Doctoral Nursing Education in Thailand

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Doctoral nursing education in Thailand started in 1984 at the Faculty of Public Health, Mahidol University. However, the degree granted was Doctor of Public Health (Public Health Nursing), not nursing degree itself. Not until 1990, when the first doctoral degree in nursing was established as a collaborative program between four major universities led by the Faculty of Nursing, Mahidol University.


In recognition of insufficient number of doctoral prepared faculty members to undertake a doctoral program in individual institution, leaders from 4 major universities: Mahidol University (Faculty of Nursing; Department of Public Health Nursing, Faculty of Public Health; Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine Ramathibodi Hospital), Chiang Mai University, Khon Kaen University, and Prince of Songkla University, proposed a collaborative project for production of doctoral graduates in nursing to the Ministry of University Affairs (MUA, currently is the Commission on Higher Education, Ministry of Education). The project was approved and funded with the objective of increasing the credential of faculty members in nursing schools up to doctoral degree, increase quality of nursing research, education, and increase optimal utilization of existing resources. The degree granted was Doctor of Nursing Science (DNS). The goal was to produce approximately 50 faculty members with doctoral preparation; the cooperating institutions were expected to manage their own program effectively at the end of the project in 1999.

This project was funded by the Ministry of University Affairs, that included: tuition and fees, per diem, and dissertation expense for students travel cost for faculties to teach at the focal institution; honorarium for faculties for other supportive costs such as expense for inviting scholars from abroad, and for books, journals, and the like.

The following were additional features:

1. Ministry of University Affairs appointed an Administrative Committee of the Project composed of representative from each collaborating institution and MUA.

2. Invited scholars from abroad to conduct seminars and workshops to enhance and broaden the knowledge of the faculty and enrolled students.

3. Faculty of Nursing, Mahidol University was the focal point.

4. A team of expert faculties from collaborating institutions was responsible for each of the courses.

5. Members of dissertation committees were composed of faculties from collaborating institutions who were experts in that area.

The outcomes achieved from the project over a ten-year period were as follows:
1. This project was very successful and used by MUA as an exemplar of how a collaborative project can be organized in other disciplines.

2. 47 students graduated from this project.

3. Graduates from this project demonstrated leadership and actively participated in professional activities at their institutions and professional organizations.

4. Each collaborating institution now offers its own doctoral program in nursing independently.

After this project ended, the program of Doctor of Nursing Science was temporarily closed until 2012; the program was revised and reopened again at Mahidol University Faculty of Nursing. All other collaborating institutions are offering their own PhD programs; the exception is that the two nursing entities of Mahidol University, the Faculty of Nursing and Ramathibodi School of Nursing, are collaborating in offering one PhD program.

The Doctor of Nursing Science degree focuses mainly on producing professional nurses who have competency in clinical practice, conducting research in health and nursing system to improve health care and nursing system. While PhD program focuses on producing individuals with expertise in conducting research that advances the discipline.

In 1990, Thailand faced a significant shortage of nurses, which continues today to a lesser degree. Therefore, every publicly supported nursing school increased the number of nursing students admitted. At the same time, the National Nursing Education Development Plan was launched to prepare more qualified faculty members and approved by the cabinet in 1993. During 1994 - 2001, 331 scholarships to study overseas for doctoral degrees in nursing were approved, with 251 scholarships to be funded for the MUA, and 80 for the MOPH (Ministry of Public Health). Unfortunately, Thailand experienced a severe economic crisis in 1997, causing only 140 scholarships to be awarded. To compensate for the scholarships that could not be funded, the MUA encouraged the Thai schools to collaborate with doctoral programs overseas in leading universities (English language), in order to help them to improve and advance nursing education and nursing research to support practice and to influence health policy in Thailand. At the same time, MUA launched a new project titled “Post Graduate Education Development for the Development of Higher Education in Thailand (PED),” and supported a new project called the “sandwich program” at two Thai universities:

- Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing (International and Collaborative with Foreign University Program), a collaborative program between Faculty of Nursing and Ramathibodi School of Nursing, Mahidol University, and
- Doctor of Philosophy in Nursing (International and Collaborative with Foreign University Program), Chiang Mai University.

In this sandwich program students studied coursework in their home university and went abroad for one year (now reduced to about eight months) in the collaborating partner university. The purposes of study abroad are: 1) to be research assistant to faculty in the same area of students’ dissertation, 2) to audit some courses to strengthen their dissertation, and 3) to develop their proposal. Examples of activities are to: create collaborative research network among faculties; invite foreign faculty members to serve as visiting professor to teach in some courses, and invite students’ mentor/preceptor to serve on dissertation committee as co-advisor or external examiner.

Models of Doctoral Education

According to the Thai Qualification Framework issued by the Commission on Higher Education, Ministry of Education, there are two plans of doctoral education in nursing for graduates from master degrees to further their doctoral study:

Plan 1: Research only, students have to conduct a research project (dissertation) equal to 48 semester credits (one semester lasts about 15-16 weeks) to submit for the doctoral degree in nursing.

Plan 2: Research plus course works, students have to take at least 16 semester
credits of course works and conduct a research project (dissertation) equal to 36 semester credits for completion of doctoral degree in nursing. This is the most common model chosen by nursing institutions.

Currently, doctoral programs in nursing are offered by six public universities including Mahidol University, Chiang Mai University, Chulalongkorn University, Burapha University, Khon Kaen University, and Prince of Songkla University.

Areas of Nursing Focus Offered

In the doctoral programs, most students focus on their major interest and they conduct a research project (dissertation) which generally focuses on one of the following areas:
- Prevention and Management of Chronic Conditions
- Health promotion
- Health system/Nursing System

Quality of Doctoral Education

Juntasopeepun, Kunaviktikul, Chintanawat, & Srisuphan conducted a research project regarding the quality of nursing doctoral programs in Thailand. The objectives of the project were to examine the quality of Thailand’s PhD level nursing education. The samples were derived from all seven faculties of nursing that offered PhD programs, that included deans or chairpersons of the program, faculty members, students who have completed at least three semesters of study, and graduates who have completed their studies within the last three years. From a total of 392, only 199 of the sample responded to the questionnaires. The questionnaire was based on the international doctoral program quality document described by Kim, McKenna and Ketefian. The quality criteria, standards, and indicators document was developed by the International Network for Doctoral Education in Nursing (INDEN), and served as the guiding framework for the 2012 national study. The results revealed that more than 80% of the faculty members, the students and graduates considered their PhD programs and supporting academic environment and facilities to be good. More than 80% of respondents were satisfied with the quality of their programs and considered the curriculum, faculty members and learning facilities, as well as curricular assessment methods of their programs to be good. The study results showed that the quality of Thailand’s PhD level nursing education meet international standards.

Networks as Systems for Doctoral Programs

One of the weak points of doctoral education in Thailand is lack of formal national networks to work together and support each other. After the collaborative project ended in 1999, each institute offered its own doctoral program independently. Although, the Commission on Higher Education is a regulatory body setting the standards of higher education, every nursing program has to be approved by the Nursing Council as well. Each institution offering doctoral study works directly with these two organizations without networking together.

Mahidol University was first Thai nursing school that took part to establish EAFONS (East Asian Forum of Nursing Scholars) and has been active in it; similarly, Thai faculty and students have been active in INDEN since its establishment, and every effort is made to send students to its biennial meetings. EAFONS is regional and is comprised of leading school that offer doctoral nursing study in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. Member schools of EAFONS take turns to host an annual conference. Strong attempts are made to include all doctoral nursing programs in Thailand to join and form a strong link to support each other before joining the international networks. However, it is very difficult because there is not a focal point or structure to enhance this collaboration as in the past. This is a major challenge for the advancement of doctoral nursing education in Thailand. It is necessary to hold a national seminar on graduate education yearly.
Collaboration with Institutes in Other Countries

Since the inception of the sandwich program, most nursing doctoral programs in Thailand have developed strong international components, and have some forms of collaboration with institutes in other countries. For example, Mahidol, Chulalongkorn, Chiang Mai University and Prince of Songkla University have collaboration with schools of nursing both in Canada, U.S.A and Australia. Examples of those partnership schools are LaTrobe University, University of Alberta, Oregon Health Science University, University of California at San Francisco, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Pennsylvania, University of Alabama at Birmingham and University of Washington at Seattle.

Marketplace for Doctoral Prepared Nurses in Thailand

Currently, almost all doctoral students are faculty members in nursing schools throughout the country. These candidates are on leave for full-time study and have an obligation to return to work at their former institutions, in education or service. The graduate school of most universities requires full time study and funding in order to enable students to complete their studies as promptly as possible. However, despite this potential opportunity, very few students currently serve in research assistant positions, as most faculty either do not have research funds, or the funds they have do not cover the expense of employing students in such roles. The recent study by Juntasopeepun et al.1 found that about 71% of faculty members from their national sample did not offer research assistant opportunities for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, the graduate school does not require that students work in return for the scholarship they receive, in teaching-, research-assistant or other roles relevant to students’ future employment.

There are very few students who are self-supported; it is easy to apply and find a job in a nursing school. There are 396 graduates of doctoral programs in Thailand since the inception of the programs. There are additional individuals with doctoral preparation who have obtained their degrees overseas; the countries represented by this group are the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.

Challenges Facing Doctoral Education in Thailand

The significant challenge of doctoral education in Thailand is the shortage of qualified faculty members. As mandated by Commission of Higher Education and the Nursing Council, qualifications for faculty members to serve as major advisors in doctoral programs are doctoral preparation with the academic rank of at least associate professor. This is a big challenge for all nursing schools that are offering doctoral programs because some associate professors are nearly retired or will do so soon, while others who are credentialed are too new and inexperienced to apply for associate professor rank. Moreover, in the next 10 years approximately 51% of doctoral prepared faculty who teach and guide theses will retire at age 604. Another challenge we face in Thailand is lack of research, scholarship, and publications of faculty members in peer-reviewed journals, both nationally and internationally. This issue is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Because of the ongoing nursing shortage, every nursing school has had to enroll additional baccalaureate students, resulting in increases in faculty workload, and leaving little time to conduct research.

The shortage of faculty members is intensifying due to the increased number of nursing students in which increase by 10,128 students during the year 2014-2017 which require 1,266 new nurse teachers5. It is anticipated that there will be approximately 1,173 faculty members retiring in the next 10 years. Therefore, we will need to start recruiting approximately 2,500 faculty members in the next 10 years, with master’s preparation to teach bachelor degree students, and some with doctoral preparation to teach at the graduate level to replace retiring faculty5 and the increased number of nursing students.
According to the regulation of Thai Nursing and Midwifery Council, the ratio of clinical teaching is one faculty to eight undergraduate students. Therefore, most faculty prepared at the doctoral level are required to help in clinical teaching for undergraduate students because the increasing production of nurses to allay the nursing shortage is a nationwide responsibility. Thus, an important challenge for academic administrators in assigning faculty workloads is to consider research activity time for those qualified to do so, rather than only time for teaching and academic services, which is the case at present. This means that relevant accountability should be built in for faculty evaluation, so that scholarly productivity (such as publications) is expected and measured at the end of each academic year if research time was allocated.

For the reason of faculty shortage, we should propose the age of retirement to 65 or over and start the plan to prepare for 2,500 new faculties in the next 10 years submitted to the government. The other challenge is the less of impact of nursing doctoral dissertations on the country's health policy. According to an annual evaluation from the Bureau of Standard and Evaluation, Commission on Higher Education, Thailand, dissertations of doctoral students in nursing rarely guide policy in health care delivery systems as expected\(^6\). This issue reflects the need to conduct research syntheses of doctoral dissertations in Thailand and explore their impact on health policy; indeed, this same point applies to nursing research in general, as no single study can have impact by itself, unless findings are supported by similar studies and replications. The results from such syntheses and meta-analytic studies can enable doctoral dissertations, along with other research, to help solve health problems of the Thai people.

**Future Directions**

Thailand is one of the members of Association of South East Asian Nations’ ASEAN Community (AC) which will be fully implemented in 2015. With the standard doctoral programs offered, Schools of Nursing in Thailand have the opportunity to serve as leaders in doctoral nursing education in this region. This can be done by working collaboratively with other nursing schools in the ASEAN community to strengthen doctoral nursing education. In a preliminary step, Faculty of Nursing Mahidol University has been acting to spearhead efforts by initiating the forum for leaders of the First/Top Nursing Schools in ASEAN countries by August 2013.

**References**