

# Distance and face-to-face education in postgraduate nursing education after the COVID-19 pandemic

Educación a distancia y presencial en la formación de posgrado en enfermería tras la pandemia de COVID-19

Educação à distância e presencial no ensino de pós-graduação em enfermagem após a pandemia de COVID-19

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Over the past decades, postgraduate nursing education has maximized the advancement of knowledge in health sciences around the world (1). Thanks to the modern pedagogical approaches and new higher education models that consider undergraduate –bachelor's degree, licentiate, or technological program– and graduate students –specialization, master's, or doctorate courses– as the main protagonists of the education process, master's and doctorate programs have allowed the generation of more technological products and high-impact scientific research (1). As a result, these graduate programs have gained more public, social, media, and cyberculture visibility. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions regarding nursing education under these academic programs (2).

The propagation of new teaching methods (3), considering that the current period is moving towards the endemicity of COVID-19

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(post-pandemic), has strengthened the idea that face-to-face education combined with a remote approach could make graduate nursing education more flexible, without causing losses in the post-academic training of students (4). Faced with the new reality of public health, which daily reformulates nursing teaching practices, enabling new spaces for debate and reflection about the models that minimally ensure the required levels of excellence in the teaching of master's and doctoral programs becomes essential.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic and the times of social isolation there was a need for the continuity of graduate nursing courses in many countries (5). This scenario required faculty, students and universities to adapt to the new reality and adopt distance or remote teaching –with the use of digital information and communication technologies–, which allowed not to stop graduate courses, the production of new health technologies, and the development of research studies, especially at this time of pandemic.

Within this rapid transition, professors had the need to review their teaching practices and learn how to handle the available technologies –even with little prior knowledge in informatics– in order to broadcast their classes online (especially synchronously) and enable an interaction with their students that would bring them all closer to a face-to-face contact (6). Despite the initial difficulties, these tools have proven to be an effective alternative for the continuity of teaching in graduate nursing courses, and thus made master's and doctoral programs more flexible, as they were previously taught only under in-class modality. Therefore, the use of these mechanisms might become a differential in the promotion of face-to-face teaching.

Students were also faced with the challenge of adjusting to remote classes, using different technological platforms, having access to a quality internet network, and counting on a suitable environment to attend classes and learn the contents taught in their courses in an effective way, which was not always possible due to the different socioeconomic contexts experienced by graduate students. Despite this, the adoption of remote teaching during the pandemic period was essential to minimize the damage of COVID-19 for education (7).

More than two years have passed since the beginning of the pandemic, but inequalities in the access to higher education still present in several countries (1). Thus, challenges such as the lack of infrastructure, vulnerabilities related to the use of technologies, and the development of the necessary skills for the adequate performance of health students continue to raise debates about the impact of this period on the performance and learning process of graduate nursing students in the long term, in a perspective that includes the post-pandemic period (8).

Despite the various difficulties experienced by both teachers and students, the pandemic highlighted a teaching system with little visibility and, until then, discredited, that is, hybrid teaching (9). This teaching method, so strengthened during the pandemic, brought to light that the modalities and teaching practices previously in force in master's and doctoral programs will no longer be the same, given that the adoption of a model of hybrid education by higher education institutions and the incorporation of new technologies in face-to-face class sessions would be expected, even in the post-pandemic period (10). This panorama accelerated a reality that the academic community would only experience in the future and boosted the use of educational tools that have favored more autonomy in the acquisition and production of knowledge by graduate nursing faculty and students (3).

Among the main educational tools incorporated during the pandemic, audiovisual resources, such as Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom and Moodle, and support tools to make class sessions more participatory and playful, such as Kahoot, quizzes and others, are worth to be mentioned (11). As a result of the technological leap achieved by education during this period, many of these technologies will still be used in the post-pandemic era for the promotion of hybrid teaching, as they have shown their effectiveness for the promotion of quality teaching.

The hybrid modality of teaching is valuable for master and doctorate students' education since it promotes greater engagement, flexibility, and a reduction of costs (10), besides making cultural exchange opportunities among institutions easier. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reflect on and measure –particularly in the long term– the impacts of this modality on the training of future masters and doctors in nursing, even if suitable and effective tools were adopted during their education process.

From the point of view of new perspectives and opportunities, this teaching modality has opened doors for graduate students to join inter-institutional exchanges without the need to leave their homes in order to attend the courses offered by other programs. It has also made it possible for students, especially those with socioeconomic constraints, to have access to renowned universities located in other states or countries, which used to be seen as a very distant or impossible reality, not always feasible without funding. Added to this, there was also an exponential increase in the realization of congresses, symposia, fairs, and seminars by virtual means (12), something that has facilitated the participation of students and the presentation of their scientific research studies in these events.

Based on the above, important national and international events in the health area had to adapt to this new scenario for the continuity of their activities (13). This may have ensured a greater participation and adherence by graduate students, since they do not need to assume some expenses to participate in these events, especially those related with transportation, accommodation, and food, as it occurs under the face-to-face modality. Consequently, it is recommended that various of these academic events remain in the remote modality during the post-pandemic.

During the last decade, graduate students have become the main character of their teaching-learning process, an issue that became even more visible in the pandemic period. Regardless of the teaching modality adopted by higher education institutions in the future, this leading role of students must endure, since even when the pandemic brought challenges and adaptation needs for these subjects and their professors, it also proved that the main person responsible for the education of master or PhD. students are themselves, whose autonomy already enables a more active and less passive graduate nursing education, with a critical scientific gaze towards a universal ethos of care.

Given the above, it is possible to consider that the advent of the pandemic anticipated the future of graduate nursing education. With this, teaching practices in defense of the hybrid model of teaching will continue to emerge, as well as the incorporation of new pedagogical trends in face-to-face teaching and distance learning. These anticipated processes will make the future of modern nursing and health care increasingly promising from the perspective of the scientific, technological and care fields, as graduate nursing programs will need to reorganize their spaces for care, management, research, teaching, and outreach activities.

The current changes in education require new forms of evaluating graduate programs in nursing and health to ensure their quality in terms of teaching practices and future developments. To do so, they must be aligned to the current path traced by the pandemic, which has led to different

methods for organizing teaching-learning processes. Therefore, it is necessary to understand this new scenario in the light of holistic educational management systems, so that new forms of effective learning could be expanded and incorporated to overcome the remnants of traditional teaching trends that were in place before the pandemic.

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