

## Original Article

**A comparative study on curriculum of geriatric nursing master's degree in Iran and Ireland**Shima Sadat-Aghahosseini<sup>1</sup>, Elham Navab<sup>2\*</sup>, Afsaneh Sadooghiasl<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Medical-Surgical Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran<sup>2</sup> Department of Geriatric Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran<sup>3</sup> Department of Management, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

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## ABSTRACT

**Background & Aim:** Comparison of existing curriculums together helps to identify strengths and weaknesses of the program and provide to improve healthy competition. This study aimed to compare geriatric nursing curriculum in Iran and Ireland.

**Methods & Materials:** This study was carried out in 2015 using Beredy model. Research community was geriatric nursing curriculums in Iran and Ireland. Comparative elements were the mission and objectives, duration and course titles, student admission, working opportunity for graduates, and tuition in four steps of description, interpretation, proximity and comparison.

**Results:** In Iran, the main focus of program was on clinic, teaching, and research; and employment opportunities were too general. In addition, student admission was centralized and normative and tuition was free. In Ireland, job opportunities were more objective and proportionate to the objectives of the program; admission was done via a decentralized model and students should have selection criteria. In addition, tuition was not free.

**Conclusion:** Geriatric nursing curriculum in Iran should be revised to define objective working opportunities for graduates activities in community, to change methods for admitting student appropriate to their interests and academic and professional backgrounds, and to design educational program for tutor and researcher training.

**Introduction**

Incompatibility of education with the needs of society, students and nursing knowledge can cause many problems for nursing education and society. As the purpose of nursing education at master's degree is to train professional nurses who are able to deliver and coordinate nursing care to individual, family and society by reviewing and assessing health status, and also to gain necessary capabilities in research and management, paying attention to this nursing program is highly important (1).

Health care and education systems in medical science universities, in order to adapt to the needs of society, should train and prepare professionals and de-

fine their roles and responsibilities that are in accordance with the current needs and requirements of society. One way to comply with the new requirements of society is to create new programs and subspecialties that need careful planning. Nursing program is one of the educational programs which introduced variety of new subspecialties in recent years (2). In this regard, as the elderly population of country was increasing, geriatric nursing as a subspecialty of nursing needed by the society, was introduced and lunched.

Studies indicate that Iran elderly population like other countries around the world is increasing. Currently, population over 60 years old in Iran accounts for 8% of total population. In other words, 5.5 million people in Iran are over 60 years old, and if this trend continuous, the population of elderly in Iran will explode by 2030 (3). It is estimated that the population of elderly in Iran will be about 25 mil-

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lion by 2048 which is growing faster than other demographic groups in the country (4). According to the estimates of international organizations, in 2039, the Iran elderly population grows in a faster rate than other countries in the region, and even the world average growth; and by 2044 will exceed the world's average growth, and five years after that will exceed the average growth in Asia (5).

Geriatric nursing is one of the nursing education subspecialties approved in 2010 by High Council for Planning Medical Science in Iran, and in 2011 the first group of geriatric nursing students enrolled in Tehran University of Medical Sciences (6).

Usually, any program, after the design and development, requires evaluation. Evaluation of program is one of the most important strategies to get feedback and promote education from static to dynamic. Educational evaluation provides a picture that the decision-makers and those involved in educational activities can see (7). One of the goals of medical science universities is to reach a high scientific position among the countries of the region in order to increase their global ranking. Undoubtedly, reaching a high position in the world would not be possible unless they consider the status of similar programs in the top universities around the world.

Comparison of existing programs with each other using comparative approach is one of the methods used in the evaluation of programs. This approach is one of the research methods in the social sciences that can be used to compare countries or different cultures in which two or more things are compared from different directions. This comparison can be used in different parts of educational institutions, curriculum, values, culture, results, places, time and methods of education (8). Different models are used in comparative studies such as; Enterprise Subject Area Model (ESAM), Beredy, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), etc. One of the models is Beredy (1865) model (9) which includes stages of description, interpretation, proximity and comparison. In this study, the authors compared the geriatric nursing programs at master's degree level between Iran and Ireland using Beredy comparative model.

## **Methods**

This was a descriptive-comparative study conducted in 2015 to compare geriatric nursing pro-

grams at master's degree between Iran and Ireland. Information of Iran was obtained from available documents and Tehran University of Medical Sciences electronic page (10) and information of Ireland was obtained through the information in the electronic page of University of Dublin (11).

By using information gathered in the internet and reviewing philosophy and aims of geriatric nursing programs at master's degree in Iran and Ireland, an attempt was made to evaluate these two programs using Beredy's model criteria (9).

Using this model, gathered information, stages of description, interpretation, proximity and comparison were analyzed. In the stage of description, studied situation based on the evidence and information obtained from various sources was described. In interpretation stage, the information described in the first stage was studied and interpreted. In proximity stage, based on the information obtained in the first and second stages, classification took place and information were put together to form a framework for the final stage. Finally at the last stage, aim of the study regarding similarities and differences was investigated and research questions were answered (9).

In this study, in the first stage (descriptions), information obtained about the mission and objectives of the program, modules descriptions, student admission requirements, employment opportunities for graduates and tuition fees were described. In the second stage (interpretation), information about the educational programs in Iran and Ireland were studied, reasoned, interpreted and analyzed. In the third stage of study (proximity), the similarities and differences of programs between the two countries were identified and classified. Finally, in the fourth stage (comparison), the programs were compared with each other in order to recommend strategies for Iran geriatric nursing education program at master's degree.

## **Results**

In this section, specifications of educational programs in the two countries, including the mission and aims of the program, duration of the programs, number of credits, titles of the modules, admission requirements, tuition fees and employment opportunities for graduates were described.

Specifications of Iran geriatric nursing program at master's degree were as follows:

**Mission:** To reduce mortality and morbidity caused by aging through expansion of specialized care structures, promotion of nursing practice, training skillful professional equipped with necessary abilities, and providing community-based health services particularly home care for elderlies with chronic and acute physical, mental and social disorders (10).

**Aims:** To achieve maximum potential in functional capabilities and competences of individual elderly patients and their families, to maintain and improve the quality of life of elderly patients as much as possible, to ensure that the special needs of elderly clients and their families are met, to promote adoption of elderlies and their families to lifestyle changes, and to maintain social functioning and participation of elderlies in society (10).

**Program duration and number of credits:** Program duration and number of credits were in accordance with master's degree education regulations. Total credits were 32 which included 7 main credits, 21 private credits, and 4 credits for dissertation. Students should obtain 4 credits of compensatory lessons, including Computers Skills, and Statistics and Advanced Research Methodology (10).

**Module descriptions:** Nursing ethics and professional relationships, theories, nursing models and their application in nursing, clinical nursing management, teaching methods and educational planning, geriatric epidemiology, assessing health status of the elderly, geriatric pharmacology and supplements, healthy and active aging, geriatric nursing 1, 2, and 3, including physical and functional disorders, psychological status, social problems of the elderly, geriatric care structures and systems, computer systems and medical informatics, statistics and advanced research methodology, and dissertation (10).

Learning methods include student-centered learning methods such as problem-solving, combined methods, discussion and promotion of critical thinking, and analysis of challenging issues. Both the theoretical and practical modules would be evaluated (10).

**Entry and admission requirements:** Students were selected via a centralized method through the university entry examination held by the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education once a year. Having a bachelor's degree in nursing approved by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, passing the university entry exam, and being

in a good physical and mental health status were among the requirements (10).

**Tuition fee:** Study was free for Iranian nationals, but foreign nationals should pay tuition fee (10).

### **Graduates' professional duties**

**A. Clinical domain:** Commitment and accountability in functional roles, preserving and implementing ethical principles and respecting the rights of elderlies and their families, participating and collaborating with other team members in delivery of nursing care and interventions to elderly patients, assessing and identifying elderly patients' and their families' needs, prioritizing the care and critical thinking, developing therapeutic relationship with elderly, family and members of healthcare team, referring elderly patients to other health disciplines if needed, and collaborating with other geriatric health team members in the delivery of holistic care (10).

**B. Educational domain:** To provide training and consultation for elderly patients and their families at three levels; prevention (using latest information and knowledge to improve geriatric nursing care in different health domains, help to provide up to date and valid educational software and help in choosing its contents regarding geriatric health, participate and collaborate with universities educational groups to develop educational contents and hold seminars, workshops and short-term courses about geriatric issues (10).

**C. Research domain:** Participation and collaboration in health research, reviewing areas and needs for research projects and development of related projects in geriatric nursing services, using latest tools and technology in geriatric health research, promote geriatric research findings through articles and conferences in national and international scientific communities, participation in creation and development of research centers related to geriatric health, treatment and rehabilitation, using evidence-based research findings to promote geriatric nursing practice, participating in creation and development of population research centers to provide clinical-social services for elderly population, and using tools and technology in research (10).

Specifications of Ireland geriatric nursing education program at master's degree were as follow:

**Mission and aims:** To provide advanced research method, development of theoretical and practical aspects of management, clinical practice and

education in geriatric nursing for students, transform students to clinicians who provide nursing care for the elderly in medical groups of St. James Hospital or other approved clinical settings (11).

**Program duration:** 2 years or 24 months, part-time (11).

**Entry and admission requirements:** Currently registered on the appropriate divisions of the live register held by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland, applicants' active participation in a area where geriatric nursing care is needed during the entire program, to have at least one year experience of working as a clinical nurse, to have an honorary certificate in nursing (or equivalent) or otherwise consent of the program committee to have the ability to complete and benefit from the program, to have at least two letters of recommendation from scientific references, copies of academic transcripts of training courses, copies of official awards from training courses, to have a recommendation letter from own nursing manager, to have certificate of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with a minimum score of 6.5 or Cambridge C degree or Pearson Test of English (PTE) exam with a minimum score of 63 or 230 computer-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam based on internet 88 and paper 570 (11).

**Tuition fee:** For the first year, 5925 Euros and second year, 4895 Euros (11).

**Modules description:** The first year included advanced theoretical foundations of geriatric nursing, acquired theoretical and practical approaches to health care, promoting elderly's health and wellbeing, geriatric nursing practice placement, advanced geriatric nursing practice placement and to choose one of the two following modules, ethics and law in health care or palliative or end of life care. The second year includes the dissertation (11).

In the first year, the program begins with the one week fulltime in September and one day per week for the rest of the first year, and in second year, students participate in educational workshops during entire academic year (11). Learning methods in theoretical content included lectures, group discussions and self-learning. The evaluation process was a combination of theoretical and practical evaluations (11).

**Employment opportunities:** Transforming student into a clinical nurse who care for elderly patients in medical groups of St. James's Hospital or

other approved clinical settings (11).

In the interpretation stage, information obtained from the educational programs of Iran and Ireland was studied, thought, reasoned and interpreted. In the proximity stage, the similarities and differences between the two programs showed that in the geriatric nursing program at the University of Dublin, existence of job opportunities in the program represents a defined structure in community nursing activities and particularly, in St James Hospital that fitted perfectly with the design of the program. While in Iran, there was no defined structure as educational setting for geriatric nursing students, or if there was a setting, there was no opportunity for all universities to access this setting. It must be noted that geriatric nursing department in the medical science universities were established recently in Iran; and due to the lack of specialized geriatric graduates and lack of program independence, these departments were run by other disciplines specialists who used them as their own field of specialty. Thus, the departments did not belong to the geriatric nursing education. Also in Iran, job opportunity and specific position for geriatric nursing graduates in hospitals, and particularly in the community was not defined.

Information about geriatric nursing program at master's degree in Iran indicated that the aim of program was to train nurses who provide health care for society, families and patients (both healthy and ill individuals). Therefore, the program was not specialized and nurses were not trained for specific primary care and prevention. On the other hand, training nurses specialized in geriatric nursing could help to create job opportunity for the graduates such as establishment of elderly centers and care homes by this group of people, and this was one of the strengths of the program.

Job opportunities in Iran included both treatment and prevention domains in community and hospital. It also showed that health system in Iran did not have specific setting for activity of graduates of this program. In Iran, this educational program was started before job positions being planned, thus, there was no job position for the graduates. Graduates could not put into practice what they learned during their education and this issue created confusion. Centers that provide services for the elderly include hospitals and care homes and usually sick elderly receive care in the hospitals. Considering

the fact that, this program was introduced recently in Iran and there was no specific job opportunity for the graduates, the program had not received any feedback from the society; so it could not self-regulate based on needs.

One of the expectations of the program was to provide prevention interventions, which was not in line with the structure of health system in the society. Although, the program tried to respond to the needs of society, it faced many challenges such as lack of setting to provide services reflected in the program aims.

Student admission in Dublin University was decentralized and based on university criteria in which multiple competences and abilities were considered. In regard to the university entry requirements, although some of the criteria were objective, some others including recommendation letter would be influenced by personal opinions of the university personnel. However, paying attention to multiple criteria was important. There was no information about student admission capacity of Dublin University. It seemed that, depending on university facility and applicants' competencies, the number of students could vary each academic year which is the positive factor of the program. In Iran, student entry was centralized through a master's degree exam which was a type of normative test and student's competencies and abilities were not measured using specific criteria. This factor caused students to have different abilities at different stages of the education. Therefore, applications with different education and job backgrounds could enter the program by obtaining higher academic score. Although, obtaining high academic score is one of the requirements, it does not show the applicants professional competence.

Paying tuition fee and education expenses also cause applicants to enter the program with awareness. Therefore, it prevents waste of resources and each student pay for his/her education personally or by support of an institution. Paying tuition fee causes students to finish the program faster. Using scholarship helps to recruit applicants with better educational background. It also causes students to concentrate more on the education to receive scholarship. Although, tuition fee limits the admission of students, it provides opportunity for institutions and organization that are active in geriatric fields to use the expertise of graduates by contributing to their

education cost. This factor acts as a regulator for professional workforce to provide services.

In Iran, limited capacity and timely student admission showed that the program was not in line with education facilities in universities and society needs. Free education although provides equal opportunity for applicants, it does not guarantee the time of graduation. Lengthy education increases the education costs for universities and delays entry of graduates to job market. Students who have used free education must provide some services for the universities they studied in, depending on the educational rules and regulations of each university. This commitment depends on the time of education and student's agreement to receive the help, which is problematic as graduate's employment has not been specified in the regulations.

In Iran, titles of the modules were focused on different aspects such as education, research, and care at health and illness, which caused the time to be divided between these three aspects; but this time, was not enough to achieve the program goals. In addition, students entered to different fields within a limited time which could not lead to in-depth understanding. Students complete theoretical modules in 3 semesters and working on dissertation takes more time. Therefore, students could not complete the program in 4 semesters and enter the job market. Considering the needs of society, training researchers and teachers becomes later priorities, and it is expected that time would be spent to train specialized geriatric nursing professionals. While in Dublin University, completion of dissertation took one year, and the entire time could be spent on dissertation activities. In regard to the taught modules of geriatric nursing at master's degree in Iran, it is suggested that specialized modules such as geriatric theories and principles of palliative care should be added to the curriculum of the program in order to achieve the program aims.

In Iran, training nurses to take leadership and managerial duties was one of the program aims, and there was a module with the same title in the curriculum. Perhaps that could be considered as one of the strengths of the program in Iran as there was a module about clinical nursing management with 1.5 credits, whereas, in the curriculum of Dublin University, this important role of nurses was ignored.

In last stage, the two programs were compared and solutions were suggested. Lack of specific positions for the graduates of geriatric nursing in Iran was considered as an important challenge in education of geriatric nursing. Whereas in Ireland, existence of real job opportunities in the program showed that there was a defined structure for nurses' activities in society. Therefore, it was suggested that, before designing new programs in Iran, a clear and precise definition of job position for the graduates should be provided.

Titles of modules in Iran educational curriculums focused on different aspects of education, research and care. In the content of program, aim of dissertation is to train researcher, which is time consuming but does not train researcher. In Ireland, this takes one academic year. Therefore, it is suggested that, Iranian students conduct research as module assignments in order to learn how to use research findings in practice.

Another aim of Iranian curriculum was to train competence teacher to train professionals in the university, but there was not enough related modules in the program. Therefore, adding complementary modules about teaching would be beneficial for students interested in this field.

Student admission in Iran was centralized, whereas in Dublin University, student admission was decentralized with multiple criteria. Thus, it is suggested to assess the needs of society before student admission in order to select students with specific competences and characteristics in addition to interest and enthusiasm. Furthermore, because of lack of specialized geriatric teacher, usually this program was taught by teachers of different disciplines. As this program is a specialized program and requires specific education, it is suggested to train specialized teachers to teach the program.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to compare the geriatric nursing program at master's degree between Iran and Ireland. The results of this study showed that in Dublin program, there were genuine job opportunities in community for geriatric nurses, but in Iran, there was no defined structure in this regard. Study by Sadooghiasl et al. showed that in BSc geriatric nursing program of John Hopkins University in

United States, there were specific places for graduates of geriatric nursing programs to work in (12).

Considering the fact that, this program is new in Iran and there is no specific information about employment for its graduates, the program has not received any feedback from the society. Although, the program tries to respond to the needs of society, it faces challenges such as lack of setting to deliver services based on the program aim. Kermanshahi et al. compared and critically analyzed the programs of nursing master's degree in Iran and Canada and the results showed that the nursing program in Iran is not in line with the needs of society, and according to many studies, it lacks required quality (1).

Student admission in Dublin University is decentralized and is based on multiple competences and requirements; whereas in Iran, is centralized and students are selected through master's degree entry exam. In Iran, student's professional competences and abilities are not assessed by specific criteria and applicants can enter the program by obtaining higher academic score regardless of their different educational and employment backgrounds. In this regard, the results of a study showed that in Iran, the focus is on the academic scores of written exam rather than empirical skills and work experiences of the applicants, but in United States, in addition to curriculum vitae (CV) and transcript, applicants should attend interview and have work permission (13).

The program of master's degree for geriatric nursing in Iran is not specialized and is focused on training nurses who provide care for patient, family and society, and the aim of program is for both healthy and sick people. In this regard, the result of a study showed that the program of master's degree for geriatric nursing in United States as two independent programs includes primary care and acute geriatric care, and this could be considered as strength of the program.

Training specialized professionals and concentrating on professional performance of graduates of geriatric nursing results in society needs to be met, and by reviewing current situation of each domain, an opportunity will be created to receive feedback about each domain by society. Admission and training students will also be in line with the needs of society. Applicants can choose the program based on their interest and job opportunities. A change in patients' needs can be specifically considered and used to reform the program (12).

Among limitations of this study, there was the source of information in University of Dublin, and it is suggested to use valid state and academic information in future studies. Furthermore, data should be gathered and analyzed through a qualitative interview with teachers, students, officials and other related individuals. Since there is no accurate information about employment status of the graduates in Iran, comparison in this regard requires more study and review.

Comparison of the two programs showed deficiencies of Iran educational program in 4 main domains, lack of job opportunity in the society for graduates, lack of transparency in the ability to respond to the needs of society, centralized student admission regardless of their competences and abilities, and lack of specialty in the program of master's in geriatric nursing. Therefore, these factors should be considered carefully by decision-making organizations in program revision.

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#### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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