



## **Investigation of Prospective Medical Secretaries' Perspectives of Online Education: The Example Of February 6, 2023 Earthquake**

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### **Abstract**

**Aim:** In the present study, we aimed to investigate the perspectives of medical secretariat students, one of the important branches of the health services sector, about the distance education decision made by the CoHE due to the earthquake.

**Methods:** In line with this purpose, an e-survey was administered to the first and second year students studying in the Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program of a public university in Anatolia between February 13 and 17, 2023 (N: 285). In the analysis of the data, both the descriptive statistics and the Chi-square analysis were used. The data were analyzed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) V.26.

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**Results:** Of the students, about three quarters were female students, a little more than half were second year students, and the vast majority stayed in state dormitories. The number of the students who lived in the earthquake zone and lost their relatives in the earthquake and whose houses were damaged was less than was that of the other students. Approximately three quarters of the Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program students did not favor online education, in other words, they wanted to have all the courses face-to-face.

**Conclusion:** In short, necessary suggestions were made to heal traumas throughout the country and not to compromise on the quality of education.

**Keywords:** Medical secretary, university student, online education, distance education, earthquake

## INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters are events that cause significant damage to humans and nature. Since the existence of our planet, this negative effect of natural disasters has manifested itself in every age, and millions of people in the world are faced with negative situations caused by natural disasters every year. One of these natural disasters is earthquakes and they have extremely destructive effects both on the earth and on people.

One of the important natural disasters in Turkey is earthquakes. Earthquakes are in the group of ground-based disasters. Earthquakes are short-lasting natural events that take their source from the depths of the earth and cause vibrations on the earth (Aksoy and Sözen, 2014). Among other words used by people to mean earthquake are ground shaking, tremor, shock, seism, and temblor. Turkey is located on the Alpidic earthquake zone, which is one of the three most important earthquake belts in the world. It stretches from Java to Sumatra, across the Himalayas, the Mediterranean, and then into the Atlantic. The other two are the Circum-Pacific Seismic Belt, which surrounds the Pacific Ocean, and the mid-Atlantic Ridge or Oceanic Ridge belt most of which lies deep below and remote from human activity. Almost all of the earthquakes in Turkey have occurred on the following three main belts. The North Anatolian Fault Line, the Southeastern Anatolian Fault Line and the West Anatolian Fault Line (Karakuş, 2013). According to the earthquake zone map, 96% of Turkey's lands are located in regions with different levels of earthquake hazard and 98% of the population lives in these regions (Aksoy, 2013).

On February 06, 2023, two earthquakes occurred in Kahramanmaraş, a province in southeastern Turkey. The center of the first earthquake with a magnitude of 7.7 was Pazarcık district of Kahramanmaraş, and the center of the second earthquake with a magnitude of 7.6 was its Elbistan district. After the earthquakes occurred thousands of aftershocks. The earthquakes were felt in a wide area covering Southeastern Anatolia, Eastern Anatolia, Central Anatolia and Mediterranean Regions (Press Bulletin, 2023). The first reports from the area where the earthquakes took place point to heavy damage and loss of life. According to AFAD's (Turkish acronym for "Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency") report released on February 19, 2023, 40,689 citizens lost their lives, thousands of people were injured, and thousands of disaster victims living in the provinces of Kahramanmaraş, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Diyarbakır, Adana, Adıyaman, Osmaniye, Hatay, Kilis, Malatya and Elazığ were evacuated from the region to other provinces. A state of emergency was declared for three months in these 11 provinces where the disaster took place.

Earthquakes have an impact on the population size in a place, can adversely reverse economic indicators, and have serious effects on macro-economic balances. In addition, it is known that the phenomenon of earthquake leads to some short- or long-term psychological disorders as it settles in people's subconscious mind (Öcal, 2005). It is also a fact that many public services could not be provided or that there could be disruptions in their delivery after the earthquake. One of these services is education services.

The Ministry of National Education announced that education would start on February 20, 2023 outside the earthquake zone and on March 1, 2023 in the earthquake zone. According to the first decision made by the Turkish Higher Education Council (CoHE) on February 9, 2023, the start of the spring semester education at universities was temporarily postponed until a second announcement. In the press release of CoHE on February 11, 2023, it was stated that due to the earthquake, it would be appropriate to complete the spring semester of the 2022-2023 academic year through distance education. In the simplest terms, distance education is an education method based on the use of information technologies when the instructor and students are not in the same environment (Valentine, 2002). After it was decided to transition to distance education, the process of relocating earthquake victims' families to empty state dormitories started. It was also announced that new decisions on how to give applied courses such as internship and workplace

training in certain fields such as medicine and dentistry would be made in the coming days. On February 17,2023, CoHE President Erol Özvar said, *"It was decided to continue with distance education for the 2022-2023 period. Some decisions were taken to limit it to the spring semester. The decisions taken will be re-evaluated in April. The hybrid education system will be evaluated."*

The decisions made by the CoHE and announced to the public led to great reactions throughout the country. For example, Eğitim Sen (Turkish acronym for “Education, Science and Culture Workers Union”) filed a lawsuit demanding to stop the execution of the decision made by the CoHE to switch to distance education in universities as of February 14, 2023. The TTB (Turkish acronym for “Turkish Medical Association”) also stated that face-to-face education should not be abandoned, emphasizing that distance education in the health sciences, especially medical education, would lead to irreparable errors and deficiencies and prevent the provision of a qualified health service in the future.

Huseyin Celik, Former Minister of National Education of the Republic of Turkey, criticized the decision about distance education in universities due to the earthquake and said, *“I do not consider it a right decision. For instance, many university students did not have the face-to-face education at the university throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Now they will receive diplomas and will be graduates without adequate skills and competence”* (Ege Postası, 2023). In addition, many education experts drew attention to the fact that distance education would not be possible due to the lack of internet infrastructure in the region, and that even if there were internet infrastructure, students would not have the equipment to receive this education. In this context, determining the opinions of students studying in health-related departments regarding the decision of distance education is of great importance because, in health services, unlike other service sectors, substitutability of the service and compensation of the errors is not possible. The cost of these errors can result in illness, disability or, in the worst case, death.

## **1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Although students attending an associate degree program in the Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program do not take a direct role in patient care, they facilitate the work of other health professionals when they enter data and systematize medical documents. In many countries, in Turkey in particular, it is a well-known fact that most of the work that should be done by medical secretaries is usually done by nurses. In a natural disaster such as an earthquake, where great loss

of life is experienced, medical secretariat students' being at work and their being able to carry out their professional practices in hospitals will alleviate the workload of other health workers, especially nurses, and will enable nurses to focus only on patient care. Therefore, in the present study, we aimed to investigate the perspectives of medical secretariat students, one of the important branches of the health services sector, about the distance education decision made by the CoHE due to the earthquake.

In line with this purpose, an e-survey was administered to the first and second year students studying in the Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program of a public university in Anatolia between February 13 and 17, 2023. In the study, in which the universe sampling method was used, 285 usable data were obtained. In this descriptive study, seven survey questions were created by the researchers considering the current situation in Turkey. Before the data were collected, the participants were informed about the study, and their informed consent indicating that they volunteered to participate in the study was obtained.

We utilized Google Forms to prepare the e-survey. In the analysis of the data, in addition to descriptive statistics, the Chi-square analysis was used. The data were analyzed in the SPSS V.26 package program. The data were collected only from a single program of a university; thus, the results obtained in the present study are applicable only to the participants surveyed and they cannot be generalized to all medical secretariat students, which is the most important limitation of the study. On the other hand, it is expected that the study will contribute to the medical secretariat and health management literature.

## 2. FINDINGS

Of the participants, 71.2% were female students, 50.5% were second year students, 64.9% lived in a state dormitory, 17.2% lived with their family, 11.9% lived in a rented house and 6% lived in a private dormitory (Table 1).

**Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Participants**

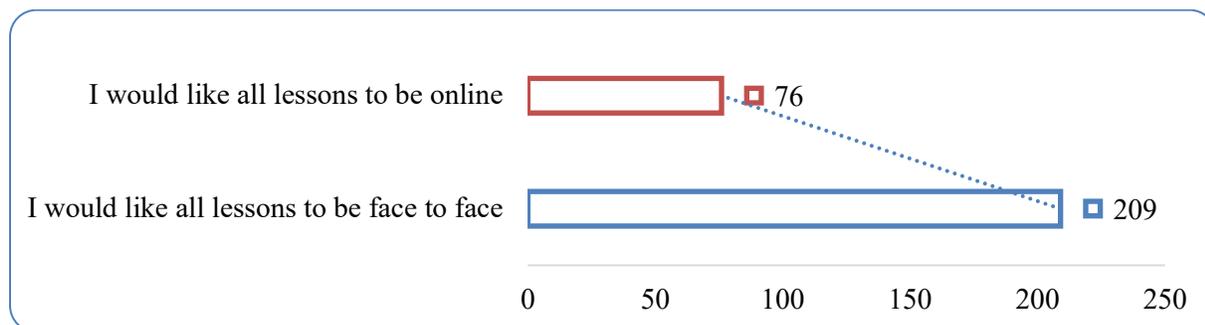
	Variables	f	%
Sex	Women	203	71.2
	Men	82	28.8
Year at school	1 <sup>st</sup> year	141	49.5
	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	144	50.5
Place of residence	State dormitory	185	64.9
	Private dormitory	17	6.0
	Family's home	49	17.2
	Rented house	34	11.9
<b>Total</b>		<b>285</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Of the participants, 9.8% lived in one of the provinces struck by the earthquake, 7.0% lost their relatives in the earthquake, 3.2% had houses/apartments completely damaged by the earthquake and 3.2% had houses/apartments partially damaged by the earthquake (Table 2).

**Table 2. Earthquake-Related Characteristics of the Participants**

	Variables	f	%
Do you live in one of the provinces affected by the February 6, 2023 earthquake?	Yes	28	9.8
	No	257	90.2
Did you lose any of your relatives in the February 6, 2023 earthquake?	Yes	20	7.0
	No	265	93.0
Was your house/apartment damaged in the February 6, 2023 earthquake?	Yes	9	3.2
	Partially	9	3.2
	No	267	93.7
<b>Total</b>		<b>285</b>	<b>100.0</b>

While 73.3% of the participants wanted all the courses in the 2023 spring semester to be given face to face, 26.7% wanted the courses to be given online (online) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Opinions of the Participants Regarding Online Education**

The relationships between the descriptive characteristics of the participants and their education preferences were analyzed with the Chi-Square analysis. According to the results of the

analysis, a statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) relationship was determined between the variables such as sex, place of residence, loss of a relative in the earthquake and damage to the house in the earthquake and the participants' preferences for the education type. The differences stemmed from the female participants, those who stayed in the state dormitory, those who did not lose their relatives in the earthquake and those whose houses were not damaged in the earthquake. On the other hand, there was a statistically insignificant relationship ( $p > 0.05$ ) between the participants' preferences for the education type and the variables such as year at school and whether they lived in the earthquake-affected areas.

**Table 3. Relationship between the Participants' Descriptive Characteristics and their Preferences for the Education Type**

Sex	Preference for the education type		X <sup>2</sup>	p
	Face-to-face	Online		
Women	156	47	4.45	<b>0.035*</b>
Men	53	29		
Year at school	Preference for the education type		X <sup>2</sup>	p
	Face-to-face	Online		
1 <sup>st</sup> year	105	36	0.18	0.668
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	104	40		
Place of residence	Preference for the education type		X <sup>2</sup>	p
	Face-to-face	Online		
State dormitory	141	44	7.35	<b>0.043*</b>
Private dormitory	8	9		
Family's home	34	15		
Rented house	26	8		
Do you live in one of the provinces struck by the earthquake?	Preference for the education type		X <sup>2</sup>	p
	Face-to-face	Online		
Yes	19	9	0.48	0.490
No	190	67		
Did you lose any relatives in the earthquake?	Preference for the education type		X <sup>2</sup>	p
	Face-to-face	Online		
Yes	7	13	16.16	<b>0.000*</b>
No	202	63		
Was your house/apartment damaged in the earthquake?	Preference for the education type		X <sup>2</sup>	p
	Face-to-face	Online		
Yes	3	6	7.91	<b>0.019*</b>
No	200	67		
Partially	6	3		

***p < 0.05***

### 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present study, carried out to investigate the perspectives of medical secretariat students, one of the important branches of the health services sector, on the distance education decision made by the CoHE due to the earthquake, included 285 associate degree students. Of the participating students, about three-quarters were women, and slightly more than half were second-year students. While the majority of them lived in state dormitories, very few of them stayed in private state dormitories.

The number of the students who lived in the earthquake zone and lost their relatives in the earthquake and whose houses were damaged was less than was that of the other students, which, of course, can be perceived as a positive result in terms of less loss of life. Approximately three quarters of the Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program students did not prefer online education, in other words, they wanted to have all the courses face to face.

Education is one of the areas affected by natural disasters and epidemics most. For example, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic all over the world, most countries suspended education and started the distance education process. In Turkey, education suspended at all levels continued through distance education at primary and high school levels with the Education Information Network system. As for universities, the CoHE decided that the semester should be completed with distance education (Bulut, 2021, Işık et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the efficacy of online education was intensively discussed in terms of the future of countries and students studying at different education levels.

In a study conducted with lecturers (Sayan, 2020), it was reported that online education was not an effective way. In a study conducted with teachers (Avcı and Akdeniz), the teachers had problems with the technological infrastructure and internet, and inequality of opportunity in education emerged. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and parents had serious problems in adapting to distance education.

In a study conducted on the effects of online education on parents (Arslan et al., 2021), it was determined that parents could not use the applications used in online education sufficiently, that they lacked internet, and technological tools, that they could not connect with teachers in the online classroom and could not access the course materials, that the students' sense of responsibility, technology and social skills decreased and that their social media addiction increased.

In another study conducted with the students of the faculty of theology (Genç and Gümrükçüoğlu, 2020), it was reported that the students were satisfied with the opportunities offered by distance education such as saving of time, easy access to the online classroom and listening to the repetition of the lesson, but they criticized online education because they were far from the socialization and face-to-face interaction of formal education.

In the literature, results on online education experiences of students studying in health-related fields during the COVID-19 pandemic are available. For example, in a study conducted to investigate medical school students' perspectives of emergency distance education processes (Atılğan et al., 2020), most of the students stated that the cognitive load in online education was high and tiring, that there were missing points in their education, that they had difficulty in developing self-discipline and that this process increased their social isolation levels.

In a study in which nursing students' views of online education given during the COVID-19 pandemic were investigated (Kurtüncü and Kurt, 2020), most of the students stated that both theory and practical courses would be insufficient with distance education, that they did not think to freeze registration, but that they thought that the school year would be extended. In their study (2021), Michel et al. concluded that most of the nursing students were worried about not being able to perform clinical practice during online education. In another study conducted with nursing students in Egypt (Diab & Elgahsh, 2020), it was determined that more than half of the students displayed a negative attitude towards distance education.

In a study (Kaya and Karaşin, 2022) in which Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program students' opinions of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic were investigated, it was concluded that the students were generally not satisfied with the online education given during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that online education was less efficient. In

a study conducted with Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Department students (A. Yılmaz, 2020), 87.5% and 78.5% of the students considered the efficiency of online education as low for applied and theoretical courses respectively.

In a study conducted with students of Vocational School of Health Services (Sarman and Günay, 2022), of the students, 80.3% stated that distance education was not as effective as face-to-face education, 24.4%, 37.4% and 54.6% stated that distance education did not contribute to their theoretical knowledge, their general culture level, and their professional practice skills at all respectively. The most common problem that the students had due to distance education was internet interruptions (15.8%).

In another study conducted by Yorulmaz and Söyler (2022), health management students' opinions about distance education was highly negative. These results suggest that our study results are largely consistent with the results of the current studies in the literature.

The results of our study demonstrated that the female participants, those who stayed in state dormitories, those who did not lose their relatives in the earthquake and those whose houses were not damaged in the earthquake preferred the face-to-face education model at a statistically significant level. These results can be interpreted as the female students staying in state dormitories were more familiar with the face-to-face education method compared to the male students staying in different places and they considered this method more suitable for them.

On the other hand, the placement of the citizens affected by the 6 February 2023 earthquake in the state dormitories affiliated to the Credit and Dormitories Institution paved the way for online education, which causes the students to experience accommodation problems. These decisions made by the CoHE caused great reactions throughout the country. For example, while the Education, Science and Culture Workers Union filed a lawsuit against this decision of the CoHE, the Turkish Medical Association underlined that the online education model in health-related fields would pave the way for irreversible mistakes and problems. Unlike other service sectors, it is not possible to substitute the service and compensate for the errors in health services. The cost of these errors can result in illness, disability or, in the worst case, death.

Considering the fact that online education carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic led to serious learning losses in students, it will be inevitable to face similar scenarios after this

earthquake disaster. It should not be forgotten that many healthcare professionals who provide healthcare services today received their education online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, due to the earthquake, students' houses were destroyed, tools such as tablets, computers and smart phones which are indispensable part of information technologies became unusable, their psychology was deeply injured and the internet infrastructure of the region was damaged. Therefore, due to such a serious picture, it does not seem rational for universities to make decisions to shift to distance education. Universities are the most valuable institutions because not only are they a place of education for students, but also they enable students to socialize. These contributions of universities to socialization will also have a positive impact on the psychosocial structures of all students who were affected by the earthquake directly or indirectly.

Another significant result obtained in the present study was that the students who did not lose their relatives and whose houses were not damaged in the earthquake displayed a more favorable attitude towards face-to-face education compared to the others. These results are not surprising because it is quite natural for students who were not affected by the earthquake directly to want to return to their face-to-face education. In the Medical Documentation and Secretarial Program, students should participate in the compulsory practice courses such as hospital practice and summer internship in addition to the theoretical courses, which may have influenced such decisions of the students.

In a study conducted on the issue in Turkey (Kızıltepe & Kurtgöz, 2020), no significant difference was reported between the nursing students' attitudes towards online education in terms of the variables such as sex, year at school and place of residence. Similarly, in another study conducted with nursing students (Uysal et al., 2022), no significant difference was reported between the nursing students' attitudes towards online education in terms of the variables such as sex, year at school and place of residence. In a study conducted with undergraduate students (Buluk ve Eşitti, 2020), it was reported that compared to female students, male students considered online education statistically more effective and they were satisfied with it. Within this context, we can say that while some of the results obtained in our study are similar to those in the existing literature, some are different.

Given the fact that the majority of the students in the present study wanted face-to-face education, it would be possible to list the following suggestions:

☑ The number of universities and students affected by the earthquake in the earthquake region is limited. Therefore, it is not the right policy to switch to distance education throughout the country. Therefore, the decision of how the universities that are not affected by the earthquake will continue their education should not be made by a single center.

☑ It is more suitable to allocate not dormitories affiliated to the General Directorate of Credit and Dormitories Agency but public guesthouses or hotels to families with children who are the victims of the earthquake.

☑ For the temporary use of dormitories affiliated to the General Directorate of Credit and Dormitories Agency, the beginning of the spring semester of universities can be postponed, and even a new academic calendar can be determined to include the summer season.

☑ Since electricity, internet and mobile phone lines have come to the point of collapse in the earthquake zone, it will be very difficult for thousands of students and instructors to access education if education is switched to distance education. Thus, students from universities in the earthquake zone can be admitted to the appropriate departments of universities in different provinces as guest students. Thus, it can be ensured that students can continue their education, and their wounds heal faster.

☑ Universities are places where students can meet their social and emotional needs during trauma periods. Returning to routine is very important for trauma. Therefore, the decision of distance education can be much more devastating, especially for the psychological and physical health of earthquake survivors.

☑ Students who request to freeze registration can be allowed, and academic staff can be given semester leave.

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