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CONTENTS

CRITICAL FACTORS OF CAREER PERSPECTIVE AND CAREER MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A MULTI-CRITERIA SWARA APPROACH

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Abstract: This research was undertaken to investigate the criteria that motivate individuals to progress in their careers. To accomplish this, research was conducted with employees from the University of Zadar. The study aimed to identify the criteria that affect career advancement within the context of a higher education institution. A total of 15 employees participated, evaluating 15 specific factors to determine the primary elements that promote career progression, using a rating scale from 1 to 10. The significance of these factors was assessed through the SWARA (Step-wise Weight Assessment Ratio Analysis) method. The findings of this study indicated that motivation and persistence are crucial elements in networking and professional relationships, while expertise and skills also contribute significantly. Nevertheless, a unique aspect of advancement in higher education is that work experience does not significantly enhance employee motivation. The research advances the thesis that motivation and professional networking are the dominant factors in academic career progression. This research offers insights into the factors that affect career development for employees within higher education institutions.

Key words: career in higher education institutions, career development factors, advancement, multi-criteria approach.

JEL: C60, I23, J24, M12.

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Introduction

A career is a fundamental element of human existence. Individuals receive education to cultivate a profession in a particular domain (Ariani et al., 2024). Given the ever-evolving and dynamic nature of the market, managing a career has become increasingly intricate. The labor market demands ongoing adaptations, and long-term positions within a single organization are becoming rarer (Kuzmak & Kuzmak, 2023). The ongoing transformations in the market impact career trajectories (Suganya Bharathi & Celina, 2024); some careers advance, others arise, while some fade away. Consequently, individuals must perpetually adjust and acquire new knowledge to attain success in their professions.

Individuals often transition between jobs and organizations to facilitate career progression (Vlasenko, 2023). Certain companies may lack the capacity to offer adequate opportunities for career growth. As professionals enhance their careers and achieve promotions, their overall quality of life improves, encompassing both financial benefits and increased life satisfaction (Calen et al., 2025). Consequently, individuals are motivated to cultivate their careers and attain professional advancement (Jemmali et al., 2026). Conventional methods that emphasize linear career paths and job stability are becoming increasingly rare. The landscape of careers is evolving, necessitating that individuals remain adaptable and acquire new skills to sustain employment (Obeidat et al., 2026). Thus, effective career management requires the collection of relevant information and informed decision-making regarding career advancement strategies.

It is essential to recognize the primary elements that affect professional growth and personal fulfillment in the context of career development and management. These elements may encompass various motivators that drive individuals to evolve, pursue, and enhance their careers (Kurt & Ozbakır, 2020). Identifying the key factors is vital for a comprehensive understanding of career development and management, and these factors will serve as criteria for this research.

The choices made concerning the trajectory of an individual's career are shaped by numerous factors, which frequently conflict with each other. While higher salaries and more prestigious roles within a company may be appealing, they often require sacrifices in personal life, complicating the effort to achieve a balance between professional and personal commitments while pursuing career advancement (Liang et al., 2024). Consequently, a career within a particular industry may provide job security

but restrict opportunities for growth, prompting individuals to seek new employment to further their progress. This research employs the SWARA (Step-wise Weight Assessment Ratio Analysis) method to investigate the motivations behind individuals pursuing new challenges and managing their careers through professional advancement. The study aims to address the research question: What are the primary factors that affect career management and development within the contemporary business landscape, particularly in the context of a higher education institution?

The main objective of this research is to identify key criteria that affect a career in higher education. This will be accomplished through the SWARA method, which employs subjective evaluations to assess the significance of various criteria (Kozoderovic et al., 2024). This approach facilitates the evaluation of criteria importance by means of comparison and ranking (Lukic, 2024). In pursuit of this main aim, the research also establishes specific objectives, detailed as follows:

- Identify the key criteria that motivate individuals to progress in their careers within higher education.
- Evaluate the key criteria by ranking and comparing these criteria.
- Use the SWARA method to determine their importance.
- Implement the findings in practical career management.

This research contributes in several significant ways. Firstly, it offers a theoretical enhancement to career development by introducing the concept of career decision-making. Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of criteria, which facilitates a structured approach to career development within higher education. Thirdly, the practical aspect is demonstrated through the application of the SWARA method, which sheds light on the necessity for career development in higher education. Fourthly, the methodological framework paves the way for future research and the creation of new career models. Lastly, this study aims to increase awareness regarding career development amidst the ongoing changes in the labor market affecting higher education.

Literature review

This selection will be observed through three segments, namely: understanding career approach models, perspectives in career management, and the application of MCDM methods in previous career research.

Numerous books and research papers have explored the topic of career development; therefore, this research will concentrate on a select few of these works. Persons (1909) was the pioneer in defining career counseling, outlining it in three stages: self-awareness, job awareness, and decision-making. Super (1957) examined the career life cycle, detailing the progression from career advancement to decline throughout an individual's life. Such studies have paved the way for the emergence of additional career theories. For instance, Lent et al. (1994) formulated a theory rooted in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, identifying three critical elements in career decision-making: self-confidence, expectations, and objectives. Arthur et al. (1989) introduced the concept of the protean career, emphasizing that career progression is not solely linked to a single organization. Goleman (1995) presented the idea of emotional intelligence and explored its impact on career advancement. According to Schutte & Malouff (2013), emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in achieving career success. Brynjolfsson & McAfee (2014) examined the implications of digital transformation on careers and future employment, highlighting the effects of technological advancements on job applications. Hoekstra (2011) posits that career development involves the dynamic formation of career identity and significance.

These studies and publications offer valuable insights into the intricacies of personal career development. The subsequent discussion will center on research that has specifically addressed career management. Greenhaus et al. (2010) highlight that career management is an ongoing journey for each individual, necessitating continuous learning and adaptation to the evolving demands of the job market. Briscoe et al. (2006) explore the notions of protean and boundaryless careers, emphasizing personal growth and the ability to navigate across different organizations. This phenomenon is particularly significant in light of globalization and the ever-changing landscape of the labor market. On the other hand, Eby et al. (2003) explored the concept of boundaryless careers, examining career progression within a single organization and concluding that this approach is increasingly becoming obsolete in today's landscape. As a result, individuals are now seeking to advance their careers beyond their current employer. Savickas & Porfeli (2012) highlight the importance of career adaptability, emphasizing that individuals must adjust to the ever-evolving market conditions, which can be accomplished through continuous learning. King (2001) underscores the necessity of mastering self-management in one's career, describing it as a recursive and dynamic journey. This process entails the involvement of career

counselors who aid individuals in their professional growth. Baruch and Hall (2004) examined the career framework pertinent to the academic setting, identifying protean and boundaryless career models within universities. De Vos et al. (2020) present the notion of career sustainability in the context of career development, encompassing aspects such as job satisfaction and work-life equilibrium. Their research also promotes the necessity of ongoing skill enhancement.

This selection will conclude with a presentation of various studies that examine the use of MCDM methods in career development research. Kurt and Özbakır (2020) employed the Intuitionistic Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (IF-AHP) to assess the optimal placement of candidates within the organization. Chaki et al. (2025) utilized the Full Consistency Method (FUCOM) to investigate the enhancement of self-awareness through career choices, identifying the critical criteria for career decision-making. Kan (2024) applied the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to pinpoint the essential factors for attracting new personnel to maritime positions. Liang et al. (2024) conducted a SWOT analysis to uncover employment challenges at universities using fuzzy numbers. Abdullah et al. (2018) employed the Tahani method within a fuzzy database model to strategize employee progression in organizations, focusing on career planning for existing staff and the recruitment of new personnel. These studies illustrate the application of diverse MCDM methods to establish particular criteria for career development. This research is unique in its emphasis on identifying the primary factor that influences career advancement.

Materials and methods

This research was carried out to identify the primary factors that drive individuals to pursue career progression and transitions. The objective of this research is to evaluate and analyze the essential criteria for career advancement to ascertain their significance through the SWARA method. Employees from the University of Zadar participated in this research, tasked with identifying the critical elements that affect career advancement within the framework of a higher education institution.

The process for establishing the essential criteria (Table 1) for career progression and advancement commenced with the identification of employees at the University of Zadar. Subsequently, these employees were given questionnaires to evaluate the significance of the criteria on a scale from 1 to 10. A score of 1 signifies minimal importance, indicating that the

criterion is insignificant, whereas a score of 10 denotes maximum importance for a specific criterion. Each employee within this sub-department submitted their ratings autonomously, drawing from their individual experiences in career development activities.

Table 1
Key criteria for encouraging individuals to advance in their careers

Id	Criterion	Description
C1	Professional Knowledge and Skills	It refers to continuous improvement and the acquisition of new competencies.
C2	Work Experience	It implies practical experience reflected in the knowledge and experiences gained through work.
C3	Education and Certifications	It relates to formal education, professional training and certification of training programs.
C4	Leadership and Managerial Skills	It refers to an individual's ability to make the right decisions and manage colleagues effectively.
C5	Innovation and Creativity	It involves an individual's engagement in finding new solutions and ideas that improve business activities.
C6	Networking and Professional Contacts	It refers to building relationships with colleagues, subordinates or superiors.
C7	Work Ethic and Responsibility	It reflects reliability and dedication in the work of individuals, demonstrated through the development of professionalism in their job.
C8	Communication Skills	It is reflected through the effective use of verbal and written communication.
C9	Flexibility and Adaptability	It implies the ability of an individual to adapt to changes in the organization where they work.
C10	Achievements and Results	It refers to concrete contributions and success achieved in work.
C11	Self-confidence and Proactivity	It is demonstrated through taking initiative at work and supporting decision-making processes.
C12	Support and Mentorship	It refers to advising and providing guidance to colleagues.
C13	Organizational Skills	It is reflected in the effective management of time and resources within the organization.
C14	Motivation and Persistence	It involves the ability to achieve the goals set by the organization.
C15	Recognition and Reputation	It refers to the professional reputation and credibility held by an individual.

Source: Research of authors

The procedure for gathering employee ratings was conducted in the following manner: Initially, a survey questionnaire was developed based on the chosen criteria, which was subsequently distributed to employees. A total of 15 completed questionnaires were received. The ratings were then

analyzed and organized for further examination. The significance of the findings in this study will be assessed using the SWARA method.

The SWARA method was initially utilized in research by Keršuliene et al. (2010). This approach is intended for the subjective assessment of the significance of criteria (Aytekin & Korucuk, 2024). The process of establishing the weight of the criteria involves first ranking them according to their importance, followed by an evaluation. Based on the revised procedures of the original SWARA method, the weights of these criteria will be ascertained.

Step 1. Rating of criteria by employees.

Step 2. Determining the average rating of the criteria.

Step 3. Ranking the criteria according to the average rating.

Step 4. Assessing the significance of the criteria. The criterion with the highest rank is assigned an importance value of one (1), whereas the importance of the remaining criteria is calculated by deducting the value of the criterion under evaluation from that of the higher-ranked criterion.

Step 5. Establishing relative significance. This step represents the traditional aspect of the SWARA method. In this step, the most critical criterion is designated a value of one (1), and a value of one (1) is subsequently added to the importance values of the remaining criteria.

$$k_j = \begin{cases} 1 \; if \; j = 1 \\ s_j + 1 \; if \; j > 1 \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

Step 6. Assessing relative significance. In this step, the top-ranked criterion is assigned a value of one (1), thus for this criterion *k*j = q_j = 1. The values for the remaining criteria are calculated by dividing the relative significance of the higher-ranked criterion by that of the criterion under consideration.

$$q_j = \begin{cases} 1 \; if \; j = 1 \\ \frac{q_j - 1}{k_j} \; if \; j > 1 \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

Assessing the significance of the criteria. In this step, the specific value representing the relative importance of each criterion is divided by the cumulative value of the relative importance of all criteria.

$$w_j = \frac{q_j}{\sum_{j=1}^{n} q_k} \quad (3)$$

Results

The ratings gathered from the employees of the University of Zadar were initially processed and organized for the implementation of the

SWARA method. The ratings from the respondents, identified as E1 through E15, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Respondents' ratings on the importance of the criteria

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12	C13	C14	C15
E 1	10	10	9	8	8	7	9	9	7	8	9	8	8	9	8
E 2	10	6	10	6	9	10	10	10	8	9	9	9	8	10	8
E 3	8	8	8	9	7	7	9	10	10	10	10	8	8	10	9
E 4	10	8	9	10	10	10	10	10	9	8	10	10	10	10	9
E 5	10	7	8	5	6	10	10	10	9	8	10	10	8	10	8
E 6	9	8	7	8	10	10	10	8	9	9	7	7	9	8	8
E 7	9	7	8	6	10	8	8	10	10	10	8	7	7	10	7
E 8	6	6	6	5	6	9	10	8	10	7	10	6	7	10	5
E 9	8	1	8	2	1	9	3	1	1	7	6	1	1	8	1
E 10	8	7	7	9	9	8	8	8	7	7	9	8	8	8	8
E 11	8	8	10	9	9	9	8	9	10	10	9	10	8	10	9
E 12	8	5	8	8	5	10	10	10	10	5	8	10	10	10	10
E 13	10	8	7	9	9	8	8	8	10	9	8	9	9	9	9
E 14	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
E 15	10	7	10	9	9	10	10	10	10	9	9	9	10	10	8
Mean	8.93	7.07	8.33	7.53	7.87	9.00	8.87	8.73	8.67	8.40	8.80	8.13	8.07	9.47	7.80
Rank	3	15	9	14	12	2	4	6	7	8	5	10	11	1	13

Source: Research of authors

Once the ratings from the respondents were gathered, the SWARA method is employed to assess the significance of the criteria. Initially, the average rating for each criterion is computed. Subsequently, the criteria are organized according to these average ratings. It is evident from the average ratings and the subsequent ranking that criterion C14, which pertains to motivation and persistence, holds the highest average rating and is thus the top-ranked criterion. The subsequent steps of the SWARA method will be illustrated using criterion C6, which is ranked second. The significance of this criterion is determined by deducting the average rating of criterion C6 from that of criterion C14 (9.4667 - 9.0000 = 0.4667). This same approach is utilized to ascertain the significance of the remaining criteria. Then, the relative significance of the criteria is determined by adding one (1) to the importance of the chosen criterion (1 + 0.4667 = 1.4667). The value of s_j is assigned to k_j only for the highest-ranked criterion, while the same calculation method is applied to the remaining criteria. To ascertain the relative importance of criterion C6, the importance value of the top criterion is divided by the relative importance of criterion C7 (1.0000 / 1.2273 = 0.6818). Ultimately, the weight of each criterion is derived by dividing the

individual relative importance of each criterion by the cumulative relative importance of all criteria. For criterion C6, its relative importance is divided by the total relative importance of all criteria (0.6818 / 6.6050 = 0.1032).

The application of the SWARA method indicates that the primary criterion is C14 – motivation and persistence (see Table 3), which serves as the key factor encouraging employees at the University of Zadar to pursue career advancement opportunities. This is succeeded by criteria C6 – networking and professional contacts, and C1 – professional knowledge and skills, whereas the criterion deemed least significant by employee evaluations is C2 – work experience.

Table 3
Determining the importance of criteria using the SWARA method

	s_j	k_j	q_j	w_j
C14	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	0.1514
C6	0.4667	1.4667	0.6818	0.1032
C1	0.0667	1.0667	0.6392	0.0968
C7	0.0667	1.0667	0.5993	0.0907
C11	0.0667	1.0667	0.5618	0.0851
C8	0.0667	1.0667	0.5267	0.0797
C9	0.0667	1.0667	0.4938	0.0748
C10	0.2667	1.2667	0.3898	0.0590
C3	0.0667	1.0667	0.3655	0.0553
C12	0.2000	1.2000	0.3045	0.0461
C13	0.0667	1.0667	0.2855	0.0432
C5	0.2000	1.2000	0.2379	0.0360
C15	0.0667	1.0667	0.2231	0.0338
C4	0.2667	1.2667	0.1761	0.0267
C2	0.4667	1.4667	0.1201	0.0182
		sum	6.6050	

Source: Research of authors

Discussions

The progression of an individual's career is influenced by numerous factors (Belas et al., 2023). This study identified 15 motivating factors that encourage individuals to pursue career advancement. The research utilized the University of Zadar as a case study. Similar to other organizations, employees within higher education institutions aspire to advance in their careers. However, the unique nature of higher education institutions dictates that career advancement is governed by legislation pertaining to higher education, which requires employees to fulfill specific criteria for

progression. Job vacancies are announced in accordance with the requirements of each particular higher education institution (Bolatbek et al., 2025). Promotions within an institution are generally awarded to employees who meet specific criteria established by the higher education law (Meldebekova et al., 2026). Consequently, it is imperative for employees to engage in ongoing personal development to satisfy these requirements. However, a challenge arises for assistants, as they are ineligible for promotion to lead a department if it is currently held by a professor. This situation underscores the necessity of clearly defining the essential criteria for career advancement in higher education institutions.

The findings of this research reveal the factors that drive employees to pursue career transitions related to promotions and advancement opportunities. The SWARA method, a component of multi-criteria decision-making techniques utilized to establish the weights of various criteria (Korucuk et al., 2026), was employed in this analysis. While this is merely one of the approaches available for determining criterion weights (Belke et al., 2026), it is particularly advantageous when dealing with multiple ratings of criteria. According to the evaluations from the sub-department and the outcomes derived from the SWARA method, the primary criterion identified is motivation and persistence. This criterion distinctly indicates that it serves as the main driver for career progression at the University of Zadar. The research further substantiates that motivation and perseverance in one's work are crucial to the choices individuals make concerning promotions, especially in organizations where advancement relies on clear criteria (Manske, 2024). Moreover, a significant element influencing employee advancement is their performance outcomes (Yigit et al., 2024).

The significance of networking, along with professional contacts and expertise, ranks second and third respectively in terms of importance. The networking criterion emphasizes that employees should engage with one another and with peers from other higher education institutions to meet their advancement obligations. Each employee is responsible for their scientific growth and the publication of scientific papers. Networking with colleagues facilitates this process, as they can receive support in drafting these papers. Additionally, all contributors to these papers fulfill the legal requirements in this manner. Consequently, this criterion holds significant importance for employees within higher education institutions. They aim to progress both personally and professionally (Charchafa & Kimouche, 2024). On the other hand, while professional knowledge and skills are essential, they are not the primary motivators for individuals seeking continuous career

advancement. This criterion should be integrated with other factors to illustrate a comprehensive individual who is committed to their profession, equipped with the requisite knowledge and expertise, and possesses relevant experience. These criteria are vital for career progression in higher education institutions.

This research indicates that work experience is the least significant criterion. The primary reason is that transitioning between universities is challenging; career progression tends to be vertical rather than lateral within higher education. Such advancement is contingent upon an individual demonstrating exceptional performance in research or projects, thereby enhancing their appeal to other institutions. Consequently, while work experience is not a critical factor for promotion on its own, it should be considered alongside other criteria to increase its relevance in the context of career advancement within higher education.

In light of the findings from this research, it is imperative for universities, particularly the University of Zadar, to prioritize the enhancement of employee motivation and facilitate the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills necessary to fulfill the legal criteria for career advancement. Furthermore, universities should implement a system for promoting employees to higher positions based on their accomplishments. It is crucial to allow employees who demonstrate superior performance to advance more rapidly, thereby enabling them to effectively impart their knowledge to students. Employees enhance their expertise through collaboration with colleagues on new projects and research endeavors. Advancement within higher education is rendered meaningless if an employee fails to achieve specific results or does not satisfy the minimum legal requirements. Every employee is required to engage in personal development to enhance the university's reputation. Consequently, it is crucial for each higher education institution that their staff attain commendable outcomes, particularly in research, to elevate the institution's position in world rankings. Furthermore, by fostering the professional growth of their employees, the university becomes increasingly appealing to prospective students. It is essential to recognize that universities are established for the benefit to students; in the absence of students, universities cannot exist. Consequently, the advancement of employees' professional skills is an essential element for the development of every university.

Conclusions

In contrast to other studies, this research specifically examined employees within higher education institutions. The unique characteristics of these institutions, along with the constraints imposed by higher education legislation on career progression, necessitate compliance with legally defined criteria for advancement. Consequently, the findings of this research are crucial in identifying the factors that affect the career development of employees. The study's findings reveal that accomplishments, motivation and perseverance, networking and professional relationships, as well as professional expertise and skills, are essential elements that drive individuals to pursue career advancement. This research provides a basis for formulating new theories related to career development and recognizing the essential factors at play. Furthermore, it has shown that the SWARA method is a valuable instrument for assessing the significance of various criteria and is capable of handling numerous ratings. Consequently, this methodology is suggested for future research endeavors that require the evaluation of criterion importance.

One limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on employees within higher education. Consequently, future research should replicate this study while encompassing both public and private sectors to discern the differences between them and ascertain which factors hold greater significance for the private sector versus the public sector. Furthermore, the study utilized a relatively small sample size of 15 employees from the University of Zadar. To develop more robust theories, larger studies are essential to identify the factors that motivate individuals in their career advancement. Expanding the respondent pool would also mitigate the subjectivity associated with evaluating the importance of the criteria.

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