

Comparison of the Curricula of Master of Science in Nursing (MScN) Programs in Iran and Japan: A Descriptive Comparative Study

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Abstract

Background: Lack of suitable educational programs in nursing causes irreparable damage to the community's health and reduces the academic credibility of universities. In Iran, the master of science in nursing (MScN) program is not tailored to the needs of the community, and graduates lack the required nursing skills. Considering the distinguished quality of higher education in Japan, the aim of the present study is to perform a comparative analysis of MScN programs in Iran and Japan.

Methods: In this descriptive comparative study, an extensive electronic search was carried out in Persian and English databases, including PubMed, Iran Medex, Medline, Scopus, Google Scholar, scientific information database (SID), and MagIran among articles published during 1997 - 2016. The gathered data were categorized and compared according to the study objectives.

Results: In comparison with Iran, Japan has a longer history of postgraduate nursing programs, and its educational system has prominent strengths and advantages including: admission interviews; English language requirements for admission; versatility and flexibility of the educational curricula to facilitate student employment during education; integration of research-based units in the curricula; and attention to community-based and home care nursing.

Conclusions: Comparison of the educational systems of Iran and Japan highlights the need for more flexible curricula in Iran in accordance with the community's needs.

Keywords: Comparative Study, Educational Planning, Curriculum, Nursing Education, Iran, Japan

1. Background

The primary goal of healthcare systems is to provide high-quality care services (1, 2). The presence of specialized nurses with advanced knowledge and skills is essential in healthcare settings in order to provide regular, high-quality, safe, and affordable services (2-4).

Specialized nurses were trained for the first time in 1954 when Peplau introduced the graduate program in psychiatric nursing at Cambridge university (5). Today, despite the increasing number of nurses with master of science in nursing (MScN) degrees, the quality of nursing services has failed to improve, and a decreasing trend has been observed (6). According to several studies, nursing graduates are incompetent and lack the required skills in clinical settings (7). Such problems are indicative of inconsistency between nursing training and the community's needs (8).

Educational programs and curricula are among the most important domains of higher education (9, 10). In recent years, evaluation of higher education systems has been of major interest to educational planners for the sake of improving the quality of curricula (11). Overall, the main

goal of educational programs is to equip students with excellent ethical, theoretical, and practical skills (12).

Lack of suitable educational programs in nursing can cause irreparable damage to the community's health and reduce the academic credibility of universities (13). On the other hand, rapid changes in healthcare environments over the past years have necessitated changes in academic perspectives (14). The world health organization has called for the promotion of educational standards for newly graduated nursing students (15). Nevertheless, the components of postgraduate nursing programs in Iran have not significantly changed since 1995 (8). In fact, some scholars believe that the postgraduate programs in Iran are not in accordance with the community's needs and fail to meet any specific objectives (16).

Paying greater attention to successful educational systems around the world can help institutionalize an effective system in a country (11). In addition, comparing different educational systems can improve the quality of educational programs and curricula (17). Comparative study, as a fully established academic field, is a prerequisite for the design of modern educational systems. However, this method has been neglected in Iran (18). In general, com-

parative studies evaluate the differences and similarities among educational systems, examine the reasons for their success or failure, and use their experiences for the development of effective educational systems (19).

Japan is one of the most developed and prominent countries in the world with respect to higher education. The reason for the great success of their educational system is the localization of knowledge in accordance with the dominant culture in society (15). With this background in mind, the present study aimed to perform a comparative analysis of postgraduate programs in Iran and Japan.

2. Methods

This descriptive, comparative study was conducted using the well-known George F. Brady method. Overall, in comparative studies, two or more phenomena are compared in terms of their differences and similarities (19). Based on this method, the status of postgraduate nursing education was analyzed and compared in Iran and Japan.

To obtain the required information, an extensive search was carried out among articles published in English and Farsi languages during 1997-2016. The search was performed in PubMed, Iran Medex, Medline, Scopus, Google Scholar, scientific information database (SID), and MagIran databases, using the following keywords: "nursing," "education," "curriculum," "Japan," "Iran," and "descriptive comparative study."

In total, 40 articles that met the criteria and study objectives were selected and carefully reviewed. In addition, the websites of the Iranian ministry of health, ministry of sciences, Japanese nursing association, and two high-ranking Japanese universities (Chiba and Oita universities) were examined. The data was collected, classified, and compared.

3. Results

In this section, we first present a brief description of the social status of nursing in Iran and Japan. Then, the higher education systems of these countries are examined in terms of their goals, admission criteria, curricula, and employment prospects.

3.1. Nursing Status in Iran and Japan

In Iran, nurses play an important role in the health-care system. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction, lack of motivation (20), forced choice of study field, and the community's stigmatizing attitude (nurses are recognized merely as "doctor's assistants") are among the common problems of nurses in our country.

In comparison with Iran, Japan is a smaller country with a larger population. Although Japan has the largest workforce in the world, it is still facing human resource shortage. Nursing in Japan is described in negative terms, including: "hard," "dirty," and "dangerous." In addition, it is associated with "low income," "limited vacation time," the inferior position of "doctor's assistant" and "minimum chance of marriage," which reflect the poor image of this profession in society (21-23).

In both countries, the high prevalence of chronic diseases and advancing age of the population in recent years have been noted in the curricula of postgraduate programs (23). It should be noted that the postgraduate program was first implemented in 1987 in Iran and 1980 in Japan (23).

3.2. MScN Program in Iran

3.2.1. Goals

The purpose of postgraduate programs in Iran is to train committed and competent nurses with high theoretical knowledge, familiarize them with advanced research methods and equip them with theoretical and practical skills in each of the domains of nursing, education, research, and management (24).

3.2.2. University Admission

In Iran, the requirements for admission in postgraduate programs include:

- 1) Bachelor's degree from domestic or foreign universities with a minimum passing grade of 12 out of 20
- 2) A minimum of 2 years of clinical experience in critical care nursing, neonatal intensive care nursing, or emergency nursing
- 3) Acceptance with at least 50% of the total average score on the written exam
- 4) Postgraduate admission with at least 30% of the total score (25).

The score of English language proficiency test should be moderate to high (26); students are accepted in universities based on their scores.

Since 1998, talent management policies have been implemented to encourage capable students towards strategic and executive roles. Consequently, each university has been allowed to admit up to 10% of its undergraduate students from each discipline in postgraduate programs, besides students accepted with national postgraduate examinations. According to this policy, the selected students should be among honor students of each discipline (honor students are selected among students admitted in the same year) (27).

3.2.3. Curricula

The postgraduate program continues for 4 to 6 semesters. The total number of compulsory and optional credits ranges from 30 to 44, depending on the university policies (28); normally, 4 to 6 modules are assigned to the dissertation project. The focus of classroom training is on student participation in group discussions. Most presented modules focus on theoretical knowledge and clinical skills to a lesser extent. Seminar and thesis modules are usually presented in the second and third semesters, respectively.

The postgraduate program includes 2 disciplines of nursing education and management. Each discipline encompasses 4 specialties of internal-surgical nursing, psychiatric nursing, pediatric nursing, and community-based nursing. The postgraduate program focuses on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills and includes basic, clinical, and applied courses (25). In addition, in recent years, changes in healthcare services have led to the emergence of new disciplines, such as intensive care nursing, pediatric intensive care nursing, military nursing, rehabilitation nursing, emergency nursing, and elderly nursing care (26).

3.2.4. Employment Prospects

The employment prospects include teaching, research, and higher education planning assistance (24). According to some studies, Iranian nursing students continue their education due to factors such as financial advantages and escape from clinical settings (28).

3.3. MScN Program in Japan

3.3.1. Goals

The objectives of postgraduate programs in Japan include knowledge acquisition, research promotion, acquisition of advanced nursing skills (29), and instruction of researchers and trainers (21). Students gain nursing knowledge and skills for activities such as physical examination and pharmacological studies (30).

University admission: In a similar manner to the undergraduate level, each university can establish a set of postgraduate admission criteria (31). The general admission criteria include:

- 1) Age above 22 years
- 2) Completion of undergraduate studies
- 3) Proficiency in English language and acceptable TOEFL and IELTS scores
- 4) Submission of resumes or educational accomplishments (for those with no work experience)
- 5) Letter of recommendation by 2 faculty members, faculty president, or undergraduate instructors

- 6) Presentation of the undergraduate thesis abstract (32)

3.3.2. Curriculum

This 2-year program contains 30 - 32 syllables (32), nearly 20 of which are related to seminar presentation and dissertation (33). The areas of study include nursing education, management, advanced clinical nursing, maternal and child care nursing, midwifery, elderly care, psychiatric nursing, community-based nursing, home care nursing, and international nursing (33, 34).

Classes are held during the day and night with the minimum number of students and mentoring training; this system allows working students to continue their education (30). To provide educational opportunities for motivated students, some universities have established 4-year postgraduate programs (30). Overall, in these programs, a great amount of time is devoted to clinical training by medical professionals in hospital settings (30).

3.3.3. Employment Prospects

Overall, by increasing the number of postgraduate programs, we can pave the way for higher education (32). Students of advanced professional nursing are specialized in a variety of clinical domains, such as cancer nursing or psychiatric nursing (35). Advanced professional nursing in Japan focuses on specialized clinical roles. Nurses examine the client in the clinic and at home, cooperating with physicians to provide care services (34).

3.4. Comparison of Educational Systems in Iran and Japan

Table 1 presents and compares different dimensions of nursing education systems in Iran and Japan.

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to compare postgraduate nursing programs in Iran and Japan. Based on the results, there are significant differences between these countries. Unlike Japanese universities, which do not hold any entrance examinations, the university entrance exam in Iran is the only means to gain admission to higher education. However, this type of examination is associated with several problems, such as admission of unmotivated students who have the potential to drop out of the university (25, 36) or those who only continue their education to escape actual clinical settings (37). One of the ways to overcome these problems is to incorporate interviews in the student recruitment system and consider the academic/clinical background of the candidates.

Table 1. Different Dimensions of MScN Programs in Iran and Japan

	Iran	Japan
Objectives		Research
		Improvement of theoretical and practical skills
Admission criteria	National university	Resume submission
	Entrance exam	Recommendation letter
	Talent recruitment policies (selection of honor students)	Presentation of an undergraduate thesis abstract
Curricula	No English language requirements	Proof of English language proficiency (IELTS or TOEFL)
	4 to 6 modules of seminar and dissertation	20 modules of seminar and dissertation
		Overnight courses and 4-year postgraduate programs for working students
	Fields of study: Intensive Care Nursing, Medical Surgical Nursing, Community Health Nursing, Psychiatric Nursing, Neonatal Intensive Care Nursing, Military Nursing, Rehabilitation nursing, Management of Nursing, Emergency Nursing and Geriatric nursing	Fields of study: nursing education, nursing management, advanced professional nursing, maternal and child care nursing, midwifery, elderly care, psychiatric nursing, community-based nursing, home care nursing, and international nursing
Prospects	Integration of theoretical and practical disciplines in both countries	
	Similar number of syllables and duration of programs in the countries	
	University positions in both countries	
	Limited acceptance of home care nursing	General acceptance of home care nursing

There are also some challenges in the talent recruitment system of Iran, such as students' limitations in selecting their desired field of study or university (27). In Iran, unlike Japan, general English fluency is sufficient for postgraduate programs, and many students, after passing general and specialized language courses, still lack the required skills to meet their academic and professional needs (38-40). This problem seems to be associated with language teaching methods (41). Some researchers believe that the main reason for students' poor language skills is the use of traditional teaching methods (42).

Unlike Iran, the educational curricula of Japanese universities are quite flexible and diverse. For instance, working students can continue their education in 4-year postgraduate programs. In addition, part-time education in

Japan gives students an opportunity to study while working. However, this type of education is associated with reduced leisure time, physical stress, fatigue, irritability (37), frequent absenteeism, rare use of library resources (43), and reduced academic performance (44). In fact, working while studying can influence the students' educational experiences, values, behaviors, attitudes, and sense of identity (45). In addition, students, besides earning money, can improve their practical skills and experiences and increase their chances of attaining employment after graduation (46).

In Japan, home-care nursing is accepted as a profession, whereas it is not as common in Iran, and few nurses (usually undergraduates) provide such services (25). Considering the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases and the advancing age of the population in Iran, incorporation of community-based nursing services and reforms in the educational programs seem necessary (36).

The international nurses association has emphasized the importance of evidence-based performance in nursing care. In this regard, Muir-Gray (1997) has described evidence-based performance as a great challenge for nurses (47). According to a study by Mokhtari et al. (2014), integration of evidence-based nursing standards is an effective way to reduce hospitalization, increase patient satisfaction, and improve decision-making and healthcare quality (48).

As the findings revealed, research is among the educational objectives of postgraduate programs in Iran and Japan. However, in Japan's educational system, students are required to pass more research units, and therefore they devote more time to research activities. In Iran, thesis presentation is the first research activity of postgraduate students, while in Japan, students are required to present a thesis even at undergraduate level, which is also one of the admission criteria for higher education (30).

The present study had certain limitations, such as the Japanese language of most articles and scarcity of studies in this area.

4.1. Conclusion

The findings show that promotion of the educational system can improve nursing training. The Japanese educational system has different strengths and advantages, including: use of admission interviews for student recruitment; strict English language requirements; diversity and flexibility of programs for working students; focus on research activities and integration of more research syllables at universities; attention to community-based nursing; and educational planning for promotion of home-care nursing. Comparison of the educational systems of Iran and Japan indicates the need for more flexible curricula in

accordance with the needs of the Iranian society. Finally, we can improve Iran's nursing education system through education localization and use of Japan's experiences in nurse training.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material(s) is available [here](#) [To read supplementary materials, please refer to the journal web-site and open PDF/HTML].

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