

Saudi social work students' perceptions of future career: A quantitative and qualitative research in light of changes in the labor market and social representations of jobs

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the views of Saudi social work students about their career prospects, especially considering the reduced job openings for students in humanities and social sciences. Unlike most research that focuses on science and medical fields, this study aims to bridge the gap by examining social work students. It employs surveys and focus groups to understand why students choose social work as a major and what they expect from their careers post-graduation. The findings reveal that students often choose this major not out of passion or a calling but to gain a university degree and secure a government job, which offers job stability and social status. The extended wait for employment has led to a willingness to take up jobs previously seen as unsuitable for Saudis. Additionally, the lack of university support in career planning leaves many students feeling uncertain and doubtful, highlighting the issue of transitioning from education to the workforce.

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1. Introduction

The integration of young people into the workforce is a major concern in contemporary society. This is because of swift changes in social and economic conditions and the regular occurrence of global crises. Notably, the rate at which young individuals aged 15 to 24 were participating in the labor market showed a consistent decrease from 1999 to 2019 (ILO, 2020; Buchanan et al., 2020).

Students, since the very beginning of their university experience, feel anxiety about their future goals (Yavuzaslan et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these anxieties (Belle et al., 2022). This is reflected in the fact that a high proportion of students are confused about their career choices, which increases their risk of making wrong decisions that may affect both their individual futures and society in general (Reddy, 2021). In today's world, we are witnessing rapid advancements in science and technology. However, this era is also marked by a high level of uncertainty and unpredictability, known as the VUCA period,

standing for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. This makes it challenging for individuals to understand their place and determine the direction of their future growth (Wang et al., 2022).

Saudi Arabia's situation reflects a broader global context due to its significant economic and human potential and strong ties to the global economy. The Saudi labor market is rapidly evolving, with a growing number of Saudi graduates entering the workforce. This is occurring alongside a noticeable trend of unemployment among graduates in arts, humanities, and social sciences, a phenomenon seen in many countries worldwide (Dayaratna-Banda and Dharmadasa, 2022).

Consequently, the current research investigates social science students' perceptions of their future careers, tackling the situation of male students studying the Social Work Program at H'ail University, Saudi Arabia. This university was chosen because it is one of the emerging universities located in the Kingdom's inland area.

2. Literature review

The term student aspirations has been commonly used by early research in the field of educational studies and policies since the early 1930s as an expression of desire for achievement and development (Quaglia and Cobb, 1996). In other

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words, it refers to "what an individual hopes to happen in the future" (Khattab, 2015).

Various theories have been developed to explain what influences students' thoughts about their future careers. These influences are grouped into three categories: (1) Intrinsic factors, such as personal interests and beliefs in their own abilities. (2) Extrinsic factors, like job availability, salary, job stability, and professional status. (3) Interpersonal factors, which include the impact of family, teachers, and peers (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Kazi and Akhlaq, 2017).

The Social Cognitive Career Development Theory (SCCDT) states that career decision-making is linked to occupational interest factors, a sense of ability to perform the chosen profession, and expectations of outcomes. It emphasizes that self-efficiency and achievement are influenced by gender, vocation, health status, family patterns, and learning experiences (Tang et al., 2008).

Self-determination theory has emerged since the 1980s. It focuses on motivation and highlights the importance of three basic psychological needs for understanding optimal performance: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This theory has been used over the past decades extensively in research on education and monitoring aspirations for students' career guidance (Guay et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2022).

Self-efficacy is one of the most important concepts that helps to understand the pattern of decision-making in future careers (Ogutu et al., 2017). This concept has attracted the interest of researchers over the past decades and has been applied within a network of other concepts such as self-knowledge, interests, career maturity, ability, vocational identity, career commitment, and career indecision (Lease and Dahlision, 2009). It also enhances the usefulness of self-regulation processes that allow undergraduate students to gain greater awareness of their identity and develop their ability to explore careers (Kiener, 2006).

Our research started from this theoretical reference to focus on social work students in one of the Saudi interior regions that did not receive much attention in scientific research. We benefited from the findings of previous research regarding the factors that motivated these students to make their choices while also focusing on the role of values, moral background, and previous competence for social work (Mizrahi and Dodd, 2013), in addition to the suitability of the students' beneficial personal goals to the social goals of the profession. The Social Work Career Impact Questionnaire was used to evaluate career impact variables among social work students: the desire to specialize, the social importance of the profession, family background, and the mission of the profession (Biggerstaff, 2000).

However, access to social work jobs has been shown to face an uncertain and changing future, and the number of social work students in many parts of the world has declined markedly over the past few years (Wilson and McCrystal, 2007). Students

frequently express their anxiety in this regard. Training programs to meet the requirements of the profession are required (Mathias-Williams and Thomas, 2002), as employers focus on applied skills and experience. There is an urgent need to combine theory and practice (Tham et al., 2023). Additionally, a significant number of social work students have expressed a desire to receive further training to apply their knowledge in the actual practice of the profession.

Saudi scientific research has not paid much attention to social work students, who are in significant numbers in Saudi regions and face difficulties in obtaining jobs. Researchers have focused on students of medicine, science, and technology who have greater chances of entering the labor market (Osugwu et al., 2014; Halawany et al., 2017; Al Subait et al., 2017; Alkhaneen et al., 2018; Alhomoud et al., 2019; El-Dief et al., 2019; Almaghaslah et al., 2021).

We have benefited from the methodology used in this research to design research tools, and we have placed greater emphasis on the findings of the few researchers who focused on social dimensions and the issue of representations and perceptions.

Among these previous researches, we mention in particular Thompson and Almoaibed (2021), who elaborated on the problem of the Saudis' perception of good and poor jobs and their relationship to economic transformations and the development of society and aimed at identifying social and cultural factors affecting attitudes and perceptions of work. Furthermore, a number of researchers were interested in Saudi students' relationship with the labor market (Alghamlas and Alabduljabbar, 2019; Shaalan, 2019; Aloud et al., 2020; Aldossari, 2020).

Scientific research on the Hai'l area in the north of the Kingdom appears to be very limited, with the exception of a study on medical students' perceptions of the subject of their choice of specialties after the bachelor's degree (Alshammari et al., 2023) and a study on the impact of communication competencies, job requirements, and academic performance on students' career development at H'ail University (Alshammari, 2023).

Finally, the previous research we reviewed was used to guide the elements of current research and to formulate its instruments: a questionnaire and focus group discussions. Emphasis was placed on the importance of cognitive and social aspects in guiding students' choices of educational paths and questioning the nature of their future perceptions and factors influencing them.

The current research aimed at answering the following questions:

- Q1.** To what extent do social origins and educational path affect guide social work students' perceptions of their future careers?
- Q2.** How does self-efficacy influence the choice of specialization and career prospects?
- Q3.** Is previous aptitude for social work specialization a vocation or a necessity?

Q4. What impact does the Saudi labor market structure have on guiding career perceptions?

Q5. Do students make a flexible and smooth transition from school to work?

The hypotheses of this research can be outlined as follows:

H1: Social work students' perceptions are influenced by their social origins and prevailing representations about the ideal career future.

H2: The motivation for choosing to study social work is to obtain a university degree similar to the one attained in scientific studies.

H3: Orientation toward studying social work is not motivated by vocation

H4: Changes in the Saudi labor market have an impact on changing perceptions of good and bad jobs.

H5: There are no pathways available to help students make a smooth and flexible transition from school to work.

As for limitations, the current research tackled social work students as an example of specializations facing difficulties in getting jobs.

3. Research methodology and instruments

Methodological diversity was adopted by combining statistical data and analysis of focus group discussions and narratives. The questionnaire tool was used to collect basic data, and it was supported by the focus group tool to delve deeper into the results.

The questionnaire was designed based on the following axes:

- Demographic data of the sample members and their social origins.
- Motivations for secondary and university study
- Social service motivation
- The future professions that the sample members dreamed of as children
- Their assessment of how easy it will be for them to get jobs in the future
- Evaluate their ability to achieve a future career.

The text of the questionnaire was reviewed by two faculty members and two external experts working in the social service sector, and a test was conducted on a small sample of 30 students.

Based on the initial results of the questionnaire, we organized five focus groups representing the various levels of study in the Bachelor of Social Work. The discussion was directed based on the hypotheses and questions that were set for the research and needed further in-depth study.

4. Research population and sample selection

The total number of male students in the social work program, which was estimated by the

Admission and Registration Unit at the College of Humanities and Arts, was 498 male students during the school year 2022-2023. The sample size was determined statistically using the Krejcie-Morgan table and equation (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970).

The size of the targeted sample was (217), at a confidence level of 95%, and the degree of accuracy as reflected in the permissible error was (0.05), and the sample was divided into two groups: the first amounted to (117) individuals and the second amounted to (100), where the questionnaire was applied to the first group, and the number of valid and finally approved questionnaires reached (115) after excluding two questionnaires due to (incomplete data or lack of response), with it being reinforced by focus groups in which 50 individuals actually participated.

5. Results

5.1. Statistical results

Regarding the social origin and educational path, the focus is on the sons of the educated middle class working in the government sector. This specific subgroup within the study consisted of males aged between 19 to 26 years. Notably, this research was limited to male students, as female students were part of a separate college campus and were not included in this sample. A significant majority of the sample, 87.8%, were identified as sons of the educated middle class, primarily because their parents were employed in the public sector.

The students, predominantly from the educated middle class working in the government sector, showed a tendency to join the general educational path with a focus on humanities during their secondary education. This trend is depicted in Fig. 1, which highlights that a significant number of these students opted for humanities majors. The reasons behind these choices, as explained by the respondents, were aligned with their cognitive abilities. They found that pursuing humanities was more congruent with their skills, enabling them to achieve success in secondary school and subsequently facilitating their transition into university.

Regarding the aptitude for the social work major, it is highlighted that the majority of students' decision to join the social work program was not driven by a prior aptitude or vocation. Specifically, 85.2% of the students chose to enroll in the social work program after completing high school. Meanwhile, 14.8% were directly placed in this major by the university's Deanship of Admission and Registration. Interestingly, this choice was generally not due to a pre-existing inclination towards social work. This is supported by the fact that most respondents were not active in associations, nor did they engage in voluntary work, despite acknowledging the importance of social work in society. This trend is further illustrated in Fig. 2.

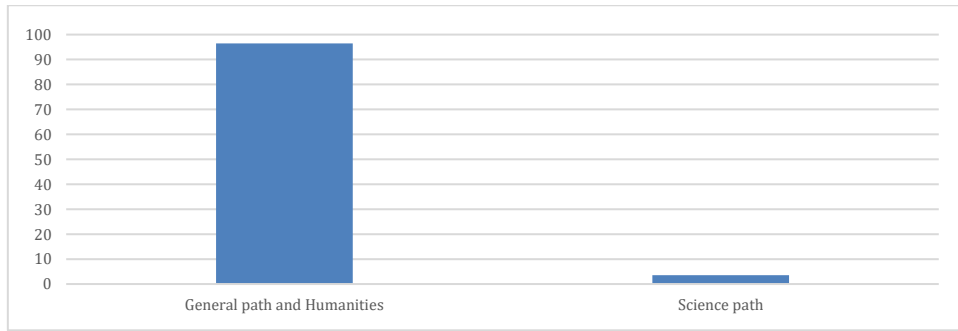


Fig. 1: Choosing the educational path at secondary school

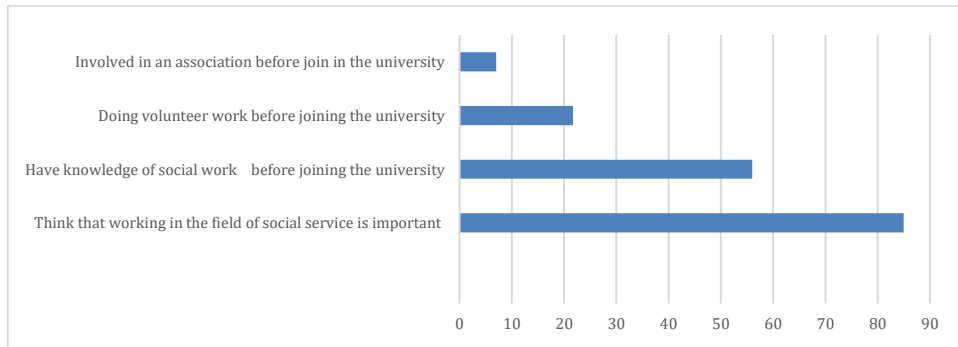


Fig. 2: Prior aptitude of social work

Focusing on future career perceptions, it is revealed that, similar to their parents, most of the respondents showed a preference for working in the government sector, with a particular inclination towards military professions and education. A substantial 90.4% of the respondents expressed a desire to work in the government sector. In contrast, only a small fraction, about 7.9%, were considering

launching a private investment project. Additionally, a mere 1.7% preferred to be employees in the private sector. When reflecting on their childhood aspirations, the respondents predominantly dreamed of careers in military, education, aviation, and medicine. These preferences and aspirations are further detailed in Fig. 3.

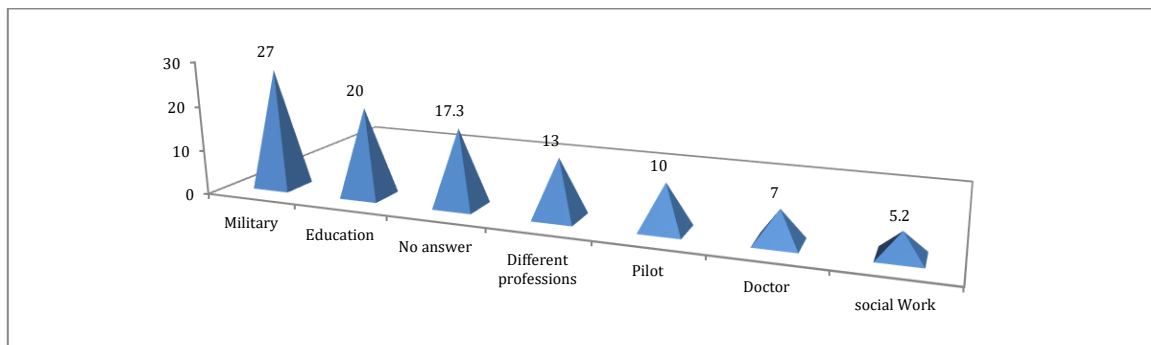


Fig. 3: The professions that the respondents dreamed of in their childhood

As for the most sought-after profession, the military topped the list with 39.2%, while 18.2% said they were still undecided. The percentage of those

who were confident in getting a profession in social work did not exceed 17.4%. as shown in Fig. 4.

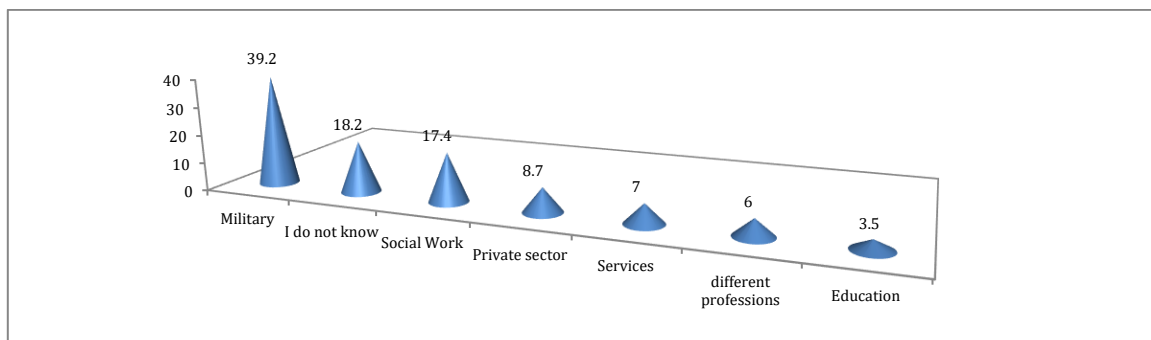


Fig. 4: The expected profession

In exploring the topic of confidence in achieving a professional future, a notable lack of guidance, unclear perceptions, and uncertainty were evident among the respondents. When assessing their confidence in reaching their desired profession, the results showed a varied picture. Only 40% of the respondents were confident in securing their desired job, while 45.2% faced uncertainty. There were 12.2% who did not have a clear stance on this matter, and 2.6% were in outright denial of their prospects. Furthermore, complete clarity about their professional future was reported by 44.4% of the respondents, with 28.6% experiencing uncertainty, 19.2% in outright denial, and 7.8% having no

opinion. Specifically, in the field of social work, the confidence level in securing a job was 38.3%, which was lower than the uncertainty rate of 43.5%. Those without an opinion in this field constituted 13.9%. Additionally, when asked about their confidence in achieving future goals in general, 54.8% expressed confidence, 31.3% were uncertain, 10.4% outright denied their prospects, and 3.5% had no opinion. The evaluation of the university's role in helping to clarify future prospects showed that 50.5% responded positively, affirming the university's support, while 24.3% were uncertain and 20.9% denied any significant role of the university in this regard, as shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1: Levels of confidence in achieving a professional future

Phrase	Yes	Absolutely not	not sure	I don't know	Total
Do you think you will achieve the career you dreamed of?	40%	2.6%	45.2%	12.2%	100%
Do you think you will get a job in social work?	38.3%	4.3%	43.5%	13.9%	100%
Is your professional future clear?	44.4%	19.2%	28.6%	7.8%	100%
Do you think you are fully capable of achieving your future goals?	54.8%	10.4%	31.3%	3.5%	100%
Does the university help you clarify your future career prospects?	50.5%	20.9%	24.3%	4.3%	100%

5.2. Focus group results

Focus group sessions were organized to deepen thinking about the general directions drawn by the questionnaire. Their conclusions were as follows:

Families were keen on their children continuing their education and obtaining a university degree, but parents did not play a role in guidance or counseling to plan for their children's future careers. The students did not receive any direction or guidance from the school and, later, the university regarding their future careers. *"My family's goal is to obtain a degree from the university, as it is necessary... The specialty does not matter... the degree is enough... I did not receive any advice or guidance from the teachers or even the university... I think all my friends are in the same situation"* (Saeed, first-level student social service). The high degree of students' preoccupation with future careers in the advanced levels of university education, where anxiety increases as a result of not being sure of obtaining a suitable job at an acceptable time, in addition to a sense of the complexity of social life and the high costs of living. The long waiting period to get a suitable job results in a delay in achieving social integration; among its indicators is the delay in the age of marriage. *"I do not know what my future career will be like...the waiting period to get a job may be long..."* (Nayef, third-level social service student). Continuity to prefer the government sector with regard to the future career because it provides job security: a stable salary, professional development, good working conditions, and social prestige. The tendency towards enrollment in the military is a clear pattern and is common among students. The main reason is that it represents a secure branch in the labor area, enabling the job seeker to achieve social prestige, with a relatively short pre-employment period compared to other sectors. *"I do not expect to get a job in the social service quickly... My ambition and the ambition of many of my*

colleagues is that entering the military is a guaranteed job and has prestige in society... Personally, I submitted an application, if they accept me, I will leave the university and join them without hesitation" (Michael, 5th level).

A change in the representations of proper professions for Saudis, which is manifested in the acceptance of work in service professions (previously among expatriates' jobs) such as store accountants, receptionists, delivery and transportation agents, guarding institutions and reception, and restaurant and coffee shop jobs; as well as acceptance of temporary and insubstantial professions to reduce the stress of the waiting period. There is a growing belief that despite the social value of a university degree, it is not necessarily a guarantee of employment, especially in the government sector. *"There is nothing wrong with working in delivery services, or as a cashier in malls, or working in Uber cars... The country is changing and developing... We are not different from Western youth, they do that"* (Nayef, 6th level).

6. Discussion

6.1. The impact of social origin factors in guiding perceptions of the future career

H1: Social work students' perceptions are influenced by their social origins and prevailing representations about the ideal career future.

Results of the current research showed that social work students come from the middle class. Like their fathers, they prefer working in the government sector as it provides job security and social status: a stable salary, job advancement, social security, and suitable working conditions. This preference dates back to an early age when the military, education, aviation, and medicine professions were at the forefront of childhood

dreams. Working in the military has remained at the forefront of future job expectations, followed by working with a social work certificate, with a clear weakness in the percentage of those eager to work in the private sector. The focus group discussions highlighted that most of the sample members were born and raised in a family environment that did not encourage "adventurism in private investments" and that there were not many business owners. In addition, the state represents a refuge for all, as well as being the incubator of society.

This correlation between social origin and the perception of the career future is significant and is consistent with the findings of previous studies that confirmed the impact of social factors, especially family affiliation, in directing perceptions of the future career (Lease and Dahlbeck, 2009; Metheny and McWhirter, 2013; Albugamy, 2014; Guan et al., 2016; Fadaak and Roberts, 2018). Additionally, religious values and kinship relations were in favor of the public sector and seizing the opportunities offered by Saudization (Albugamy, 2014; Thompson and Almoaibed, 2021).

6.2. The impact of the self-efficacy factor on choosing the educational path and the expectations of the future career

H2: The motivation for choosing to study humanities is to obtain a university degree similar to those obtained in scientific studies.

Most of the sample members chose the humanitarian path, especially the general path, in their secondary studies, and they explained this as a specialization that suited their cognitive abilities because they felt being able to succeed in it. After a deep examination of this conclusion of the focus groups, it was found that most of the respondents did not have tendencies or aptitude toward science and modern technologies due to the concentration, mental capabilities, and study effort they require. Furthermore, the family did not play a major role in directing them towards these majors, as the most important goal for them is studying and getting a certificate regardless of specialization, in addition to the absence of an advisory or counseling role at school as there are no programs or courses to help secondary students and guide them in choosing their path.

The focus group discussions showed a common belief among students directed to social work: easy courses and a high success rate, as well as the understanding and assistance of the faculty members for the students. The significance of this conclusion is confirmed by its consistency with the Social Cognitive Career Development Theory, which focuses on the idea of occupational choices being related to the nature of the individual's feeling of ability and competence to accomplish the chosen profession (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Guay et al., 2003; Tang et al., 2008; Chantara et al., 2011; Kazi and Akhlaq, 2017; Ogotu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022).

However, the level of confidence in the ability to achieve future goals was not very high among all respondents in terms of clarity of their future careers and confidence in getting a job in the field of social work. Thus, it seems that the degree of uncertainty and hesitation was significant and noteworthy. Actually, this is a common phenomenon in all societies today, as shown by numerous studies (Yavuzaslan et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2022).

6.3. Orientation towards the social work program was not preceded by prior aptitude or vocation

H3: Orientation toward studying social work is not motivated by vocation.

The feedback from the questionnaire and focus group discussions indicated that the students' choice to specialize in social work was largely due to a lack of alternatives rather than a genuine interest in the field. Despite acknowledging the importance of social work in society, most students had not engaged in related activities or volunteer work. The findings suggest a trend where students aim to secure stable employment while also hoping to contribute to society's welfare, merging personal goals with societal values.

6.4. The structure of the Saudi labor market is an influential factor in guiding students' aspirations for their future careers

H4: Changes in the Saudi labor market have an impact on changing perceptions of good and bad jobs.

The current research concludes that Saudi students are aware of the changes taking place in the Saudi labor market. The focus group discussions showed that the most serious concern is the difficulty of getting a proper and secure job and that the end of university life means entering into a long waiting period, which affects the agendas of future life, including marriage, whose date began to be later than it was for previous generations. This conclusion is in agreement with the studies of Fadaak and Roberts (2018), HKS (2019), and Kumar et al. (2019). It is also confirmed by official statistics on the Saudi labor market, which has shown that despite the low unemployment rate, it reached 4.7% for the workers in the primary working age 25-54 years, registering a decrease of 0.3% from the second quarter of 2021. However, with regard to Saudi youth in the age group of 15-24 years, the unemployment rate increased in the second quarter of 2022 by 2.5% to reach 17.6% (GAS, 2022). These conclusions are definitely linked to global and regional trends that are reshaping the labor market at a rapid pace. Globalization, digital technologies, and shifts in migration and work organization make workplaces more virtual, more interconnected, and more technology- and knowledge-intensive, in

addition to the COVID crisis, which deepened these transformations. Therefore, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, in general, are witnessing shifts in the traditional development model based on oil dependence and the dominance of the prosperity and welfare state model that has generated certain social perceptions and attitudes towards the labor market.

6.5. Difficulties of achieving a flexible and smooth transition from school to work

H5: There are no pathways available to help students make a smooth and flexible transition from school to work.

Results of the current research showed that 50% of the respondents believed that the university helps them to identify their future careers and prepare for them. In addition, a high percentage of the participants in the focus groups expressed the view that they did not receive school counseling at the secondary level to support their future professional preparations. A significant percentage of the respondents seemed uncertain of their ability to join the labor market with a social work certificate despite the fixed social value of this prominent university degree. It has turned out that this transition is not easy, as young people aspire to a good job with a high salary, suitable working conditions, and smooth, professional promotions, while the labor market is witnessing transformations of more complexity and difficulty (Alzalabani et al., 2013). In fact, there is an inconsistency between the skills acquired by Saudi student degree holders and those required by employers (HKS, 2019). However, this problem is not exclusive to Saudi Arabia but rather is a general phenomenon in societies today, as the transition of young people from school to stable employment is difficult, which shows the need for developing sound and effective policy responses to improve youth's access to the labor market (ILO, 2019).

7. Conclusion

The study shows that rapid changes in Saudi Arabia's job market are affecting universities and their students. There's a growing demand for science and technology majors, while government jobs for humanities graduates are decreasing. This shift towards the private sector leaves humanities students uncertain about their job prospects, reflecting a misalignment between their degrees and available positions.

There is a gap between students' academic choices, their perceptions of their future careers, and the reality of the labor market. There is no doubt that there is a need to deepen thinking about school-to-work transition policies. The results of this research draw attention to the shrinking employment opportunities for social work graduates, while Saudi society, which is experiencing

rapid changes, requires social work more than ever to address the negative effects of these changes. There is also a lack of guidance in schools and universities regarding helping students plan for the future, which calls for implementing appropriate programs and providing them with specialized mentors.

The recommendations for future research suggest a deeper investigation into the phenomenon of the marginalization of humanities and the challenges of employment in the field of social work. This situation arises due to the Saudi labor market's predominant emphasis on scientific, technological, and health fields, which are considered to be rare specializations. Additionally, the research should address the weak position of social service professionals in society, as this is likely to have significant effects.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Ha'il, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Informed consent was provided by all participants, emphasizing that their participation was completely voluntary. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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