

Experiences of Undergraduate Students Completing Health Degrees in Social Work Departments

Sağlıkta Lisans Tamamlama Öğrencilerinin Sosyal Hizmet Lisans Bölümlerindeki Deneyimleri

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ÖZET

This research, conducted as part of the undergraduate completion program in health initiated by the Higher Education Board in 2015, involved 19 qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews using snowball sampling. The aim was to determine the experiences of undergraduate completion students placed in social work departments at state universities. There is a lack of sufficient research on the experiences and challenges faced by these students. Therefore, understanding their experiences is crucial for the future of social work education. The findings indicate that social work students in the undergraduate completion program chose the department consciously and were knowledgeable about social work. However, it was also revealed that these students face significant challenges in their educational journey, including difficulty with coursework and encountering prejudiced attitudes and behaviors from classmates and academic staff. To ensure social work education is inclusive and free from discrimination and prejudice, it is recommended that further research and improvement activities be conducted with undergraduate completion students and lecturers.

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ABSTRACT

Bu araştırma ile 2015 yılında Yükseköğretim Kurulu tarafından başlatılan sağlıkta lisans tamamlama programı kapsamında, devlet üniversiteleri bünyelerindeki sosyal hizmet bölümlerine yerleşen lisans tamamlama öğrencilerinin deneyimlerini saptamak amacıyla kartopu örneklem ile nitel yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine 19 görüşme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu kapsamdaki öğrencilerin deneyimleri ve yaşadıkları sorunlara dair yeterli düzeyde araştırma bulunmamaktadır. Bu nedenle bu kapsamdaki öğrencilerin deneyimleri sosyal hizmetin eğitiminin geleceği için önemlidir. Lisans tamamlama programı kapsamındaki sosyal hizmet öğrencilerinin, bölümü bilinçli olarak seçtiği ve sosyal hizmeti bildiği görülmüştür. Fakat lisans tamamlama öğrencilerinin eğitim hayatlarında zorlandıkları, dersleri zor buldukları ve sınıf arkadaşları ile akademik kadronun önyargılı tutum ve davranışları ile karşılaştıkları ortaya çıkmıştır. Sosyal hizmet eğitiminin kapsayıcı ve mesleğin odağı gereği ayrımcılık ve önyargıdan bağımsız olması için lisans tamamlama öğrencileri ve öğretim elemanları ile yapılacak araştırmaların ve iyileştirme faaliyetlerinin yapılması önerilmektedir.

Atıf İçin

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INTRODUCTION

The foundation of social work education in Turkey was in the 1960s. In this period, we first see the influence of the United Nations. The United Nations has shown interest in the organization of social work services and education problems in Turkey. This interest was demonstrated by the studies initiated by the Social Welfare Counselor Miss Hershey, who came to Turkey in 1957. As a result of these studies, the "Law on the Establishment of the Institute of Social Work" was enacted (Karataş & Erkan, 2002; Tufan & Koşar, 1999). Four educational consultants were assigned through the United Nations Technical Assistance Program. In addition, faculty members from the United States, the Netherlands, Pakistan, and India joined the Institute of Social Work through the Fulbright Commission, the Netherlands Technical Assistance Program, and bilateral agreements (Karataş & Erkan, 2002).

The Institute of Social Work was established within the Ministry of Health and Social Aid in 1961 as the first institution to provide social work education in Turkey. Later in 1982, with the Higher Education Law No. 2547, the Institute of Social Work was incorporated into Hacettepe University and its name was changed to the School of Social Work, affiliated with the Rectorate. The Department of Social Work, which was established within the Faculty of Social and Administrative Sciences at Hacettepe University in 1967, became the second institution to provide social work education in Turkey and continued its education until it was closed in 1983. While the School of Social Work initially adopted a health and psychology-focused model of social work education, the Department of Social Work developed its educational approach based on social sciences (Tomanbay, 2005).

According to the Higher Education Council (YÖK) Atlas preference guide, as of 2022, 99 social work departments actively enroll students, have a minimum score requirement, and provide a 4-year education. These departments offer education through various methods such as regular/face-to-face, open, and distance education, within the framework of both private and state universities (YÖK Atlas, 2023).

The social work program offers various types of education opportunities in many universities in Turkey. It is possible to graduate in the field of social work through different education types such as formal education, open education, distance education, and completing an undergraduate degree in health. These trainings include associate degree (2 years) and undergraduate (4 years) education. Social work education in Turkey is provided at the associate, undergraduate (formal, open education, and distance education), graduate, and doctoral levels (Aydemir & Yiğit, 2017; Sehman, 2019).

According to Temporary Article 69 of Law No. 2547 of Higher Education, "Starting from the date of the entry into force of this article, undergraduate completion training is provided in related fields for those who have graduated from midwifery and nursing programs in the field of health, as well as for those who have graduated from midwifery and nursing programs in their respective fields, and for other fields to be determined by the Higher Education Council. These pieces of training can be provided through distance education methods in the fields to be determined by the Council of Higher Education. The Ministry of Health and the Council of Higher Education cooperate for practical training. The procedures and principles of these trainings are determined by the Council of Higher Education" (YÖK, Law No. 2547, Article 69). Undergraduate Completion in Health refers to a higher education program that includes at least a two-year training program for health associate degree graduates to gain undergraduate qualifications (YÖK, 2021).

The first applications for completion of an undergraduate degree in the field of health were received on August 3-18, 2015, and the number of applicants was found to be 100,305, according to the Journal of Higher Education in 2016. According to the statistical data from the 2021 Higher Education Information Management System, the number of students who registered electronically for the undergraduate completion program was 3,214, with a registration rate of 46% (Higher Education Information Management System, 2021). Students who have graduated from associate degree programs before November 19, 2014, are eligible to apply for this program and can choose

from the undergraduate programs determined following the associate degree program they graduated from. Preference rights of 20 points are offered based on the undergraduate grade point averages multiplied by 2, and placement in universities is made according to the score ranking. As a result of these applications, approximately 500 or more students have been placed in social work departments in different universities in Turkey, as reported by the YÖK (YÖK, 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022).

When looking at the fields in which associate degree holders can benefit from the opportunity to complete their undergraduate degree, there are various fields such as Oral and Dental Health, Dental Prosthetics, Dental Prosthetics Technology, Dental Prosthetics Technician, Dental Prosthetics Secretariat, Hospital Management and Organization, Health Facility Management, Health Management, Emergency Care Technician, Emergency Aid, Emergency Aid Technician, Emergency Aid Techniques, Forensic Medicine, Forensic Medicine Technician, Ambulance and Emergency Care, Operating Room Services, Anesthesia, Anesthesia Technician, Autopsy Assistance, Paramedic, Environment, Environmental Health, Dialysis, Pharmacy Services and Technician, Disability Care and Rehabilitation, Occupational Therapy, Home Care for Patients, Elderly Care, Elderly Services and Care, Child Development and Education, among others, where associate degree holders have the opportunity to complete their undergraduate degree in social work programs (YÖK, 2021).

Students who come from diverse educational backgrounds that are not directly related to the field of social work and become social work graduates upon completing their undergraduate degree are often met with negative reception in the professional and academic communities (Turkish Social Workers Association [SHUDER], 2020; 2021; İdealsosyalhizmet; 2017). Professional associations have filed numerous lawsuits to suspend the implementation of undergraduate completion training in health for social work programs. This situation currently impacts students who are pursuing their education through an undergraduate degree completion program in health. Therefore, this study was designed to uncover the experiences and perspectives of these students. Furthermore, no studies have been found that specifically focus on those social work students who are now enrolled in the undergraduate completion program in health. Hence, the objective of this research is to investigate the challenges, difficulties, and experiences faced by students enrolled in the undergraduate social work department within the scope of the Higher Education Council (YÖK) undergraduate Degree in Health program.

Therefore the primary goal of this study is to thoroughly examine the challenges, obstacles, and general experiences faced by students pursuing their associate degrees and transitioning to undergraduate education through YÖK's undergraduate degree completion program in health, particularly within the social work department where they initially enrolled. Supplementary objectives include pinpointing the issues encountered by participants in their coursework, analyzing their interactions with peers, assessing the attitudes of classmates, instructors, and administrative staff toward them, gauging overall satisfaction with the social work departments, investigating the perspectives of participants' social circles and families regarding their return to education, determining participants' future plans and employment outlook, and uncovering the difficulties encountered in the undergraduate completion program in health.

METHOD

The main objective of this research is to comprehensively explore the difficulties, issues, and general experiences encountered by students who intend to complete their associate degree education and transition to undergraduate education through the undergraduate degree completion program in health offered by YÖK in Turkey, specifically within the social work undergraduate department where they initially enrolled and continued their education. In alignment with the main purpose, the secondary aims of this research are to identify the problems encountered by the participants in their lessons, uncover their interactions with their classmates, investigate the attitudes of their classmates, instructors, and administrative staff towards them, understand their overall opinions about the social work departments, explore the thoughts of the participants' social

environment and family regarding their return to education, ascertain the future plans of the participants and their perspectives on employment, and reveal the difficulties and challenges faced by them in the undergraduate completion program in health. To achieve these objectives, this research was designed using qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research involves a set of interpretive practices that aim to make the world more visible, such as field notes, interviews, photographs, recordings, and investigative diaries. Thus, qualitative research seeks to make sense of and interpret "things" in their natural environment based on the meanings people assign to events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Sample

The population of the study consists of students who were enrolled in the undergraduate degree completion program in social work under YÖK Health Undergraduate Completion Program in one of the state universities in Ankara during the 2021-2022 academic year, including students from the freshman (1st year), sophomore (2nd year), junior (3rd year) and senior (4th year). The snowball sampling method, which is one of the sampling methods in qualitative research, was used to conduct this research. Snowball sampling is effective in identifying individuals who can be a source of information about the research topic (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Additionally, qualitative research is used when a problem and/or topic needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, it facilitates reaching individuals with relevant knowledge, such as when working with a previously unstudied group like this research. In this context, the number of participants interviewed in the study and some basic socio-demographic information about them are presented in Table 1. Since it is snowball sampling and exploratory research, it is not possible to control equal distribution of associate degrees of the participant. The data collection process for the research continued throughout the Fall Semester of 2022-2023.

Table 1. *Sociodemographic information of participants*

Participant Code	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Hometown	Associate degree	Graduation Point (5 highest)	The Year of starting Health Undergraduate Completion Program	Employment Status
A	Women	30	Married	Erzincan	Child Development	3.47	2019	Unemployed
B	Women	40	Divorced	Ankara	Management of Health Institutions	2.06	2020	Unemployed
C	Women	31	Single	Samsun	Social Work	2.70	2019	Unemployed
Ç	Men	36	Single	Malatya	Child Development	3.60	2020	Employed
D	Women	29	Single	Sakarya	Child Development	3.13	2019	Unemployed
E	Women	34	Single	Erzurum	Child Development	3.10	2019	Unemployed
F	Women	33	Married	Ankara	Child Development	3.50	2019	Unemployed
G	Women	33	Married	Ankara	Child Development	3.70	2019	Unemployed
H	Women	26	Single	Ankara	Child Development	3.00	2020	Employed
I	Women	29	Single	İzmir	Child Development	2.75	2020	Unemployed
İ	Women	38	Married	Kahramanmaraş	Child Development	3.10	2019	Unemployed
J	Women	33	Single	Diyarbakır	Child Development	3.33	2019	Unemployed
K	Women	27	Single	Ağrı	Child Development	3.04	2019	Employed
L	Women	28	Single	İstanbul	Child Development	3.23	2018	Unemployed
M	Women	31	Single	Ankara	Child Development	3.00	2019	Unemployed
N	Women	25	Single	Samsun	Child Development	3.50	2019	Unemployed
O	Women	24	Single	Yozgat	Child Development	3.52	2019	Unemployed
P	Women	28	Single	Ankara	Child Development	3.20	2019	Unemployed
R	Women	26	Single	Ankara	Child Development	3.50	2019	Unemployed

Data Collection Tools

The data for this study were collected using the semi-structured interview method with voluntary participants who were recruited through snowball sampling from the targeted population. A meeting was arranged with a serious purpose, and it involved a mutual interaction and communication process that was conducted in the form of questioning and answering (Stewart & Cash, 1985). This method differs from everyday conversations, and it can be classified into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured types as a qualitative data collection method (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). For this study, a semi-structured interview form was utilized to identify the experiences and difficulties encountered by undergraduate students in the field of health. The questionnaire was designed based on qualitative research principles (Creswell, 2013). The information in the literature was supplemented by the experiences and observations of the research team, as well as preliminary data obtained from a few undergraduate completion students. The questions used in this study were carefully reviewed and evaluated comparatively to ensure their suitability for qualitative research purposes. The questionnaire consisted of qualitative questions related to the following topics: Sociodemographic Information, Decision Stage for the Undergraduate Completion Program in Health and Social Work Department, Undergraduate Completion Program in Health, Educational Experiences After Placement in the Department, and Future Plans.

Process

Assistant researchers who knew of some of the health undergraduate completion students in the social work undergraduate department approached them in their social circles, explained the purpose and importance of the research, asked for their voluntary participation, and obtained their informed consent. Interviews were conducted with the participants whose consent was obtained, and in each interview, the participants were asked to provide the names and contact information of 2 more individuals who might be willing to participate in the research. In this way, the research progressed towards other participants through the participants. As is inherent in qualitative research, the data collection phase was terminated by the researcher when similar issues and themes were repeated during the interviews.

Data Analysis

During the interviews, participants provided consent for voice recordings. Subsequently, these audio recordings were transcribed and subjected to descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis involves summarizing and categorizing data based on predetermined themes, questions, or dimensions of the research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). In this study, descriptive analysis was employed to examine the main topics related to the research questions and to reveal the experiences of undergraduate students in health programs. The research team classified the transcribed data according to the research questions and cross-checked their respective classifications.

FINDINGS

Findings will be discussed in sub-headings by following the order of the research questions. These topics are the decision-making phase, experiences related to educational life, the impact of the social environment, expectations, and projections for the future.

Decision-Making Phase

The first subheading, the Decision-Making Phase, highlights the participants' process of deciding to pursue an undergraduate completion program in health. The study revealed that participants' perceived professional inadequacy as associate degree graduates played a significant role in their decision-making process. Participants expressed a desire to improve their employability prospects by enhancing their skills and knowledge through further education. The findings suggest that perceived professional inadequacy may serve as a motivator for individuals to pursue additional education.

Moreover, social influences were also observed as a factor in the decision-making process. Some participants reported that they became aware of the program through the recommendations of their friends, which influenced their decision to enroll. The role of social influences in shaping educational decisions highlights the importance of social networks and peer recommendations in the education domain. Overall, the Decision Making Phase findings suggest that both internal factors, such as perceived professional inadequacy, and external factors, such as social influences, play a critical role in the decision-making process for pursuing further education.

“I realized that my associate degree was useless. I could not find a job in the state institutions, I saw that they did not open a quota for my department. Later, I thought of studying undergraduate degree to improve myself, to know myself, and to progress. Then I realized the difficulty of preparing for the university exam. When I was given such an opportunity (YÖK Health undergraduate Completion Program), I applied without hesitation.” (Participant A)

“So, this is how I started my business life after getting associate degree, and in my working life, it came to me at every opportunity that an associate degree wasn't enough. The fact that employers equate them with high school graduates, compared to undergraduates, affected me a little bit negatively.” (Participant I)

Another topic in the decision-making stage was to determine whether the participants' preference for social work departments in the health completion program was a conscious choice. In this context, it was observed that the participants had relatively low levels of knowledge about the social work department.

“Social work is my first choice. While I was studying in child development department, I had known social work and social work department. But after university entrance exam I wanted to study in my hometown and because of that I didn't choose social work departments. I wanted to stay with my family as I was an online child of the family, and my mother wanted me to choose child development department. But I've always wanted to study social work since I've known social work profession is the most effective profession for helping people.” (Participant D)

“My cousin is social worker, and she/he gives information about it. I love to talk about social work. When she/he talks about social work I get very excited. She/he always talks about the work she/he does, so it has been very effective my choice of social work department.” (Participant J)

“Yes, I have researched about social work, I've heard employment opportunities. I think it is a good department to study and I'm very glad I'm studying in here” (Participant P)

It has been learned that only 7 of the participants wrote the social work department as their first preference. When asked about the reasons for choosing the social work department, it was

generally seen that they chose it because they perceived it as a profession that helps people and touches their lives.

“... I considered social work as a useful profession. I realized that this department was going to help me to develop different point of view about community. That’s way I chose this department. I also learnt that social workers employed in government and private sector.” (Participant A)

“Actually, I want to develop my skills in community work, and I believe I can work in that field. I also believe I can work with individuals since I am interested in human psychology. I love human psychology and I like to help people. I’m happy to guide people, so I prefer this department.” (Participant O)

In general, it can be said that participants who prefer the social work department in the scope of the undergraduate completion program received information from a family member or someone in their social circle about the department and had prior knowledge about it. In addition, the fact that social work is a profession that provides help and touches human lives seems to influence their preference decisions.

Experiences Related to Education Life

Participants were asked about their experiences when they first started the department. It was observed that some of the participants had concerns about adaptation, especially due to their age being older than undergraduate students. It was also seen that participants coming from other cities had the most difficulties with issues such as accommodation and adapting to a new city.

“When I first started to courses, I wondered whether my classmates develop different point of views about me and my age? What my social environment says about that? I thought was I successfully express myself? But after some time, I’ve get along and have not experiences problems.” (Participant A)

“In my first year I had problems about accommodation not adaptation problems.” (Participant E)

Participants were also asked about their communication and interactions with their undergraduate classmates, and it was observed that there were generally no problems in this regard, with statements indicating that everything was going smoothly.

“I don’t have any problems with my classmates. Thankfully they are so respectful, we don’t have any communication problems or disagreements.” (Participant A)

“I have limited relationships with my classmates. I have more relationships in my private life. Actually we only greet each other in the classroom.” (Participant J)

It’s seen that almost all the participants find social work courses hard.

“Yes, I’m struggling. In this department the amount of internship hours so long, I know this is an advantage but in other universities the lecturer teaches the course then leave. He/she says you’re responsible for these subjects, study them and you’ll be passing the course. In here it’s not enough, there are so many activities, homework, assignments, and projects. The students have so many responsibilities. I didn’t have a week to relax or repeat the subjects I’ve learnt. We always have a homework or project. I can’t be interested in any other subject than social work. English and Maths

are very difficult for me, I'm not struggling in department courses, all of them useful." (Participant A)

"There are some courses I'm struggling. First year these were Maths and English. I think these courses are not relevant to social work. In some other courses I'm struggling because of the content and the lecturer. Some lecturers are very easy on students and teaches us so little. I don't like that because I've come here to learn. These courses are mostly elective ones." (Participant F)

"The courses are very useful and enjoyable for me, I miss that. Sometimes I'm struggling but I'm glad. For example, in this third year our internship has begun, and we've started to struggle, every year there is new challenge for us. I like to read, and all the courses requires so much reading but it's exhausting sometimes. When the course content does not appeal my interests, it's harder for me and we try not to choose them." (Participant N)

Participants generally mentioned that the undergraduate completion programs in healthcare have significant advantages for them. It was observed that these advantages intersect in terms of being able to enter university without an exam, self-improvement, and completing their unfinished education.

"The advantages of this undergraduate completion program are I can enter this department without an exam and I'm living out my dreams on my education." (Participant K)

"I think me and friends like me have a chance to complete their education and we can be independent as we graduate" (Participant E)

"I feel more educated about my profession and it's nice to have knowledge and experience. With these knowledge and experiences and my former employment experiences I feel that I can be better in my field, children. I want to work children." (Participant I)

In addition to these advantages, it was also seen that a large majority of participants mentioned some disadvantages. It was observed that the main disadvantage mentioned was their perception of biased attitudes and behaviors towards them by classmates, management, and department faculty members.

"Sometimes when the topic comes up, people claim that we entered university without taking an exam and argue that this situation has disadvantaged them. I sense that they are not happy about it. I sense that they are not at all satisfied with this situation. Naturally, it creates an exclusion towards us. We are already being perceived as a separate group. We are considered as undergraduate completion group." (Participant K)

"You are already facing prejudice from your classmates. They may try not to make you feel it or not show it at all, but you know because whenever you reveal your age, everyone turns to look at you. I had an incident in my first year. One of our professors asked for my age in class and then asked the class who had chosen this university as their first preference. I raised my hand, and then he/she asked why it was my first choice and why I chose this field. He mentioned that my peers had already gotten married. I could have taken it as a joke, but other students in the class might not have understood it that way." (Participant D)

"I believe that some professors are excluding us. They position us as students who entered this department without taking an exam and without putting much effort."

Once, I heard one of our professors make a comment about us, saying, "And then these ones came to our department, and we should also sort them out." I also saw similar remarks on Twitter. I sense that most professors share a similar view. Even if they don't directly come up to us and say anything, you can understand it. For example, we have some professors who sometimes don't fully explain a question I ask. From all of these, I understand that discrimination is taking place." (Participant F)

During the interviews, researchers observed that participants had a great concern for privacy and secrecy when it came to providing their names or the names of other reference interviewees. This may be due to the discrimination and exclusion that students feel, as seen in the findings.

During the first semester of the freshman year, I felt a bit excluded by some professors. They didn't acknowledge us and there were some negative conversations within the class. It really bothered me when they referred to us in a sarcastic manner as "undergraduate completion students" or something similar. (Participant J)

"I encountered a negative situation during the registration process. When I was speaking with the Student Affairs, the person working there said sentences like, 'I get annoyed with these undergraduate completion students.' They mentioned that it would be better if we didn't come at all. We had an argument there." (Participant K)

"The professors in this department believe that, regarding undergraduate completion, we entered this program through an easy path, that we didn't actually choose this field willingly, and that we have received no education before starting here. However, we are just as dedicated to our profession as they are." (Participant L)

"Some faculty members are really cold towards us, and there are those who give very snappy answers to questions asked. It's as if they are responding as if they were dealing with a child, even though nobody has the right to give a snappy answer to a child either. I think they could be more positive about these matters." (Participant M)

Other disadvantages mentioned by participants include having too many outside school responsibilities and dissatisfaction with starting from the first year of undergraduate studies as part of the completion program.

"I have a lot of responsibilities. I have a child, and I'm trying to both take care of them and keep up with their school. Naturally, I'm also trying to manage things at home. This is truly a significant disadvantage for me." (Participant G)

"When we look at the disadvantages, there are a few points to consider. Starting from the first year created difficulties in terms of time. Due to my age and being a single parent, I faced challenges. I don't have anything else to add. These are things that have affected my life. As I mentioned before, I had to make a choice between work and school, and I chose education." (Participant B)

Participants were also asked to evaluate the attitudes of faculty members and students towards them. While participants generally stated that there was no direct bad behavior or attitude towards them, they expressed that the faculty members were too focused on teaching and did not think about the students.

"They are quite supportive (faculty members). We can easily communicate with them. If you have high self-confidence, you can establish relationships with people both normally in society and within the university. When it comes to one-on-one interactions, I can also comfortably engage in conversations, get answers to my

questions. I enjoy being able to approach them without hesitation when I want to ask something or when there's something I don't understand.” (Participant B)

“I haven't witnessed any bad behavior, but it's just that the faculty members are focused solely on the coursework and don't consider the well-being of the students. They don't think about whether the student has understood or not, or if the student is having difficulty attending classes. They don't provide support in terms of financial difficulties either. They simply expect students to learn the course material, as if they prefer the courses to be more challenging in order for students to face even more difficulties. I haven't experienced any discrimination or disrespect from them. (Participant H)

Additionally, three participants who were employed faced some difficulties that were different from those of other participants, and they expected support from the department's faculty members regarding these issues.

“During my adjustment period, something happened actually. I started experiencing difficulties with time management because I had to attend classes and work at the same time. In reality, our professors are understanding about this; at least, I believe most of them are. When we individually approach them and discuss our situations, some professors try to help us. However, there are also professors who say, "It's your responsibility, so if you had to work, you shouldn't study." I think they should support us more.” (Participant L)

The impact of the social environment

The researchers asked the participants about their social environment's (family and friends) thoughts and support regarding their decision to return to education life. Overall, it was observed that the participants received support from their social environment regarding their decision, and only a few participants did not receive any support from their social environment.

"My family and friends were very pleased. They fully support my decision to pursue education, and they even suggested that I quit my job and focus solely on studying. However, I didn't do it because it would have been very challenging for me financially, as I was self-supporting during the first two years." (Participant A).

"My family definitely did not want me to choose the social work program. Despite all their efforts, I insisted on it. However, my motivation would sometimes waver. They would constantly remind me of my age, which would bring down my morale and dampen my enthusiasm. I would often find myself torn between whether I should quit and leave or stay and continue studying. There were many moments when I contradicted myself. I was negatively influenced at times, but I am proud of myself for not listening to any of it and persevering to reach my fourth year. I put aside all the negativity and focus on my achievements." (Participant J).

Expectations

Participants were asked about their expectations from their school and social environment. Among the expectations from their field of study, it was observed that they expected their instructors and fellow students to be there for them and provide support, and they believed that they should be involved in decision-making and planning processes.

"... I want my professors to be accessible to always support me, to be able to ask them comfortably whenever something comes to my mind. I mean, I want to remember this place fondly, despite the negative memories." (Participant C)

"My expectation from the department is that it should be somewhat student-focused, because currently the school is putting too much pressure on the students and it is my expectation that it becomes more student friendly, department should have plans tailored to the experiences of the students." (Participant K)

"I have expectations for them to provide more support to students, for example, they can guide us and focus on career-related aspects such as helping us find jobs in the private sector. I believe they can support us in this regard." (Participant L)

Regarding their social environment during their education, the participants expected continued support and appreciation of the difficulties of completing a degree through a continuing education program.

"I'm saying they already provide support, so they shouldn't withdraw that support because sometimes it becomes increasingly challenging every year, and the more I struggle, the more I will need their support." (Participant N)

"I would expect them to provide even more support, for example, when they call and I can't answer, I would like them to understand that I might be in class or on an internship and act accordingly." (Participant L)

Future Projections

Participants were asked about their future projections regarding what they plan to do after graduating from the social work department. Generally, it can be said that their projections include preparing for the KPSS (Public Service Exam to be employed in public institutions) exam, continuing to develop necessary skills in the areas they need, and pursuing a master's degree to some extent. Their expectations regarding employment mostly focus on finding a job quickly.

"Currently, I have a plan to pursue a master's degree. If it's meant to be, I would like to do a master's degree and there might be a plan for me to start a job in the university after completing it." (Participant K)

"After graduating from social work, I am considering pursuing a master's degree in family counseling. Before that, I plan to take some additional training courses to further develop myself. Afterward, I will focus on the private sector because there is no Public Service Exam (KPSS) for two years." (Participant L)

"After graduation, I am considering taking the Public Service Exam (KPSS) and I aspire to work in the field." (Participant P)

DISCUSSION

Although it is possible to come across studies on the experiences of social work students and their reasons for choosing the department in the relevant literature, there has been no study specifically focusing on social work students in the context of completing their undergraduate degrees in health. Therefore, the findings are discussed within a limited literature framework. First, when looking at the findings regarding decision-making, it is seen that choosing social work departments within the scope of undergraduate degree completion programs in health is a conscious choice.

This finding is consistent with other studies in the field that examine students' department preferences, even if they are not within the scope of undergraduate degree completion programs. These studies also observed that students knew about the social work profession beforehand, had a social worker in their immediate environment, and chose the department after researching the profession (Altındal, 2022; Doğan, 2018; Koçak, Seviç, & Savacı, 2018). In this study, 7 participants stated that they chose social work as their first choice; similarly, social work prospective students are generally observed to choose the department as their first choice and choose it willingly (Sevim & Altın, 2017; Doğan, 2018). At this point, it seems that the choice of social work department is similar whether it is for undergraduate degree completion or regular undergraduate education.

Looking at the experiences related to their education, concerns about adaptation due to age differences and the difficulty of social work courses stand out. These difficulties are generally related to the workload of assignments and projects in courses and the student-centered approach to education. A similar result was also observed in a study conducted with formal undergraduate social work students (Attepe Özden & Tekindal, 2019). In this study, students criticized themselves as "students who choose the easy way out" and "do not attend classes." In this context, dissatisfaction with active learning-supporting education processes is also observed among students completing their undergraduate education in social work in healthcare. Considering the importance of projects and assignments and student-centered learning in social work education, it can be said that undergraduate completion students also have a similar mindset in this regard.

It has been observed that participants mention certain disadvantages related to the undergraduate completion program. These disadvantages include biased attitudes and behaviors towards classmates and instructors. While there are no studies directly related to social work undergraduate completion programs, two studies suggest that social work undergraduate students believe that the profession is harmed by those who transfer from other majors and those who complete their degree through distance education programs, which may decrease job opportunities (Doğan, 2018; Sevim & Altın, 2017). Similarly, studies on distance education undergraduate completion programs in theology and nursing reveal similar issues related to biased attitudes and behaviors (Karateke, 2020; Polat et al., 2019; Kaymakcam, 2015). However, it is not incorrect to say that this phenomenon, which may be interpreted in the context of biased attitudes and behaviors, needs to be further investigated in terms of its frequency and level and the students' perception of it. The opposing statements of social work associations in Turkey and contrary thoughts on undergraduate completion programs are thought to have an impact on students of undergraduate completion programs in healthcare (SHUDER, 2020, 2021; İdesalsosyalhizmet; 2017). Students may perceive the professional opinions and judgments expressed towards the undergraduate completion program as directed to themselves.

Participants in the study faced difficulties, some of which were due to excessive out-of-school responsibilities. It was observed that some of the undergraduate completion students, whose age is above average, struggle due to responsibilities in the family, work, and school triangle, and they have expectations from the department's academic staff regarding this issue. In the studies conducted with social work undergraduate students, it was suggested that the instructors listen to the students more and establish an egalitarian relationship (Attepe Özden & Tekindal, 2019; Başer & Akçay, 2019). However, within the scope of this research, it is seen that undergraduate completion students demand an understanding and convenience beyond being heard themselves.

Although participants generally receive support from their social environment in terms of social support, it is also seen that some participants, albeit in small numbers, have objections to returning to education due to their age, work life, and having a family in their social environment. It was observed that these participants, who are lacking social support, had more difficulties in terms of school and non-school responsibilities. At this point, the experiences of these participants differ from those in formal undergraduate programs. Because research in the field shows that social work

students receive support from their social environment, family, teachers, and friends in their department preferences (Doğan, 2018; Sevim & Altın, 2017; Altındal, 2022). As for the expectations, some common expectations of undergraduate and undergraduate completion students have emerged. These include ensuring that faculty members are always with students, supporting them, and enabling their participation in decision-making processes (Attepe Özden & Tekindal, 2019; Başer & Akçay, 2019). As for future provisions, it is also found in the studies conducted in the field that completion students have thoughts and concerns about preparing for the KPSS exam and being able to quickly join the workforce when they graduate, similar to other undergraduate students (Doğan, 2018; Sevim & Altın, 2017; Altındal, 2022; Başer & Akçay, 2019; Başer, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research was conducted to determine the experiences of undergraduate completion students who were placed in social work departments within the scope of the health undergraduate completion program initiated by YÖK in 2015. There is not enough research on the experiences and problems of these students. Therefore, the experiences of these students are important for the future of social work education.

In this study, it was observed that students generally preferred social work departments to some extent as a profession that defines and touches people's lives and helps them. It shows students' belonging to the department and profession, and these preferences are not entirely random. In this sense, it can be said that students choose the social work department willingly. It can be said that participants saw themselves as quite advantageous as they had the chance to enter university without an exam through the health undergraduate completion program, had the chance to improve themselves, and had the opportunity to continue their unfinished education. However, in return for these advantages, they evaluated the abundance of non-academic responsibilities outside of school and starting their education by taking first-year courses as a very negative situation. It was stated that these students in the scope of undergraduate completion expect understanding and facilitation from the academic staff for their non-academic responsibilities, but this is not met. A general evaluation and introduction meeting regarding the department, courses, and graduation conditions may be useful for undergraduate completion students when they start their departments.

When looking at the experiences of students in their educational lives, one of the prominent problem areas is staying above the average age of the students in the departments they are placed in, causing problems with adaptation and communication. Participants did not experience negative interaction in this regard, but it can be said that they did not establish much of a relationship with their younger classmates in general. However, when the anecdotes they later shared were evaluated, it is noticed that they also faced prejudiced attitudes and behaviors from their classmates. It has been expressed with many examples that these prejudiced attitudes and behaviors are not limited to classmates only, but that they have also seen these attitudes from the academic staff. It is understood from their expressions that they are seen as insufficient in the field of social work and that they have come to this department "without an exam, easily" by the academic staff in general. At this point, students have been very careful about not mentioning the names of the faculty members and courses during the interviews and they needed to be reassured about confidentiality. Students may perceive professional opinions and judgment processes related to the completion program in healthcare through as directed towards themselves and may have great sensitivity towards discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. However, this issue needs to be supported with more comprehensive studies with both faculty members and students. Considering these, academic and social activities that encourage interaction between all students and faculty members can be organized.

In general, it can be said that students receive support from their social environments to continue their education and expect to have some ease and participation in decision-making processes within their departments. These expectations can be evaluated by department management and

addressed accordingly. To improve communication and interaction among students in the classroom, responsible faculty members can pair them with other classmates in assignments and activities. This will help reduce communication barriers and, indirectly, biased attitudes.

Given that this program has been widely accepted as a Higher Education Council (YÖK) policy and implemented for years, it is important to ensure that students studying or graduating from this program and those in social work departments are not excluded by the academic and professional community of social work. Conducting inclusion efforts is crucial to prevent segregation and hostility within the profession. Social work is inherently an inclusive discipline, and individuals who are admitted to or graduate from social work schools, regardless of the pathway, should be treated equally with their peers. Additionally, since there is a specific age limit for the completion of undergraduate health programs, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of students enrolled in this program, for instance in the year 2023. It is possible that in the next few years, there may be no students eligible for education under the undergraduate completion program. Therefore, supporting students who have received education in this manner until now becomes even more critical.

The undergraduate completion program in health sciences initiated by the Higher Education Council (YÖK) has sparked considerable debate, particularly within the field of social work, leading to litigation by professional organizations. Numerous press releases have emphasized concerns that such a presented undergraduate education might detrimentally impact the profession. According to YÖK Atlas statistics, there are over 100 undergraduate social work departments within both state and private universities in Turkey, significantly increasing the number of graduates from social work programs. Considering the already acknowledged lack of rapid employment opportunities within the social work field, the necessity of the student cohort resulting from undergraduate completion programs can be questioned. As a policy, undergraduate completion programs may be observed to pose certain issues regarding departments and the professions they represent. Furthermore, albeit limited in scope, findings from this research also indicate intra-departmental communication and interaction problems among students and faculty members. Hence, the necessity of undergraduate completion programs remains subject to debate.

There are some limitations of this study. Since it is one of the first studies on this subject, snowball sampling is used to discover the potential participants more easily and this sampling method limits the equal distribution of the participants. As in the method sections, almost all the participants graduated from child development department; this can be limited the findings to only the participants had associate degree from child development and chose to study in social work in health complication program. It is generally considered that the child development field is close to social work. However, the participants education background is child development, the research aimed to collect experiences of being social work student in social work department. Also, qualitative research, by its nature, does not produce generalizable results to the population. Therefore, the findings of this study have served the function of providing preliminary insights for a limited group, rather than aiming to shed light on academic research through generalizability. The findings of this research can be used by social work departments with students of health complication program.

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Uzun Öz

Bu araştırma, Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu'nun 2015 yılında başlatmış olduğu ve birçok bölümü kapsayan sağlıkta lisans tamamlama programı kapsamında sosyal hizmet lisans bölümlerine yerleşmiş olan öğrencilerin deneyimlerini derinlemesine anlamak ve ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu'nun bu programı ile tüm Türkiye'de sosyal hizmet lisans bölümlerine oldukça fazla öğrenci yerleşmeye hak kazanmıştır. Fakat bu öğrenciler, Türkiye'de yapılmakta olan üniversitelere yerleşebilmek adına yapılan merkezi sınava girdikten sonra bu hakkı kazanmadıkları için akademik ortamlarda, meslek örgütünde ve üniversitelerin sosyal hizmet bölümlerinde birtakım tepkiler ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu tepkilerin lisans tamamlama programı kapsamında sosyal hizmet bölümlerine yerleşen öğrencilerin üzerindeki etkisi ise bilinmemektedir. Bu nedenle bu araştırma, keşfedici araştırma deseni kullanılarak planlanmış ve gerçekleştirilmiştir. Daha önce bu grup ile yapılan bir çalışma ile karşılaşılmadığından nitel araştırma deseni tercih edilmiştir. Nitel araştırma, henüz hakkında derinlemesine bilgi sahibi olmadığımız konuların keşfedilmesinde tercih edilen bilimsel araştırma yöntemlerinden birisidir. Bu kapsamda, bu çalışmada veri toplama aracı olarak yarı yapılandırılmış soru kâğıdı ve nitel görüşme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. İlk olarak araştırmacıların kendi sosyal çevrelerinden tanıdıkları sosyal hizmet lisans bölümlerinde bulunan sağlıkta lisans tamamlama öğrencileri ile yüz yüze, derinlemesine ve yarı yapılandırılmış nitel görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş olup toplamda 19 öğrenciye ulaşılmıştır. İlk görüşmeyi kabul eden ve onam veren görüşmecilere, iki isim önermeleri istenmiş ve bu şekilde ilerlenerek kartopu örnekleme yöntemi ile çalışılmıştır. Görüşmelerin başında araştırmacının amacı, gizlilik, ses kaydı ve etik konuları hakkında sözel bilgilendirme yapılarak görüşmecilerin aydınlatılmış onamı alınmıştır. Yaklaşık 16. Görüşmeden sonra katılımcıların ifade ettikleri deneyimler, duygu ve düşüncelerin benzerleştiği saptanmış ve en sonunda 19. Görüşmeden sonra veri toplama süreci araştırmacıların ortak kararı ile sonlanmıştır. Görüşmelerin ses kayıtları ve görüşmeciler belli kodlar verilerek kodlanmış ve deşifre edilmiştir. Daha sonra bu deşifreler üzerinden araştırmacılar içerik analizi yapmışlar ve ortaklaşan temaları saptamışlardır. Araştırmanın bulgularına bakıldığında ise ilk bulgunun sağlıkta lisans tamamlama ile sosyal hizmet lisans bölümlerine yerleşen öğrencilerin genelinin ilk tercihinin sosyal hizmet bölümü olduğu görülmüştür. Bu tercihin bilinçli ve sosyal hizmet bilgisine sahip olarak yapıldığı anlaşılmıştır. Bu durum daha önce sosyal hizmet lisans öğrencileri ile yapılan çalışmalarla da uyumludur. Genel anlamda sosyal hizmet tercih eden öğrencilerin, bilinçli bir tercih yaptıkları ve sosyal

hizmet bölümünü ilk sıralarda tercih ettiği görülmektedir. Bir katılımcı dışında tüm katılımcıların ön lisansta çocuk gelişimi okudukları, bazılarının evli olduğu ve bazılarının çalışmakta olduğu görülürken genel yaş ortalamasının üniversite sınavı ile lisans bölümlerine kaydolun öğrencilerden yüksek olduğu önemli noktalardan birisidir. Sosyal hizmet bölümü ile ilgili bulgulara geldiğimizde, sağlıkta lisans tamamlama ile yerleşen öğrencilerin sosyal hizmet bölüm ve bölüm dışı derslerinde zorlandıkları görülmektedir. Öğrencilerin, bazı bölüm derslerinin içeriğinin çok yoğun olduğundan; verilen ödev, proje ve uygulamaların fazlalığından şikâyet ettikleri görülmektedir. Benzer bir sonuç sosyal hizmet lisans öğrencileri ile yapılan çalışmalarda da öne çıkmıştır. Özellikle çalışan ve/veya evli olan öğrencilerin bu noktada daha fazla zorlandıklarını söylemek yanlış olmayacaktır. Bu nedenle de öğrencilerin bölümlerinden kendileri için ayrıcalık veya kolaylık beklemedikleri ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu araştırmanın en önemli bulgularından bir tanesi ise sosyal hizmet bölümlerinde bulunan sağlıkta lisans tamamlama öğrencilerinin, önyargılı tutum ve davranışlar ile karşılaştıklarını ifade etmiş olmalarıdır. Bu önyargılı tutum ve davranışların hem bölümdeki akranları hem de akademik kadrodan geldiğini belirtmişler ve buna örnekler vermişlerdir. Akranları olarak değerlendirdiğimiz sınıf arkadaşlarının ve akademik kadronun kendilerini sınavsız giriş ile sosyal hizmet bölümlerinde bulunuyor şeklinde algıladıkları ve davranışlarının kaynağını oluşturduğunu ifade etmişlerdir. Bazı katılımcılar, akademik kadrodaki önyargılardan dolayı bölüme başladıkları zaman birinci sınıftan başlatıldıklarını iddia etmişlerdir. Bazı öğrenciler ise sınıf içinde derslerde öğretim elemanları/üyeleri ile yaşadıkları bazı durumlara örnekler vermişlerdir. Özellikle akademik kadro ile ilgili konular konuşulurken katılımcıların rahat olmadığı ve tekrar tekrar isimlerinin gizliliğini sordukları görülmüştür. Görüşmeyi gerçekleştiren araştırmacı, bu durumu fark ettiğinde katılımcının rahatlaması için verilen onamı ve gizlilik şartlarını tekrar hatırlatmış ve katılımcıların kendilerini rahat hissetmelerini sağlamışlardır. Elbette bu araştırmanın bulguları, nitel araştırmanın doğası gereği örneklem sayısı olan 19 öğrenci ile sınırlıdır ve genişletilebilir. Daha önce doğrudan sağlıkta lisans tamamlama ile sosyal hizmet bölümlerine yerleşmiş öğrencilerle yapılan çalışmalar olmasa da hemşirelik ve ilahiyat bölümlerinde bulunan sağlıkta lisans tamamlama öğrencilerinin de benzer önyargılardan ve sorunlardan bahsettiği görülmüştür. Bir diğer bulgu ise sağlıkta lisans tamamlama ile sosyal hizmet lisans bölümüne yerleşerek tekrar üniversite hayatına dönen bu gruptaki öğrencilerin, genel anlamda sosyal çevrelerinden, ailelerinden ve arkadaşların destek gördüğü saptanmıştır. Bu bulgu da alanda sosyal hizmet lisans öğrencileri ile yapılan çalışmalarla uyumludur. Sosyal hizmet eğitiminin kapsayıcı ve mesleğin odağı gereği ayrımcılık ve önyargıdan bağımsız olması için lisans tamamlama öğrencileri ve öğretim elemanları ile yapılacak araştırmaların ve iyileştirme faaliyetlerinin yapılması önerilmektedir. Bu araştırmanın sonucunda elde edilen bulgulardan hareketle tüm sağlıkta lisans tamamlama program ile sosyal hizmet bölümlerine yerleşen öğrencilere ulaşarak bir nicel çalışma yapılması bir sonraki adım olarak önerilebilir. Bir başka öneri olarak, lisans tamamlama öğrencilerinin ifade etmiş oldukları önyargılı tutum ve davranışların araştırılması, öğrencilerin dinlenmesi ve ne gibi çözüm önerilerinin ortaya çıkabileceği üzerine çalışmaların yapılması önemli olabilir. Ayrıca bölümler içinde sağlıkta lisans tamamlama ve diğer öğrencilerin ve akademik kadronun yakınlaşması ve iletişimin güçlenmesi adına birtakım çalışmaların yapılması önerilebilir. Bu tür uyum ve iletişim çalışmalarının faydası olacaktır. Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK) tarafından başlatılan sağlık bilimleri lisans tamamlama programı, özellikle sosyal hizmet alanında önemli tartışmalara yol açmış ve mesleki kuruluşlar tarafından dava açılmasına neden olmuştur. Birçok basın açıklaması, bu tür bir lisans eğitiminin mesleği olumsuz etkileyebileceği endişelerini vurgulamıştır. YÖK Atlas istatistiklerine göre, Türkiye'deki hem devlet hem de özel üniversitelerde 100'den fazla sosyal hizmet lisans bölümü bulunmakta ve bu da sosyal hizmet programlarından mezun olanların sayısını önemli ölçüde artırmaktadır. Zaten hızlı istihdam fırsatlarının sosyal hizmet alanında bulunmadığı kabul edilirken, lisans tamamlama programlarından kaynaklanan öğrenci kohortunun gerekliliği sorgulanabilir. Bir politika olarak, lisans tamamlama programlarının bölümler ve temsil ettikleri meslekler açısından belirli sorunlar yarattığı gözlemlenebilir. Ayrıca, kapsamı sınırlı olsa da bu araştırmanın bulguları, öğrenciler ve öğretim üyeleri arasında bölüm içi iletişim ve etkileşim sorunlarını da göstermektedir. Dolayısıyla, lisans tamamlama programlarının gerekliliği hala tartışma konusudur. Bu çalışmanın bazı kısıtlamaları bulunmaktadır. Konu üzerine yapılan ilk çalışmalardan biri olması nedeniyle, potansiyel katılımcıları daha kolay keşfetmek için kar topu örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmış ve bu örnekleme yöntemi katılımcıların eşit dağılımını sınırlamıştır. Yöntem bölümlerinde belirtildiği gibi, neredeyse tüm katılımcılar çocuk gelişimi bölümünden mezun olmuştur; bu da bulguları, sadece çocuk gelişiminden mezun olan ve sağlık komplikasyon programında sosyal çalışma okumayı seçen katılımcılarla sınırlı kılabilir. Genellikle çocuk gelişim alanının sosyal çalışmaya yakın olduğu düşünülmektedir. Ayrıca, nitel araştırma doğası gereği, sonuçlar genelleştirilebilir sonuçlar üretmez. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın bulguları, genelleştirilebilirlik yoluyla akademik araştırmaya ışık tutma amacı gütmek yerine, sınırlı bir grupta ön bilgiler sağlama işlevini yerine getirmiştir.