



## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF PERCEIVED ANXIETY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON ACADEMIC JOB INTERVIEW IN ILORIN, NIGERIA

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### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

A phenomenological research design was deployed to examine the perceived anxiety and its implications of the academic job interview in a recently concluded interview setting at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. A total of 25 participants were purposively selected to participate in the study. Data were analysed using content analysis. The result of the content analysis revealed that applicants who went through stress, nervousness and poor coping skills were triggered by personal factors while agony as was triggered from external and they all had negative implications on interview performance. Also from the content analysis, participants reported unnecessary delay and extension of interview days had tendencies to elevate anxiety and state of melancholy among the applicants. Participants reported poor organisation on the part of the organisers and poor preparation of the applicants' students were other factors that affected the levels of nervousness, anxiety and agony during the job interview. However, anxiety and nervousness were moderated by previous job experiences of some applicants. Applicants into the lower academic positions were more likely than those applying for senior positions to feel more anxious and nervous. The study made recommendations to both applicants and the University administration on the need for providing a cushion effect towards reduction of anxiety among job seekers of academic positions in the country.

**Keywords:** Academic applicant; anxiety; job interview; mental health; phenomenology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The selection of candidates for job positions is a herculean task. It is usually characterised by bureaucratic stress to hundreds of job seekers as well as employers/organisers. Job seekers are usually inundated with anxiety from the very first day of application until the day 'successful' candidates are shortlisted while the employers are faced with the

herculean task of ensuring 'best' applicants are shortlisted for the job as advertised. Selection processes are, therefore, most rigorous and stressful for both the job seekers and the employers because it requires a whole lot of hard work. This is because job seekers, most especially in University teaching appointment positions, must be able to prove their academic sagacity and intellectual capability before being selected. The selection procedures often involve

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several stages. These include but are not limited to the writing of professional competence examination, defence of past dissertation or publications and final interview with the faculty board members. At this stage, the originality or otherwise of submitted certificates are verified among other interview requirements. The use of interviews during employment stands as a centrepiece for the selection of employees, most especially in the assessment of the best candidates for academic job positions [1].

Been employed in an academic environment takes a whole of academic and intellectual stress from, especially, early-career people working in a resource environment like Nigeria [2]. The stressful experience young career academic interviewees go through when seeking a position in the University has been posed with a lot of anxiety of whether or not they would be selected by the board of examiners [3]. Often, for young academic interviewees that came from a very long distance, they have to sleepover in a dirty environment, sleep in lecture rooms, wear dirty clothes or rewash their clothes for subsequent use if there are no funds to purchase another cloth for the interview [4]. Also, job seekers often experience serious anxiety both before the interview and during the job interview session which may negatively affect their performance and mostly creates some anxiety-like shaking of hands, speaking errors, destructive thought processes like the fear of saying wrong things [5]. The level of happiness among this set of early-career academic job seekers seems very low [6], this, in particular, hurts an individual without strong coping skills to adjust after the interview might have been completed [7]. The thrust of this study, therefore, was to examine the level of anxiety among academic job-seekers in recent advertised academic positions at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. The questions the study attempted to provide answers to are:

- What are the anxiety symptoms as a result of interview experience among academic job applicants?
- How does the extension of the interview process and anxiety among academic job-applicants?
- What are the perceived factors influencing anxiety among academic job- applicants?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In low and middle-income countries like Nigeria, there is a paucity of studies relating to the level of anxiety among academic interviewees [2, 8]. However, literature reviews from developed countries that examined the level of anxiety of experience of

young career academic interviewees were searched from three different search engines: *Dephis*, *Google Scholars* and *Ajol*. In the end, 91 articles were found, many of which were useful for the empirical explanation in this study.

### 2.1 Interview Experience and Anxiety Symptoms among Job-applicants

Gielen, & Schils, et al. [9] examined the contribution of the recruitment process, available social support and prevalence of anxiety disorder among newly employed staff from the Netherlands Mental Health Survey and Incidence Study (NEMESIS), this was longitudinal data collected among 646 newly employees who were aged 18 to 65 years. The study employed three dimensions of the self-reported condition of the experience during the recruitment process in the organisation (the psychological demands, decisions latitude and the level of job security). The study reported that 10.5% of the women and about 4.6% of men were presented with cases of depressive symptoms within 2 years while the psychological demands were predicted with the incidence of anxiety disorder was common among the newly employed staff.

Another study conducted to examine interview experience among job applications was disaggregated by gender in a qualitative analysis on interview experience and anxiety symptoms across genders. The study found that anxiety in female applicants may be less detrimental because they have higher coping resources as they engage in a more constructive coping strategy than their male counterparts [10]. A further study reported gender as a significant moderator self-rated symptoms of anxiety and performance during the interview. The study revealed that male interviewees were more anxious than female interviewees [11]. As a result, the male interviewees had higher impairment during the mock interview session. The interviewers-rated interview anxiety did not have a significant association with the performance of both genders. Also, Tamres, et al. [12] reported that female interviewees are less impaired by anxiety unlike their male counterparts based on the fact that they engage in more tasks and are emotion-oriented with strong coping strategies than males.

Anxiety level during an interview oftentimes negatively impairs outcomes during a job interview as they are less likely to receive advancement in their job selection processes [13]. Given the fact that most of the interview processes are stress endemic, Tross and Maurer [1] reported a negative association between interview anxiety and self-efficacy of interviewees, although, this did not reduce through interview

coaching. Similarly, Carless and Imber [14] opined that interviewee's characteristics like the use of humour and warm communication with the interviewers reduced the level of anxiety among interviewers.

## **2.2 Extension of Interview and Anxiety of Job-applicants**

However, plethora of studies conducted indicated that the duration of the interview process shunts happiness including the performance of job applicants in most developing countries where there are few resources to support job applicants. The relationship between the duration of the interview and anxiety among job-seekers was examined by [15]. The study found that long hour interview duration impaired hiring but it mediated the job-seekers motivation for making a good impression and hiring applicants. However, it was reported that applicants with less anxiety have the possibility of been hired at the end of the job interview process [16]. Also, Walsh, et al. [17] examined how reduced duration of interview process promotes career success among job-seekers in low and middle-income countries where applicants have multiple applications in several other organisations. Similarly, Cheng & McCarthy, [18] examined the correlates of the long duration of the selection process and anxiety during interviews among young people without support from the interviewing organisation.

## **2.3 Perceived Factors Influencing Anxiety in Job-applicants**

Factors are influencing generally, depending on life circumstances which are can either be external or internal factors. Generally, anxiety can be caused by stress at work, from school, personal relationships like marriages, financial stressors, emotional trauma or medical conditions (Anderson, et al, 2010; Bonaccio, et al, 2016). Considerable studies have explored factors influencing anxiety among job applicants around the world and found that candidates with anxiety symptoms often obtain lower interview scores and are very less likely to be employed for their desired position [19], Cook et al.2000; [10, 5]. However, job interview is one of the common methods of decisions for selecting the best candidates for a position [20], but anxiety remains the main cause of poor performance during the job interview applicants. Although significant number of studies have reported negative impact of anxiety and interview performance of job-seekers there had been insufficient attention regarding factors driving anxiety among job-applicants in the region. McCarthy, et al, (2013) reported two factors influencing anxiety among job applicants as personal and external factors.

Furthermore, Chen & McCarthy, [18] reported stress experience and poor coping skills during the interview process was important factors influencing anxiety among job-applicants in resource constraints environments. Similar to these findings were reported by Huffcutt, et al. (2001) that interview experience is different from other employment selection tool like the personality or situational judgement test hence, anxiety symptoms as a result of the interview is often as a result of personality type. Other factors like external factors were also major determinants of anxiety experience during the interview process for example agony, financial predicaments and accommodation problems during the interview process [11] ( McCarthy, et al, 2013).

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that anxiety among job seekers have attracted the attention of researchers all over the world. However, this area of research has not been adequately studied in Nigeria. This study was conceived to fill this gap by examining the perceived anxiety experienced among academic job seekers during the last general interview conducted by the University of Ilorin using a phenomenological perspective. This study contributes to local and global discourses around anxiety and happiness for job seekers.

## **3. MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **3.1 Study Design**

The study adopted a phenomenological research design where smaller samples are required to provide the required data and an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Giorgi, 2012). In a phenomenological study, the researcher establishes the essence of human experiences concerning phenomena as represented by participants (Creswell, 2007). The design takes into cognisance the experiences and perceptions of the participants under study.

### **3.2 Study Site**

This study was conducted at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. The University of Ilorin is usually abbreviated as UNILORIN. Unilorin is a Federal Government-owned University in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. The University was established by a Federal Government Decree of 1975 in fulfilment of the Third National Development Plan which was aimed at providing abundant opportunities for Nigerians aspiring to acquire University education and to generate high-level manpower necessary for the rapidly expanding economy. Today, the University has 15 faculties with over 40 000 students of both

undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. On the 10<sup>th</sup> July, 2019, applicants for both academic and non-academic positions were invited for interview and examinations for different academic and non-teaching positions. The process of the interview took a whole week which drew thousands of applicants to the University. The interview took place between 27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2019.

### 3.3 Study Population

Study participants were limited to 25 participants invited for academic positions. They comprised willing male and female academic interviewees aged between 18 and 60 years. About 4% of these applied for the post of Graduate Assistant, 24% applied for the positions of Assistant Lecturer and Lecturer II respectively. Only 8 % applied for the post of Professorship.

**Inclusion criteria:** Must be applicants for academic positions. This was determined by asking participants to show their biodata page form which carried pictures and identity numbers of the applicants.

**Exclusion criteria:** All non-consenting academic interviewees were excluded from the study. All non-teaching applicants were also excluded from the study.

### 3.4 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A purposive sampling procedure was employed in the selection of the participants. The study sampled a total of 25 academic interviewees for the in-depth interview. Participants were selected before and after the written examination and interview from four different faculties in the University. A total of 25 applicants participated in the study; 15 males, 10

females. The participants were selected based on different academic positions as advertised; from Graduate Assistant to Professorship. Of this number, 10 participants were selected from the Faculty of Social Sciences while 15 others were selected from other faculties within the University main campus. The interviews took place between 30 and 45 minutes. The interview was conducted before and after the interview by the Faculty Board of Examiners in each the selected faculties.

## 4. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

This study employed an in-depth interview to collect data from the participants. An in-depth interview is a deeper and lengthier conversation between the interviewers and interviewees where emphasis is always on 'depth, detail, vividness and nuance' [21]. The study obtained information about the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. The interview questions were developed by the researchers, each of the interview sessions was transcribed verbatim by the authors. The two researchers independently transcribed the interview sessions from Yoruba to English, we later met to ensure the translations were accurate. The texts were read and re-read in a bid to identify preliminary themes and group them into sub-themes. During the process of coding, the researcher noted down his thoughts, reflections and observations while reading the texts. The researcher was able to identify and accept all divergent and convergent views relating to each theme obtained from the transcript. When reporting the results of the findings, excerpts were selected from the interview themes, all names that appeared in comments were replaced with pseudonyms and there was no attempt to use the same pseudonyms when making the quotes in this study.

**Table 1. Master table of emerged themes, sub-themes on anxiety experience among job-applicants**

Themes	Sub-themes
Anxiety symptoms and interview experience	Nervousness Shivering Interesting interaction with colleagues
Extension of interview and happiness	Sleeping in classroom Poor support from the employer Hunger
Perceived factors of anxiety	The stress of the interview process Agony Unconducive interview environment The financial commitment for feeding, transportation and accommodation

#### 4.1 Method of Data Analysis

Data gathered were analysed using the content analysis technique. Content analysis was used to detect some themes or concepts within the qualitative data from which the researcher made the required inferences.

### 5. RESULTS

The results from the fieldwork is hereby presented.

#### 5.1 Anxiety and Experience of Job-Applicants

In a volatile and fragile country like Nigeria where corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of society and youth unemployment is as high as 20% [22], and where job scams thrive, anxiety, frustration and nervousness among job seekers are inevitable. The experience of frustration of a job seeker in the labour market may also trigger anxiety. However, the current study revealed that the experience of anxiety and nervousness was not the same for all categories of applicants and participants. While some job seekers revealed they began to experience anxiety, apprehension and nervousness at the point of applying for the advertised jobs (owing to uncertainties), the majority began to experience anxiety and nervousness at the point of receiving messages or letters of invitation for a job interview or written examination. For the majority, the experience of anxiety became worse on the 'D-day' for the interview. However, it was observed that anxiety and nervousness could be moderated by the socio-demographic characteristics of the applicants, especially previous work experience and the rank that is being applied for. For example, applicants for the posts of Reader and Professorship reported minimal levels of anxiety. An applicant for the position of a Reader disclosed that:

*It is normal for job applicant to feel nervous and anxious. But, sincerely speaking, I am not... I am a Senior Lecturer somewhere else. I just want to try my luck for the position of a Reader. I became Senior Lecturer a year ago. So, if I get this, it's fine. It's like an accelerated promotion. If I don't, It's okay. Life goes on. But I shall be happy if I do.*

He had this to say after the interview:

*It was an interesting interaction. I think I did well. I was confident and composed. No shaking. No shaking of voice. I think I was able to answer all questions. It was a nice experience.*

*Based on my performance I would rate my above 70%.*

Prior to the interview, another applicant for the position of Professor revealed that:

*I rose from the position of Assistant Lecturer to become a Reader in a private University two years ago. I think it is time for me to move on. I have paid my dues. I wish to change from a private University to public. I feel Federal universities look promising than private. I like to retire from a public University like Unilorin. I am not desperate though but getting it will gladden my heart.*

He had this to say after the interview:

*The interview went well. I met people I have always read their works. Those in my field also acknowledged reading some of my works. The interview was based on my experience and productivity over the years. Recall that I have served as an external examiner to the Department. So, there was no basis for anxiety or nervousness or shaking.*

However, the feeling of anxiety was higher among applicants for positions lower than Readership. For applicants for the positions of Assistant Lecturers and Graduate Assistants, the call for interview into academic positions was perceived as a new experience, especially the rigidity in credential screening, written examination and interview. Hence, likely questions around research areas, publications and contributions to knowledge and national development, past dissertations and level of motivation triggered nervousness among these categories of job seekers. For these categories of applicants, previous interview experience had a minimal impact on the level of anxiety experienced. One of the participants has this to say:

*My heart jumped the moment I received a message to appear for a written test and interview. As I talk to you, I still feel nervous. The crowd that came to write the exams made me more scared. The moment I saw the crowd I said to myself I can't get this job.*

Another participant said:

*I was so scared. I felt anxious. That was the first time to be interviewed by professors. The nervousness I went through was overwhelming. I could not answer some of the questions asked.*

*Not because I did not know but because of fear. Anxiety is bad.*

Another participant also said:

*As soon as I entered the interview room and saw the professors, my confidence disappeared and I could feel an excruciating nervousness. I was shivering. A panellist observed the nervousness and asked me to sit down. He advised I shouldn't be panic. My conditions became worse when the questions started coming in. I was blank. Everything I read disappeared. Realising I was lost, one of the panellists told me to calm down. Gave me a bottle of water and asked me to breath in and out for few seconds... That seemed to help but...*

Another participant also submitted that:

*My heart pounded fast as I entered the interview room. I greeted the interviewers and was offered a seat. Even though I was told to feel comfortable, but the fear of the panellist made me forget answers to questions that I know on a day that I am not in an anxious situation such as this.*

## 6. EXTENSION INTERVIEW AND PERCEIVED ANXIETY

The participants revealed that according to the text message received, the written examinations and interview for academic job-seekers was originally scheduled to hold for two days. However, the interview lasted for three days in some faculties which the majority of the interviewees did not prepare for. While they acknowledged the need for the extension, many felt that the extension aggravated the level of anxiety they went through. Participants complained they had a worse life experience of having to sleep in empty classrooms densely populated by mosquitoes thereby exposed to malaria and other kinds of infections. However, this experience was not for all categories of applicants. The categories of applicants who went through the ordeal included those who applied for the positions of Lecturer II, Assistant Lecturers and Graduate Assistant. The following sub-themes emanated from the participants' during the interview process, agony, poor coping skills and financial commitment.

One of the participants shared stressful experience

*Although, I am hopeful to be selected as a lecturer in this great citadel of learning, the interview process was unnecessarily long. This is becoming stressful for me.*

Another participant reported horrible experience of sleeping in the classroom that:

*I think this is the most horrible experience of my life as I had to sleep in a classroom with seven other people. I could not take my bath and I had to keep washing a cloth everyday.*

Another participant recalled what she went through when preparing for the interview inspite of the extension of days that:

*I spent three days without preparation because I didn't know it would take this long. The faculty interview board was too slow and should have departmentalised the interview process.*

According to another participant:

*I discovered that the longer I had to wait for my turn to get interviewed, the more I was anxious. I had already prepared, and I had the attitude of "let's get over with it", but then I had to wait and wait, till the interview gets to my turn, and of course, I do not know exactly when that will be. I was mentally stressed up, though we were not doing anything per se. we were just waiting.*

However, participants with some level of support from friends and family in town had little to complain about. To them, friends and family members residing within and outside the university environment provided the kinds of succour and support needed. According to a participant:

*I had to put up with my Uncle and his family who were staying somewhere far from the University area. I was anxious on the day of the exam/interview. I had a short sleep as I woke up around 4am to glance through my notes, past projects and to rehearse how I would answer the questions being directed to me.*

### 6.1 Perceived Factors Influencing Anxiety

Apart from the extension of the interview, participants identified poor organisation, unconducive interview waiting room and poor level of preparedness on the part of applicants as perceived factors responsible for anxiety among applicants. Unconducive interview environment was a major factor the participants complained as the lead cause of anxiety for them because the temperature of the waiting was very hot, not conducive for personal study for preparation.

One of the participants said 'the waiting room is not conducive for the job-seekers and hence some level of anxiety in me.'

Another participant also complained about the uncondusive waiting room as thus:

*In one of the faculties (name withheld) all applicants were crowded in a room. We all moved from the room to the board room where the interview was taking place. The room was stuffy and uncondusive.. They could do better. At a point, we all left the room to wait for our turn outside. You can imagine how bad it was.*

Participants identified long waiting period of interview as worsening anxiety. Participants that experienced long waiting period reported high level of nervousness and anxiety few minutes to the interview session with the faculty board. According to one of the participants:

*The interview process was too long and rigorous; I think the faculty interview board was not considerate to individuals who are attending the interview for the first time.*

Another participant has this to say:

*I spent three days waiting to be called for interview which I am not sure I will be selected because, I am pregnant and the faculty interview board were too strict and not considerate.*

A mother of one has this to say:

*I came from Lagos to attend the interview. I came with my child. First all applicants were told to write an essay. Can you imagine that? All of us; professors, Readers, senior Lecturer, all of us. At that moment, I knew these people are not serious. Now, we have just been told that the interview won't finish today again; that it has been extended. This is not fair. I have exhausted all my money. No where to sleep (participant crying).*

There was a consensus among the participants that poor level of preparedness is a predictor of the anxiety experienced. Some participants received their letters of invitation a day before the interview and had to travel long distance. Generally, the participants reported poor level of preparation for interview in terms of reading, rehearsing with expert in their area of expertise for adequate preparation and interacting with colleagues in the same department. A participant from Ibadan revealed that:

*I got the information about the interview last-night, I had to move to the park. I had to be here as early as possible, but I have not been able to read anything since I left home.*

## 7. DISCUSSION

Nigeria has one of the highest rates of graduate unemployment in Nigeria. They have written several applications, most job seekers became agitated and discouraged to give another trial. Yet, those who managed to apply for a job usually go through stress and a high level of anxiety exacerbated by uncertainties and corruption. Therefore, this study explored a phenomenological report of anxiety as experience by job-seekers at the University of Ilorin, obtained through key informant interviews among 25 job-applicant at the University of Ilorin selected from different faculties and departments.

In this study, the perceived anxiety and interview experience among job seekers were examined. Interview anxiety is manifested in the form of speech disturbances (e.g., stuttering, verbal fillers), socially inappropriate behaviours (e.g., appearing rigid or demonstrating little eye contact) as well as other nervous jitters (e.g., hands shaking), this is consistent with the findings of [23]. A similar study reported interview experiences that are related to anxiety which is inimical to performance during the selection of the best candidate for an academic position like that of a university [24]. During the study, participants experienced rigorous screening exercises coupled with poor welfare services, this is consistent with that of [25], rigorous screening exercise is inevitable in the selection of academic positions around the world including developing countries where there is paucity of resources, but there are job-applicants often experience poor welfare and poor level of comfort during the interview experience especially among the high number of applicants.

The result on theme two indicated that extension of the interview has major impact on perceived anxiety among job applicants at the University. Three major themes emerged from the key informant interview among the job-applicants e.g sleeping in the classroom, poor support from the university and the hunger as a result of extension of the interview process. The result is consistent with that of Rivera, [26] that when selection of job applicants is elongated if often result to reduced motivation and high sense of anxiety among first-time job applicants. Similar study was reported by Himle, et al. [27] that extended long interview process often result to possibility of developing anxiety among job applicants without appropriate support from the interview organisers. Hence, there is poor performance during the interview process among job applicants. Additionally, DeGroot & Gooty [28] reported extension of interview process often comes with negative implications on job applicants as they experience anxiety and hunger

because they find it extremely difficult to look for food whenever they think of having a job interview ahead of them especially when there is no adequate preparation for the interview. Poor performance and high level of anxiety is inevitable among job applicants when the interview process is elongated by the institution [29].

Apart from the level of preparedness, the duration of the interview process was believed by applicants to be associated with the level of anxiety. The result of the in-depth interview indicated that academic job-seekers reported different factors (external and internal factors) as influencing anxiety experience while undergoing the interview process. Different subthemes emanated during the key-informant interview among job applicants as stress of the interview process, personality traits and poor coping skills as internal factors while for external factors, agony, unconducive interview environment and financial commitment to feeding, transportation and accommodation were external factors influencing anxiety among job-applicant. The result corroborates with the findings of Feiler & Powell, [10] observed that external factors like agony and internal factors like poor coping skills significant impact on the anxiety symptoms of job applicants in the African region. A similar study was reported by Blume, et al, [30] that in Africa, job-seekers are made to go through serious unpleasant experiences when seeking positions which often exposes applicants, especially female applicants, to several psychological traumas including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety disorder. Huffcutt, et al. [20] categorized an unconducive interview waiting room as internal factor for job applicants as it may result in poor performance during the interview session, especially among individuals with low self-esteem, this is in tandem with the findings of [6]. According to these study, personality traits was also categorised as one of the internal factors influencing anxiety experience among job applicants and has possibility for poor performance during the interview process (Caza & Wrzesniewski, 2013).

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

This study is an outcome of the experience of academic job-applicants invited for an interview at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, between 27<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of July 2019. The study indicated that applicants invited for screening or interview claimed they went through stressors while trying to secure employment. Both internal factors like personal traits, stressful experience and poor coping skills while external factors like agony, unconducive interview environment contributed to feeling anxiety reported

by the applicants. The study discovered that poor preparedness for the interview resulted in anxiety for the majority of the applicants. Also, most of the applicants had worse experience during the screening process before being subjected to an interview with the faculty board. It is therefore recommended that applicants applying for academic positions should adequately be prepared for rigorous screening and by studying hard and rehearsing questions with individuals who have similar experiences. Beyond the individual factors, the University of Ilorin and other universities across the country should provide adequate support services for job-applicants to prevent being over-stressed that might lead to mental health conditions. Also, university administrators and faculty selection boards should ensure that interview process is departmentalised in a bid to reduce the duration of waiting of the applicants. What this implicitly means is that the interview programme for new academic positions should be directed towards the improvement of mental health and happiness of applicants even if the result would not be positive as this would give a message of hope for a better future. For example, Huffcutt, [20] reported that promotion of happiness in the face of negative outcome of an interview for an academic position is very important as it has implications on the improvement of quality of applicants [6,31]

## CONSENT

Consent to participate in the study was obtained from the participants before commencement of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were guaranteed.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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