

# Turkish Public University Students' Views on the Quality of PhD Education in Nursing

## Türkiye'deki Devlet Üniversitesi Öğrencilerinin Hemşirelikte Doktora Eğitimi Kalitesi İle İlgili Görüşleri

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### Özet

Bu çalışma, hemşirelik doktora öğrencilerinin “hemşirelikte doktora eğitimi” üzerine görüşlerini belirlemek için yapılan tanımlayıcı bir çalışmadır. Araştırmanın verileri, literatür kullanılarak hazırlanan “Hemşirelikte Doktora Eğitime Yönelik Öğrenci Görüşleri” başlıklı anket formu kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Anket hemşirelik alanındaki doktora eğitiminin en az üçüncü yarıyıldaki öğrencilere e-posta yoluyla gönderilmiş ve ankete toplam 110 öğrenci yanıt vermiştir. Öğrenciler “hemşirelik bilgi ve uygulamalarını güçlendirmek için” bir doktora eğitiminin gerekli olduğunu, “yetersiz zaman” ve “danışmanın tutumu” gibi zorluklarla karşı karşıya kaldıklarını ve “araştırmanın planlanması ve sürdürülmesi, eleştirel düşünme vb.” profesyonel yetenekler kazandıklarını ancak doktora eğitiminin entelektüel gelişimlerine sınırlı katkı sağladığını belirtmişlerdir.

**Ahtar sözcükler:** Doktora eğitimi, hemşirelik, kalite.

**P**ostgraduate training aims to ensure in-depth and comprehensive learning of the information in the selected area, to ingrain positive attitudes, values and habits of analytical thinking, to understand the importance of research for nursing practice and to use evidence-based data in practice, and to choose the appropriate scientific principles that will be useful for the analysis of the nursing problems and the development of new hypotheses (Akdemir, Özdemir & Akyar, 2011; Kocaman, 2005).

It is reported that nurses' knowledge and skills related to patient care, and their roles such as leadership and advocacy will become more important as the quality and quantity of postgraduate education improve (Ketefian, Davidson, Daly, Chang, & Srisuphan, 2005). Doctoral programs are critical force in developing nurse leaders for education, management, policy and research (Evans & Stevenson, 2011; Kim et al.,

### Abstract

This is a descriptive study to determine the views on the “doctoral education in nursing” of the doctoral students in Nursing. The data of the study were collected using the “Student Views Regarding Doctoral Education in Nursing” survey prepared by using the literature. The survey was sent via e-mail to the students who were at least in the 3rd semester of their doctoral education in nursing. A total of 110 students answered the questionnaire. The students stated that receiving doctoral education is necessary for “improving the nursing knowledge and practices”, that they faced challenges such as “inadequate time” and the “attitude of the advisor”, and they gained professional skills such as “planning and sustaining research, critical perspective, etc.”, but the doctoral education provided a limited contribution to their intellectual improvement.

**Keywords:** Doctoral education, nursing, quality.

2010). Doctoral education is necessary for the evolution of nursing science; as it prepares nursing students developing nursing science through research and theory development, promoting nursing knowledge, and building leadership in the profession (Yavuz, 2004). Doctoral education in nursing is essential to take the lead in practice, scholarship, education, policy and research to meet healthcare needs (Kim et al., 2010). The doctoral programs should be delivered in high-quality standards to achieve the desired outcomes. The International Network for Doctoral Education in Nursing (INDEN) has been a guide developer for the quality of nursing doctoral education (INDEN, 2014). Kim, McKenna and Ketefian (2006) indicated “the quality of the faculty, the mission, the students, the syllabus, program management and resources” as the major criteria for the quality of doctoral education (Kim et al., 2006). Holzemer and Chambers (1986)

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found that academic environments are significant predictors of the commitment and motivation of nursing doctoral programs and doctoral students. Anderson (2000) described five components related with the quality of doctoral education: faculty, students, research, program, and career development. Recent studies investigate the views of students and faculty members about the quality of doctoral education (Arimoto, Gregg, Nagata, Miki, & Murashima, 2012; Kim et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2015; Kim, Park, Park, Khan, & Ketefian, 2014; Kjellgren, Welin, & Danielson, 2005; Mckenna, Keeney, Kim, & Park, 2014; Miki, Gregg, Arimoto, Nagata, & Murashima, 2012; Nabolsi, Abu-Moghli, & Khalaf, 2014; Nagata et al., 2012, Park, Kim, & Kyung, 2013; Smith & Delmore 2007).

Nursing PhD programs started in 1968 for the first time in Turkey with the opportunity to earn “Doctor’s Degree in Sciences” in medical departments. Doctoral degree programs in nursing science started in 1972 (Bağçecik & Alpar, 2009). In Turkey, Turkish Council of Higher Education conducts undergraduate (baccalaureate degree) and graduate levels of education (Yavuz, 2004). Generally, there are currently nine master and doctorate programs (Fundamentals of Nursing, Surgical Nursing, Medical Nursing, Children’s Health and Diseases, Women’s Health and Obstetrics, Community Health Nursing, Mental Health Nursing, Education in Nursing, Nursing Management) in Turkey. We were able to find only two studies, from 1972 to the present day, conducted on doctoral programs in nursing (Özdemir, Arslan, & Taşçı, 2014; Yavuz, 2004).

Doctoral programs require continuous evaluation to follow and assure the quality of the curriculum content and outcomes. Students’ feedback and perceptions of their experiences contribute to program evaluation (Evans & Stevenson, 2011). Assessing program impact on students provides administrators and decision-makers information about ongoing and future needs for improvement (Kim et al., 2006). Program evaluation is also essential in determining whether student expectations are met. While students aim to have advanced knowledge and research skills from doctoral education, our observations indicate that the students have experienced social, cultural and economic difficulties related the overload of education, negative attitudes of advisers, being working in different cities, and staying away from the family. Nevertheless, we could not find any research on this subject in Turkey.

The aim of this study is determine “the views of students about the quality of PhD education in nursing”. Exploring students’ experience helps evaluate the program and identify challenges, strengths and weakness in the program.

## Method

### Sampling and Setting

The population of this descriptive study consisted of students studying in universities granting doctorate education in nursing in Turkey. According to the 2013–2014 data of the “Measurement, Selection and Placement Center” of Turkey (ÖSYM) 25 Turkish universities offer PhD degrees in nursing. Seven of the 25 universities offering nursing doctoral programs in Turkey were selected, using the following criteria:

- Volunteering to participate in the study
- The sample of the study included the doctorate programs in nursing at public universities offered for a minimum of four years.

The sample of the study consisted of the universities that grant doctorate education in the nursing field in the 2014–2015 academic year. The sample of the study consisted of the universities that grant doctorate education in the nursing field which included Hacettepe, Istanbul, Dokuz Eylül, Ege, Erciyes and Erzurum Atatürk Universities and Gülhane Military Medical Academy. The population of the study consisted of students attending the 3rd semester of a PhD program in nursing in the selected universities. The researchers requested the e-mail addresses of students attending the 3rd semester of PhD programs from the university administrations. The study involved a convenience sample of 196 students receiving doctorate education in the nursing field.

### Data Collection Tool and Application

The data of the study were collected using the “Student Views Regarding Doctoral Education in Nursing” survey prepared by using the literature (Anderson, 2000; Arimoto, et al., 2012; Bağçecik & Alpar, 2009; Kim, et al., 2015). The survey contains questions to determine the views of the students from doctoral training, and their challenges and achievements. The survey was sent via e-mail to the students in the 3rd semester of their doctoral education in nursing and the students were asked to answer the survey on a voluntary basis. The research data were collected via e-mail. A total of 110 students answered the questionnaire. The response rate of the survey was 56.1%.

In the questionnaire form prepared by the researchers, two demographic characteristics, age and sex, were included. In addition, there were 8 questions about doctorate education: doctoral field (e.g. surgical nursing, public health nursing), doctoral education period (thesis or lecture), the necessity of doctoral education, expectation, living difficulties, professional and intellectual gain, and the quality of doctoral education.

**Table 1.** Students' views regarding the necessity of doctoral education in nursing ( $n=110$ ).

| Opinions*   | <i>n</i> | Percent** |
|---|----------|-----------|
| Improving nursing knowledge and practices                         | 90       | 81.8      |
| Improving the quality of education and developing new care models | 71       | 64.5      |
| Strengthening the social status of the nursing profession         | 67       | 60.8      |
| Having adequate research knowledge                                | 66       | 60.0      |
| Enhancing the reputation and worth of the profession              | 52       | 47.3      |
| Gaining professional values and ethical decision making process   | 43       | 39.1      |
| Ensuring professionalism  | 40       | 36.4      |
| Transferring to clinic of evidence-based practices                | 22       | 20.0      |

\*Multiple responses were obtained. \*\*Percentages were calculated based on "*n*".

### Analysis of the Data

The study data were analyzed by SPSS 20.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) program by using percentage and numeric calculations.

### IRB Approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Hacettepe University for Non-Interventional Clinical Studies (GO 14/31-37). The students included in the study were informed by e-mail and those who accepted to participate in the study were kindly requested to answer the survey. To protect the privacy of participants and student rights, the researchers only contacted students attending universities other than their own. In addition, responses to the survey were assigned numbers and saved after any personally identifiable information was deleted.

### Results

The views of the students regarding the doctorate education are listed below. All participants in the study were female, and the mean age was  $31.4 \pm 4.45$ . The students who participated in the study were continuing their doctorate in the fields of Medical Nursing (20%), Surgical Nursing (20%), Community Health

Nursing (20%), Children's Health and Diseases (10%), Fundamentals of Nursing (11.8%), Women's Health and Obstetrics (11%), Mental Health Nursing (3.6%), Nursing Management (3.6%), and most of students (54.5%) were in their thesis stage.

The first finding of the study was about the students' views on whether "doctoral education" in nursing was necessary or not. The students stated that the doctorate education is necessary "to improve their nursing knowledge and practice (81.8%)" (Table 1).

Nursing students state that they expect "to study the safe, efficient, practical, up-to-date and evidence-based nursing practices in patient care (86.3%)", and "to follow professional innovations and developments (65.4%)" (Table 2).

When the students were asked about the difficulties they encountered during the doctorate education, they responded that "they are not able to allocate time to the doctorate education because of their workload (90%)" and "the lack of suitable physical environment (55%)", and they stated that "they attended the doctorate program in another city (49%)" (Table 3).

Despite the difficulties they encountered during the doctorate education, the students stated the "Planning, conducting and publishing a high-quality study (70.9%)" as a professional gain and "Developing an ethical point of view about the cases,

**Table 2.** Expectations of the students from doctoral education ( $n=110$ ).

| Expectations*  | <i>n</i> | Percent** |
|--|----------|-----------|
| Doing research regarding safe, effective, practical, up-to-date and evidence-based nursing practices in patient care | 95       | 86.3      |
| Following professional innovations and developments  | 72       | 65.4      |
| Having in-depth knowledge of nursing   | 71       | 64.5      |
| Developing problem solving/critical thinking skills  | 68       | 61.8      |
| Personal development   | 48       | 43.6      |
| Developing leadership skills   | 40       | 36.4      |

\*Multiple responses were obtained. \*\*Percentages were calculated based on "*n*".



**Table 3.** Difficulties students encountered during doctoral education (n=100).

| Difficulties*   | n  | Percent** |
|---|----|-----------|
| Not getting doctoral education because of workload***   | 90 | 90.0      |
| Lack of suitable physical environment (classrooms, equipment of lesson, foreign language courses) | 55 | 55.0      |
| Getting doctoral education in another city  | 49 | 49.0      |
| Cannot allocate time for themselves because of intense syllabus                                   | 45 | 45.0      |
| Language problems   | 40 | 40.0      |
| Not studying with adequate and qualified advisor  | 38 | 38.0      |
| Not being supported by the institution  | 32 | 32.0      |
| Having economic problems****  | 32 | 32.0      |

\*Multiple responses were obtained. \*\*Percentages were calculated based on "n". \*\*\*Most of the students are working as a nurse or academic staff (lecturer/research assistant) in different institutions. \*\*\*\*Stationery, ticket, book price etc.

and developing theand critical thinking and problem solving ability (67.2%)” as intellectual gains (■ Tables 4 and 5).

The students were finally asked to state their opinions about the quality of the doctorate program in general; and they stated that and stated that doctorate education is generally good, but improvement of their intellectual ability was weak (■ Table 6).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Doctoral education is necessary for the advancement of the nursing science, as it prepares nursing students to improve the nursing science by way of research and theory development, to promote nursing knowledge, and to build leadership in the profession (Yavuz, 2004). Doctoral programs prepare sophisticated research scientists, leaders and academicians (Kim et al., 2006;

**Table 4.** Students' professional gains during and after doctoral education (n=110).

| Professional gain*                                       | n  | Percent** |
|--|----|-----------|
| Planning, conducting and publishing a high-quality study | 78 | 70.9      |
| Developing personal and professional perspectives        | 77 | 70.0      |
| Knowing and applying advanced nursing practices          | 73 | 66.3      |
| Having in-depth knowledge of nursing                     | 70 | 63.6      |
| Increasing self-reliance                                 | 60 | 54.4      |
| Acquiring effective presentation skills                  | 56 | 50.9      |
| Acquiring analytical thinking skills                     | 48 | 43.6      |
| Acquiring time management skills                         | 42 | 38.1      |
| Having the possibility of new jobs                       | 15 | 13.6      |

\*Multiple responses were obtained. \*\*Percentages were calculated based on "n".

**Table 5.** Students' intellectual gains during and after doctoral education (n=110).

| Intellectual gain*  | n  | Percent** |
|---|----|-----------|
| Developing critical thinking and problem solving skills from an ethical perspective | 74 | 67.2      |
| Developing a professional identity  | 65 | 59.1      |
| Acquiring scientific and social mentality   | 64 | 58.2      |
| Team working  | 60 | 54.4      |
| Taking an active role in community-oriented activities                              | 53 | 42.2      |
| Acquiring leadership skills   | 50 | 45.4      |
| Increasing self-confidence  | 20 | 18.2      |

\*Multiple responses were obtained. \*\*Percentages were calculated based on "n".

**Table 6.** Overall evaluation of the quality of doctoral education ( $n=110$ ).

| Opinions                      | Poor     |      | Well     |      | Excellent |      |
|-------------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|-----------|------|
|                               | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i> | %    | <i>n</i>  | %    |
| Quality of doctoral education | 11       | 10.0 | 44       | 40.0 | 55        | 50.0 |
| Quality of advisor            | 8        | 7.2  | 42       | 38.2 | 60        | 54.6 |
| Quality of academic personnel | 1        | 1.0  | 72       | 65.4 | 37        | 33.6 |
| Intellectual life             | 25       | 22.7 | 57       | 51.9 | 28        | 25.4 |
| Research experience           | 18       | 16.4 | 80       | 72.7 | 12        | 10.9 |

Lewallen & Kohlenberg, 2011). In our study, the participants agreed that the curriculum helped them. The students stated that a doctoral training is required for “improving the nursing knowledge and practices” and “acquiring adequate knowledge of research and application”; they faced challenges such as “inadequate time” and the “attitude of the advisor” during their doctoral education; and they gained professional abilities such as “Planning and sustaining research, critical evaluation of a published article/critical evaluation of the quality of a research publication, critical look at the evidence, etc.”. In the study, the students explained the reason of why they did not feel themselves adequate about the research experience as “we have the research knowledge, but our experience is rather limited”. For this reason, gaining research experience besides writing their thesis is important for students during their doctoral education.

The quality of doctoral programs should ensure that the targeted outcomes are achieved. The literature identifies some factors that affect the quality of doctoral education in nursing. Smith and Delmore (2007) stated that there are three key components of successfully completing a doctoral program in nursing: a curriculum that best fits the students’ needs, a strategic plan that sets out resources clearly accompanied by a strong support system, and a systematic approach to completing diploma requirements. Similarly, Anderson (2000) described five components related with the quality of doctoral education: faculty, students, research, program, and career development. Kim et al. (2014) identified an environment that supports students’ learning, faculty mentorship, and assistance to students in appreciating the value of research/scholarship programs as important factors that affect the quality of a doctoral program. In addition, the program also needs to be evaluated on a regular basis. The continued success of a program as well as its ability to continue its mission requires the participation of key decision-makers and their commitment to conduct regular assessments (Ketefian et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2006; Minnick, Normam, Donaghey, Fisher, & McKrigan, 2010).

Doctoral education should be planned to ensure both academic and intellectual improvement of the students; the indi-

vidual develops not only in the field of science but also in the arts and social, ethical, cultural, economic, and political fields. In our study, the students stated that the doctorate education is necessary “to improve their nursing knowledge and practice”. They also expect “to study the safe, efficient, practical, up-to-date and evidence-based nursing practices in patient care”, and “to follow professional innovations and leading professional developments”. The curriculum should be designed in such a way as to meet students’ expectations. To develop doctoral programs, attention must be given to the curriculum, competency in the faculty, the research activity and to the students’ involvement in courses and research (Kjellgren et al., 2005). The curriculum is a significant criterion for quality doctoral education (Kim et al., 2015). The curriculum should provide students with systematic learning about philosophy of science, scientific and nursing theories, ethical principles in research, methods, statistics and leadership strategies for being interested social, ethical, cultural, economic, and political subjects in nursing and health care (Kim et al., 2006). If the doctoral program fails to meet students’ expectations, the program is seen as a continuation of their MSN education (Özdemir et al., 2014). Students participating in the study of Nabolsi et al. (2014) on doctoral nursing programs in Jordan stated that they would like to have elective courses that help them to develop and prepare for different roles in the future. National and international cooperation is also identified as a factor in improving the quality of a program.

Another indicator of the quality of a doctoral program is the presence of an adequate number of high-quality advisors and academic personnel (Nagata et al., 2012). Parse (2005) underlined that it is vital having an adequate number of qualified educators and professors who are conducting nursing research and able to supervise dissertation to provide quality nursing doctoral programs. Academic personnel should have expertise not only in their fields but also in teaching, researching and mentoring skills (Kim et al., 2006). Similar results have been reported from other literature studies on this issue. Kim et al. (2010) reported that the students stated conducting the research and professional improvement as the strong sides of the doctorate program and inadequate expert nursing faculty members as its



weak side. Nagata et al. (2012) found that students had positive opinions about faculty members. In two studies evaluating doctoral education in Japan, Miki et al. (2012) found that students were not happy with the quality of teaching and mentoring provided by faculty members. In the second study, Arimoto et al. (2012) reported that many faculty staff rated inadequacies with the number of faculty members, and elements of the research infrastructure, such as funding, and technical and support staff needed for research. In the present study, students stated that they were happy with the quality of the academic personnel, but found it difficult to spend sufficient time with their advisors doing high-quality work.

Smith and Delmore (2007) stated that one of the three key components of successfully completing a doctoral program is to build financial and emotional support systems. Students who participated in the present study stated that their universities failed to provide sufficient administrative and financial support. Some of the students even said that they would like to pursue a PhD degree, but had difficulty doing so because they were working as research assistants in a university other than the one they attend for doctoral studies, and had to take turns with fellow research assistants to be able follow courses. This lowers both students' motivation and the quality of doctoral education. To provide high-quality doctoral education, PhD programs should be offered by universities that have sufficient and qualified personnel (McKenna et al., 2014; Nagata et al., 2012; Parse, 2005). Yet, many universities start offering doctoral programs without having established the necessary infrastructure. This affects the students' ability to follow programs at a time and in a manner suitable for their needs.

In this study, most of the students stated that they were not able focus on their work as required, because they were too busy working or because they lived in another city. In addition, they said they were not able to work with their advisors, and did not receive enough guidance for their research. Smith and Delmore (2007) emphasized the significance of having thesis commission with professors' expert in students' research topic areas. Similarly, Özdemir et al. (2014) explained that the students expressed the problems such as the failure of their advisors in sparing time for them, and failure to receive necessary support from their advisors during the preparation and presentation of seminars. This was despite the fact that doctoral students need to spend an adequate amount of effective time with their academic advisors for academic and personal development.

Doctoral programs should be flexible enough to allow many students to apply (Kim et al., 2010). This situation is especially significant for nursing, as the majority of doctoral students worldwide are females who maintain part-time study (McKenna, 2005). Also, the program should provide occasions for students'

socialization with schoolfellows, advisors and mentors. In the present study, students said that they were unable to spend time on themselves due to the intensity of their doctoral programs. They said that their intellectual lives were affected negatively as well. Kim et al. (2010) reported that the students also felt the lack of an academic environment (clubs, study groups), as a weakness.

Another criterion in doctoral education is the academic environment. An academic environment that contributes to advanced learning is crucial for the success of doctoral education. For high-quality doctoral education, both resources and infrastructure should be improved (McKenna et al., 2014). Success of doctoral program is characterized by its availability of library, financial, search, and appropriate technology supporting college and doctoral students' research activities (Smith & Delmore, 2007). University libraries should be equipped with information technologies and allow part-time working. In addition, students should have easy and rapid access to online and multimedia materials (Kim et al., 2006). Park et al. (2013) found that a particular problem students had was related to access to resources. In another study, "having sufficient materials and information needed by students" was identified as one of the most important factors affecting a doctoral program (Kim et al., 2012). In the present study, students identified problems with classrooms, course materials and foreign-language sources as deficiencies in the academic environment of their doctoral programs. The native language of people in Turkey is Turkish. Even though doctoral students are admitted only after getting passing grades from a foreign language test, they still struggle with accessing and making use of English sources and experience stress because of their problems with English. Suliman and Tadros (2011) also found that a lack of proficiency in a foreign language (English) is a source of stress for students.

To sum up, this study showed that students rated the overall quality of nursing doctoral education as good to excellent. Participants in this study stated that curriculum, academic personnel and academic environment were the major factors affecting the quality of doctoral education. Turkey is one of the countries where nursing is well developed. Therefore, the quality of nursing education in general, and of doctoral education in particular, which will contribute to the training of academicians and clinicians who will shape the future of the profession, should be improved and assessed on a regular basis. This study includes students' views on the quality of doctoral education. However, while the quality of doctoral education is assessed and improved, not only students' views but also academic staff's views should be taken into consideration. Academic staff may differ from students in their views on the quality of doctoral education, because academic staff's expectations about the quality of doctoral education may be dissimilar to those of the students.

## Limitations

This study had several limitations. Access to participants was one of the most difficult challenges, as the lists of students from each college were not directly available to the researchers. Another limitation of this study was the low numbers of students who responded to the online questionnaire. Hence, it limited the generalizability of our findings. However, the findings of this study may provide useful information and insight for other doctoral programs.

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