

Project Summary for IAL Website

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Project Title:	Proactive career planning and development for Singapore female health professionals
Project Number:	GA20-07
Year of Approval:	2021
Funding Source:	WDARF
Objectives and intended outcomes of the project:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe and quantify Singapore female health professionals’ (SFHP) career development and planning behaviours; • Design a tool that will help SFHPs cultivate a life-long proactive role in planning and developing their career paths towards career satisfaction and success; and • Construct and validate a holistic multi-stakeholder assessment framework to evaluate the effectiveness of career planning and continuous learning initiatives for SFHPs.
Project Team	
Principal Investigator:	Prof Helen Elizabeth Smith
Summary of Project (up to 300 words)	
<p>Findings from our previous study on Singapore female health professionals’ (SFHPs) career decisions showed that SHFPs often take a passive approach to their career planning and development, and subsequently face challenges in their careers. They often have jobs and careers incompatible with their life aspirations and needs, poor levels of job and career satisfaction, and weak work engagement.</p> <p>This study investigates the career planning and development behaviours of SFHPs, designing a programme to help increase their proactivity in lifelong career planning, taking into account their personal needs and life plans. Subsequently we will construct an assessment tool to evaluate effectiveness of career planning and development initiatives for SFHPs. This mixed-methods study will be conducted in three phases: (1) developing a model describing SFHPs’ career management behaviour from a representative quantitative survey and qualitative interviews; (2) designing and piloting a programme encouraging proactive career planning and development in SFHPs through co-design workshops with various stakeholders (healthcare employers, human resources professionals, and SFHPs); and (3) constructing an assessment tool to evaluate the effectiveness of career management programmes based on data from previous study phases and a scoping review of existing literature. This assessment tool will be validated using confirmatory factor analysis.</p> <p>The evidence and tools from this study will contribute to improved career guidance and lifelong learning resources for SFHPs. This study’s findings will help Singapore healthcare employers and policy-makers better support in SFHPs’ long- term career management with targeted support to achieve better SFHP retention and improved career and work satisfaction. This will help support Singapore’s drive to future proofing its professional workforce. We hope that the proactive career management programme we develop will be expanded to help female professionals, in other industries and countries with similar cultures, to shape their careers to better fit with their personal needs and life demands.</p>	

Summary of Project Findings, Deliverables and Impacts (up to 500 words)

This multi-phase study examining proactive career planning among Singapore health professionals highlights several consistent themes across quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and program evaluation findings. A central and recurring theme across all phases is the role of both formal and informal networking as a key resource for career development. Survey results show that network building is the only proactive behaviour that consistently predicts positive outcomes such as work engagement and well-being. The interview data shows how career conversations with colleagues, mentors, role models, and friends help professionals clarify goals, evaluate options, and navigate uncertainties. Programme participants also requested more time for interaction, peer discussion, and networking activities, underscoring strong demand for such opportunities.

Workplace culture and supervisory support shape career experiences. Interviewees described wide variation in how comfortable they felt discussing their goals, seeking feedback, or requesting help. Health professionals in more supportive environments tend to engage in proactive behaviours such as exploring career options, seeking skill development, or adjusting goals. Conversely, those in less supportive settings or who had negative past experiences became more passive or disengaged. These findings emphasize the importance of cultivating open, encouraging, and psychologically safe organisational climates to enable ongoing career conversations and reduce fears of judgement or repercussions.

Another theme is the influence of work and family support. Survey data show that both forms of support predict positive outcomes including career satisfaction, well-being, and work-family balance. Interviews further demonstrate how caregiving responsibilities, and limited time and energy can constrain proactive career management, particularly among those with young children or high family demands. Enhanced support, either via workplace policies (e.g., flexibility, manageable workloads) or external structures, can therefore enable professionals to manage competing demands and maintain momentum in their career development.

The study also reveals variation in proactivity, shaped by life stage, personality traits, support systems, and career experiences. Some professionals had clear visions and structured plans; others preferred exploratory approaches; while some were disengaged or passive due to limited awareness, confidence, or negative experiences. Importantly, proactivity appears malleable, changing over time when exposed to supportive environments, useful resources, or role models. This suggests a need for interventions to encourage less proactive individuals to engage more actively and sustain proactivity among those already inclined to do so.

The absence or scarcity of career management resources such as job market knowledge, confidence-building mechanisms, or exposure to diverse career pathways emerged as a constraint. Participants valued mentors and role models but noted that many lacked accessible guidance, particularly for non-conventional career paths.

Taken together, findings indicate a need for multi-level strategies:

- Introduce structured networking opportunities in career programmes.
- Build supportive workplace cultures that normalise career dialogue and reduce stigma associated with help-seeking or alternate pathways.
- Provide tailored career resources, including mentorship, job market information, and confidence-building supports.
- Enhance work and family support customised to career and life stages, and diverse demands faced by health professionals.