

Exploring Students' Perceptions of Academic Advisors' Performance: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Despite the critical role academic advisors play in students' academic success, limited understanding of students' perspectives has left fundamental issues, such as underutilization of advising services or dissatisfaction with them, largely unresolved. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore students' perceptions of academic advisors' performance at Bushehr University of Medical Sciences.

Methods: This qualitative study employed a conventional content analysis approach. Given the use of a qualitative research design, data were collected through focus group discussions. A total of 26 students from various medical science disciplines attended three focus group sessions. The students were selected through purposive sampling from different academic levels (bachelor's and professional doctorate). Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection and continued until data saturation was reached. Transcribed interviews were manually coded, and the codes were subsequently grouped into themes using more abstract categories. To ensure trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, Lincoln and Guba's criteria were applied.

Results: Analysis of 360 initial codes resulted in 10 subcategories, 7 main categories, and 2 overarching themes, including *advisor characteristics* (advisor accessibility, understanding diverse student needs, and confidentiality) and *advisor responsibilities* (academic guidance, educational leadership, developmental support, and problem-oriented responsiveness).

Conclusion: The students in this study perceived effective advisor performance as a combination of individual characteristics and the fulfillment of various educational, developmental, and problem-solving roles. It is recommended that a comprehensive assessment of advising challenges be conducted from multiple perspectives. Moreover, a performance evaluation tool for academic advisors should be developed, and appropriate interventions should be designed based on these insights.

Keywords: Academic advisor, Qualitative study, Content analysis, Medical sciences

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Introduction

University is the primary institution responsible for the education and development of skilled human resources and plays a pivotal role in harmonizing various dimensions of society (1,2). University professors and faculty members, as one of the most valuable components of the academic environment, actively contribute to enhancing the capabilities of the educational system (2). Another key component of the university is its students, who play a significant role in realizing the institution's policies and goals (3). Upon university admission,

students often face multiple personal, emotional, social, and academic challenges, such as part-time employment during studies, academic underperformance, and issues related to transferring or changing majors (3, 4). Neglecting these challenges and the absence of effective planning to address them can jeopardize students' physical and mental health, as well as their academic success (3). Thus, the responsibility of university authorities and faculty members in identifying, preventing, and resolving such issues, as well as providing appropriate counseling services, cannot be overlooked (3, 5).



Academic advising is a dynamic and purposeful relationship between the advisor and the student, tailored to the student's needs and based on effective problem-solving approaches (1). Counseling is a structured and systematic activity that began in 1908 in Boston, USA, by Frank Parsons, widely regarded as the father of vocational guidance (6). According to the "Academic Advisor Regulations" ratified in the 39th session of the Supreme Council for Medical Education Planning (dated May 12, 2009), an academic advisor is a faculty member who, upon recommendation of the advising coordinator and approval by the Vice Chancellor for Education, is officially appointed by the Dean of the Faculty. The advisor is responsible for guiding students in educational, personal, and research-related matters (7). Academic advisors are skilled individuals who engage directly with students and are expected to possess certain characteristics such as empathy, responsibility, availability, and self-confidence. These qualities enable them to play a crucial role in guiding and encouraging students toward achieving both academic and societal goals (8, 9). As the initial point of contact between students and the educational system (1), academic advisors help enhance students' self-efficacy in the learning process (10) and contribute to reducing first-year student dropout rates (11). In other words, academic advisors act as the first line of defense in protecting students from the stressors commonly found in the university environment (12).

Despite the critical need for academic advising, numerous studies have reported challenges related to academic advisors. For instance, although students express a significant need for educational guidance, effective communication between students and their academic advisors is often lacking (13, 14). In some cases, students did not perceive their academic advisors as trustworthy individuals or reliable sources for addressing their academic and personal needs throughout their years of study (15). Moreover, studies have revealed divergent and at times contradictory perspectives between faculty members and students regarding the advising process (1, 3, 16). Major challenges reported in the literature include the manner of selecting advisors, the level of advisors' awareness of educational regulations, the availability of adequate physical space for advising, advisor accessibility, and the communication strategies used for delivering guidance (1, 5, 17, 18). A systematic review conducted across eleven Iranian medical universities examined students' perspectives on the performance of academic advisors. The findings showed a wide range of advisor performance ratings from poor to excellent, with student satisfaction levels varying (19). A qualitative content analysis aimed at improving faculty development programs at Jundishapur University of Medical Sciences found that while most faculty members were satisfied with the programs and the performance of the faculty

development committee, certain weaknesses remained that required attention (20).

Following numerous studies highlighting the diverse personal, social, and academic challenges faced by students upon entering university, and the mixed feedback on advisor performance in delivering appropriate guidance and support, there is a clear need for improvement. In the specific context of Bushehr—with its hot and humid climate, small population, and limited infrastructure—unique challenges and opportunities exist for advancing medical education. These conditions necessitate innovative educational approaches and the effective use of experienced academic advisors, with a strong emphasis on understanding students' perspectives as the primary beneficiaries of such programs. Given the existing challenges in advisor systems from the student viewpoint, it is crucial to identify and address these issues to enhance the quality and effectiveness of advising services. Most previous research in this area has employed quantitative methodologies, focusing primarily on measuring student satisfaction using descriptive statistics. To our knowledge, no study has conducted an in-depth qualitative exploration of medical students' lived experiences with academic advising. This gap in the literature limits our understanding of the cultural and psychological roots of problems such as low student engagement with advisors or dissatisfaction with the advising process. Therefore, conducting a qualitative study using in-depth interviews not only helps bridge this gap by uncovering fundamental themes but also provides essential insights for designing effective reform strategies and educational interventions. Furthermore, such a study can respond to policymakers' concerns regarding the causes of dissatisfaction with current academic advising programs. Accordingly, and in light of the significance of this issue, the present study sought to explore students' understanding of the structural components of academic advisor performance at Bushehr University of Medical Sciences.

Methods

This qualitative study, employing conventional content analysis, was conducted from April to June 2024. Content analysis is considered a systematic and valid research method for describing the quality of a phenomenon (21). Qualitative content analysis enables researchers to derive valid and replicable inferences from data and transform them into meaningful concepts. It aims to generate knowledge, awareness, and novel insights, offering a practical guide for action (21). The research population consisted of all students who had received academic advising at Bushehr University of Medical Sciences. Participants were selected using purposive sampling from students across various disciplines and academic levels, including bachelor's and professional doctorate students in various fields such as nursing, midwifery, radiology,

laboratory sciences, nutrition, environmental health, public health, operating room technology, anesthesia, medicine, and dentistry. Maximum variation sampling was used to ensure diversity across the field of study, academic years, and gender.

Following approval from the Vice-Chancellor for Research of the university, a call for participation was issued. The research objectives and the voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained. Students who expressed interest, provided informed consent, and demonstrated the ability to articulate their views and experiences were invited to participate. Given the exploratory nature of the research topic, data were collected through focus group discussions, using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Focus groups allow for discussion among individuals with shared experiences, perceptions, or thoughts on a specific topic (22) and are designed to foster a concentrated, supportive, and non-threatening environment for participants (23).

Before data collection, several sessions were held with the research team to develop guiding questions based on existing literature. Sample guiding questions included: *"In your opinion, how necessary is the implementation of the academic advising program?"*, *"How do you evaluate the implementation process of the advisor's performance?"*, and *"What factors contribute to improving the performance of academic advisors?"* During the focus group sessions, additional probing and follow-up questions were asked to explore participants' responses in greater depth. Each focus group comprised 6 to 10 participants to represent the diversity of the students' characteristics. Accordingly, efforts were made to include participants from various majors, academic years, and both genders. The interviews were held in suitable classrooms or meeting rooms within the university, based on participant preferences. Before conducting each session, two researchers were assigned specific roles: the first researcher, a specialist in qualitative methodology, acted as the main facilitator, establishing rapport with participants and outlining the study objectives. The second researcher acted as a technical and logistical coordinator. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, the audio recording of sessions, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. All participants provided full informed consent before taking part in the study.

The sample size was determined based on data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point at which continued data collection yields no new information and only reiterates previously gathered data. In qualitative studies, the recurrence of information, themes, or key points indicates that the sample size is adequate (22). The duration of each interview, depending on participants' interest and tolerance, ranged from 45 minutes to one hour. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed word by

word manually. A single member of the research team conducted all interviews. The group interviews and data collection lasted approximately three months. The topic under investigation had a clearly defined scope, and students actively engaged in the discussions. Data saturation was reached when, after three successive focus group sessions, no new codes or subcategories emerged during analysis, and repeated content patterns were observed in participants' responses. To validate these findings, three additional individual interviews with students were conducted. Analysis of these interviews confirmed the absence of new codes, thereby affirming that data saturation had been achieved (24).

In qualitative content analysis, data collection and analysis must be conducted concurrently. To maximize the reliability and depth of the analysis, the researcher should begin coding with full immersion in the data as soon as data collection starts (22). At this stage, the researcher engaged deeply with the data to gain a general impression of the dataset. This process began by listening to the audio recordings of the interviews and reviewing participants' narratives, followed by repeated readings of the transcribed texts. Initially, each line of the transcript was reviewed thoroughly, breaking the data into smaller, meaningful units. A large number of preliminary codes were extracted from the interviews and handwritten notes. These initial codes were then reviewed, and those with conceptual similarities were merged through further refinement, resulting in a set of consolidated codes that formed the foundation for the final categories and primary themes.

Content analysis in the study was conducted through the following steps: (1) formulating the research question to elicit meaningful responses; (2) selecting interviewees and conducting interviews; (3) establishing credibility; (4) executing the coding process; (5) defining categories; and (6) outlining the overall coding framework and analyzing its results (25). To ensure credibility, defined as the confidence in the truth of the data, a warm, friendly relationship was established with the participants throughout the interviews. In addition, the interviewers' prior experience working within the university and with students provided a favorable context for asking probing and exploratory questions. The researchers remained focused on the objectives of the study and avoided leading questions to collect accurate data. For the coding process, the participants' responses were reviewed multiple times by the researchers to achieve a comprehensive understanding, and maximum variation sampling was considered by selecting participants from diverse academic disciplines, genders, ages, and academic levels. Initial coding and categorization were conducted by a researcher skilled in qualitative studies, and an independent expert reviewed the coding process. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion and

consensus, with over 90% inter-coder agreement achieved. A selection of codes was shared with the participants for feedback on their accuracy and appropriateness. To enhance confirmability, the researchers described the data in rich detail and documented each step of the research process to facilitate transparency and possible replication. The accuracy of coding was further validated by two faculty members experienced in qualitative research. To promote transferability, the participants' implicit remarks were closely examined, direct quotations were provided, and the research context was described in detail (22, 25). Recognizing the susceptibility of focus group research to various forms of bias, special attention was given to careful study design, precise participant selection, and facilitation by a highly experienced qualitative researcher. To prevent social desirability bias—where participants might conform to social norms or dominant group opinions—the participants were briefed beforehand on how to respond and were repeatedly reminded during sessions that there were no right or wrong answers. Clarifications were sought to ensure full comprehension of each question. A diverse range of participant personalities was included, and interviewers ensured that all participants actively contributed to the discussion.

Ethical Considerations

The protocol for this study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Bushehr University of Medical Sciences with the code IR.BPUMS.REC.1402.235, and all ethical permissions were obtained. Participants were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of their information, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time. They were assured that all data would remain confidential and, if needed, only selected portions of their statements would be presented in the findings using numeric codes or identifiers.

Results

A total of 26 medical sciences students (12 male and 14 female), currently enrolled at Bushehr University of Medical Sciences, participated in this study. Participants

were selected from a range of disciplines and represented three distinct groups of bachelor's and professional doctorate students, aged between 19 and 28 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants. Following the analysis of 360 initial codes, 7 final categories were extracted, grouped under two main themes: *characteristics of the academic advisor* and *responsibilities of the academic advisor*, which together represent the structural components of academic advisor performance (Tables 1 and 2).

Theme 1: Characteristics of the Academic Advisor

The participants in the study identified several characteristics and personal attributes they expected academic advisors to possess to provide effective guidance. Three main categories emerged under this theme: advisor accessibility, understanding diverse student needs throughout different stages of education, and adherence to confidentiality principles.

Advisor Accessibility

From the students' perspective, one of the key features of an effective advisor is their accessibility, ensuring that students can easily and promptly reach their advisor. The students emphasized the importance of having clear and convenient communication channels and noted that the number of students assigned to each advisor should be manageable. This would allow the advisor, despite academic and administrative responsibilities, to allocate adequate time and attention to each student. Moreover, students should not face challenges in terms of scheduling or location when seeking consultation. For instance, a sixth-semester male dental student stated: "My advisor is a specialist and very busy. I feel like my issue is a small one that only takes five minutes, but in reality, it has deeper aspects that may require one or two hours to resolve". Similarly, a fourth-semester male laboratory sciences student stated: "Our advisor is much more available, especially at the beginning and end of the semester, which helps in better follow-up on student course registrations".

Table 1. Academic advisor's characteristics

Categories	Advisor accessibility	Understanding students' diverse needs	Adherence to principles of confidentiality
Subcategories	The appropriate ratio of students to academic advisors Availability of the academic advisor in terms of time and location for consultations Allocation of sufficient and accessible time for student advising	Early years of study Greater need for awareness of academic rules and regulations among newly admitted students New students' need for more focused attention and follow-up from academic advisors The novelty of the course content and study conditions at the university Difficulty in managing study time and balancing various life activities	Some students' problems differ from those of other students The importance of maintaining the confidentiality of students' personal and private issues The need for individual and private sessions alongside group counseling to express confidential concerns
		Final years of study Need to obtain clinical information from academic advisors with clinical expertise Need for information about military service and job opportunities Increased challenges related to internships and clinical practice in the final years of study	

Table 2. Academic advisor's responsibilities

Categories	Educational guidance	Academic leadership	Supportive-educational roles	Problem-oriented responsiveness
Subcategories	Introduction to the university and academic program Training in reading and learning skills Presentation of the educational vision Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the academic advisor Explanation of academic rules and regulations	Delegation of authority, guidance, and supervision of class representatives Establishment of academic order and discipline Monitoring and supervision of regular meetings based on student needs Planning and holding multiple individual and group sessions Academic and career guidance	Supportive role Moral support Social support Emotional support Family-related support Encouragement of effort and perseverance Preservation of student dignity	Problem-finding Identifying problems and improving the group's educational processes Monitoring the student's academic status and grades Analyzing student performance and providing appropriate feedback Monitoring and tracking student progress The academic advisor's academic and social credibility in addressing student issues
			Enhancing resilience Training class representatives Encouraging and facilitating team participation Proper instruction in dealing with issues Communication skills Facilitating a friendly atmosphere and promoting dynamism	Responsiveness Responding to students' questions Submitting reports to higher authorities Communicating students' problems to the relevant authorities

Understanding Diverse Student Needs

According to participants, effective academic advisors must possess the ability to identify and respond to students' evolving needs at different stages of their academic careers. First-year students, for example, undergo a transitional period from high school to university, during which they must learn institutional policies and regulations, develop time-management skills for coursework and assignments, and cope with anxieties related to adapting to university life. These students, therefore, require more proactive follow-up from their advisors. In contrast, students at higher academic levels focus primarily on challenges such as retaking failed courses, clinical and internship placements, military service obligations, and job seeking. They emphasize a need for clinical expertise, requesting that advisors recommend bedside reference materials, practical procedures, and necessary equipment as though they were practicing therapists. As one fifth-semester nursing student suggested, *"First-year students know very little about the university. They do not understand course-selection procedures, academic regulations, or the university's hierarchy. Conversely, upper-division students, although more knowledgeable, may face larger issues such as structuring their internship schedules or deciding which specialty courses to take"*. A sixth-semester male dental student added, *"For advanced students, the advisor's influence on clinical work becomes more significant—suggesting essential references at the patient's bedside, teaching more practical techniques, or introducing the devices we need as if acting in a therapist role"*.

Adherence to Confidentiality

The participants also stressed that strict confidentiality is essential to their willingness to seek advice. Many

high-achieving students feel no need for counseling and hesitate to disclose personal information in group settings. However, following general reassurances from advisors in group meetings, these same students became more open to both group and individual sessions once they understood that their private concerns would be safeguarded. Almost all participants underscored the importance of distinguishing between general topics, which can be addressed in group workshops, and sensitive personal issues, which should be handled in one-on-one meetings with the advisor, always with absolute assurance of discretion. Accordingly, a fourth-semester female nutrition student stated, *"Students must be confident that what they share with their advisor stays between them and the advisor alone"*.

Theme 2: Responsibilities of the Academic Advisor

The students in this study identified four primary responsibilities for academic advisors, including educational guidance, academic leadership, supportive-educational roles, and problem-focused responsiveness.

Educational Guidance

The students emphasized the need for advisors to be fully aware of their responsibilities, possess up-to-date knowledge on educational regulations, and be well-informed about the specifics of academic programs and institutional rules, particularly for first-year students. Advisors should clarify the educational trajectory of students, including how specific courses and academic terms relate to future career paths. They should also teach students effective learning and study strategies adapted to university-level education. A fourth-semester female environmental health student stated, *"Our advisor would stress the importance of getting a good*

grade in certain courses—he would explain how to study effectively and highlight which courses are prerequisites and must not be failed”. An eighth-semester male medical student suggested, “Those of us who were admitted to university during the COVID-19 pandemic didn’t get much information about what an advisor could do for us—students didn’t really understand the scope of their advisor’s role”. A sixth-semester female anesthesia student noted, “Even though we had a semester plan, it took a long time to grasp what the advisor was trying to explain about the path over the next four years and how courses would be structured”. Another sixth-semester female environmental health student added, “When students first enter the university, the advisor must fully explain the program and career outlook so they can decide whether or not to continue—because initially they have no understanding of their major. They need to know which courses are hard and likely to be failed, especially prerequisites”.

Academic Leadership

From the students’ perspective, academic advisors must not only delegate certain responsibilities while guiding class representatives, but also directly or indirectly facilitate educational discipline within the classroom. They should plan for multiple individual and group sessions throughout each semester and ensure these advisory meetings are held regularly and in line with student needs—this defines the academic leadership role of advisors. A fifth-semester male nursing student stated, “To maximize student participation in group counseling sessions, our advisor uses a good strategy by informing us ahead of time and scheduling the session right after our class ends”. A sixth-semester male radiology student added, “In the first semester, when students are young and inexperienced, they argue over things like makeup classes or exam times. Our advisor created good order through the class representative’s coordination”. A sixth-semester female surgical technology student stated, “Sometimes the advisor even calls the class rep to remind students about unit registration or tells them to inform a specific student to come see the advisor”.

Career and academic guidance was highlighted as a sub-role within academic leadership. The students believed that advisors should be well-versed in all aspects of the curriculum, semester-by-semester course arrangements, prerequisite requirements, how to manage courses in case of failures, and have in-depth knowledge of various educational resources. They should guide students in making proper unit selections based on institutional regulations, help with choosing extracurricular training beneficial for future careers, and advise on postgraduate opportunities and job market conditions. A second-semester female public health student said, “Since we’re new to university, the advisor helped a lot in choosing the right courses and avoiding schedule conflicts”. Another

sixth-semester male radiology student added, “Our advisor is very experienced both professionally and academically. In the early semesters, he spent a lot of time explaining the academic structure and further education opportunities, giving us a clear outlook on our field”. A fourth-semester female medical student shared, “When we talk about our problems with the advisor, it feels like we’re not bearing the burden alone. Many times, my friends had failed a course and didn’t know when to retake it. The advisor clearly explained that semester four is very challenging and advised which term to retake the course”.

The students also stated that for more effective counseling, advisors should have complete familiarity with their students’ academic status, behavior, and abilities; hence, they do not need to reintroduce themselves or explain their situation at each session. The advisory process should progress with continuity. A sixth-semester male radiology student explained, “Our advisor taught several of our courses, so he knew us very well. Whenever a student approached him, he already knew their academic level and classroom behavior, which saved a lot of time and made the counseling more efficient”.

Supportive-Educational Role

The participants pointed to various supportive and educational responsibilities of academic advisors. From the students’ perspective, advisors play important roles in fostering resilience against challenges, encouraging empathy and the realization that many issues are shared among peers, promoting team participation, and enhancing solidarity among students. They are also seen as responsible for guiding class representatives, teaching appropriate responses to challenges, using peer-support techniques (through collaboration with senior students or same-level peers), and organizing experience-sharing workshops. The students also emphasized that academic advisors should develop interpersonal skills among students and create a friendly and dynamic group atmosphere. In terms of supportive functions, students pointed to the need for emotional support (within appropriate student-teacher boundaries), security, acknowledgment of students’ efforts, respect for their dignity, and even involving families when needed. A sixth-semester male dentistry student said, “In the group sessions with our academic advisor, when we sit in a circle and hear others talk, it’s really helpful. We feel a sense of empathy. For example, I often feel like 24 hours isn’t enough for all my tasks, and I used to think it was just my problem. But I’ve realized many others feel the same”. A fifth-semester male nursing student commented, “One of the challenges during the first year is how to interact with the opposite sex. In high school, we were segregated. Advisors should teach us how to work together effectively so we can build classroom unity, which in turn affects our academic success”. A fourth-semester female medical student noted, “I feel comfortable

asking my advisor anything—even personal problems. If it's something outside their expertise, they'll refer me to a psychologist". Another fourth-semester female medical student said, "Many students seek guidance from other students at higher academic levels, but not all are qualified. Sometimes the advice is wrong or just their interpretation. If the advisor doesn't have enough time due to a large student load, they could assign trained peer mentors or qualified upper-year students, possibly with some incentive or support from the advisor". A sixth-semester male radiology student emphasized the importance of emotional sensitivity and dignity: "Respecting students' dignity and recognizing their efforts is so important. My advisor says if a term has been particularly hard and a student's GPA has dropped a bit, he won't pressure them unnecessarily. He considers that a previous term might have been easier, and the GPA was higher. Too much pressure could distance the student, so he supports them differently instead".

Problem-Oriented Responsiveness

The students described this responsibility as an integrated function that merges continuous monitoring, problem diagnosis, and active response from academic advisors. According to the participants, academic advisors must take an active role in tracking students' academic progress, reviewing transcripts each term, analyzing overall performance across semesters, and monitoring both the mental health and academic development of students. Advisors are expected to identify problems early, provide timely and constructive feedback, and engage in problem-solving actions when necessary.

This role also includes a systemic responsibility. Advisors are seen as key figures in improving educational processes at the department level by identifying recurring academic issues (e.g., high failure rates in specific courses), responding directly to students' concerns, and reporting issues upward to departmental leadership or faculty planning councils. In some cases, they may even act as representatives of student voices, especially in communicating feedback or concerns about teaching quality or course structure to other faculty members. Students emphasized that an effective academic advisor must possess both social and academic credibility, along with the influence to advocate on behalf of students and ensure that their concerns are heard and addressed meaningfully. A fourth-semester male medical student stated: "An academic advisor should constantly monitor students' academic trajectories. If a student's performance is declining, the advisor must thoroughly investigate the reasons". A third-semester male nursing student said: "If a large number of students are failing a course, the advisor should conduct a full review, talk with students and faculty, identify the root causes, and try to fix the issues—at least for future cohorts". A sixth-semester male dentistry student stated: "The advisor should not wait for the student to

come to them—they should actively reach out, follow up on academic concerns, and provide guidance proactively". A fifth-semester male nursing student emphasized the advocacy role of advisors: "We, as students, sometimes can't say everything directly to our professors. We need our academic advisor to speak for us to the department or faculty heads. If we have concerns about teaching quality or other issues, they should be our voice. Maybe there should even be a council of academic advisors to set goals and plans at the start of each academic year". A sixth-semester female midwifery student added: "For failed courses, the academic advisor—especially one from our own field—should follow up and understand why students are failing. If further action is needed, they should escalate the issue to relevant authorities and keep students informed".

Discussion

The present study revealed that students, being aware of their evolving needs throughout different academic years and driven by concerns regarding learning and academic advancement, perceived the role of academic advisors as highly influential in facilitating learning and enhancing educational conditions. Overall, two main themes emerged from the interview with the participants regarding the performance structure of academic advisors: (1) advisor characteristics—comprising three categories: *student access to the advisor*, *understanding students' diverse needs*, and *adherence to confidentiality principles*; and (2) advisor responsibilities—comprising four categories: *educational guidance*, *academic leadership*, *supportive-educational role*, and *problem-oriented responsiveness*.

Concerning advisor characteristics, including accessibility, understanding diverse student needs, and respect for confidentiality, participants stated that due to the critical nature of academic advising throughout students' educational journey, the advisor serves as the first point of contact within the educational system and plays a significant role in the formation of students' professional identity and academic success. Accordingly, advisors must possess specific personal and professional qualities that enable them to establish effective communication with students, easing their challenging academic paths and fostering a more supportive environment. Mortazavi et al. also highlighted the importance of advisors' individual, professional, and academic competencies in establishing constructive relationships between students and faculty members (26).

Accessibility to the academic advisor was identified as a key feature related to the advisor's characteristics. In the present study, the students acknowledged the existing educational and administrative workload of their academic advisors, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of having sufficient ability, time, and physical space to respond appropriately to all students. In a similar vein, Keshavarz et al. (1) and Rezapur-Shahkolai et al. (5)

identified the lack of proper physical space and limited time, due to heavy faculty workloads, as significant barriers to effective academic advising. Moreover, the issue of limited access to advisors was also cited as a key challenge in the implementation of academic advising programs (5). On the other hand, the importance of having set hours for advisor availability has been confirmed in studies by Park et al. (27), Ebrahimipour et al. (16), and Jebreili et al. (28), highlighting a different perspective that reinforces the necessity of advisor accessibility. Such access contributes to a sense of psychological safety and the development of strong advisor-student relationships, ultimately leading to greater student satisfaction with the advising process (18, 29). Nonetheless, it is also important to maintain a balance between the personal and professional roles of advisors (30).

Another characteristic highlighted for academic advisors in this study was their ability to understand the diverse needs of students. Upon entering university, students undergo a transitional phase that presents numerous challenges. According to participants, these needs, which often underlie the challenges they face, vary across different stages of their academic journey. These needs are not limited solely to academic concerns but extend to personal, familial, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions. Consistent with these findings, in three other studies, one of the most significant sources of student dissatisfaction with academic advisors was perceived indifference toward students' problems (31–34). Etway reported that academic advisors demonstrated a high level of understanding regarding student difficulties and provided effective strategies to address them (35). While students' needs in most studies were predominantly reported in the personal domain (36, 37), cultural differences between advisors and students have also been identified as a challenge in the implementation of advising programs (1). A study conducted in Saudi Arabia further emphasized the importance of assigning academic advisors during the first year of study, highlighting their social role, as well as their support in time management and decision-making skills (38). Overall, both the present study and previous studies have underlined the broad and multifaceted nature of student needs and the critical role of academic advisors in addressing them. This body of evidence even supports the necessity of designing appropriate instruments to evaluate students' satisfaction with academic and advisory services (39).

Another essential characteristic of academic advisors identified in this study was their adherence to principles of confidentiality. From the students' perspective, the confidentiality maintained by academic advisors and the secure handling of personal information during advisory sessions were of great importance. A study by Esmaeilpour indicated that, from the students' perspective, confidentiality of their information was the

most crucial aspect of academic advising (40). Moreover, trustworthiness and discretion were among the most influential factors in establishing effective advisor-student communication (41). Fear of personal information being disclosed by the advisor was also noted as one of the main challenges in another study on academic counseling (5).

A noteworthy aspect of the present study lies in the perspectives of participating students regarding the responsibilities of academic advisors, which formed the second major component in the structure of academic advisors' performance. These responsibilities were categorized into four domains: educational guidance, academic leadership, supportive-educational counseling, and problem-oriented responsiveness. Despite the students' emphasis on the significance of academic advisors and the diverse roles they fulfill, findings from multiple studies indicate that some faculty members do not hold favorable attitudes toward the duties associated with this role (4, 14, 32).

In a qualitative study on 15 postgraduate education leaders from health professions across six WHO geographical regions, three core dimensions of academic advising were identified: academic advancement, personal development, and community-building to facilitate communication and networking (30). According to the academic advising regulations, advisors are expected to fulfill a wide range of responsibilities encompassing educational and academic counseling (including course registration, credit selection, student transfers, and exchange programs), research, as well as social and cultural support. Moreover, advisors are tasked with identifying factors influencing students' academic trajectories, such as emotional, psychological, social, economic, familial, and cultural issues, and referring them to appropriate services when necessary (42). This underlines the need for evaluating faculty perceptions of existing challenges and highlights the importance of offering professional development programs to strengthen faculty members' advisory capabilities.

The students in the present study particularly emphasized educational guidance as a core responsibility of academic advisors. Due to their academic standing and experience, faculty members were viewed as the most reliable guides to help students navigate their educational paths. Consistent with these findings, a study by Raisi et al. reported that the majority of academic advisors at Qom University of Medical Sciences agreed with the importance of monitoring students' academic progress and addressing their educational concerns (3). A study conducted at a medical college in Saudi Arabia also highlighted the positive impact of academic advising on both academic and personal development of students (43). In a qualitative study by Hart-Baldrige, participating faculty members identified the responsibilities of academic advisors as including academic guidance,

ensuring graduation requirements are met, supporting postgraduate study plans, outlining future career opportunities, and empowering students (44). During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational and research-related issues were the most frequent reasons for student visits to academic advisors (45).

The participants in the current study further noted that advisors' familiarity with academic regulations and students' specific educational conditions was an essential component of effective guidance. Similarly, Mortazavi et al. (2) and Keshavarz et al. (1) emphasized the importance of advisors' up-to-date knowledge and command of academic regulations and scientific content in establishing effective advisor-student communication. Faculty members' unawareness of educational policies and procedures has been identified as a significant barrier to the effective implementation of academic advising systems (1). Thus, adequate knowledge, insight, and skills on the part of academic advisors are vital to the successful delivery of student support services (46).

Academic guidance was identified by students as one of the critical responsibilities of academic advisors. This role encompasses guiding students in their academic and career paths, instilling academic discipline, and holding individual and group sessions to address students' challenges. A study conducted in Ahvaz reported that students expressed dissatisfaction with academic advisors due to the failure to address their counseling needs in areas such as personal and family issues, career prospects, and course add/drop procedures (33).

The findings from the present study highlighted the supportive-educational role of academic advisors, which involves encouraging student solidarity and teamwork, offering emotional support, and maintaining the dignity and respect of students. Respecting students, motivating them to engage in academic work, fostering their participation in university affairs, and promoting mutual respect play a fundamental role in shaping a positive student-faculty relationship (2, 6). Similarly, Hart-Baldrige's study highlighted the role of academic advisors in encouraging student participation in extracurricular activities (44). The importance of role modeling and mentorship has also been emphasized in Indian medical schools as a strategy for guiding high-potential students (47). In a study by Rezapur-Shahkolai et al., poor student-faculty relationships were cited by students as a major challenge in the context of academic advising (5). Intimacy and empathy on the part of faculty members were found to significantly contribute to the development of effective communication between students and instructors (2, 48).

According to the students in the present study, another essential responsibility of academic advisors is problem-oriented responsiveness. Advisors are expected not only to monitor students' academic performance but also to consider their overall well-being, including their mental

health, and actively seek solutions to their problems. Given that students are central stakeholders in the academic environment, identifying and addressing their challenges is of paramount importance. However, some faculty members' neglect of student problems and lack of follow-up have led to student dissatisfaction (1). Contrary to the present findings, another study reported that only a small proportion of faculty members believed that academic advisors should be involved in monitoring students' physical, mental, and emotional health (3). Similarly, Ganji et al. revealed that faculty members' awareness of student issues was generally at a moderate level (4). These findings highlight the need for the development and implementation of interventions, such as workshops, to empower faculty members to effectively identify and address student problems. Since the academic environment and its associated challenges play a crucial role in students' adaptation and academic success, targeted faculty development initiatives are essential.

Limitations of the Study

The use of focus group discussions may have influenced participants' responses due to group dynamics. This includes potential conformity with majority opinions or self-censorship by some participants. Moreover, for personal reasons, some students may have expressed unrealistically positive or negative attitudes toward academic advisors, or refrained from discussing certain issues due to cultural sensitivities or fear of identity disclosure. These factors may have introduced bias into the data, thereby affecting their validity. Moreover, the present study did not explore discipline-specific differences in students' counseling needs, as the general interview approach employed was not suited to identifying challenges unique to each academic field. The exclusive focus on students' perspectives, without incorporating the viewpoints of academic advisors or educational policymakers, limited the study's capability to achieve a comprehensive understanding of advising practices and challenges. Furthermore, the transferability of findings to other universities or academic disciplines is constrained due to the influence of the target university's specific cultural and structural context. Finally, the qualitative and experiential nature of the data imposes inherent limitations on the generalizability of the results.

Conclusion

This study explored the structural dimensions of academic advisors' performance from the perspective of students at Bushehr University of Medical Sciences, and identified two key domains as the foundational pillars of effective advising: (1) Advisor characteristics—including accessibility, comprehensive understanding of students' diverse needs, and adherence to confidentiality principles; and (2) Advisor responsibilities—encompassing

educational guidance, academic leadership, supportive-educational roles, and problem-oriented responsiveness. The findings indicated that effective academic advising is the outcome of a dynamic, reciprocal interaction between advisor and student, occurring within the framework of institutional regulations, educational policies, and the specific nature of medical sciences disciplines. Initial trust, grounded in the core characteristics of the advisor, can foster students' willingness to engage with and seek the advisor's support in fulfilling their multifaceted educational, emotional, and advisory needs. Future studies should be expanded in scope and adopt a multi-perspective and mixed-methods approach. Moreover, the development and implementation of skills-based training programs for academic advisors are essential for enhancing their competencies and functional roles. To further improve advising performance, a comprehensive assessment tool needs to be designed to evaluate advisors' effectiveness based on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

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Authors' Contribution

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Bushehr University of Medical Sciences.

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