The Experiences of Ph.D. Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11 which resulted in the deaths of millions, in 2020, and continues to affect all areas of life deeply. Cao et al (2020), Johnsons et al. (2020), and Lyson et al. (2020) indicated that there is an increase in financial and psychological stress in Ph.D. students compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. In addition to the economic difficulties, the pandemic impacts the mental health services available simultaneously (Wasil et al., 2021). Chirikov et al. (2020) indicated depressive and anxiety disorders among Ph.D. students increased between 2019 and 2020. Undoubtedly, these concerns influence graduate students who were already a vulnerable group before the Covid-19 (Evans et al., 2018).

In the Turkish context, studies were mostly examined at the undergraduate level such as university students' COVID-19 fear and intolerance of uncertainty (Duman, 2020), the effects of personality traits on their perceptions of distance education (Çiçeklioğlu & Akmaz, 2020), the distance education experiences (Orçanlı & Bekmezci, 2020; Yolcu, 2020), and the factors that affect anxiety levels (Ceviz et al., 2020). The studies carried out at the graduate level investigated the distance education experiences of the students during the COVID 19 period (Genç et al., 2020; Arar et al., 2021).

Purpose

A limited number of studies examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ph.D. students in the Turkish context. The current study intended to understand the experiences of Ph.D. students in one of the leading research universities in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design

The phenomenological research design was used to understand the Ph.D. students' perspectives, experiences, and feelings during the COVID-19 outbreak (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The study was conducted at a state university in the capital city of Turkey that has been identified as a research university. Criterion sampling was used since the target population was all Ph.D. students in the university. 213 (129 female and 71 male) Ph.D. students out of 3369 from different fields of study participated in the study. Data were collected through two questionnaires. The Nature Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on postdoctoral students (Woolstone, 2020) was adopted and revised for Ph.D. students in Turkey for the first questionnaire. The second questionnaire includes three open-ended questions; a) constructive outputs of COVID-19, b) relationship with the supervisor, and c) the necessity of emphasis on researchers' mental health. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted for the quantitative part of the study. Qualitative content analysis was conducted for the open-ended questions after transcribing the data using the pure verbatim protocol (Mayring, 2014).

Results of the Descriptive and Content Analysis

Descriptive analysis showed that the 127 participants in the dissertation writing stage were affected by COVID 19 outbreak on various issues such as data collection, data analysis, and laboratory studies. However, most participants indicated that literature review processes (42.4%) and ethics committee applications (53.8%) were not affected by the COVID 19 outbreak. The 59 participants who were still taking courses stated that the COVID19 outbreak did not have any impact on course attendance and access to resources for assignments, while it had a negative impact on the preparation of the course assignments and projects *54.2%*, the relationship with the lecturer *64.4%*, and the motivation to attend the courses online *67.8%*.

When the strategies for coping with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak were examined, the participants stated various strategies to cope with the situation, such as playing games, spending more time on social media, and communicating more with family members. When the experiences of Ph.D. students in terms of social support were examined, results indicated that they are using social support from other friends who are enrolled in a Ph.D. program, colleagues, family, and friends outside the academia. While 11.3% of the participants received

professional psychological support, 23.5% of the participants stated that they needed psychological support. Most of the participants (56.4%) stated that they were considering quitting their Ph.D. education program.

There are four themes that emerged from content analysis of open-ended questions; 1) strengthening close relationships, 2) focusing on academic work, 3) the "self" during Covid-19, and 4) the need for psychological help. Under the first code, participants indicated that they spent more time with their nuclear and extended family. Since the business trips have decreased and they started to work remotely, they spent more time with their children and created stronger connections with them. In addition to the family relationships, participants also mentioned that they created stronger connections with their boyfriends or girlfriends during quarantines.

Participants emphasized the time they focused on their academic work increased under the second code. This code has four subcodes; a) thesis workload, b) courses, c) online academic meetings, and d) relationship with the supervisor. Participants indicated that even if the laboratory or the libraries were closed, they found time to focus more on their thesis since they could do the time management effectively. Furthermore, especially the participants who have a full-time job outside the university mentioned the positive outcomes of online courses. Most participants indicated that they couldn't make contact with their supervisor adequately. On the other hand, some participants could create powerful and productive relationships with their supervisors. The third code includes the participants' experiences of focusing on their "self". It was mentioned that they had a chance to think about their thoughts and feelings more with the quarantines. Thus, they started to think about "who they are" and "what they want from their life" more than ever. The fourth code includes the need for psychological help of Ph.D. students. Participants indicated that Ph.D. is a stressful journey. Thus, they need to get psychological help besides the academic one they are getting from their supervisors.

Implications

This study revealed the current issues and needs of Ph.D. students at a research university in Turkey during covid-19. Even participants have various coping mechanisms stated in the quantitative results, indicating their need for psychological help. Thus, psychological training regarding coping mechanisms, stress, and anxiety should be developed to encourage Ph.D.

students. Furthermore, the coping mechanisms mostly include social aspects such as creating contact with family and peers. Thus, creating a network for Ph.D. students where they can find social support would be beneficial for their mental health. In addition, participants stressed the positive impact of Covid-19 on communicating with their supervisors and scholars from all over the world. Collaborations, communication, and support structures might be developed between experienced researchers and Ph.D. students to create academic support.

Acknowledgments

Resources

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