

DOI: 10.5455/msm.2024.36.40-46

Received: Jan 10 2024; Accepted: Feb 25, 2024

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Mater Sociomed. 2024; 36(1): 40-46

Insights Into the Employability of Midwifery Graduates. A Case Study of the International Hellenic University

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines the employability and career trajectories of International Hellenic University's (IHU) midwifery students who graduated between 2016 to 2021, with a focus on undergraduate curriculum changes.

Objective: To comprehensively examine the post-graduation journey of recent IHU Midwifery graduates. This includes shedding light on their employment trajectories, satisfaction levels, and the practical application of academic knowledge.

Through this exploration, the study seeks to inform educational strategies to ensure alignment with the evolving needs of midwifery professionals in Greece. **Methods:** Online questionnaires that explored post-graduation experiences, perspectives on the study program, and future plans. The questionnaires consisted of a mix of open and closed-ended questions and were completed by 273 recipients. The study was conducted from May to September 2023, with participant anonymity maintained. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS. **Results:** This study revealed differences between graduates of the 'old' and 'new' midwifery undergraduate curriculum. There were notable variations in the perceived impact of the six-month internship on employment. The study also highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational experiences, emphasizing the nuanced challenges faced during clinical practice, practical training, and simulation training. Finally, the self-employed professionals and those employed in the public sector expressed higher satisfaction with the alignment of their employment with their undergraduate studies, than their

counterparts in the private sector ($p=0.038$).

Conclusions: Our study offers valuable insights into job placement, knowledge sufficiency, and the impact of the pandemic on midwifery undergraduate education. These findings can guide tailored strategies for improved education and holistic professional development, ultimately enhancing maternal and neonatal care.

Keywords: employability, educational impact, midwifery, pandemic influence, graduates.

1. BACKGROUND

In the ever-changing landscape of higher education and evolving professional demands, particularly in health science studies, it has become crucial to understand the employability of midwifery graduates. Higher education institutions have the responsibility of not only equipping students to address the growing complexities in maternity services but also preparing them for the workforce (1). This study presents a comprehensive exploration of the professional trajectories of midwifery alumni from International Hellenic University (IHU) over the past five years. The study aims to investigate the employability outcomes of the graduates, given the unique nature of midwifery education, which balances theoretical and practical training, and changes in the study program.

This cross-sectional survey analyses the experiences, satisfaction levels, and career paths of midwifery graduates. Crucial facets such as current workplaces, the quality of midwifery education received, post-gradua-

tion pursuits, and future career plans are recorded, presenting a comprehensive examination of the distinctive journey of midwifery professionals. Moreover, the undergraduate curriculum underwent modifications back in 2019, concurrent with the University's transition from a Technological Education Institution to a University i.e the International Hellenic University. Consequently, there is a divergence in educational backgrounds among the participants, with some having completed the Old Study Program (OSP) and others having incorporated an additional semester at the conclusion of their studies to align their training with the newly introduced study program. In this study, participants who underwent the supplementary semester are categorized as having followed the 'New Study Program' (NSP).

An evaluation is conducted on the experiences of both OSP and NSP graduates to gain insights into the impact of educational changes on midwifery graduate outcomes. Understanding the unique professional journeys of midwifery alumni is crucial in shaping the future of midwifery education at IHU, especially in the current era of healthcare evolution and educational innovation.

2. OBJECTIVE

This study aims to comprehensively explore the employability of midwifery graduates from IHU over the five years i.e. 2016 to 2021. The study is designed to assess the current employment status of graduates, examining the types of positions held within the healthcare sector, while also delving into the levels of workplace and educational satisfaction. Additionally, the study aims to identify and analyze any emerging trends or patterns in midwifery graduate employability, exploring post-graduation pursuits and future career plans.

Recognizing the broader context, this research will add up to the current knowledge on midwifery employability in the European health sector. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, insights from this study can inform policies, educational practices, and workforce planning not only within the university but also contribute to the wider discourse on enhancing healthcare workforce preparedness and adaptability in Europe.

3. PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

The study involved 273 midwifery graduates from IHU, spanning from 2016 to 2021. In 2023, a two-phase online questionnaire was administered to the graduates using the contact information provided to the university.

Procedure and ethical considerations

The responses were collected from May 2023 to September 2023. The research was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research of the International Hellenic University. Before completing the questionnaire, the participants were informed about the research's purpose and the use of their data. The questionnaires were designed based on the standard questionnaire sent to IHU graduates based on the Association of American Medical Colleges' standard on the basis of the Institutional Evaluation Procedures performed annually by the Quality Assurance Unit of I.H.U

(<https://www.ihu.gr/modip/internal/>). The majority of the questions were closed-ended, either multiple choice with one or more responses or in a scoring format using the five-point Likert scale. The survey instruments were disseminated through the email addresses submitted by the graduates during their enrollment, ensuring direct communication with the target population. This method allowed for a personalized and efficient data collection process.

Questionnaires

The first questionnaire aimed to gather information on their current employment status, post-graduation pursuits, and post-graduate education. A follow-up questionnaire with additional questions was sent to gather further insights on workplace satisfaction, perceived quality of midwifery education, and future career plans. The questionnaire was designed to capture key dimensions of midwifery graduate employability and elicit detailed responses on workplace dynamics, educational experiences, and post-graduation trajectories.

To evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was utilized which, for the basic questions for both questionnaires (37 questions), was $\alpha=0.833$ thus the reliability is very much satisfactory as it is above 0.8, which makes the questionnaire as well as its results, valid and reliable.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics and statistical analysis of the findings were performed using IBM SPSS (Version 26.0, Armonk, NY) with parametric statistical tests. For independent comparisons, the student t test was used, while ANOVA, was used, with Tukey post hoc correction, to investigate the existence of a relationship between a quantitative variable and a categorical variable with more than two categories.

4. RESULTS

Two questionnaires were distributed to 273 people. Of these, 115 completed the first questionnaire and 110 completed the second. Of the respondents, 98.3% (n=113) were women and the remaining 1.7% (n=2) were men.

In the analysis of demographic data, we focused on the information collected from the first questionnaire due to its larger participant pool. We made the decision to present only the demographic data from the initial survey because there were no significant differences between the two administrations, and this ensures a more substantial representation of the study cohort. Both questionnaires contained identical content concerning the demographic data.

In terms of age distribution, 60.9% (n=70) fell within the 26-30 age bracket, while 33.9% (n=39) were aged between 22-25 years. Regarding time since graduation, 74 participants (64.3%) reported graduating between 2 to 5 years ago, 31 (27%) within the past year, and the remaining 10 (8.7%) between 1-2 years ago.

Furthermore, 51.3% (n=59) of the participants identified as graduates of the Old Study Program, while the remaining 48.7% (n=56) were graduates of the New Curriculum, which includes the old curriculum and an ad-

Post-graduate studies		n	%
Received additional certification related to obstetrics or midwifery	Yes	39	33.9
	No	76	66.1
Post-graduate studies	Pursuing a Master's degree currently	30	26.1
	Have completed a Master's degree program	20	17.4
	Pursuing another Bachelor's degree	6	5.2
	Have completed another Bachelor's degree	3	2.6
	None	60	52.2

Table 1. Post-graduate studies (N=115)

ditional semester. Of the participants, 91.3% (n=105) live in Greece, while 8.7% (n=10) live abroad.

Of the respondents, 41.2% (n=21) who pursued or are pursuing post-graduate studies reported that the knowledge they acquired during their studies at IHU supported them to a moderate degree, 19.6% (n=10) to a fairly high degree, and 17.6% (n=9) to a very high degree.

Furthermore, 44.8% (n=39) of the respondents currently working as midwives believe that the knowledge they have acquired has moderately supported them in meeting their job requirements, while 41.4% (n=36) believe it has supported them to a fairly high extent.

In addition, 97.4% (n=112) of recent graduates have not received any awards or distinctions in the scientific field of Midwifery, but a promising 2.6% (n=3) have already earned positive recognition.

In the second survey (n=110) regarding the choice of midwifery as a career, 51.8% (n=57) of the respondents stated that it was their first choice of studies after finishing High School, while the remaining 48.2% (n=53) answered negatively. Out of those who answered negatively, 67.9% (n=36) reported that their first choice was in the medical/paramedical field.

Additionally, 69.1% (n=76) of the participants reported that they are currently employed in the midwifery field. Of the participants, 60.9% (n=67) work as salaried employees and 10% (n=11) are self-employed.

46.4% (n=51) expressed that inadequate compensation would be the reason for seeking new employment, while 31.8% (n=35) cited a misalignment between their current job and their career ambitions. Of the total respondents, only 14.5% (n=16) stated that their current job did not align with their educational background.

A notable 76 respondents (69.1%) perceived a divergence in workplace experiences between female and male midwives based on their gender.

When examining respondents' satisfaction levels with their employment in relation to their studies, nuanced perspectives emerge. 37 (33.6%) of the respondents, expressed moderate satisfaction, 31 (28.2%) conveyed a fair level of contentment, and 19 (17.3%) indicated that they are not satisfied at all. Additional insights into job satisfaction regarding remuneration reveal that 30% (n=33) of the respondents are somewhat satisfied, 24.5% (n=27) are moderately satisfied, 21.8% (n=24) express a fair level of satisfaction, and an equal percentage express no satisfaction at all.

Type of employment		n	%
Employment in a health-related job with a formal employment relationship during the studies at IHU	Yes	45	39.1
	No	70	60.9
Current employment as a midwife	Have not yet started working	3	2.6
	Unemployed	4	3.5
	Working in a different field than midwifery	22	19.1
	Working as a midwife in the public sector abroad	7	6.1
	Working as a midwife in the public sector	13	11.3
	Working as a midwife as an independent professional	3	2.6
	Working as a midwife in the private sector	63	54.8
Employment in the education field	Yes	4	3.5
	No	111	96.5
The 6-month-long internship helped in finding a job	Yes	81	70.4
	No	34	29.6
Held a position of responsibility in the workplace (e.g. supervisor)	Yes	35	30.4
	No	80	69.6
Time period post-graduation to taking up service as a midwife	Right away	45	39.1
	2-6 months post graduation	25	21.7
	6-12 months post graduation	11	9.6
	1-2 years post graduation	8	7.0
	2-3 years post graduation	3	2.6
	More than 3 years post graduation	4	3.5
	Chose not to take up service as a midwife	19	16.5

Table 2. Type of employment (N=115)

When considering the application of acquired knowledge in the workplace, the findings indicate that 41.8% (n=46) of the respondents believe that what they learned through their training is moderately applied, 28.2% (n=31) to a lesser extent, and 13.6% (n=15) believe that it is not applied at all. Regarding the alignment of theoretical knowledge with clinical practice during training, 52 participants (47.3%) reported moderate consistency and complementarity, while 24 (21.8%) reported lesser consistency and another 24 (21.8%) reported fairly high consistency.

Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, 54.5%

Education received (all questions used a 1 to 5 rating scale)	n	%
Alignment between theoretical knowledge and clinical practice	Moderate degree (3/5)	52 47.3
	Lesser degree (2/5)	24 21.8
	Fairly high degree (4/5)	24 21.8
Quality of the clinical practice experience	Moderately satisfactory (3/5)	44 40.0
	Low (2/5)	25 22.7
	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	24 21.8
Quality of the six-month internship experience	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	47 42.7
	Moderately satisfactory (3/5)	27 24.5
	Very satisfactory (5/5)	21 19.1
Preparedness for midwifery practice		
General nursing skills	Fairly prepared (4/5)	57 51.8
	Moderately prepared (3/5)	24 21.8
	Very prepared (5/5)	23 20.9
Infection control	Fairly prepared (4/5)	46 41.8
	Moderately prepared (3/5)	29 26.4
	Very prepared (5/5)	24 21.8
Nursing prioritization skills	Moderately prepared (3/5)	43 39.1
	Fairly prepared (4/5)	42 38.2
	Very prepared (5/5)	13 11.8
Critical thinking & decision-making skills	Moderately prepared (3/5)	43 39.1
	Fairly prepared (4/5)	41 37.3
	Minimally prepared (2/5)	13 11.8
Communication skills (with women/patients)	Fairly prepared (4/5)	43 39.1
	Very prepared (5/5)	32 29.1
	Moderately prepared (3/5)	19 17.3
Addressing legal issues	Moderately prepared (3/5)	42 38.2
	Minimally prepared (2/5)	26 23.6
	Fairly prepared (4/5)	23 20.9
Consultation/Counseling	Fairly prepared (4/5)	35 31.8
	Moderately prepared (3/5)	34 30.9
	Minimally prepared (2/5)	23 20.9
Collaborative skills with the rest of the hospital's staff	Fairly prepared (4/5)	49 44.5
	Moderately prepared (3/5)	26 23.6
	Very prepared (5/5)	24 21.8
Caring for diverse populations	Fairly prepared (4/5)	34 30.9
	Moderately prepared (3/5)	25 22.7
	Very prepared (5/5)	18 16.4
Applying evidence-based information to practice	Moderately prepared (3/5)	43 39.1
	Fairly prepared (4/5)	41 37.3
	Very prepared (5/5)	15 13.6

Table 3. Education received (N=110)

(n=60) of the respondents confirmed their enrollment in the department during the pandemic. Within this subgroup, 57.6% (n=34) reported a significant impact of the pandemic on the quality of their educational experience during clinical practice, practical training, and laboratories. An additional 27.1% (n=16) reported a considerable influence. Moreover, 36.8% (n=21) of respondents who reported ongoing enrollment during the pandemic believe that their theoretical education has been significantly affected by online learning, with an additional 35.1% (n=20) indicating a very significant impact.

Respondents were asked about their future career plans within the next 5-10 years. 40% (n=44) expressed a preference for employment in hospitals in the public or private sector, while 37.3% (n=41) aspired to establish a private self-employed practice. Additionally, 30.9% (n=34) envisioned a career in education, 30% (n=33)

in primary healthcare facilities, and 20% (n=22) in the field of research. 20% (n=22) of the respondents, expressed an interest in hospital administration, while 4.5% (n=5) are considering alternative sectors. Regarding research involvement, 32.7% (n=36) foresaw minimal engagement, 24.5% (n=27) foresaw no engagement, 20% (n=22) foresaw significant involvement, and 19.1% (n=21) foresaw moderate participation.

In conclusion, 56.4% (n=62) of the respondents stated that they would choose to study midwifery again if given the opportunity to reconsider their career path.

In order to test specific research hypotheses, a comparative analysis of means was carried out using the ANOVA method. The results of the survey showed that the significant role of the six-month placement in facilitating employment in the field of midwifery was acknowledged by both OSP and NSP graduates.

Furthermore, compared to NSP graduates (p=0.023), OSP graduates showed a stronger belief in the contribution of the internship. A difference was observed in the domains of Postpartum Midwifery Care and Family Planning when assessing the adequacy of knowledge acquired by OSP and NSP graduates. In these areas, OSP graduates had higher opinions of the adequacy of knowledge than NSP graduates did (p=0.028) and (p=0.016) respectively.

The data also suggests that self-employed professionals and those employed in the public sector express higher satisfaction with the alignment of their employment with the subject matter of their studies, while their counterparts in the private sector exhibit lower satisfaction (p=0.038). Simultaneously, professionals in the public sector demonstrate greater contentment with their remuneration concerning the subject matter of their work, relative to their counterparts in

the private sector, the unemployed and self-employed professionals (p=0.001)

Additionally, participants with a Master's degree are more willing to engage in future research, than the participants who were holders of a Bachelor's degree (p=0.001).

5. DISCUSSION

The study provides valuable insights into midwifery education, employment, and career aspirations. The impact of the global pandemic on education is a central theme, with over half of the respondents having navigated their studies during this challenging period. The pandemic has significantly impacted the quality of education, especially in clinical practice, practical training, and simulation training. This highlights the importance of having resilient educational frameworks that can

adapt to unforeseen disruptions.

The analysis focuses on the level of preparedness that graduates feel in caring for diverse populations. The results are generally positive, but there is room for improvement. Extra attention is required for communication challenges arising from cultural or linguistic differences. Women from diverse backgrounds, who are accustomed to different healthcare systems, may require additional information and support beyond the standard provisions in maternity care (2).

Additionally, concerns about low wages have emerged as a significant factor motivating graduates to seek different employment. This highlights the need for attention to remuneration structures within the midwifery profession to ensure fair compensation for these essential healthcare professionals. According to a report by the World Health Organization, around 40% of healthcare professionals worldwide are expected to resign from their positions in the coming decades, citing primarily insufficient incentives and low salaries (3). Therefore, job satisfaction, particularly regarding remuneration structures, is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor in retaining healthcare professionals in their work environment. Perceived unfairness in compensation for overtime and job demands is a significant determinant of reduced job satisfaction among midwives (4).

The career aspirations of midwifery graduates are diverse, ranging from hospital employment to establishing private self-employed practices. Many graduates also express a strong interest in research engagement within the next 5-10 years, indicating a promising inclination to contribute significantly to the advancement of midwifery knowledge.

The job satisfaction of midwives is influenced by various factors, including inadequate support from healthcare organization management, low remuneration, understaffing, insufficient time for professional activities, work-family imbalance, high workload, physical demands, limited professional development opportunities, and the overall working environment. This interplay can ultimately contribute to the decision to change jobs (5). Our study reveals that midwifery graduates express concern that the knowledge and practices they acquired during their education are not being applied appropriately in their work environment. The potential impact of the discrepancy between educational preparation and real-world application on job satisfaction is a cause for concern. This echoes the broader challenges observed in midwifery practice and underscores the ongoing dialogue between academic institutions and the reality of professional practice.

Sufficiency of knowledge gained in different subjects (all questions used a 1 to 5 rating scale)		n	%
Midwifery care during childbirth	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	63	57.3
	Moderate (3/5)	23	20.9
	Excellent (5/5)	15	13.6
Portpartum care	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	55	50.0
	Moderate (3/5)	25	22.7
	Excellent (5/5)	19	17.3
Full-term newborn care	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	57	51.8
	Moderate (3/5)	23	20.9
	Excellent (5/5)	16	14.5
Neonatal care in the NICU	Moderate (3/5)	48	43.6
	Minimally satisfactory (2/5)	37	33.6
	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	19	17.3
Midwifery duties in Gynecological/Obstetrical Surgeries	Moderate (3/5)	42	38.2
	Minimally satisfactory (2/5)	36	32.7
	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	24	21.8
Family Planning	Moderate (3/5)	46	41.8
	Minimally satisfactory (2/5)	28	25.5
	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	26	23.6
Midwifery duties in Primary Healthcare Structures	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	37	33.6
	Moderate (3/5)	37	33.6
	Minimally satisfactory (2/5)	24	21.8
Psychosomatic care	Fairly satisfactory (4/5)	49	44.5
	Moderate (3/5)	28	25.5
	Excellent (5/5)	16	14.5

Table 4. Sufficiency of knowledge gained in different subjects (N=110)

Examining the profile of those who graduated from the Midwifery Department of the International Hellenic University between 2016 and 2021, we noticed that only 10 men (3.7% of the graduates) completed their studies. However, the number of male graduates pursuing a career in midwifery remains unclear, as only two male graduates participated in the survey. Efforts need to be made for more male students to enroll Midwifery undergraduate studies. However, the significant majority of respondents that acknowledged a perceived divergence in workplace experiences between female and male midwives, suggest a notable gender-based disparity within the midwifery profession. This observation is not new in the midwifery field. Bekru et al. (4) found that female midwives reported higher job satisfaction compared to their male counterparts. Male midwives face various challenges in midwifery education and practice, including a sense of being singled out and excluded. Notably, they have reported instances of differential treatment in their work environment, training, and social spheres. This subtle negation of male midwives' potential to make distinctive contributions within the profession is rooted in gender rather than individual qualities (6). This differential treatment, rooted in gender rather than individual qualities, is perceived as a subtle negation of their potential to make distinctive contributions within the profession (6). Male nurses and midwives may receive preferential treatment in the job acquisition process due to their limited representation in the field and prevailing patriarchal ideologies and ethics within organizations and professions that tend to favor men and propel them into leadership positions (7). It is important to note that

this is a subjective evaluation and should be clearly marked as such. To foster an inclusive and equitable workplace for all midwives, regardless of gender, it is essential to further explore these perceptions and address gender-related challenges.

Our study results demonstrate that both OSP and NSP graduates acknowledged the significant role of their six-month internship in facilitating employment in the field of midwifery. It should be noted that practical experience plays a crucial role in shaping the learning process for future midwives, as 50% of midwifery education is obtained through clinical internships (8). Additionally, OSP graduates demonstrated a stronger belief in the contribution of the internship compared to NSP graduates. When assessing the adequacy of knowledge acquired by OSP and NSP graduates, a difference was evident in the domains of Postpartum Midwifery Care and Family Planning (9). In these subjects, OSP graduates rated the adequacy of knowledge received higher than NSP graduates did.

The difference in age between OSP and NSP may explain this finding, as OSP consists of older graduates who completed their studies before the challenges of the pandemic era. OSP graduates assigned a higher rating compared to their NSP counterparts who did not have similar educational opportunities, possibly due to limitations on clinical practices and visits during this period.

It is acknowledged that COVID-19 has affected some midwifery courses, resulting in the delivery of theoretical content in online formats. Graduates of this study reported a significant impact on the quality of their educational experience. A cross-sectional study conducted in Australia revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to midwifery students, including emotional burden. In addition, according to Kuliukas et al. (10), students reported that online learning was less robust and accessible than face-to-face learning, which limited their engagement.

Our data suggest that self-employed and public sector employees report higher levels of satisfaction with the fit between their employment and their studies, while their private sector counterparts report lower levels of satisfaction. Midwives gravitate towards self-employment for multiple reasons. Autonomous decision-making practice has been observed to increase job satisfaction in the midwifery field (9, 10)). A study conducted in Australia found that students believed that being a self-employed midwife allowed for both freedom and accountability in responsible practice, which was a determining factor in their career choice. Additionally, the students expressed a strong preference to avoid employment in private hospitals, citing a belief that midwives in such settings are restricted in practicing within their complete scope (11).

At the same time, compared to their counterparts in the private sector, the unemployed, and the self-employed, professionals in the public sector are more satisfied with their compensation in relation to the nature of their work. Papoutsis et al. (12) identified 'nature of the work,' 'supervision,' and 'salary' as key indicators of job satisfaction in the midwifery field. That study found that

the determinants of job satisfaction in the Greek public healthcare system were the 'nature of the work' and 'supervision,' while in the private healthcare system, 'interpersonal relations' had the greatest influence.

Additionally in our study, participants with a post-graduate degree showed a greater inclination towards future research compared to those with a Bachelor's degree. The European Strategic Direction (ESD) framework recognizes research as a crucial mechanism for nurses and midwives to effectively contribute to its Priority Areas of Action. These priorities include expanding and transforming education, strategic workforce planning, optimizing skill mix, ensuring positive work environments, and promoting evidence-based innovative practices (WHO, 2020) (9). This sentence emphasizes the significance of including nurses and midwives in research projects that evaluate healthcare services and generate evidence across the entire care continuum.

Regarding career reconsideration, most respondents who initially chose midwifery as their first preference expressed a willingness to enroll in the same department again. Conversely, a significant proportion of respondents who did not initially prioritize midwifery would choose not to re-enroll. This observation highlights the unique nature of the midwifery profession. Individuals who intentionally choose midwifery as their primary career path display a genuine and enduring interest in the field. An Australian study exploring the motivations behind midwifery students' career choices identified five themes. The factors that led to an interest in midwifery included exposure to midwifery through witnessing and hearing birth stories, the portrayal of midwives in the media, a genuine affection for babies, adopting a pragmatic approach, by being interested in the healthcare sector and intrigued by midwifery, and the aspiration to work in healthcare without being a nurse (Cullen et al. 2016). Another study has shown that younger student midwives are motivated by a desire to participate in healthcare, with a particular focus on well-being rather than illness, and an interest in working with women and babies (12).

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the employability of midwifery graduates. The research explores the factors that influence job placement and knowledge sufficiency, as well as the impact of external factors such as the pandemic. This study provides guidance for educators, policymakers, and practitioners to tailor strategies that enhance midwifery education. It is vital to ensure that graduates are well equipped to meet the ever-changing demands of the medical and nursing field. Such studies are important not only for academia but also for the holistic development of midwifery professionals.

- **Author's contribution:** All authors were involved in all steps of preparation this article. Final proofreading was made by the first author.
- **Conflicts of interest:** There are no conflicts of interest.

• **Financial support and sponsorship:** None.

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