



Evaluation of an online continuing education program from the perspective of new graduate nurses



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SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to evaluate the online continuing education program from the perspectives of new graduate nurses. An evaluation framework includes five factors (program and course structure, course materials, technology, support services and assessment). In this study, descriptive research methods were used. Participants of the study included 2.365 registered nurses enrolled in the first online nursing bachelor completion degree program in the country. Data were collected by survey. The findings indicated that students were mostly satisfied with this program. The results of this study suggest that well designed asynchronous online education methods can be effective and appropriate for registered nurses. However, the provision of effective support and technological infrastructure is as vital as the quality of teaching for online learners.

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Introduction

Online education has become a convenient learning option for adult learners. Attendance at campus classes is often difficult for them (Maxfield, 2009) because of their work schedules, families, and other responsibilities. Given their working conditions, it is hard for nurses to continue their studies or develop a new profession via traditional classroom based education. Therefore, online education provides increased flexibility, access, and cost-effectiveness in nursing education (Holly, 2009).

The number of nurses that joined online continuing education programs has increased dramatically in the last decade. Researchers have claimed that these nursing training programs have positive outputs at in-service training and graduate programs (Seiler and Billings, 2004). However, the quality of these programs has become a concern as the number of online continuing education programs grows (Martinez et al., 2006).

Evaluation of Online Learning

One of the key issues to be considered for the continuing development of online education is program evaluation. Evaluation plays an important role in identifying what is effective and what is not. Evaluation can also enable educators to think about what they are doing and achieving during the implementation (Rovai, 2003). The evaluation of online learning requires an evaluation approach or a model. There are

many models for evaluation in the literature. Implementation, interpretation and analysis of evaluations are difficult with detailed and complex models. It is important to determine sub-factors of evaluation models to develop a more suitable and understandable framework. A summary of the literature relevant to evaluation factors of online education is presented below in Table 1 (Shelton, 2011).

In order to build a clearer and more comprehensive evaluation framework, we reviewed a range of studies and examined evaluation variables. Five major clusters of factors have emerged; program and course structure, course materials, technology, support services and assessment. The scope and definitions of these factors are given below.

Program and Course Structure

The quality indicator that appeared frequently in the online education literature involved the overall program and course structure. Course structure includes the design of the program, organization of the courses in the curriculum, consistency between course objectives and the aims of the program (Chaney et al., 2007). Goals and structure of the program should be appropriate to students' conditions, needs and expectations.

Course Materials

Online education based on learning materials has various formats. Online learning materials should be designed based on the principles of learning theories (Rahman, 2006) in such a way as to facilitate effective learning of modular content and to guide the students' self learning. Course materials should be clear and meet program standards. Students

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Table 1
The factors used for evaluation of online education.

| Author(s) | Factors |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Khan (2001) | Institutional, management, technological, pedagogical, ethical, interface design, resource support, and evaluation. |
| Lee and Dziuban (2002) | Administrative leadership and support, ongoing program concerns, web course development, student concerns, and faculty support. |
| Lockhart and Lacy (2002) | Institutional readiness/administration, faculty services, instructional design/course usability, student readiness, student services, learning outcomes, retention. |
| Osika (2004) | Faculty support, student support, content support, course management system support, technology support, program support, and community support. |
| Moore and Kearsley (2005) | The number and quality of applications and enrollments; student achievement, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, program or institutional reputation, and the quality of course materials. |
| Haroff and Valentine (2006) | Quality of instruction, quality of administrative recognition, quality of advisement, quality of technical support, quality of advance information, and quality of course evaluation. |
| Chaney et al. (2007) | Teaching and learning effectiveness, student support, technology, course development/instructional design, faculty support, evaluation and assessment, and organizational/institutional impact. |
| Jung (2011) | Interaction, staff support, institutional quality assurance mechanism, credibility, learner support, information and publicity, learning tasks |

should be provided information about what materials are included, how to use them and how they are related to each other (Horton, 2000).

Technology

Technology trends at the organizational level are important because they have both a direct and an indirect impact on training and development (Driscoll, 2002). The technological dimension of online learning includes infrastructure planning, hardware, and software (Shelton, 2011). Technology should be reliable, user-friendly, and accessible at all times (Billings, 2000; Billings et al., 2001). Infrastructure should facilitate different types of online learning activities. In addition it should promote mechanisms to improve stability and robustness of hardware and software systems to minimize disruption to online learning (Horton, 2000).

Support Services

One of the most important issues in online education is the support service in terms of providing guidance, preventing frustration and feelings of loneliness. Regular feedback mechanisms should be designed and implemented to assess the success and failure of the various support systems created for the online education system (Ragan, 1999). Support services should aim at reducing students' individual deficiencies and contributing to their learning (Usun, 2004). Providing support services to the online learning population is an important part of creating the feeling of belonging (Chaney et al., 2007).

Assessment

Assessment of the students for awarding of certificates, diplomas or degrees is the most difficult phase in the online learning process. Assessment activities (assignments, online exams) and final examinations should be appropriately designed for the online students and reflect the objectives of the course. Questions in the final paper should measure the learning outcomes at different levels of cognitive ability. The ratio of the marks of online and paper based assessments should be appropriate (Iqbal et al., 2011).

The evaluation framework which includes these five factors (program and course structure, course materials, technology, support services and assessment) was used to evaluate an online nursing education programs in this study. The program is the online bachelor completion degree in nursing (HELITAM), which has about 20,000 registered nurses. This is the first online nursing program in Turkey. Students are required to have two-year college degrees and be working as nurses in professional settings (e.g., clinics or hospitals) to be admitted to the program. There are ten courses in this two-year program such as healthcare management, communication in nursing, and biostatistics. The courses were delivered through interactive learning packages, lecture notes and videos on the Learning Management System (LMS). The students participated in two online exam activities and a paper based exam in each semester. Paper based exams were carried out in exam centers over the countries. Proctoring multiple choice final exam assessments were applied for reliability. About 13,000 students graduated from this program in 2011.

Online nursing courses have increased rapidly in recent years and a number of studies have been conducted that examine these programs. However, little research has been published regarding the quality of online graduate nursing courses (Carter, 2010). Evaluation is an essential component of program improvement and renewal and long-term success. Moreover, online learning program evaluation results can be extrapolated to improve other programs (Rovai, 2003). In this study, evaluation of the HELITAM program is most closely aligned with the purposes of participant-oriented evaluation approaches. Using this approach, evaluators work to portray the multiple needs, values, and perspectives of the program stakeholders in order to make judgments about the value or worth of the program (Martinez et al., 2006).

Evaluation of this program will contribute to the creation of online education policy for adult learners. It will be particularly helpful for directing online nursing education programs in the future. This study can also be considered as a case study of teaching nurses online. The aim of this study is to evaluate the online nursing bachelor completion degree program from the perspectives of new graduates. Consequently, the research question addressed in this study is:

1. How do new graduate nurses from an online continuing education program evaluate the program using the dimensions of program and course structure, course materials, technology, support services and assessment?

Methods

This study was designed as a case study research. Case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. Case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2009) and analyses of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems that are studied holistically by one or more methods (Thomas, 2011). It has been used in varied investigations, particularly in sociological studies, but increasingly, in instruction. Case study is designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data (Feagin et al., 1991). The researchers used both quantitative and qualitative approaches during data collection and analysis. The quantitative data were collected by survey and the qualitative data were collected through open-ended items in the survey.

Participants

Participants in the study are registered nurse students who completed all requisites of online nursing bachelor completion degree program and qualified for graduation. For this reason the participants who were about to graduate are called as students in the study. Since all students are working as RNs there are no major differences among students in terms of socioeconomic status and availability of technical resources

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