

ORIGINAL PAPER**Nurses' Perspective of Distance Post-Graduate Education: A Turkish Study****Memnun Seven, RN, PhD**

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of the study was to evaluate the opinion of nurses on distance post-graduate education.

Methods: This descriptive study was conducted in a university hospital and in a nursing school of this university. A total 238 nurses were included in the study. The "Data Collection Form" was used to collect the data.

Results: Among the nurses, 58.6% are willing to continue postgraduate education in nursing. The most common (65.4%) motivation for wishing postgraduate education was to be able to pursue new developments in nursing science. 62.6% of the nurses did not wish postgraduate education by reason of not being having been able to obtain the required English proficiency test score. Also, 40.8% of the nurses thought that distance education may be an expensive way of teaching and this method may lead to insufficiencies in practical education.

Conclusions: This study shows that nurses had some concerns about the quality of education. Therefore, distance postgraduate education programs that are newly initiated and planned for the future should be designed carefully to meet the requirements of theoretical and practical education at a high rate, to use synchronized/asynchronous distance education methods, to allow students interview with the instructor face to face, to be accessed by everyone, and to be presented cost-effectively.

Key words: distance education, nursing, graduate, perspective

Introduction

In recent years, prominent changes have occurred in nursing education in Turkey as in the rest of the world. Professional nursing education first began in Turkey in 1925 by the opening of Kızılay Nursing School (Bahçecik & Alpar, 2009; Can 2010; Çınar & Altun, 2010) and when schools with four years of education opened in 1959, it was upgraded to the bachelor's degree (Can, 2010). Nursing education has been continuing in a complex education system providing different diploma degrees as high school, bachelor, undergraduate and graduate at the same time period up to 1997. By this time, in order to eliminate this chaos in education and in order to train fully equipped nurses with knowledge and skills according to the needs of time, high school and license degree schools

were closed. In Turkey, nursing distance education associate degree program that is the first example of a distance education practice was also closed according to this decision (Bahçecik & Alpar, 2009; Can, 2010; Senyuva, 2011). These changes in nursing education in Turkey accelerated in 2007 with renewal of the Nursing Law valid since 1954. This law ended the nursing education at different levels and nominated those completing four years of education as a 'nurse', and those with postgraduate education were nominated as 'specialist nurses'. In this context, the nurses' duties and responsibilities have begun to be legally determined according to their education (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, Nursing Law). As a result, be it the will of not remaining behind the requirements of this era, be it the differentiation of the nurses' tasks according to the education levels, the desires of

nurses with associate degree or lower degree of education to receive a license education and those with license education to undergo postgraduate education, have increased. In accordance with these increasing demands, the Nursing License Completion Program began to be carried out first in 2010. This program provided undergraduate nurses to be graduates by means of distance education (Nursing bachelor's degree completion program 2012; Senyuva, 2011). The lack of nursing schools and academic personnel in all cities caused difficulties in continuing the graduate education by conventional methods. These difficulties entailed planning the postgraduate education programs as in graduate completion programs.

Distance education is an important strategy used both to increase the accessibility to nursing education and to allow nurses to follow new developments in the changing and developing health system (Moore & Hart, 2004; Mancuso, 2009; Smith, et. al., 2009; Kataoka-Yahiro, et. al., 2011). However, in order to carry out a qualified training program, adequate technologic facilities, experienced staff and structured programs are needed (Moore & Hart, 2004; Reiners, 2005; Kirsten & Black, 2011). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing stated that effective use of technologies in distance education would strengthen the practical training of nurses and the academic personnel in the future (Mancuso, 2009). However, this kind of training, when compared to conventional methods, has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages may occur depending on the aim of the program and the implementation pattern (Knebel, 2001; Atack & Rankin, 2002; Chaffin & Maddux, 2004; Bigony, 2010; Reiners, 2005; Kirsten & Black, 2011; Kataoka-Yahiro, et. al., 2011). When considered for students, distance education may not provide adequate educational experience related with nursing skills that require interpersonal communication (Smith, et. al., 2009; Puterbaugh, et. al., 2010). It may not be an appropriate method for nurses with limited internet access and for those with limited computer talents (Chaffin & Maddux, 2004; Gerkin, et. al., 2009). As for the instructors, it requires more time to mentor the students, give feedback and effectively assess them (Moore & Hart, 2004; Smith et. al., 2009; Mancuso, 2009; Puterbaugh, et. al., 2010). Furthermore, during the students' assessment, there are difficulties such as the inability to determine the real identity

of the person who did the homework or the exams (Smith, et. al., 2009; Mancuso, 2009).

When the advantages and the disadvantages of distance education were evaluated, concerns have emerged regarding the quality of distance education and postgraduate education in nursing, which have newly been applied in our country. In 2011, while the distance education program planning studies continued, the Turkish Nursing Education Association arranged a workshop with participation of nursing license program administrators, instructors, Turkish Nurses Association and special branch associations. In this workshop, the effects of distance education on nursing education have been discussed. In conclusion of this workshop, it has been stated that distance graduate education in Turkey in present conditions has not been appropriate with the consensus of all peers; however, it has been stated that distance postgraduate education may be begun to meet the international accreditation criteria Nursing Education Association (Report of the Workshop, 2011). While this discussion continues, some schools began to open distance postgraduate programs in nursing by 2012 (Atatürk University, Graduate Education Regulation, 2012). Nursing education should be at a level that does not decrease the quality of profession and should provide the same basic knowledge and skills for individuals at the same educational level. At this point, the opinion of instructors that carry out nursing education on distance education process is an important issue. Furthermore, it is thought that the expectations, the reasons for choosing this distance education and the opinion of nurses that will have the education in this program are important.

In this study, it was aimed to evaluate the opinion of nurses in a university hospital and nursing school on distance post-graduate education. In order to reach this purpose, answers to following questions are sought:

1. What are the reasons for nurses to opt for/not opt for distance post-graduate education?
2. What are the opinion of nurses on distance post-graduate education and the affecting factors?

Methods

Participants

This descriptive study was carried out in a university hospital and in a nursing school of this university in Turkey. The population of this

research was composed of 650 nurses working in the hospital and in the nursing school. In the study period, 75 nurses that had been off duty for a long time were excluded from the study. The study was completed with a total of 238 nurses, excluding those who had disagreed to participate in the study, those off duty and those filling the forms incompletely.

Measures

The "Data Collection Form" developed by researchers was used to collect the data. The data collection form comprised a total of 18 questions divided into two groups. In the first section of the form, the socio-demographic characteristics of participants such as age, marital status and the educational level were questioned. Also in this section, the working hours of nurses, their professional lives such as clinics they worked in and their statuses and their education in different fields were questioned. In the period the study was carried out, distance postgraduate education had been planned in Turkey, but the student registration had not started. In the second section of the form, the opinions of the nurses regarding the newly applied distance postgraduate education in nursing were questioned. In this section, there were statements related with distance nursing education, the postgraduate education process and its results. These statements, which have been made according to the review of the literature, consists of advantages and disadvantages of distance education over conventional education (Cook, *et. al.*, 2004; Gerkin, *et. al.*, 2009, Smith, *et. al.*, 2009; Mancuso, 2009; Bigony, 2010). The participants' agreement levels to the statements were graded by the three points likert scale as "I agree", "I disagree" and "neutral". They were also requested to grade their opinion between 0 and 100 about "To what extent would distance postgraduate education in nursing be adequate, providing appropriate conditions in Turkey, compared to conventional nursing education". In order to evaluate the applicability of the questionnaire form, the opinions of nursing specialists were received. Before the research was carried out, a pilot study was conducted and these participants were not included in the study.

Procedures

The study was begun after having obtained the ethics committee approval. The investigators

informed the nurses in all the units about the aim and method of the study. Nurses who agreed to participate in the study and gave consent, received the questionnaire forms and were informed on how to fill the form. The filled data collection forms were collected by the investigators. Each nurse filled up the form in about mean 15-20 minutes.

Statistical Analyses

The SPSS for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) software, version 15.0, was used for the statistical analysis. The distribution of the data was presented as counts and percentages, while the descriptive statistics were presented using the arithmetic means and standard deviations, minimums-maximums, frequencies and percentages. The Chi-square test was used to analyze the data.

Results

All of the nurses working in this medical center were female. The mean age of the nurses was 32.72 ± 6.07 and their mean working period as nurses was 11.59 ± 6.63 years. Among the nurses, 62.2% had undergraduate diploma, 37.4% were in internal medicine clinics and 69.7% were clinical nurses. Furthermore, 14.7% had had education in branches other than nursing (Table 1).

The most common (65.4%) motivation for wishing/pursuing postgraduate education in nursing was to be able to pursue new developments in health and nursing science. Furthermore, 62.6% of the nurses did not wish postgraduate education by reason of not being having been able to obtain the required English proficiency test score (Table 2).

Discussion

In this study, the nurses' opinions about distance postgraduate education were evaluated. All of the nurses participating in the study were female and more than half had graduate diploma in nursing. In Turkey, only women attending nursing education could work as nurses up until 2007.

A new nursing law introduced in 2007 allowed males to study nursing in order to become nurses.

This law also removed different levels of nursing education and in order someone to be a nurse, and graduate education became obligatory for nurses (Can, 2010).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics Of Participants (n=238)

Characteristics	n	%
Age (years) (mean±SD)	32.72±6.07	
Work period (years) (mean±SD)	11.59±6.63	
Education level		
High school	2	0.8
Bachelor	12	5.0
Undergraduate*	148	62.2
Postgraduate (MSc)	28	11.8
Postgraduate (PhD)	48	20.2
Marital status		
Married	144	60.5
Single	94	39.5
Actual work unit		
Internal medicine	89	37.4
Surgery	50	21.0
Intensive care	15	6.7
Emergency unit	14	5.9
Outpatient	13	5.5
School of Nursing	56	23.5
Actual professional status		
Clinical nurse	166	69.7
Clinical nurse in charge	16	6.7
Instructor	56	23.5
Other education		
Yes	35	14.7
No	203	85.3

* Among these nurses, 34.9% had become undergraduates by distance education.

Table 2: Nurses Willing/Unwilling To Continue Postgraduate Education

	n	%
Participants willing to continue postgraduate education in nursing (n=162)		
Wants	95	58.6
Does not want	67	41.4
Participants willing to continue distance postgraduate education in nursing (n=162)		
Yes	119	73.5
No	43	26.5
Participants' reasons for continuing/willing to continue postgraduate education* (n=171)		
To improve professional knowledge and skills	112	65.4
To be able to follow new developments in health and nursing science.	114	66.6
To be able to have higher status and possibility of promotion	92	53.8
To be a lecturer / faculty	78	45.6
Participants' reasons for not continuing/ not willing to continue postgraduate education* (n=67)		
Thinking that not useful for their profession	26	38.8
Having family responsibilities	13	19.4
Having work responsibilities	2	2.9
Failing in foreign language exams necessary for education	42	62.6

*Participants marked more than one item.

Table 3: Thoughts Of Nurses On Distance Graduate Education In Turkey (n=238)

	n	%
Nurses' following the developments related with postgraduate education in nursing in Turkey		
With enough knowledge	135	56.7
With limited knowledge	76	31.9
Do not know	27	11.3
Nurses' opinion about distance graduate education in Turkey		
Positive	148	62.2
Negative	90	37.8
The percentage of distance education meeting the success of nursing education	57.21±26.70 (min;0-max;100)	

Table 4: Nurses' Opinion Related With Distance Post-Graduate Education Process And Its Results (n=238)

	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
May provide equality for fast and slow learners	82	34.5	63	26.5	93	39.1
May provide opportunity for those who cannot continue education at any place and any program	61	25.6	27	11.3	150	63.0
May be an easier course than conventional education methods	71	29.8	44	18.5	123	51.7
May be insufficient in practical studies	86	36.1	55	23.1	97	40.8
May be an expensive education	80	33.6	61	25.6	97	40.8
It may be more difficult for those with inability to use computers and internet	92	38.7	66	27.7	80	33.6
May result in less sharing between the trainer and the trainees	70	29.4	76	31.9	92	38.7
As immediate feedback is not possible for learners, it may cause defects in education	73	30.7	70	30.7	92	38.7
Increases malpractice	81	34.0	80	33.6	77	32.4
Learning and reinforcement is difficult as there is no role model	82	34.5	72	30.3	84	35.3

Table 5: Comparison Of Nurses' Socio-Demographic Characteristics According To Their Will For Distance Postgraduate Education

	Supporting distance postgraduate education		Against distance postgraduate education		χ^2	p
	n	%	n	%		
Age (years)						
19-31	67	53.6	58	46.4		
32 and over	81	71.7	32	28.3	8.251	0.003
Work period						
1-10 years	57	48.7	60	51.3		
11-20 years	71	72.4	27	27.6	19.416	<0.001
21years and over	20	87.0	3	13.0		
Educational level						
High school and undergraduate	13	92.9	1	7.1		
Graduate	118	79.7	30	20.3	76.212	<0.001
Postgraduate	17	22.4	59	77.6		
Distance education experience						
Yes	62	74.7	21	25.3		
No	86	55.5	69	44.5	8.487	0.002
Marital status						
Married	96	66.6	48	33.3		
Single	52	55.3	42	44.7	3.114	0.052
Working unit						
Clinics	135	74.2	47	25.8		
Nursing School	13	23.2	43	76.8	47.295	<0.001
Current professional status						
Clinical nurse	124	74.7	42	25.3		
Clinical supervisor nurse	11	68.8	5	31.2	47.515	<0.001
Instructor	13	23.2	43	76.8		

The increased demand for nurses to complete graduate education resulted in a decision to allow undergraduate nurses to have an opportunity to complete graduate education by means of distance education in 2010 (Karaman, 2011). Within the scope of this program, about 13200 nurses began the graduate education and most of these nurses completed their education and received their diplomas. In this study, 34.9% of the nurses included had already received their graduate diplomas within this program.

More than half of nurses with undergraduate level and under, stated that they wished to continue postgraduate education and in particular, about three fourths of them agreed to receive distance postgraduate education. The most common reasons (more than half) for their wish to continue education were 'to increase their knowledge and skills' or 'to follow developments in nursing and health'. Kataoka-Yahiro, *et. al.*, (2011) stated that most of the nurses with different levels of education stated that they wished to continue education in different nursing branches in order to acquire more detailed information. It is inevitable for nurses to continue their education in the continuously changing and developing health sciences (Atack & Rankin, 2002). There are a very small number of studies in the literature investigating the continuation of nursing to postgraduate education and the factors affecting this decision. Chang, *et. al.*, (2003) stated that more than half of graduate nurses needed to continue education to keep their professional knowledge and skills up to date. The desire of nurses to continue postgraduate education was similar to those in the literature.

The main reason that has prevented nurses from receiving postgraduate education is insufficient points acquired from the English language exam that is necessary to begin postgraduate education. As in our study, another study in a country in which the English language is not the native language, reported that the most notable obstacle for nurses to continue their education was the inadequacy of English and self-confidence (Chang, *et. al.*, 2003). In Turkey, in order to participate in postgraduate education, one of the prerequisites in many universities is to know English at a certain level. Therefore, it is mandatory to get a certain

point from the English language exam. However, by means of the newly applied distance education, English is not an obligatory for admission to postgraduate education. The vast majority of nurses are thought to continue their education through distance education because of this. However, instead of abating the mandatory English language adequacy for postgraduate education, the teaching of English language should be accentuated in the graduate and lower degrees of education. In countries where English is the native language, nurses leave their education because of economic reasons, professional or familial responsibilities, lack of time and geographic obstacles (Chang, *et. al.*, 2003; Moore & Hart, 2004; Cathro, 2011). In our study, these factors had affected the desires of nurses to continue postgraduate education to a lower extent.

More than half of the nurses participating in this study were in favor of distance postgraduate education in Turkey. Nurses mostly think that distance education will provide an opportunity for those who cannot continue education for different reasons to receive education wherever and whatever they want. Many studies in the literature have reported that distance education is an important opportunity to acquire education at appropriate times and to attend the programs they wish, for nurses who cannot continue conventional education (Knebel, 2001; Cook, *et. al.*, 2004; Bigony, 2010; Karaman, 2011; Gormley, *et. al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, nurses think that distance postgraduate education may reach the quality (success) of conventional education by 57.0%

in our country. Although about half of the nurses stated that they did not know about distance education adequately and thought that the quality of nursing education would decrease by 40.0%, the rate of agreement with distance education was high. In this study, half of the nurses thought that it would be an easier educational process compared to conventional methods. Likewise, in the study of Karaman (2011), he mentioned that nurses attending distance license completing programs stated that this kind of education was easier and that the number of learning subjects was lower compared to conventional education.

In this study, 40.8% of the nurses thought that distance education would yield insufficient

practical training and would be more expensive. Furthermore, about one third thought that absence of a role model and immediate feedback during the education process may cause impairment in education and increase malpractice. Nurses attending distance education programs in the United States and the United Kingdom were reported to think that social interactions and learning activities were at a low level, and nurses working as a member of a team moved away from the team spirit; therefore, they concluded that this education method was insufficient and required development (Puterbaugh, *et. al.*, 2010). Similarly, education given by means of distance method has been reported to have some disadvantages for students (Knebel, 2001; Bigony, 2010). Chaffin and Maddux (2004) had some concerns, such that students attending distance education may experience problems such as diminished academic performance and lack socialization experience; students who could not use computers would struggle, both with the program content and the technology. Kenny (2000) stated that the establishing and implementing distance education programs may not be a cost effective method compared to the conventional methods. Puterbaugh, *et. al.*, (2010) reported that both nurses and instructors thought of nursing as a practice-based profession that required face to face communication to learn the psychomotor skills and to implement the learned subjects. Therefore, during the planning and implementing distance education programs, the program content, the education techniques used, and the assessment methods of students should be well designed for both costs and the quality of the program.

In this study, factors such as old age, longer period of working in the profession, undergraduate degree and lower education levels, and previous experience of distance education, increased the rate of nurses agreeing to acquire distance education. Pool, *et. al.*, (2013) reported that young nurses did not think that nursing was attractive and wished to continue their careers in different areas. The same factors may be valid in our study to explain why young nurses were not eager to attend distance education. On the other hand, because of having been married and having familial responsibilities, older nurses generally preferred distance education. On the contrary,

in one study, the ages and the professional experience of nurses completing distance graduate education did not affect their opinions about online continuing education (Karaman, 2011).

The rate of agreement with distance graduate education of nurses working as instructors in this study was low. Mancuso (2009) stated that instructors had concerns regarding subjects like students doing their homework/tasks themselves or the dishonest behaviors of students during the exams. This is because of the high probability that online exams and homework being done by individuals other than students and the students sharing the information about exam questions and homework taking them at different times (Smith, *et. al.*, 2009; Mancuso, 2009). Furthermore, it was emphasized that instructors thought that students would have problems with adaptation to their professional roles, completing their socialization process, lack of face to face interaction and were obliged to spend more time and effort (Moore & Hart, 2004; Mancuso, 2009; Puterbaugh, *et. al.*, 2010). Distance postgraduate education in Turkey has just recently been implemented and universities and instructors do not have adequate experience on this issue. Therefore, instructors have concerns about the sustainability of qualified nursing education through the distance education method. Supporting our opinion, Cook, *et. al.* (2004) also stated that distance education was an important source of anxiety for those applying for the first time. It was also, stated that beside the fact that distance education was a good way of learning, both the instructors and students had to experience a transition period that changed and developed their skills and understanding related with distant education (Cook, *et. al.*, 2004).

Conclusions

According to the findings of this study, it is thought that distance education will provide nurses more accessibility and an easier way for postgraduate education. However, participating nurses had some concerns about the quality of education. Therefore, distance postgraduate education programs that are newly initiated and planned for the future should be designed carefully to meet the requirements of theoretical and practical education at a high rate, to use synchronized and asynchronized distance

education methods, to allow students interview with the instructor face to face, to be accessed by everyone, and to be presented cost effectively. In the application stage of this study, since there were no nurses attending distance postgraduate education in Turkey, it is suggested that new studies should focus on the satisfaction and experiences of postgraduate nurses graduating through distance education and instructors that carry out these programs.

The most prominent obstacle for the participating nurses to continue postgraduate education was their inability to achieve sufficiency in foreign language, particularly English. Therefore, foreign language trainings in undergraduate and graduate educations should be provided at a level so as to meet the needs of the current era. In different studies, it has been suggested that the obstacles in front of English lessons in graduate level should be determined and studies should focused on solution recommendations should be carried out.

Limitations

The results of this study cannot be generalized, as they reflect the opinions of nurses working in an education hospital and an affiliated nursing school. Moreover, this study was carried out in Turkey at a time when the distance postgraduate education program had been planned, but no students had been registered yet. Nevertheless, it is thought that it will be an important source, as it is the first study on this subject, and reflects the opinions of nurses about newly applied distance postgraduate education and may help review this program to determine areas that were positive or needed improving.

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