

How Do Doctoral Scholars in Health Professions Education Construct and Negotiate Their Professional Identity During Their PhD Journey: A Qualitative Study Design

Zeeshan Ahmed Rehman, Afreenish Malik, Ambreen Shabbir, Fouzia Sultana, Gul Shaikh, Shazia Irum, Ayesha Junaid, Junaid Sarfraz Khan

¹Director Medical Education & Research, SMBBMCL Karachi,

²Lecturer Medical Education Khyber Medical University, Peshawar

³Oral Pathology, HAS, Islamabad,

⁴HOD Medical Education, SZAMBU, Islamabad

⁵Director Medical Education & QC, MIMC, Mirpur, AJ&K,

⁶Assistant Professor DHPE, Shifa college of medicine, STMU,

⁷Assistant Professor, Centre for Language Development, FCCU, Lahore,

⁸Prof Medical Education, HSA, Islamabad

Author's Contribution

^{1,2,3}Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, ⁸Supervision and Final approval ^{4,5}Drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content, ^{6,7}Active participation in active methodology

Funding Source: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Received: Jan 15, 2026

Revised: April 09, 2026

Accepted: April 24, 2026

Address of Correspondent

Dr. Zeeshan Ahmed Rehman
Director Medical Education & Research, SMBBMCL Karachi
dr.zeeshanarehman@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore how doctoral scholars in Health Professions Education construct and navigate their professional identity during the PhD journey, including the challenges and their future aspirations.

Methodology: In order to investigate how doctoral researchers in health professions education create and manage their professional identities during their PhD journey, this study used a qualitative research approach. Because professional identity construction is a complex and socially created process that best retains significance through participants' lived experiences and interpretations, a qualitative method was selected. An in-depth analysis of how PhD researchers interpret their evolving roles, values, and professional identities in academic and clinical settings was made possible by this design. The six PhD participants completed a five-point open-ended questionnaire, and themes and subthemes were derived from the written responses.

Results: Five analytic themes emerged: (1) Multiple Facets of HPE Professionals (2) Achieving Credibility as HPE Professional (3) Practical Barriers to Progress (4) Shaping the Future of PhD in HPE (5) Expanding Horizons in HPE. Senior leaders highlighted systemic innovations and institutional legacies, while early-career professionals expressed hopes for advancement and recognition. In order to gain a reputation and make a significant contribution to HPE, all participants had similar goals. Their goals go beyond personal achievement; taken as a whole, they want "HPE ecosystem" and a "transformed PhD landscape" that is adaptable, organized, and contextually relevant. In this way, their stories blend individual aspirations with more general reformist goals, presenting the PhD in HPE as a "catalyst for individual growth as well as systemic change" rather than just an academic endeavor.

Conclusions: Both macro (financing, organized PhD curriculum, official career pathways, international evaluation) and micro (mentorship, protected research time, faculty development) initiatives are needed to strengthen PhD-HPE in Pakistan.

Keywords: Professional identity, PhD, Health professions education.

Cite this article as: Rehman ZA, Malik A, Shabbir A, Sultana F, Shaikh G, Irum S, Junaid A, Khan JS. How Do Doctoral Scholars in Health Professions Education Construct and Negotiate Their Professional Identity During Their PhD Journey: A Qualitative Study Design. *Ann Pak Inst Med Sci.* 2026; 22(2):173-177. doi. 10.48036/apims.v22i2.1635.

Introduction

The development of PhD programs in HPE and the professional identity formation (PIF) of educators in the medical and health professions are essential for enhancing leadership and educational scholarship in Pakistan. Evidence-based skills for curriculum design, assessment, program evaluation, and educational research are provided by doctoral training (PhD) in HPE. However, the way educators view themselves (professional identity), the reasons behind pursuing a PhD, and the institutional environment that supports or impedes post-doctoral careers and doctoral training all play a role in creating a supportive environment for PhD HPE scholars.

Competency-based frameworks, changing pedagogies, and rising standards for academic scholarship are all contributing to the fast-global evolution of health professions education (HPE). Teachers with advanced skills in curriculum design, assessment, program evaluation, and research are needed in light of these changes. To build this competence and prepare academic leaders who can promote evidence-informed educational systems, doctoral (PhD) training in HPE is essential.

However, low- and middle-income countries like Pakistan still lack the conditions necessary to support doctoral training and post-PhD careers in HPE. The motivation for doctoral studies, the formation of professional identities, and institutional systems all have a considerable impact on the experiences and career pathways of HPE academics. Recent qualitative studies with large sample sizes in Pakistan have demonstrated that identity changes during faculty development and have highlighted both structural limitations and strong intrinsic drive. However, these studies have focused primarily on general teaching responsibilities rather than the PhD transition itself.

This study addresses this knowledge gap by examining the lived experiences of a small, carefully selected group of PhD HPE scholars. It offers comprehensive insights into how doctoral training encourages the reconstruction of one's professional identity, how motivations evolve, and how researchers balance their dual roles as clinicians and educators by emphasizing depth over breadth.¹

Methodology

Six doctoral researchers enrolled in PhD programs in Health Professions Education completed five open-ended

questions in a qualitative study that was conducted utilizing reflective theme analysis of their written narrative responses. Written narratives were selected to encourage intentional reflection and give participants the opportunity to express personal meanings pertaining to their professional identities, reasons for seeking a PhD in HPE, difficulties they faced while pursuing their degree, and changes they would like to see in the PhD-HPE landscape over the next five years.

Participants were encouraged to critically interact with their experiences at the individual, institutional, and professional levels by the open-ended, yet organized, reflection prompts. This method recognized professional identity as socially located and constantly contested, which was in line with the constructivist perspective of the study.

PhD-HPE scholars who provided informed consent were included in the study, while those who did not consent were excluded.

The first step in data processing was familiarization through reading participant narratives several times. 86 preliminary codes addressing five reflecting domains, motivations, identity markers, impediments, facilitators, and desired systemic changes were produced after member verification. Axial coding was used after open coding, which produced five overarching themes and 15 subthemes: (1) Multiple Facets of HPE Professionals, (2) Achieving Credibility as an HPE Professional (3) Practical Barriers to Progress, (4) Shaping the Future of PhD in HPE, (5) Expanding Horizons in HPE. The themes were cross-checked against participant narratives and iteratively examined for coherence and agreement with the source data. Following the refinement and explicit definition of the themes and subthemes, the results were compiled and displayed in the Results and Discussion sections.²

Doctoral training in Health Professions Education (HPE) and professional identity formation (PIF) are closely related, especially for academics moving into leadership and educational research positions. Identity creation at the PhD level entails more than just learning new skills; it also entails renegotiating one's scholarly voice, professional legitimacy, and potential career paths—all of which are particularly difficult in settings like Pakistan, where HPE is a relatively new field.³

Identity issues associated with unclear career prospects, a lack of mentorship, and marginalization within biomedical academic organizations are highlighted in international research on PhD-HPE programs.⁴ According to small-scale qualitative research, pursuing a doctorate can be a pivotal moment in one's identity, exposing scholars to systemic limitations and isolation while simultaneously boosting confidence and leadership ambitions. Focused investigations of small cohorts, as opposed to huge faculty samples, are better suited to capture these subtle identity modifications.⁵

Research from Pakistan has shown that medical educators who participate in faculty development programs that emphasize reflective practice, communities of practice, and intrinsic motivation improve their identities.⁽⁶⁾ The deeper identity work necessary for doctoral study is not entirely covered by this research, though. Problems with finance, supervision, and research culture confront Pakistan's new PhD-HPE programs, further influencing the experiences and identity formation of doctoral academics.⁷

In general, there is a lack of knowledge in the literature regarding how PhD-HPE scholars create professional identities in systems with constraints. To improve HPE scholarship in Pakistan, a thorough examination of small groups like six doctoral scholars offers special insights into identity transformation, motivation, and institutional navigation.⁸

Five interconnected themes emerged from the analysis of reflective narratives and interviews, shedding light on how PhD students in Health Professions Education (HPE) deal with institutional restrictions, motivation, and professional identity. Instead of distinct answers to predetermined queries, the themes show dynamic processes of identity construction shaped by aspiration, tension, and adaptation.



1. Multiple facets of HPE Professionals

The participants characterized their professional identities as multifaceted, dynamic, and incomplete. Although they were all recognized as educators, PhD studies led to an increasing recognition as scholars and future leaders in HPE. Participants viewed this shift as aspirational rather than fully achieved, actively pursuing legitimacy as educational researchers but maintaining their primary institutional positioning as doctors or teachers. Tension between participants' perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of others' recognition characterized identity negotiation.

All found their identities along a trajectory of "growth, contribution, and legitimacy in HPE," regardless of seniority inequalities.

"I take pride in saying that I established the department of medical education at SZABMU in 2015."

"I consider myself in a budding stage with so many heavyweights in the field."

2. Achieving Credibility as HPE Professional

Identity validation was a key motivator for pursuing a PhD in HPE. In academic settings, participants saw PhD training as a way to increase their influence, intellectual voice, and reputation. Beyond enhancing abilities, the PhD represented official acknowledgement of HPE as a valid area of study.⁹ Participants expressed a wish to transition from non-formal teaching roles to responsibilities that would allow them to influence institutional decision-making, evaluation procedures, and curriculum. Thus, "personal academic growth" and "systemic educational impact" emerged as their two main motives.¹⁰

"The major motivation is promotion and career pathway to excel."

"I saw how with our faculty developments programs helped change the faculty's mind set. If a master's can do that, imagine what a PhD can do."

3. Professional Barriers to Progress

Participants characterized problems as forces actively influencing their identity trajectories rather than just logistical obstacles. Lack of protected research time, conflicting clinical or administrative responsibilities, and inadequate mentorship

“One big challenge for me will be quantitative research...”,

“I foresee difficulties in juggling work, personal, and academic obligations...”

Feelings of alienation and identity pressure were exacerbated by the unclear acknowledgment of educational scholarship. These limitations, which required participants to constantly defend their academic focus, frequently strengthened the feeling that they were "in-between" being neither fully supported trainees nor completely recognized scholars. Other difficulties noted included personal balancing acts (job, family, studies) and logistical limitations (travel, money, institutional approvals).⁵

4. Shaping the Future of PhD in HPE

Participants undertook intentional identity work in response to these limitations. Informal peer networks, reflective practice, and participation in academic communities functioned as sources of affirmation and resilience. Hard work, mentor support, and disciplined time were also highlighted by the participants for moving forward in the PhD field

“One big challenge for me will be quantitative research... I will be putting extra effort in that area.”

“I foresee difficulties in juggling work, personal, and academic obligations...I plan to handle this by actively seeking out peer support and mentorship.”

In spite of the lack of institutional support, these venues allowed participants to develop their intellectual identities, build their confidence, and maintain their motivation. Thus, rather than being a passive result of instruction, identity creation became an active, agentic process.

5. Expanding Horizons in HPE

Identity development was found to be context-dependent and future-oriented based on participants' reflections about intended future changes. Participants' imagined professional selves were strongly correlated with their desires for more defined academic jobs, better supervision, and organized PhD pathways. These views emphasize that without institutional acknowledgment and structural alignment, identity development in HPE is insufficient.

“PhD programs in Health Professions Education are currently offered in only a few places, and there is a clear need for more PhD programs to be introduced.”

“Structured Course Work, Online and Physical Equilibrium, and an increase in the number of PhD Seats is need of the hour.”

The development of professional identities among PhD-HPE scholars was shown to be a dynamic balancing act between structural constraints and personal aspirations across all subjects. As academics constantly constructed meaning, legitimacy, and belonging amid changing institutional environments, doctoral training served as both an identity catalyst and a location of friction.

Discussion

This research highlights how PhD students in Health Professions Education (HPE) in Pakistan navigate their professional identities within a developing academic discipline. The stories shared by participants suggest that identity is a fluid process influenced by engagement, acknowledgment, and institutional context, rather than merely a straightforward collection of roles.¹¹ Based on Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice, the doctoral training served as a form of legitimate peripheral participation, facilitating a gradual transition towards becoming members of the HPE scholarly community; nevertheless, this advancement was incomplete due to the uneven institutional recognition of HPE.¹²

From the viewpoint of doctoral socialization, the PhD represented both a symbolic and practical route to gaining legitimacy, authority, and a scholarly voice.¹³ The conflicts among clinical, teaching, and research roles reflect Ibarra's idea of provisional selves, emphasizing the exploration of identity in environments that provide minimal validation. Structural limitations, including insufficient mentorship, pressures from workload, and financial challenges, significantly influenced scholars' feelings of belonging, underscoring sociocultural perspectives of identity as collaboratively formed and reliant on context.¹⁴

The aspirations of participants for well-defined doctoral programs and changes within institutions highlight that identity development in HPE is intertwined with systemic factors.¹⁵ Consequently, PhD training becomes not just a

personal growth journey but also a space where the validity of the HPE discipline is continually debated.

Conclusion

This study shows how PhD-HPE scholars, who see doctoral education as essential to scholarly legitimacy and educational effect, are increasingly constructing their identities as teacher-researchers and emerging leaders. However, structural and cultural hurdles that restrict recognition, mentorship, and prolonged research engagement limit their objectives. A coordinated, system-level strategy that includes protected academic time, improved supervisory capacity, structured and contextually relevant PhD programs, sustainable funding sources, and institutional cultures that value educational scholarship will be necessary to strengthen HPE doctoral ecosystems. The advancement of HPE scholarship and the development of a robust, future-ready health professions education workforce in Pakistan depend on addressing these interrelated aspects.¹⁶

Limitations: There are various restrictions on this study. Although suitable for in-depth qualitative research, the small sample size restricts transferability outside of comparable situations. Dependence on interviews and reflective writings could favour well-spoken, driven individuals, which could lead to self-selection bias. Additionally, in contrast to longitudinal or ethnographic methodologies, written reflections may limit the ability to make meaning on the fly. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the research provides a deep, contextually based understanding of how doctoral identities are formed in HPE.

References

1. Tekian A, Anthony R. AM Last Page: Overview of doctoral programs in health professions education. *Acad Med.* 2014;89(9):2014. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000421>
2. Braun V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol.* 2006;3:77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
3. Thibault GE. The future of health professions education: Emerging trends in the United States. *FASEB Bioadv.* 2020;(July):685-94. <https://doi.org/10.1096/fba.2020-00061>
4. Lambert WM, Nana N, Afonja S, Saeed A, Amado AC, Golightly LM. Addressing structural mentoring barriers in postdoctoral training: A qualitative study. *Stud Grad Postdr Educ.* 2025;16(1):1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-04-2023-0033>
5. Mahmood A, Rehman N, Huang X, Riaz I. Barriers to undergraduate medical students' research engagement in Pakistan: A qualitative exploration. *BMC Med Educ.* 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-025-07185-9>
6. Kiran F, Ayub R, Rauf A, Zahoor A. Transforming professional identity of medical teachers in Pakistan by a certificate program in health professions education: A thematic analysis of reflective essays. *Front Med.* 2024;10:1323075. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2023.1323075>
7. Fatima SS, Yasmeen R. The fate of health professions education as a profession: A road less travelled. :264-9.
8. Siddique U, Mahboob U, Mahsood N, Mehboob B, Abdullah AS, Baseer M. Adaptation and modification of the professional identity formation scale for postgraduate trainees in basic health science: A mixed method study. *BMC Med Educ.* 2025;25(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-025-07025-w>
9. Javaid A, Irum S, Zahoor A. Factors affecting professional identity formation of basic medical sciences teachers in Pakistan: A phenomenological analysis of interviews.
10. Sharif S, Rasheed A, Masood MK, Salahuddin H, Nisar B, Ilyas A. The transformation of professional identity of Master in Health Professional Education graduates. 2025;31(01). <https://doi.org/10.21649/akemu.v31i1.5714>
11. Reid A, Dahlgren LO, Petocz P, Dahlgren MA. Identity and engagement for professional formation. *Stud High Educ.* 2008;33(6):729-42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070802457108>
12. Lave J, Wenger E. Legitimate peripheral participation. *Learn Knowl.* 1999;21-35.
13. Anderson T. The doctoral gaze: Foreign PhD students' internal and external academic discourse socialization. *Linguist Educ.* 2017;37:1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2016.12.001>
14. Ibarra H. *Working identity, updated edition, with a new preface: Unconventional strategies for reinventing your career.* Harvard Business Press; 2023.
15. Gardner SK, Mendoza P. *On becoming a scholar: Socialization and development in doctoral education.* Taylor & Francis; 2023.
16. Lateef A, Yousaf S, Noor K, Parveen A, Zahira SU. The future of education: Trends to watch in the next decade in Pakistan. *J Soc Signs Rev.* 2024;2(6):54-73.