “courage”, “temperament”, “will”, “justice and fairness”, “loyalty and trust”, “faith”, “ability to hear criticism as well as being a critic”, “creativity”, “progressiveness”, “confidence”, “responsibility”, and “tidy appearance”. Honesty in behavior and speech, honesty in teaching and research, as well as guiding and counseling were among the codes that were placed under the category of honesty. Some participants argued that in the light of courage, one could overcome the discomfort of various stages. They considered having the courage to do what is right, the courage to defend their own as well as other’s rights, and the courage to make change important; and argued that courageous professors will make changes without being afraid, after considering the goal, planning, and considering all the aspects of a task, including its harms and benefits. Participants considered kindness, amiability, affability, and having a sense of humor as other vital components in teaching and achieving educational goals. One of the professors said: “A professor’s kindness and affability in class

will turn a cold and dull environment into a dynamic atmosphere, and the class will constantly stay fresh this way" (Male participant, No. 8). Participants stated that the "will" factor is involved in both life and classroom, and it helps people to go through the storms of life. The will to control emotions, to behave and to overcome the desires of the soul, the will to make decisions and to deal with problems and to make progress in reaching goals, were all among the codes that were placed under the "will" subtheme. One of the interesting findings of the survey was that the professors considered justice to be a factor helping in their ease of mind and also a criterion for evaluating their lives.

The participants expressed factors such as advocacy of what is right, lack of bias and impartial judgments, non-discrimination in terms of economy, society, culture, and ethnicity, as well as not creating racial segregations, not making comparisons among students, giving equal importance and attention to the students, scientific neutrality and observance of objectivity, justice in evaluation of students and colleagues, lack of prejudice, having justice in education and in implying the laws, respect for other's rights and fair render of services, were all categorized under the title of "fairness and justice".

One of the professors said: "Anyone who considers their job as profession, shall not just work for earning money, and justice is a very important principle for that person; justice in their perspective, behavior, and work" (Female participant, No. 13). Commitment to their duties, secrecy, protection of the rights of others and university, loyalty to universities, having integrity in quotations, as well as in religion and knowledge, and protecting students, were among the codes that were placed under the integrity subtheme. Participants considered trust and integrity as important factors for the survival of social relationships and maintaining contact with the student. They mentioned that believing in God and religious and spiritual beliefs, as some of the characteristics of professors, and getting closer to God, moving toward his satisfaction, and having inner belief of the creator will ensure physical well-being, life satisfaction, and discipline in their life. Having the spirit of accepting criticism, having flexibility, making correct and clever criticism, avoiding sarcasm in criticism, accepting correct critiques, responding properly to false criticisms, creating a suitable environment for criticism, and criticizing at the right time and place, were among the codes placed under the classification of "criticism and critic". They considered criticism as an attempt to progress in life, escape from failure and interpersonal problems, and increase performance and self-efficacy. Initiatives in action, having new ideas in education. Excellency in

professional affairs, being hard-working and having perseverance, having a motivation to succeed, being serious about work and having a working interest were among the codes that were placed under the "creativity and progressive" subtheme.

One of the professors said: "A professor must be able to bring the student into a creative and enquiring space; when the space is not set for creativity and progress, the motivation of students and even professors will decrease" (Male Participant, No. 6). The professors who participated in the study, considered factors such as overcoming stress, fear, and anxiety, identifying educational goals, practicing and being diligent, self-encouragement, and acquiring specialized skills as important factors in increasing self-confidence. They stated that thinking, concentration, and tranquility could not be achieved without self-confidence and, negative thoughts, especially during teaching arise from lack of self-confidence, therefore, the factor of self-confidence was considered as the most important factor for success in professional ethics. Being responsible in decision making, accepting consequences, having a work commitment, sense of responsibility toward others, following-up on duties, being responsible in maintaining and improving the health of the community, make an effort to improve the weaknesses of the university, make an effort for realization of real ethics, and finally, attempt to remove the work limitations and defects, were among the codes that were categorized under the group of "responsibility".

One of the professors said the following about being responsible: "Professional ethics means that a professor takes responsibility for decisions and consequences and shall recognize the problems of others as their own and he/she must be reputable and sensitive in their work" (Male Participant, No. 7). Having a clean and tidy appearance and appropriate clothes in the workplace and the community were among the other features that university professors obliged themselves to have. They argued that a tidy appearance could be translated as having a well-organized life and has an indirect impact on the personality of their audience.

Professor's capability

"Proper relationship", "specialized competence", "management", "discipline", "the power of conveying concepts," "teaching method," "researcher," and "being up to date," were eight subthemes of professor's capability. Participants in the study considered the ability to establish appropriate relationships as one of the important characteristics of a capable professor. Almost all of them referred to the importance of teacher's interaction with the student, the use of verbal and nonverbal language

and social intelligence in teaching, and stated that the proficiency of a professor in various fields is not only one of the indications of their success, but also can lead to the success of students and university. One of the professors stated that: "The professional ethics of a professor is his ability to understand how he/she interacts and communicates with the student, how he/she understands and collaborates with them in general, and knowing how to create the proper atmosphere in the classroom" (Male Participant, No. 1). Some participants stated that a professor should not only have the ability to provide counsel for students while teaching, but also have the skills of diagnosis, expertise in identifying, proving, and solving problems. One of the participants stated: "In the professional ethics, the lecturer must have sufficient expertise in the field of his/her work and be capable enough to use educational facilities in order to turn theories into the practical application" (Female participant No. 2). Time and classroom management, power management, personal and social relationships management, program management and meetings management, ability to lead and organize a classroom, and correct and timely decision making, were among the codes that were categorized under the management subtheme. Participants stated that management would enhance individual and environmental productivity and, in addition, creates new knowledge and ideas. Discipline in work and thought, regular attendance of teacher and students to the class, and regular evaluation of professors were among other vital components of teaching ethics. One of the participants stated: "The existence of discipline is important for continuation of the right flow of work. Lack of order causes a person to suffer and disturbs the mind and thoughts and lowers productivity and efficiency" (Female participant No. 4). Participants had the following repeatedly pointed out in their statements: the power of expression, utilization of different vocabulary in teaching, presentation of contents in a fluent and understandable way, having a clear voice and using proverbs and examples during teaching. One of the interesting findings of the study was that the participants considered a professor's success in their teaching method as one of the most important factors and described it as the most vital component of professional ethics in teaching. Appropriate division of the course plans, teaching on the basis of educational principles, providing appropriate content, applying new teaching methods and using teaching aids were among the codes of teaching method. One of the professors said: "When a professor is teaching, s/he must pay attention to the student's psychological differences, have a continuous evaluation, and give the students a summary of learning and practice activities" (Male participant No. 11). The use of learning experiences and the use of educational tools were other

important components of teaching from the perspective of the contributors. A small number of participants stated that a professor should be a researcher be able to compile articles and books, and they should collaborate in national and international researches, in order to eventually be successful in the profession of education. On the other hand, the majority of participants pointed out that a professor should be up to date. Being aware of university news, as well as political, social, and economic situations, using up to date content for teaching, up to date researches, and progressing with today's knowledge were among the codes placed under "up to date" subtheme. One of the professors stated that: "A professor should not just attend training courses and teach only a few university credits, but he/she must participate in university activities and update his thoughts and ideas." (Female participant, No. 3).

Promoting the university

"Promoting the university" theme includes 3 subthemes, containing "Giving importance to educating students", "giving importance to educational development of the university", and "giving importance to student's educational development". The majority of participants argued that their training is only considered complete if they have helped the students have increased motivation, self-worth, and self-confidence, and when they have obtained decision-making skills, life skills, patience, justice, and realism. One of the participants stated that: "Educating students, developing spiritual aspects in them, motivating them, teaching them responsibility, sympathy etc. are included in professional ethics, meaning that we as university professors should not claim that our work is only about teaching the university syllabus; however unfortunately, that has become our primary focus (Female participant No. 2). Participants stated that development and growth of any institution and society would only take place when education is accompanied by training, which could provide the best atmosphere for people to grow. One of the interesting findings of the study was that the professors stated that paying attention to educational and training development of the university should be taken into account during the education, whether explicitly or implicitly. They considered their education successful, when they valued the ideas, creativeness, and achievements of their colleagues, and tried to advance and promote them. They also stated that making effort to expand the culture of education, having interaction and collaboration with the university as a whole, trying to identify and resolve educational problems, and supporting university's educational activities are among the fundamental principles of teaching ethics. One participant stated: "In my opinion, educational

ethics is not solely about the students, but also the fact that one can identify educational problems or take steps to help one's colleague or the university to advance is very important on its own" (Male participant No. 15). Paying attention to thoughts, scientific and specialized skills, student's educational and research-related achievements, identifying their creativity and areas of growth, academic empowerment of students, cooperating with them in conducting educational activities, including students in educational processes, and encouraging them to engage in educational activities were among the codes that were categorized under the importance of the student's educational and research-related developments. One of the participants stated that: "One of the most important tasks of a professor is to reduce the amount of direct education and direct transfer as much as possible, and to involve students in the educational process, so that a desired learning environment is created" (Male participant No. 9).

Protect of respects

The theme of protecting of respects is divided into two subthemes: "Respect and attention to culture" and "Respecting others". Participants in the study considered paying attention to cultural factors as one of the more important principles of ethics in teaching. They also valued the preservation of local culture and having respect for other languages, dialects, accents, and local clothes, caring for cultural sites, promotion of preservation of cultural heritage, and lastly, utilization of local anecdotes in teaching. The majority of faculty members stated that having a non-prejudiced attitude toward other cultures, paying attention to local traditions, having respect for religious sites and for different religions in the classroom are among the fundamental principles of teaching ethics. One of the participants said: "A teacher honors the social values, participates in social activities, respects the social laws, and does not act in a fanatic manner in dealing with other cultures" (Male participant No. 7). Another participant stated: "A teacher must act without any orientation toward the ideas of the individuals who come to him/her; and he/she must respect the students' beliefs. This is one of the most important factors of professional ethics" (Male participant No. 6). A number of participants also stated that a teacher being an example in cultural affairs, his/her familiarity with the society's culture, participation in cultural, social, and artistic activities, observance of social norms, obedience to the law and social regulations, and having respect for the values, as well as the rules of the class and university are other important cultural factors in the teaching class. Participants in the study, in addition to having respect for the culture, stated that respecting others is also considered as one of the foundations of professional ethics. The majority of participants

pointed out factors such as respecting the time and opinions of others, their attitudes, personal beliefs, personality, as well as the preservation of human dignity. They repeatedly mentioned the freedom of expressing one's belief, surveying students, and having humility in teaching. One of the contributors stated that "professors should give students the right to make decisions, do not humiliate them, have respect for them and do not question the dignity and character of the students" (Male participant No. 4). It was inferred from the participants' statements that they deeply understood the positive effects of maintaining sanctities in teaching and so they make effort to promote this quality at any circumstances. Participants mentioned that complying with educational regulations, and also students' passion and motivation for learning, are all hidden in respecting them.

Discussion

The findings of the current study portrayed the components of professional ethics in teaching from the viewpoint of faculty members of Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences in Sanandaj, located in the west of Iran. The results were based on the real experiences of people involved in the real environment. In total, this study has clarified some of the hidden and unspoken angles of professional ethics, which had not been addressed in Iran until now. The results showed that professors involved in the field of teaching should have certain characteristics (Such as honesty, trustworthiness, etc.), which are the basis and foundation of professional ethics in teaching. Jahromi *et al.* examined the ethics of clinical professors from the student's viewpoint through a quantitative approach and mentioned characteristics such as self-confidence, sense of responsibility, and creativity, but did not refer to the courage and temperament of the professors in teaching^[4]. Sobhani Nejad *et al.* as well studied the components of professional ethics of teaching from the viewpoint of students and described the personality traits of professors in teaching such as the sense of responsibility and trust^[13]. Other studies conducted all over the world, also show that positive inner characteristics of professors during teaching will lead to desirable outcomes such as effectiveness of teaching and learning processes, improvement of ethical behavior of students and professors in and out of class, internalization of values in society and growth of spirituality and skills related to it in students^[21, 22]. In order to help students understand the subject of ethics, they need to interact with ethically-competent professors. Creating cultural insight and infrastructure in the field of professional ethics, having proper ethics in personal life, and solving subsistence problems will increase ethical adherence in professors and affect their personality traits.

From the viewpoint of the participants in this study, the professors who teach at universities should have capabilities such as strong public relations, management qualities, and expertise in their profession. In his study in Canada, Malone emphasizes over competencies and professional standards [11]. A professor's mastery in various skills and his/her abilities in teaching will not only bring about personal dynamism and growth, but will also result in training efficient and capable workforce. Creating empowerment programs for professors and using these abilities in suitable and different times and places in the university, self-improvement of professors, and identification of factors of anxiety and reducing them can enhance the abilities of professors.

One of the interesting findings of this study, which has been less addressed in previous studies, is the attention given to promoting the university during teaching and also through educating students. Regarding the importance of educating students, unfortunately, the current approaches in educational systems worldwide, have mainly focused on the cognitive domain of learners. This approach creates individuals with limited thinking power who are single-dimensional, illogical, and arrogant. In addition, cognitive development is mainly based on curriculum and book-based approaches, which has been intensified in recent decades [23]. In this regard, Yuksel states that hidden curriculums are more effective than formal curriculums in transferring values and comprehensive education, and thus students will learn more than the existing ethical atmosphere and environment in the curriculum [24]. Regarding the above-mentioned topics, it is possible to address topics related to behavioral education of students in the courses they take, besides the usual curriculum, and this parameter was one of the most important components of professional ethics from the viewpoint of the professors. It is worth mentioning that rapid developments in human life and the spread of science emphasize the application of research and its impact on human life. Research in fields such as spiritual health, social and psychological well-being, etc., can be used as an option for professors to incorporate them into their teaching.

Other results of the study that the research team did not find in other studies, were respect and attention to the native cultures of students and colleagues. Faculty members acknowledged this fact and believed that paying attention to native cultures in teaching translates into respecting the ancestors and is a basis for preserving the culture of the future. Professional ethics requires insight and cultural infrastructure, and cultural factors should be the point of focus in its implementation. Respecting the culture and values of the community will strengthen morality. As long as professional ethics is

internalized and transformed into the culture in universities, certain qualities such as organized communication, mutual respect, responsibility, and a common language and culture are created among the academic communities and ultimately, generations to come will find a positive attitude toward professional ethics. Ethics is native and dependent on culture; thus ethical charters should focus on cultures, especially native cultures. From the results of this study, it is deduced that every institution and organization, in addition to complying with international ethical charters, can have a specific ethical charter with respect to the especial culture of their region.

Despite the fact that the findings of this study increased our knowledge about the components of professional ethics from the viewpoint of professors, but this study has some limitations: Firstly, in this study, the components of professional ethics were stated from the viewpoint of professors that were faculty members of Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences using content-analysis approach, and non-faculty professors, as well as professors from other universities, were not included in the study. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalized to different situations and locations. Secondly, these components are explained from the viewpoint of professors with teaching experience of over three years and they may be different from the viewpoint of professors with less teaching experience. The third factor is the limitation of access to some of the professors due to their busy schedule; and the fourth factor is, that participates voluntarily took part in the study, and their viewpoint may differ from those who did not show any inclination to participate in the study. Conducting further research on the challenges and needs of implementing professional ethics in different occupations and locations is recommended. In addition, explaining strategies and managerial strategies for implementation of professional ethics in universities, studying the effect of professional ethics on the performance and job satisfaction of faculty members, studying the effect of professional ethics on learning motivation and academic performance of students, and examining the impact of educational programs on the professional ethics of different occupations could be the subjects of future researches. The findings of this study can be useful for constructing tools for measuring professional ethics in teaching, designing professional ethics promotion programs at universities, and developing educational policies, and they can also be beneficial for professors and students.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that in the field of teaching, which is the most important function of universities and the main role of professors,

professional ethics includes different aspects with regard to learners. Professors must develop ethical qualities as their personal and professional qualities in order to be good behavioral models for promoting ethical dimensions in universities and encourage students to imply ethical behaviors in their careers. Only in this way it is possible to internalize ethical behavior in students. The other results of the present study were that each institution and organization could have a special ethical charter with respect to the especial culture of its geographical region.

Acknowledgements: The researchers found themselves obliged to thank the Vice Chancellor for Research and Technology, Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences for their financial support and to thank all the professors who participated in the study, which gave their valuable insights to the researchers.

Ethical permissions: This article is based on a research project approved by the Vice Chancellor for Research and Technology, Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences, Sanandaj, Iran (Number: R.MUK.REC.1395/302).

Conflicts of interests: The Authors state that there is no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution: Fallahi A. (First author), Introduction author/ Methodologist/ Original researcher/ Discussion author (40%); Nemat-Shahrbabaki B. (Second author), Methodologist/ Assistant researcher (20%); Shahoei R. (Third author), Methodologist/ Assistant researcher (20%); Aala F. (Fourth author), Assistant researcher (10%); Ahmadi S. (Fifth author), Assistant researcher (10%)

Funding/Support: This study was supported by the Vice Chancellor for Research and Technology, Kurdistan University of Medical, Iran.

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