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## Evaluating A New Doctoral Nursing Program: A Jordanian Case Study

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### Abstract

Establishing and maintaining a quality nursing doctoral program in a country with limited resources is a challenge to program managers. Continuous evaluation is essential to pinpoint areas of improvement. This study aims to evaluate a nursing PhD program from the perspective of its first graduate cohort to provide feedback for improvement. Qualitative design using focus group method was used to collect data from a purposive sample of graduates (N=14). Content analysis revealed seven themes: Opportunity to earn a PhD-A dream comes true; A need for peer collaboration and support; Innovative strategies to overcome faculty shortage; A need for improved mentorship; Successfully merging national and international experience; Enhanced professionalism and scholarship; Coping with limited resources. The study findings suggest reviewing program admission criteria and curriculum content to meet student and marketplace needs. Maintaining national and international partnership, innovative teaching-learning strategies, and developing further strategies to meet resources challenges were recommended.

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### 1. Introduction

Doctoral programs are critical forces in developing nurse leaders for education, management, policy and research (Evans & Stevenson, 2011; Kim, Lee, Kim, Ahn, Kim et al., 2010). Doctoral programs worldwide face challenges, with the shortage of doctorally prepared faculty being the primary one (Ketefian et al., 2005, Leners, Wilson &

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Sitzman, 2007). Many qualified candidates wishing to pursue advanced nursing degrees are unable to gain admittance to these programs due to this faculty shortage (AACN, 2005).

Issues relating to the shortage of doctoral prepared nursing faculty are well addressed (Berlin & Sechrist, 2002; Cohen, 2011; Jackson, Peters, Andrew, Salamonson & Halcomb, 2011). Factors contributing to this global shortage include the high proportion of current nurse faculty approaching retirement (Berlin & Sechrist, 2002; American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2003, 2005), high doctoral program attrition rates (Cohen, 2011, Edwardson, 2004), and salary disparity between academia and the marketplace (Berlin & Sechrist, 2002).

Like all academic programs, doctoral programs need continuous evaluation to monitor and insure quality curriculum content delivery and outcomes. Meaningful examination of a program's outcomes is one of the most challenging tasks facing faculty and administrators in designing and delivering academic graduate programs (Sakalys, Stember & Magilvy, 2001). Graduates' feedback and perceptions of their experiences contributes to program evaluation and directs strategies to promote its improvement (Evans & Stevenson, 2010). Assessing program impact on graduates provides administrators and decision makers information about ongoing and future needs for improvement (Kim, McKenna & Ketefian, 2006). Program evaluation is also essential in determining whether student expectations are met. Perceptions of program utility and relevance, the challenges and opportunities experienced during the course of study provide vital input into this process.

## **2. Background**

The first baccalaureate nursing program in Jordan was established in 1972, followed by its first Master's nursing program in 1986. Currently, 17 schools of nursing exist in the country, with most doctoral faculty either non-Jordanian or Jordanian faculty Masters prepared. While these programs ease an overall national nursing shortage, the shortage of doctoral prepared nursing faculty in Jordan remains a major problem in nursing education, contributing to the cycle of nursing shortages (Al-Maaitah & Shokeh, 2009).

The first strategy used in solving the doctoral shortage was offering baccalaureate graduates scholarships to pursue graduate education abroad. While initially successful, in the long term it was difficult to sustain financially and socially. Women constituted the majority of early nursing graduates in Jordan. Culturally, in Jordan, it is very unusual to allow single women to travel abroad alone. For married women with children, it is difficult to leave the family for three to four years and for most it is financially impossible to have their families accompany them. This made it difficult to find scholarships. These considerations, along with the natural progression of further graduate nursing education in Jordan contributed to developing a national Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program in nursing. This was a more sustainable solution and continued this natural evolution of advanced nursing education in Jordan. The primary goal of the program was, and remains, producing and sustaining qualified faculty as leaders in developing, evaluating, and disseminating nursing knowledge along with the ability to promote nursing education, practice, and research at the national, regional, and international levels. With the first cohort graduation, it became necessary to evaluate the program quality and goal achievement.

The aim of this study is to explore the nursing PhD graduates' experience in a doctoral program at a Jordanian university. Exploring graduates' experience provides evaluation of the program and identifies challenges, strengths and weakness in the program.

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1. Design*

A descriptive qualitative design using focus group method was used to collect in-depth information on the graduates' experiences in the program. Focus group techniques are appropriate in collecting information about opinions regarding educational programs (McLafferty, 2004).

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