

The impact of overqualification on proactive performance: A field study at Thi-Qar University

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Abstract: This research aims to clarify the impact of overqualification on the proactive performance of a sample of 178 employees working at the University of Thi-Qar's administration. The main idea of the study revolves around the fact that individuals' perception of possessing qualifications and abilities exceeding job requirements directly affects proactive performance. The current research adopted a questionnaire to collecting data for the variables, relying on pre-existing scales from previous studies. Two main hypotheses were considered: first, there is a statistically significant relationship between overqualification and proactive performance; and second, there is a statistically significant correlation between overqualification and proactive performance. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. The study confirmed its hypotheses, leading to a set of conclusions, the most important of which is that overqualification occurred at a moderate level, meaning that the sample perceived themselves as moderately overqualified in their jobs. This could be due to a partial gap between employees' qualifications and the requirements of their jobs. The research also recommended the necessity of redesigning jobs to better align with individual qualifications. The university should also provide ongoing development training to increase or fully utilize the capabilities and potential of its employees, and to bridge the gaps between qualifications and job requirements.

Keywords: Overqualification, Proactive Performance.

Introduction: The work environment has witnessed profound transformations in the structure of the labor market in recent decades as a result of economic changes, social pressures, and government employment policies. This has led to a significant increase in the phenomenon of overqualification. Overqualification is defined as an employment situation where an individual's qualifications, such as education and experience, exceed the requirements of the job and are not utilized effectively (Erdogan et al., 2011). The phenomenon of overqualification is attributed to a set of structural, social, and political factors that have interacted to create a clear gap between the outputs of the education system and the needs of the labor market. Among the most prominent of these factors is the significant expansion of higher education outputs compared to the limited capacity of the labor market, in both the public and private sectors, to absorb these outputs according to its actual needs. Employment has often become a means of improving an individual's future circumstances, rather than a direct response to the actual needs of the labor market. Several factors have contributed to this oversupply of qualified individuals, including Law No. (20) of 2020, which contributed to an increase in the number of postgraduate graduates by allowing study while working. Another reason is the state's reliance on public sector employment as a tool to address unemployment, particularly after 2003. The Cabinet enacted legislation to employ university graduates, such as Law No. (59) of 2017 concerning the employment of university graduates. Although these laws were enacted in response to the socioeconomic pressures faced by students and employees, their implementation was often not based on a thorough analysis of actual labor needs within institutions. Numerous previous studies have shown that the effects of overqualification vary depending on the organizational context, sometimes leading to negative outcomes and other times to positive ones. For example, overqualification is associated with negative outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction and increased desire to leave work, resulting from individuals feeling that their skills and qualifications are not being utilized optimally and that the organization is not valuing them adequately (Erdogan and Bauer, 2021;

Liu et al., 2015). However, if employees can utilize their skills and qualifications creatively, the impact of overqualification can be positive rather than negative. The feeling of being overqualified can even be

transformed into an opportunity for career growth (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). In contemporary literature, researchers have begun to pay increasing attention to the concept of overqualification and its impact on proactive and initiative-based behaviors. Proactive performance is considered one of the most important behavioral outcomes that organizations strive to promote. This behavior represents the self-initiated efforts of employees to effect positive change, improve work methods, and anticipate and address problems before they occur. This means that proactive performance is a vital behavior that helps organizations adapt to environmental changes and achieve higher levels of effectiveness and innovation, while simultaneously focusing on the future and change (Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore, this research paper seeks to explore the nature of the relationship between overqualification and proactive performance at Thi-Qar University.

Research Methodology

First: The Research Problem

Iraqi organizations today suffer from an exacerbation of the phenomenon of relative overqualification as a result of recent imbalances in the labor market and the poor alignment between employees' qualifications and available job opportunities. This has made overqualification a significant organizational issue attracting the attention of researchers and practitioners due to its direct impact on employee behavior and organizational effectiveness. Most studies consider overqualification a negative phenomenon with several significant adverse consequences, including decreased job satisfaction (Maynard et al., 2006), poor work performance (Arar & Yurdakul, 2026), and increased employee turnover (Khassawneh et al., 2023). This phenomenon raises questions about how it is reflected in employee behavior and job outcomes, particularly proactive performance, which is a fundamental requirement for modern organizations. Therefore, the research problem lies in the lack of clarity regarding how overqualification affects employees' proactive performance, and whether it represents an obstacle to utilizing their capabilities for the benefit of the organization or a resource that can be invested in to enhance initiative and development within the workplace. Accordingly, the study problem is expressed through the following questions.

1. Does overqualification have a significant effect on the proactive behavior of e Employees at Thi Qar University?
2. Is there a significant relationship between overqualification and proactive performance among employees at Thi Qar University?

Second: Importance of the Research

1- Theoretical Importance

This study highlights two important issues in business management, focusing on organizational behavior. First, there is overqualification, where the modern labor market is witnessing a significant increase in the number of individuals whose qualifications exceed the requirements of their assigned jobs (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). Second, there is proactive performance, which reflects an individual's ability to take initiative and effect change to improve work (Parker et al., 2006). The importance of this study stems from the ongoing debate about the impact of overqualification on individual behavior. Many studies indicate that individuals feeling overqualified for their jobs can lead to negative feelings, frustration, and a sense that their skills are not being utilized, which negatively impacts their overall well-being (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). Conversely, if the organizational environment is supportive and effectively utilizes employees' qualifications and skills, individuals are able to exhibit positive behaviors such as proactive thinking (Luksyte and Spitzmueller, 2016). This discrepancy in findings reflects a need to understand the nature of the relationship between overqualification and proactive performance.

2- Practical Importance

The practical impact of this issue lies in providing assistance to the University of Dhi Qar's administration to identify ways to optimally utilize employee qualifications. This is achieved by matching individuals with jobs that align with their qualifications and abilities, thereby preventing a shortage of qualified personnel. The University of Dhi Qar's administration is considered a suitable choice for achieving the study's objectives, given that these institutions have witnessed the appointment of a large number of postgraduate degree holders in recent years, in accordance with government employment legislation, particularly Law No. (59) of 2017 concerning the employment of postgraduate degree holders. Furthermore, Law No. (20) of 2020 allows employees to pursue postgraduate studies while in service, which has increased the likelihood of overqualification within the university administration.

Third: Research Objectives

- 1- Determining the level of individuals' awareness of their additional qualifications and proactive performance

2- Determining the nature of the relationship between additional qualifications and proactive performance at the University of Thi Qar

3- Studying the impact of additional qualifications on the proactive performance of employees at the University of Thi Qar.

Fourth: Research Hypothesis

The current research consists of two unidimensional variables: (1) Overqualification, which was measured among employees in the departments of the research sample based on the scale (Maynard et al., 2006) used by many studies in measuring overqualification, and it consists of (9) items distributed on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree), (2) proactive performance, which was measured among employees based on the study (Griffin et al., 2007) on which many subsequent studies were based, and this scale consists of (3) items distributed on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree).

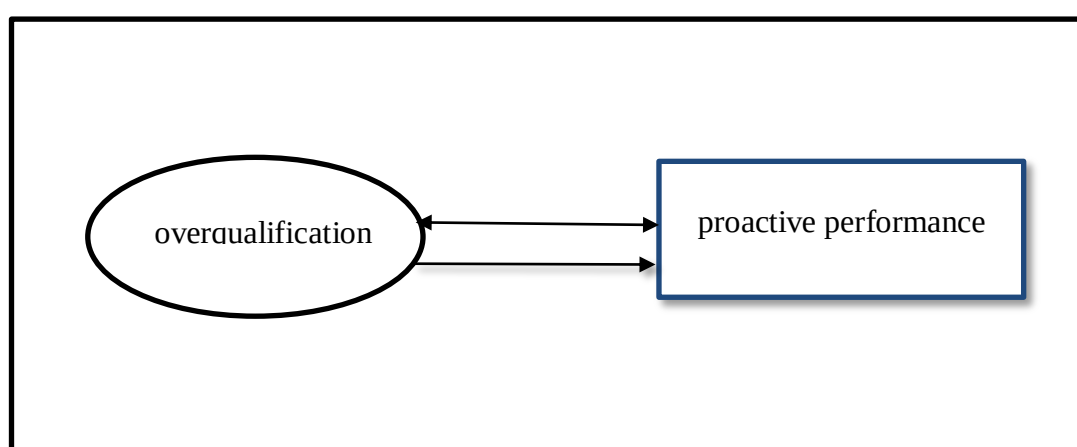


Figure (1) Hypothetical research model

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the research variables

Fifth: Research Hypotheses

The hypothetical framework reveals that the research hypotheses explain the correlation and influence relationships between the study variables, through which we arrive at answers to the research questions.

H1: There is a statistically significant impact relationship between overqualification and proactive behavior.

H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between overqualification and proactive performance.

Sixth: Research Population and Sample

The research population consists of all Iraqi public universities. The sample is the University of Dhi Qar. An electronic questionnaire was sent to the 278 participants and also shared via a link on social media. 178 completed questionnaires were returned. Table that follow illustrate the demographic factors for the sample used in this study (sex and educational level).

Table (1) Demographic Variables

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	82	46.1%
	Female	96	53.9%
Total		178	100%

Educational Attainment	Diploma or Below	45	25.3%
	Bachelor's Degree	61	34.3%
	Master's Degree	54	30.3%
	Doctorate Degree	18	10.1%
Total		178	100%

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on statistical data.

The table above presents the demographic data for the study sample of 178 employees at the University of Dhi Qar. Regarding gender, there appears to be a relative balance between male (46.1%) and female (53.9%) employees. There is also a noticeable variation in educational qualifications, with a significant number of participants holding relatively high qualifications. Among the survey participants, the majority hold a bachelor's degree (34.3%), followed by those with a master's degree (30.3%), then a diploma or lower (25.3%), and finally a doctorate (10.1%). This trend is significant for the research, as nearly half of the participants hold advanced educational qualifications, indicating a sense of competence beyond the scope of their job responsibilities.

Seventh. Research Limitations

1. Human Limits:

The current research tested its hypotheses on a group of employees at the University of Thi Qar.

2. Spatial Limits:

The research was conducted at the University of Thi Qar.

3. Temporal Limits:

The research period extended from September 2025 to April 2026, and the questionnaire was distributed during November and December

Eighth: Research Measurements.

Table (2) Research Measures

	Variable Name	Variable Type	Scale Type	Scale Range	Source
1	Overqualification	Independent	Five -point Likert Scale	Responses are provided on a scale ranging from 1 (Directly Related) to 4 (Not Related).	(Maynard et al., 2006)
2	Proactive Performance	Dependent	Five-point Likert Scale	Responses are provided on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).	(Griffin et al., 2007)

Theoretical Framework for Research Variables

First: Overqualification

1- The Concept of Overqualification

Overqualification has been identified as a commonly occurring phenomenon in the current labor market in many different industries. Research carried out by a survey among employees in Britain between 1992 and 2012 indicated that 30% of the respondents regarded themselves as overqualified in relation to their work, and the level of educational progression is associated with overqualification among workers (Felstead & Green, 2013). Thus, overqualification is a commonly observed phenomenon among employees. Scholars have developed an interest in studying overqualification using a more analytical approach. Many scholars have highlighted some important issues associated with overqualification within organizational behavior. In this regard, according to Deng et al. (2018), workers who view themselves as overqualified tend to be vulnerable to experiencing unfavorable organizational outcomes such as low job satisfaction, low organizational commitment, and engaging in deviant behaviors such as turnover intentions.

Overqualification is referred to as having more qualifications – experiences, knowledge, skills, abilities, and education – in comparison to what is required by a worker in his/her job (Debus et al., 2020). Overqualification has been considered a detrimental aspect in the employment process which may prevent employees from becoming fully engaged at their work and remaining loyal to their organizations (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). According to Howard et al. (2022), overqualification arises due to having people in positions whose demands are below their levels of education. The phenomenon is common among workers amid the current economic recession triggered by the spread of the coronavirus disease. Ma et al. (2023) argue that when people have qualifications and skills above what is needed for a job, they have an incentive to make themselves unique by creating innovative things to improve their job performance. Demir et al. (2022) state that individuals with high qualifications, skills, and abilities compared to job requirements have better insights about their job and easily meet job demands. According to Çalışkan (2025), the word "overqualified" means people with higher knowledge, skills, experience, and qualifications in relation to their jobs.

Second: The Benefits of Overqualification

While the past body of research tended to focus on the negative consequences linked to overqualification, the latest empirical evidence suggests that there are certain positive implications of this state for organizations. While being overqualified entails a person experiencing some level of discrepancy between his/her skills and requirements of the job, he/she faces certain benefits from such a situation as well. According to Erdogan et al. (2011), some overqualified employees choose jobs, which do not correspond to their skills and capabilities in order to have time for spending with their families and friends, thus, eliminating work-life conflict. Some scholars indicate that overqualified personnel is able to maintain high standards of performance beyond expectations (Fine & Nevo, 2007). According to Zhang et al. (2016), people who consider themselves overqualified enjoy enhanced cognitive and skill abilities that allow them to perform the tasks effectively and creatively enough, exceeding job expectations. In addition, people who find themselves overqualified can be promoted to the next hierarchical level and, as a rule, take responsibility beyond their position due to enhanced knowledge, qualifications, and skills. Thus, overqualified individuals become potential leaders for the future.

Second: Proactive Performance

1- The Concept of Proactive Performance

A literature review reveals that researchers have often used proactive behavior and proactive performance as synonymous concepts with the understanding that proactive performance originates from proactive behavior. This approach will be followed in this study to stay consistent with the existing literature. Proactive performance can be explained as an individual's initiative to improve himself/herself or his/her environment (Wu and Parker, 2013). Xu et al. (2015) defined proactive behavior as the process through which the employee makes efforts to seek opportunities in the work environment. According to Liu et al. (2016), proactive performance involves voluntary contributions made by the employee in order to achieve organizational goals. In all the above definitions, the definition of proactive behavior appears to be consistent with what Parker (2006) described. Thus, Parker et al. (2019) defined proactive performance as the spontaneous, self-directed and forward-looking activities made by the employee to make changes to his/her job environment to bring about gains for himself/herself and the organization. Opsata (2020) defined proactive performance as a set of conscious efforts to realize one's goals professionally, leading to better working conditions. Zhang et al. (2022) defined proactive performance as the spontaneous, future-oriented and change-oriented behavior made by the employee to improve his/her current work environment. Finally, according to Zhao (2025), proactive performance involves spontaneous, self-directed activities started by the colleague in the workplace with the aim of making future improvements in the organization's current work environment.

2- The Importance of Proactive Performance

A. Individual Level

Previous studies indicate that proactive employees experience higher job satisfaction across various aspects of their roles. According to Seibert et al., employees who exhibit proactive behavior experience greater job satisfaction when facing challenges at work. Similarly, proactive employees are characterized by high job satisfaction and strong organizational commitment, according to Ashforth et al. (2007). Proactive performance is particularly effective for new employees, helping them solve work-related problems and

offer innovative solutions. This type of performance appears to help new employees adapt quickly to the new work environment, as Cooper-Thomas et al. demonstrate that proactivity has a positive impact on new employee happiness. These behaviors contribute to fostering creativity and innovation. Proactive performance also allows employees to strive to improve work environments, which positively impacts their performance, according to Vandewalle (2003).

B. Organizational Level

Proactive and positive employee performance is a key determinant of teamwork efficiency and strong organizational performance in modern organizations. Employee proactivity is a significant factor in determining competitive advantages and organizational success (Parker et al., 2019). Proactive performance fosters positive social relationships among employees, leaders, and colleagues in the workplace, leading to improved group and organizational performance. Numerous studies, such as those by Wayne et al. (1999), indicate a link between effective communication between leaders and employees and improved proactive performance, which in turn leads to organizational change. Furthermore, some research suggests that proactive performance is geared towards overcoming recurring challenges and pressures faced by the organization, with a focus on solving current and future problems (Speichala and Sonntag, 2011). Proactively performing employees receive feedback on their performance, demonstrate an understanding of their job responsibilities, and consequently perform their work more effectively (Lam et al., 2007). As Zhang et al. (2022) noted, proactive performance focuses on the future and change, where employees engage in behaviors aimed at improving their environment or the organization's current state. Employee proactive performance means their voluntary contribution to achieving organizational goals and accomplishing tasks (Liu et al., 2016). Proactive performance encourages innovation and change within the organization, thereby increasing its effectiveness (Tang et al., 2021). Li and Abbas (2025) reveal that proactive performance improves processes, increases organizational effectiveness, and fosters innovation. Proactive employees help organizations adapt to changes in the work environment and contribute to achieving their goals.

Practical Aspects of the Research

First: Scale Reliability

The scale's reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. The researcher calculated the alpha coefficient for each scale used in the study to test its reliability. The alpha coefficient ranges between 0 and 1. The closer it is to 1, the higher the reliability; the closer it is to 0, the lower the reliability. Table (3) shows the reliability coefficients for the study's scales.

Table (3) Reliability Coefficients for the Study Scales

Variable	Number of Items	(Cronbach's Alpha)
Overqualification (A1–A9)	9	0.970
Proactive Performance (D1–D3)	3	0.787

Source:Prepared by the researcher based on statistical outputs.

Reliability analysis of the measurement tool utilized in the field study conducted at Thi-Qar University is depicted in Table 1 below. Cronbach's Alpha method was adopted to check internal consistency. According to the results, reliability levels were found to be very high, with the value of Cronbach's Alpha being 0.910. This means that the test items were constructed consistently and could reliably measure the phenomena investigated on repeat trials. Independent Variable (Overqualification): Cronbach's Alpha for the independent variable is 0.970. This means that the test items had a high level of internal consistency. Dependent Variable (Proactive Performance): Cronbach's Alpha for the dependent variable stands at 0.787, which is higher than the accepted minimum of 0.70.

Second: Presentation of the Descriptive Statistics Results for the Study Variables

The following table presents the descriptive statistics for the sample used in this study (overqualification, proactive performance).

Table (4) Descriptive Statistics Results for the Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Overqualification	3.122	1.100
Proactive Performance	3.964	0.561

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on statistical outputs.

Table (4) of the descriptive statistics shows the opinions of the participants in this research regarding the two main variables under study. According to the data obtained from the analysis, the independent variable – excess qualifications – shows a mean of 3.122 with a standard deviation of 1.100. This means that the majority of employees consider themselves overqualified, as most responses were neutral regarding their possession of skills, experience, and educational qualifications exceeding the requirements of their jobs. However, the large standard deviation indicates a significant variation in experience among the participants in this research, resulting from differing perspectives on excess qualifications.

On the other hand, according to the results mentioned above, the dependent variable, proactive performance, achieved a very high evaluation level and showed a clear positive trend with a mean of 3.964. This indicates a pattern among employees, namely their tendency to take proactive measures, anticipate potential problems, and seek practical solutions that go beyond simply performing their duties. This observation is further confirmed by the low standard deviation of 0.561..

Third: Inferential Statistics of the Study

Based on the research methodology, we test the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a statistically significant effect of overtraining on proactive behavior.

Table (5) Simple Regression Analysis

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.490	.120		37.394	.001
Overqualification	-.168	.036	-.330	-4.641	.001
a. Dependent Variable: Proactive_Performance					

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on statistical outputs.

The research tries to verify the assumption that overqualification influences proactivity amongst employees working at Thi-Qar University in a statistically significant way. According to simple regression analysis, there is statistical significance at 1% level of the influence of overqualification on proactive performance. In this case, the regression coefficient B = -0.168. This is a negative number indicating the opposite direction of influence of the variables involved.

The standardized beta was found to be -0.330, showing that overqualification has a considerable negative impact on proactive performance. The obtained t-value is -4.641 and is statistically significant at $p = 0.001$, which is lower than 0.05; hence, we can state that the result obtained in our study is indeed statistically significant. In other words, people who feel that their qualifications go beyond what they need to perform in the role can be less likely to exhibit proactive behavior because they have a feeling that their skills are underutilized.

The constant value (Constant = 4.490) indicates that the level of proactive performance is relatively high when the effect of overqualification is absent or when its value is zero.

The coefficient of interpretation (R^2) was approximately (0.109), indicating that overqualification explains (10.9%) of the variance in proactive performance, while the remaining (89.1%) is attributed to other factors not included in the model.

H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between overqualification and proactive performance.

Table (6) Pearson Correlation Results

Variables	Statistical Measure	Overqualification	Proactive Performance
Overqualification	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.330
	Sig. (2-tailed)	—	0.000
	N	178	178
Proactive Performance	Pearson Correlation	-0.330	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	—
	N	178	178

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on statistical data.

The inverse (negative) relationship can be established based on the results of the Pearson correlation analysis conducted using 178 cases (Table 6): the correlation coefficient for the two variables is equal to $r = -0.330$. Moreover, such correlation can be considered statistically significant at the level of significance equal to 0.000, and can be evaluated as moderately strong. The obtained statistically significant negative correlation implies the existence of the tendency whereby people with high levels of academic qualification, or even overqualified staff members employed at Thi Qar University, have low proactive performance and are less likely to engage into any positive activities directed to improve the work system. As far as the interpretation of the results in the context of the main concepts of organizational behavior theories is concerned, the conclusion appears to be logical. People, who are overqualified for the position they occupy, usually tend to feel frustrated, less motivated, and dissatisfied because of the unjustness caused by underutilization of their capabilities; therefore, there is no intention to engage into proactive actions.

Conclusions

1. The results showed a moderate level of overqualification among the study sample, meaning that participants perceived their qualifications as exceeding the requirements of their jobs to a moderate degree. This may be attributed to a partial gap between employees' qualifications and the demands of their tasks.
2. The results demonstrated a statistically significant negative impact of overqualification on proactive behavior. This means that when employees perceive their qualifications as exceeding the requirements of their jobs, their proactive initiative at work decreases.
3. The results showed an inverse relationship between the degree of overqualification and individuals' willingness to contribute new ideas to improve their work.
4. Overqualified employees may tend to reduce their voluntary behavior at work due to decreased job satisfaction. This may be a consequence of their overqualification.
5. The study revealed that a lack of investment in employees' skills and assigning them tasks that do not match their abilities contribute to a decrease in proactive behavior.
6. The study concluded that the absence of a supportive or encouraging organizational environment reinforces an individual's perception of overqualification and thus negatively impacts proactive performance..

Recommendations:

1. Job design to be updated in relation to the individual qualifications; university should also provide continuous development training in order to increase or fully use employees' abilities and potential and fill up the gaps between qualifications and job requirements.

2. Encourage proactive behavior by providing a favorable organizational work environment to stimulate initiative, creativity and innovation as well as rewards and incentives for those employees who contribute by their new ideas to raise performance.
3. Encourage employees to participate in decision making and submission of new proposals to increase proactive behavior and initiative at the work.
4. Provide training opportunities and continuous development for employees to maximize their abilities and potentials in the organization.
5. Establishing clear policies on promotion and job mobility which allows employees with adequate qualification to move into appropriate jobs that are consistent with their skills and academic degrees.
6. Facilitate the creative work environment by allowing employees to have authority, autonomy, independence and confidence in their work so they reach high levels of proactive behavior.

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