Factors involved in the evaluation of the students of a distance course: the experience of a course in the child health area

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Abstract

Distance learning, nowadays, has assumed a relevant position in the educational environment, however, there is a lack of studies that allow a better understanding about the factors that influence in the success or failure of the course according to the students' opinion. Therefore, the objective of the article was to verify the association between the characteristics related to the student and the evaluation of a distance course. It was analyzed the results of the evaluation of a distance course in the child's health area aimed to the primary care professionals, totalizing 330 students. It was carried out assessments of content of the students relative to the theme before the beginning of the course and after the realization of it, allowing the observance of the knowledge's evolution. Descriptive analysis involving demographics of the students and the results of the evaluation of the course were carried out, from an analytical instrument drawn for this matter. To verify the association, a bivariate logistic regression was carried out. Of the enrolled students, 72,3% finished the course; 96% considered the course great or good. According with the progression of the apprenticeship, 54% of the students improved their knowledge about the theme after the realization of the course, but 41% maintained the same level of knowledge and 5% has a worsening in the level of knowledge. The results showed that there isn't an association between the positive evaluation of the course and the following factors: sex, age, level of schooling, profession ad previous participation in other distance courses. The distance education can constitute itself as an important way of forming teams in family health.
Keywords: *Distance learning; Students' profile; Satisfaction factors.*

Resumen

Factores implicados en la evaluación de los estudiantes en un curso a distancia: la experiencia de un curso en el área de salud infantile.
El aprendizaje a distancia está asumiendo actualmente una posición relevante en el entorno educativo, sin embargo, hay una falta de estudios que permitan una mejor comprensión de los factores que influyen en el éxito o fracaso del curso de acuerdo con la opinión de los estudiantes. Por lo tanto, el objetivo del artículo fue verificar la asociación entre las características relacionadas con el estudiante y la evaluación de un curso a distancia. Se analizaron los resultados de la evaluación de un curso a distancia en el área de salud del niño dirigido a los profesionales de atención primaria, totalizando 330 estudiantes. Las mediciones de contenido de los estudiantesse realizaron en relación con el tema antes del inicio del curso y después de la finalización del estudio, lo que permite observar la evolución del conocimiento. Se realizaron análisis descriptivos que involucraban los datos demográficos del alumno y los resultados de la evaluación del curso, basándose en un instrumento de evaluación elaborado con este fin. Para verificar la asociación, se realizóuna regresión logística bivariada. De los estudiantes inscritos, 72,3% completó el curso; 96% consideró el curso óptimo o bueno. Según la progresión del aprendizaje, el 54% de los estudiantes mejoró su conocimiento sobre el tema después del curso, pero 41% mantuvo el mismo grado de conocimiento y el 5% tuvo un empeoramiento en el nivel de conocimiento. Los resultados mostraron que no hay asociación entre la evaluación positiva del curso y los siguientes factores: género, edad, nivel de escolaridad, profesión y participación previa en otros cursos a distancia. La educación a distancia puede constituir una forma importante de formación para los equipos de salud familiar.
Palabras-clave: *Aprendizaje a Distancia; Perfil del Estudiante; Factores de Satisfacción.*

Resumo

Fatores envolvidos na avaliação dos estudantes de um curso a distância: a experiência de um curso na área de saúde da criança.
O ensino a distância, na atualidade, vem assumindo uma posição relevante no ambiente educacional, no entanto, existe uma carência de estudos que possibilitem um melhor entendimento sobre os fatores que influenciam no sucesso ou fracasso do curso de acordo com a opinião dos alunos. Portanto, o objetivo do artigo foi verificar a associação entre características relacionadas ao aluno e a avaliação de um curso a distância. Foram analisados os resultados da avaliação de um curso à distância na área de saúde da criança dirigido aos profissionais da atenção primária, totalizando 330 alunos. Foram realizadas aferições de conteúdo dos alunos relativo ao tema antes do início do curso e após a realização do mesmo, permitindo observar a evolução do conhecimento. Análises descritivas envolvendo dados demográficos do aluno e os resultados da avaliação do curso foram realizados, a partir de instrumento de avaliação elaborado para este fim. Para verificar a associação foi realizada uma regressão logística bivariada. Dos alunos inscritos, 72,3% terminaram o curso; 96% consideraram o curso ótimo ou bom. De acordo com a progressão de aprendizagem, 54% dos alunos melhoraram seus conhecimentos sobre o tema após a realização do curso, porém 41% mantiveram o mesmo grau de conhecimento e 5%, tiveram uma piora no nível de conhecimento. Os resultados demonstraram que não existe associação entre a avaliação positiva do curso e os seguintes fatores: Sexo, idade, grau de escolaridade, profissão e prévia participação em outros cursos à distância. A educação a distância pode se constituir como uma forma importante de formação das equipes de saúde da família.
Palavras-chave: *Ensino a Distância; Perfil dos Alunos; Fatores de Satisfação.*

Introduction

Nowadays much is said about distance learning (from the Portuguese abbreviation EAD) as being a new teaching method, that has been assuming a relevant role in Brazil's educational context. EAD is a teaching/learning method that is carried out by using technology and that doesn't require neither a live relationship between the students and teacher nor a specific place for it to happen. Exactly because there isn't this direct contact between teachers and students, it is required from the students a more active posture in front of the learning process and a bigger capacity to learn on their own.[1,2]

According to Pelli (2018) it was on the XIX century that distance learning gave its first steps using mail, but it was only in the XX century that this teaching/learning modality was leveraged by other types of technology, facilitating the access to education for a part of the populations whose entrance to public education was hampered.[2]

The same author emphasizes that in the XXI century, due to the changes in the global scenario, people are searching to acquire new knowledge and new formations using EAD – "[...] it is necessary to highlight its importance as educational public politic, since it aims to attend a crescent portion of the Brazilian population that searches the initial or continued formation that has as objective to acquire conditions to compete in the labor market[2]".

With the advance in technology, social media and internet, populations from different geographic regions are interaction and collaborating, in the dissemination of new information and new knowledges. Moreover, the distance learning is allowing the access to higher education of certain sections of the population that didn't have conditions to attend a university in the traditional molds[3].

To know the profile of the students that prefer this kind of learning is of the utmost importance to define the best way to repost the content of the course for them, developing, by this, learning methodologies that are more efficient[4].

As important as knowing the students' profile is to know the reasons for evasion, that is one of the challenges faced by EAD. To Araújo[5] one of the reasons for evasion is "the perception by the students that EAD courses are less demanding, since they are dedicated to students that don't have time, that don't dedicate themselves as much as the students in on-site courses. When the students are faced with a reality different from what they expected there is evasion[5]."

In the whole world, as well as in Brazil, the offer of EAD courses that cover an infinity of forms (vocational courses, capabilities, scientific dissemination, formal studies in every level, etc) and to an infinity of areas of activity is getting bigger and bigger[3].

Due to the importance and the raise in the look out for distance education, it is necessary, that behind her, exists a specific legislation and a follow-up of the government agencies, that started with the creation in 1996 of the Distance Learning Secretary by the Decree 1917, from May 27th, 1996 and from then on, it is observed a big advance of the legislation regarding distance learning[6].

One of the areas in which Distance Learning is being used a lot is the health area, by capabilities courses, teleconferences and even consultations via internet[1].

To act in the health area requires from its professionals complex actions that demand a formation based in the improvement of concepts and competences that meet the population's desires. With the intention to redress its difficulties, many strategies have been studied and implemented, among them, the information technologies constitute a powerful tool for the communication and the access to information about health[7].

As for the SUS professionals, the permanent education in health (from the Portuguese abbreviation EPS) aims to improve the practice and work processes of these professionals, with the goal to have a better customer service, however, these initiatives are submitted to the guidelines of the National Politics of Permanent Education in Health (from the Portuguese abbreviation PNEPS) including what regards

to distance learning[8].

To these authors, EAD is a teaching modality that can be considered as a possibility of formation in the health area, bearing in mind "[...] the democratization of opportunities and flexibilization that it provides to the students[8]".

According to Oliveira[9] the desirable profile for the professional in the health area includes critical stance, self-assessment, self-training, self-management, promoting by this the necessary adjustments in the sense of working with interdisciplinarity, in the transmission of knowledge and the know-how "on-site", continuously, translating itself in the practice of its knowledges[9]. And this profile, as seen before, is in accord with what is demanded for the EAD students.

The UFMG Faculty of Medicine in a systematic way has developed and applied distance learning courses aimed for the Family Health Teams. Nowadays, in 2018, it was applied a distance course about the approach of the child in Primary Care, aimed for medical practitioners and nurses from the Family Health Teams. This course was applied by the Telehealth Center of UFMG's Faculty of Medicine.

This center is part of the Telehealth Brazil Networks Program, implanted in 2007 by the Health Ministry, whose main purpose it to offer for the Basic Care professionals, by digital technologies, "[...] indispensable information for the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases, for researches and evaluation and continued education of the health professionals, as main objective to promote the improvement of health[10,7]".

The objective of this article is to verify the association between different characteristics of the students and the results of the evaluation of a distance learning course, identifying the factors that can be associated with a better evaluation.

Method

This is a cross-sectional study with descriptive and inferential analysis to the distance learning course in child health in primary care, carried out during the period of 03/04/2018 to 29/06/2018 with the workload of 80 hours. The data to be analyzed were taken from the moodle platform.

Chart I. Schedule and programming of the distance learning course of child health in primary care.

Class	Themes	Period of execution of the activity	Activity
1	National Politics of Integral Attention in Child Health – Family Health	03/04/2018 to 10/04/2018	Start of the course
			Setting up the Pre-test platform and Reading class 01
2	The arrival of the child in the Family – Family Health	11/04/2018 to 17/04/2018	Reading class 2
3	The newborn's first consultation	18/04/2018 to 24/04/2018	Reading class 3
4	The child's growth and development	25/04/2018 to 07/05/2018	Reading class 4
Module progression test		**14/05/2018 to 18/05/2018**	**Module 1 progression test**
5	Immunization – Indication for immunization	19/05/2018 to 25/05/2018	Reading class 5
6	Anamnesis, physical exam and early councelling in the subsequente consultations	26/05/2018 to 04/06/2018	Reading class 6
7	Protection and care for children and their family in violent situations	08/06/2018 to 15/06/2018	Reading class 7
8	Healthy eating	16/06/2018 to 22/06/2018	Reading class 8
9	Teenager's health	30/06/2018 to 12/07/2018	Reading class 9 – last week of the course
			Final course test
Final course test and course's result		**30/03/2018 to 12/07/2018**	**Week of Completion of the Course**

This course was offered for physicians and nurses from Primary Care of the municipalities of Minas Gerais followed-up by the Telehealth Center of UFMG's Faculty of Medicine, participant in the National Telehealth Brazil Networks Program. Three hundred and thirty professionals enrolled to the course, and there was a primary loss of 51 students, therefore, 279 students started the course and of these only 72,4%, in other words, 202 students got to the end of this course. The data relative to this realm and also, from the 275 students that answered the questionnaire in a anonymous ways is what will be analyzed in this article.

Initially, it was analyzed, by student, his or her performance in the course. For this it was used data from the grades regarding the pre-test (level of previous knowledge of the students about the subject that would be studied) and the final test, to verify if there was or wasn't improvement in the grades and consequently, improvement in the learning level of the students at the end of the course. The performance of the students regarding the grades was categorized in three levels: improved, stayed the same and got worse.

It was also used data from the evaluation questionnaire automatically filled by the students in the moodle platform considering sex, age, professional category, education, experience or lack of experience with distance learning courses and general evaluation about the course. The results of the evaluation were categorized in great, regular or bad.

After that, a descriptive analysis was carried out, contemplating the performance of the students in the course evaluation by sex, age, professional category, type of formation, if he or she ever had a distance learning (EaD) course before.

From the different positive and negative aspects related to the course and that were present in the course's evaluation form, the main mentioned aspects were listed by the subtends in the course's evaluation.

Later, for the association analysis, bivariate logistic regression was used, correlating the following factors with the levels of evaluation of the students: sex, education, type of formation, profession and never had participated in a distance learning course.

Results

From the 202 students that finished the course, it is observed that 88% are women. As for the professional category, it was observed that 78% of the participants were nurses,

According to the learning progression (table 1), considering the pre-test (before initializing the course) and the final test (after finishing it), 54% of the students improved their knowledge about the theme after taking the course, however 41% maintained the same level of knowledge and 5% worsened their level of knowledge, as demonstrated in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the students of the distance learning course in child health, according to the learning progression.

Minas Gerais, 2018 - Progression	Absolute Number	%
Worsened	10	5%
Mantained	83	41%
Improved	109	54%
Total	202	100%

When verifying the level of learning among the categories (table 2), it was observed a balance in the results, for the doctors and for the nurses regarding the increase of the learning level (53,3% and 54% respectively), and for 42,2% of the doctors and 41% of the nurses there wasn't any difference regarding the learning level from before taking the course and after taking the course.

Table 2. Distribution of the students of the distance learning course in child health, according to progression of learning level for the nurses and doctors.

Role	Worsened	%	Maintained	%	Improved	%	Total
Nurse	8	5	64	41	85	54	157
Doctor	2	4,5	19	42,2	24	53,3	45
Total	10	5	83	41	109	54	202

Regarding the course's final evaluation questionnaire, this was filled in anonymously, by 275 students. We can observe that from these, 87% are women and 13% are men and 82% of the students are between the age range of 26 to 45 years, according to table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of the students of the distance learning course in child health according to the students' profile. Minas Gerais, 2018.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	36	13
Female	239	87
Age range		
18-25	10	4
26-45	226	82
46-65	37	13
66+	2	1
Education		
Middle	2	1
Higher	79	29
Post-graduation	191	69
Others	3	1
Area of formation		
Nursing	224	81
Medicine	51	19
Have you already taken a distance learning (EaD) course?		
Yes	241	88
No	34	12
General evaluation of the course		
Great	166	60
Good	99	36
Regular	8	3
Bad	2	1
Total	**202**	**100%**

Bearing in mind the education, the vast majority, in other words, 69% have a post-graduate course and 88% of these students already had experience with distance learning courses. The course was evaluated as GREAT and GOOD by 60% and 36% of the students, respectively.

Chart II. Distribution of the aspects considered as positive and negative by the students in the evaluation of the child health course. Minas Gerais, 2018.

Themes			Period of execution of the activity		
Aspects	Absolute number	%	Aspects	Absolute number	%
Interesting theme and quality of the classes	72	26,20	Requires a lot of dedication time	93	33,80
Interesting theme	61	22,20	Doesn't have negative points	55	20,00
Mentoring, interesting theme and quality of the classes	81	29,40	Access difficulty	10	3,60
Quality of the classes	31	11,30	Lack of follow-up	20	7,10
Mentoring, interesting theme	17	6,20	Problems in the classes' content	62	22,50
Mentoring	6	2,20	Others	35	13,00
Mentoring and quality of the classes	6	2,20	-	-	-
Others	1	0,30	-	-	-
Total	**275**	**100,00**	**Total**	**275**	**100,00**

As for the positive points regarding the curse, we can observe that the points most jointly quoted were mentoring, interesting theme and quality of the classes corresponding to 29,4% of the total. If we verified these items separately analyzed, we can verify that interesting theme as a positive point was mentioned by 22,2% of the students, being in second place, quality of the classes, with 11,3% and finally, mentoring, with just 2,2% (Chart II).

As for the negative points, the most mentioned were: requires too much dedication time (33,8%) and problems in the content of the classes (22,5%) totalizing 56,3% of the students. However, for 20% of the students, the course didn't have any negative points (Chart II).

Table 4. Logistic regression between factors associated to the evaluation of the distance learning course of child health. Minas Gerais, 2018.

	Condition	Absolute	P value	Interpretation
Variables studied to see the relation with the general evaluation: "great"	Female	239	Chi-square P= 0,310	There was no association
	Male	36		
	18-25	10	Fisher P=0,292	There was no association
	26-45	227		
	46-65	37		
	66+	1		
When obs (below the chart) is smaller than 20% the Fischer exact test is used	Middle Level	2	Fisher P=0,580	There was no association
	Higher Level with Post	191		
	Higher Level Without Post	79		
	Masters	1		
	Higher Level with Post-graduation in progress	1		
	Homeopath/Acupuncturist/ Efitoterapist	1		
	Medicine	51	Ch-square P=0,989	There was no association
	Nursing	224		
	Has attended a distance learning (EaD) course	241	Chi-square P=0,269	There was no association
	Never attended a distance learning (EaD) course	34		

When analyzing the data of the uni variated logistic regression between the distinct factors that could be related with the course's evaluation by the students, it was obtained the following Odds ratio, respectively: sex (p= 0,310), age (p=0,292), education (p=0,580), profession (p=0,989) and never attended a distance learning (EaD) course (p=0269). This data highlight that there wasn't an association between any of these factors with the GREAT evaluation regarding the course.

Discussion

The analysis of the factors can be associated with the evaluation as well as the learning progression in the EaD courses is complex, involving distinct dimensions.

In this study, the students' profile was predominantly of the female sex and in the age range of 26 to 45 years.

A literature review study about the profile of the student of the distance learning modality determined that the vast majority of the students are females and are in the age range above 26 years, therefore are adults and that have a professional occupation, since this teaching modality is flexible regarding hours and can be carried out in a more convenient place for the students[11,4,12].

The virtual student more than the characteristics mentioned above, can self-manage their learning, autonomous, updated and critical, in addition to having a good technology knowledge[6,11,4].

In this new learning scenery, in addition to this differentiated student profile, it is required a new form of reasoning and a new form of social relation with the knowledge that comes out of a simples and continuous patterns to another that happens "[...] in network, in flow, in which each one occupies a new autonomous position, more systematically collective and collaborative". This paradigm shift constitutes a big challenge[13].

According to Santos[13], the virtual student's previous knowledge is the fact that most influences in learning and should be considered during the elaboration of the course's structure, favoring the teaching and learning process, and by this, "[...] contributes to the meaningful learning, understood as a process through which a new information is anchored to a subsequent concept, so that the student can attribute meaning to this new information in its cognitive structure".

Considering that the students of the course analyzed in this article are doctor and nurses working in the basic care area, with higher formation and many with post-graduation coursed in the field, it was expected that they presented some knowledge or at least a notion of the subject addressed in the course in reference and beyond that, 60% of the students that finished the course considered them as GREAT. Bearing in mind these two factors, it was foreseen that a bigger percentage of students would have reached knowledge progression after taking the course.

With the intent to verify the existence or lack of asso-ciation of the evaluation GREAT of the course with factors related to the students' profile, a logistic regression test was carried out, however, after the results' analysis, no association was found that could relate: sex, age, education, profession or previous knowledge in a distance learning (EaD) courses, with the evaluation's result.

Marcuzzo[14] in his article clarifies that "[...] the student is considered the main actor in the teaching-learning process in EaD courses, therefore, it is of the utmost importance to know their qualification, characteristics and social structure for the conduction of the teaching process".

We can that the profile of the student and its differences, when considered by the teaching Institution in the planning and confectioning of the course can facilitate that the students develop "[...] the capacity to learn how to learn", leaving them satisfied. For the same authors the student's satisfaction can indicate the quality of the course as well as the quality of the learning process[13].

The satisfaction of the students regarding this course, was also proven in front of the analysis of the questionnaire filled in an anonymous form, whose most mentioned positive point, collaboratively, was: interesting theme, quality of the classes and mentoring.

According to study carried out by Karpinski[15] the positive points pointed by the students are in accordance with almost all of the findings in his research where it was identified four factors for the success of a distance learning (EaD) course and the highlights its quality: didactic/pedagogical organizational environment (DPOE); the course's and institution's reputation (CIR); qualification of the professors-tutors (QPT) and the course's structure (CS).

The literature signs that one of the reasons why the students choose the distance learning (EaD) modality is the flexible timetable and the possibility to carry out their own time management and study at home[13].

Therefore, when the students can carry out and fulfill the planning of study time with the definition of the timetable, these students have a bigger chance of succeeding in distance learning (EaD) course[14].

Although 88% of the students have informed in the evaluation that they had already attended courses in a distance learning (EaD) modality, which entails previous knowledge about the requirements of this teaching modality, 33,8% of the students signed as main negative point the fact the "it required a lot of dedication time". And this requirement is one of the main reasons for evasion in distance learning courses[5].

Therefore, the time management and the dedication are fundamental for the realization of distance learning (EaD) courses in a satisfactory manner.

But this satisfactory time management can be jeopardized by work overload to which normally the Teams of Family Health (from the Portuguese abbreviation ESF) are submitted to, which is the case of the students of the course that is the focus of this article.

Soares[16] in his research with the ESFs from the north of Minas proved the existence of a work overload, characterizing it as "[...] a repetitive, routine, heavy due to the overload work".

The same author reports that this overload jeopardizes the programming of the activities of these professionals, making them relegate to a second place important and beneficial activities for the APS such as the investment in education in health[16].

The work overload factor is also pointed out as tone of the reasons that make the students give up the realization of distance learning courses, since this work overload hinders the professional, and he can't conciliate work, study and family[17].

In addition to that, another factor that hampers even more the conciliation of the pointed spheres is that even though the distance learning courses are directly related to the role performed by the professionals, they aren't considered as being part of the working day[18].

The results shown here reinforce the need to know the students' profile and the factors involved in their learning, and it is necessary to widen the number of courses to be studied as well as to improve the evaluation instruments that can provide data that will be used in the improvement of the quality of the distance learning courses offered by UFMG's Faculty of Medicine.

Conclusion

The distance learning are a new teaching modality that has as characteristic the democratization of teaching and the possibility to encompass students from many regions and cultures, but that requires a profile of students different from the on-site courses. The successful virtual student has as main characteristics: the autonomy, the capacity to manage their time and learning, etc. In addition to that, distance learning courses also require that the teaching institutions develop other teaching forms, establishing a new relationship between the student and the professor/tutor. This change of educational model is a great challenge.

Regarding the realization of distance learning capabilities courses in the health area, we must consider other factors such as: the work overload to which these professionals are submitted to, the many times lack of working conditions, the difficulty of access to computers and internet, among others.

To bear in mind this scenario in the elaboration of courses for this public is of the utmost importance, as well as the realizations of a follow-up with quality where the professors' and the tutor's role is fundamental for the maintenance of the students' motivation.

Generally, the distance learning course in child health in primary care carried out by UFMG's Faculty of Medicine was very well evaluated by the students, despite the negative

points pointed by them. However, it wasn't very clear if the learning level followed the students' level of satisfaction.

To understand these factors and association with other is of the utmost importance in order to tackle the negative points, strengthen the positive points and by this, to guarantee that the students stay until the end of the course, allowing the effectiveness of their learning and consequently, the improvement of their professional performance.

Even with the challenges and limitations, we believe that the distance learning courses provide a new vision and new learning possibilities and of knowledge sharing, reducing distances and softening time and for this very reason, it is necessary to have a bigger investment from the government as well as from private institutions in this exquisite modality of teaching and learning.

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