

*Understanding the Graduate  
Student Journey: The Case of the  
Lebanese University*

**by**

**Samar Al-Kassar & Sahar Chaer**

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## **Statement of the Problem**

The pursuit of the doctorate degree can be one of the most challenging and exhaustive endeavors in the academic life of a student. The doctoral experience transcends the mere transmittal of knowledge and entails the internalization of norms and values that impact the personal as well as the professional life of a student. Although each doctoral student may have a story that is unique to his or her academic experience there exist common basic requirements which are important to guarantee a quality and fruitful study experience to all students with satisfaction being the pillar for the degree completion. Many studies' results provide evidence that connect students' satisfaction to the retention and completion of Doctorate students (Cummins-Collier, 1998; Heinrich, 1991). However, our experience as doctorate students was more of a grueling journey since we have and still face numerous challenges on the way that seem to emanate from the ways the program is planned, delivered and supported.

Based on recent studies conducted about the design of doctoral programs and its direct impact on student's satisfaction and hence his or her degree completion, and our one-year experience with the doctoral program at the Lebanese University's doctoral school, we have realized many of the challenges we have been facing in our Doctoral journey at the Lebanese University, can be related to ways that the program is designed and implemented. As students, our experience was filled with frustration, moments of confusion, and a feeling of burn-out as we tried to navigate the ample of

challenges and avoid the possibility of reaching the point where leaving the program altogether is our only plausible choice.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Our study presents an in depth exploration of the Doctoral Program in Education at the Lebanese University. It aims at describing the ways the program is designed, the planned curriculum, as well as the ways this program is implemented from the perspective of the students. It also identifies and describes the challenges that the students enrolled in the program experience throughout their doctoral journey; the strategies they followed to overcome these challenges and persist in the program; as well as their views on the measures that are needed to improve the quality of the doctoral studies experience at the Lebanese University. Data were collected through interviewing students currently enrolled in the program at the Lebanese University, examining documents that outline the program requirements, policies and procedures, as well as participant observation data that the authors provided as students currently enrolled in this program.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In their book Supervision: a Redefinition (2007), Sergiovanni & Starrat designed the curriculum in four major categories. “We can think about curriculum as-planned, as-taught, as-learned, and as-tested.” Hence, we got the idea of importing this design and building our research paper accordingly because we believe it serves

our perspectives. Our “as-planned” doctoral journey phase discusses the expectations and aspirations that we had before applying for the doctoral program. Our “as-taught” phase pinpoints the various challenges that we faced throughout our teachable experience. As for our “as-learned” phase, it reveals the view-gained lessons that we derived in order to avoid further difficulties which we are to encounter in the upcoming years on one hand, and to spare the novices the burned-out state that we have suffered from.

## **Literature Review**

### **Students’ Satisfaction**

In academic settings, satisfaction has been defined as the extent to which students are satisfied with a number of college-related issues such as advising, quality of instruction, course availability, and class size. According to Elliott and Healy (2001), student satisfaction is a short-term attitude based on an evaluation of their experience with the education service supplied.

Satisfaction is a well-researched topic in both academic and non-academic settings. In academic settings, students’ satisfaction data help colleges and universities make their curriculum more responsive to the needs of a changing marketplace (Eyck, Tews & Ballester, 2009; Witowski, 2008). In making curriculum more effective and responsive, it is important to evaluate effectiveness measures concerning the curriculum of each college, department, and program (Ratcliff, 1992; Elliott & Healy, 2001; Özgüngör, 2010; Peters, 1988; Billups, 2008; Aman, 2009). The effectiveness of a curriculum can be evaluated using direct performance measures (e.g., comprehensive exams, projects, and presentations) and by indirect performance

measures (e.g., students' satisfaction with the curriculum) (Jamelske, 2009; Witowski, 2008).

Numerous researchers have investigated issues related to students' satisfaction (e.g., Astin, 1977; Bryant, 2009; DeShields, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and most of them agree that highly satisfied students are more likely to remain in, and ultimately, successfully graduate from college. Some research also reveals that student satisfaction is inversely related to student complaints regarding advising, career preparation, and the need for new courses or effectiveness of current courses (e.g., Korn, Sweetman, & Nodine, 1996). Students' satisfaction surveys are important in ascertaining whether colleges and universities are fulfilling their mission. It is well known that the most important product of educational institutions is qualified graduates. In order to best prepare students so that they are sought after by employers upon graduation, an effective curriculum is needed. Students must understand the value of their education and be satisfied with their overall experience in order to promote and support their higher educational institution as students and as alumni. Moreover, satisfaction is a relevant measure because many studies have demonstrated that other factors being equal, satisfied individuals are likely to be willing to exert more effort than unsatisfied individuals (Bryant, 2006; Özgüngör, 2010). Thus, students who are satisfied with the curriculum are likely to exert more effort in their educational studies by taking actions such as regularly attending their classes and becoming more involved in their coursework and institution. Researchers have assessed students' satisfaction for many reasons. Several researchers have measured the levels of student satisfaction in order to examine accountability reporting and self-improvement purposes across departments and colleges. Others

have examined student satisfaction to determine if satisfaction ratings of college programs and services are associated with the satisfaction of the overall college experience. Still, some others have investigated student satisfaction items related to issues such as student retention and attrition.

### **Factors Resulting in Doctoral Program Incompletion**

Given the importance of student satisfaction levels at higher educational institutions, there has been a growing interest in examining factors that affect students' satisfaction. College students' satisfaction has been conceptualized in a number of ways by researchers. For example, college students' satisfaction was conceptualized as "satisfaction with college experience" (Elliott & Healy, 2001; Peters, 1988; Billups, 2008), "satisfaction with quality of instruction" (Aman, 2009), "satisfaction with advising" (Corts, Lounsbury, Saudargas, Tatum, 2000; Elliott, 2003; Olson, 2008; Peterson, Wagner, and Lamb, 2001), "satisfaction with online courses" (Banks & Faul, 2007; Heiman, 2008; Beqiri, Chase, & Bishka, 2010), "satisfaction with assessment" (Kane, 2005; Ross, Batzer, & Bennington, 2002), "satisfaction campus-wide" (Benjamin & Hollings, 1997), and "satisfaction with an academic department" (Corts et al., 2000). The above studies indicate that there is a growing body of literature on student perceptions of satisfaction. They also suggest that student satisfaction is a complex yet poorly articulated notion (DiBiase, 2004; Garcia-Aracil, 2009). In this latter study, however, satisfaction is conceptualized as "satisfaction with major curriculum". Unlike prior studies, it intends to contribute to

existing literature by determining the extent to which eleven factors affect students' satisfaction with major curriculum by focusing on a large sample of senior graduating students. Despite the many studies on student satisfaction with college-related issues, there is a lack of research on students' satisfaction with major curriculum.

There are endogenous and exogenous factors that would most likely affect the decision to stay in or leave graduate school. The set of factors that best predicted the probability of giving serious thought to quitting graduate school can be summarized as follows: negative reports about the availability of faculty encouragement and consultation (i.e. poor mentoring as measured by questions about the accessibility of faculty members, the positive or negative evaluations of mentoring, and advising relationships between faculty and students) are significantly tied to a higher probability of serious consideration of leaving graduate school. While good mentoring works against attrition, the most important factor that contributes to the thought of leaving graduate school is knowledge of inappropriate conduct (either in terms of physical behavior or verbal communication) by a department member.

Another factor influencing expected attrition is whether a department offers an orientation program to incoming students. This finding provides additional evidence that what departments do to help their graduate students does matter. The provision of an orientation program significantly reduces the probability of seriously thinking about leaving.

As one would expect, those who report having seriously considered leaving graduate school also reveal higher levels of dissatisfaction with their graduate student experience. The single best predictor of level of dissatisfaction with the graduate

student experience is whether the graduate student receives sufficient encouragement, mentoring and consultation from faculty.

A negative perception of departmental response has a significant deleterious effect on satisfaction with one's graduate program. Related again to the previous findings, the provision of an orientation program to incoming students does help to reduce the average level of dissatisfaction. The presence of an adequate orientation program significantly increases satisfaction with the graduate program. The orientation programs serve as a vehicle to "level the playing field" by letting all graduate students know departmental rules and expectations, operating policies and procedures, and opportunities available. In either case, orientation programs contribute considerably to a student's cultural capital by providing important information about the department and how to proceed to achieve one's aspirations.

Departments can improve their faculty's response to graduate student concerns generally and can take responsibility to see that each student has a mentor. This would significantly improve satisfaction.

Satisfied students are more likely to be committed and continue their studies than unsatisfied students, who are likely to be less willing to regularly attend classes, and are more likely to quit their studies (Jamelske, 2009; Borden, 1995).

Interest in factors affecting satisfaction has increased in both academic and non-academic settings. Several researchers have identified and empirically tested factors affecting or that are correlated with students' satisfaction. Since students' satisfaction has been conceptualized in a variety of ways by researchers, several factors have been examined that affect college students' satisfaction.



For instance, Corts et al. (2000) identified five factors affecting satisfaction with an academic department, while Elliott and Healy (2001) identified eleven factors affecting students' satisfaction with educational experience. Hence, students' satisfaction is affected by eleven academic related factors, namely required course availability for major, quality of instruction, major course content, variety of courses, capstone experiences, academic advising, overall college experience, preparation for career or graduate school, class size of major courses, grading in major courses, and course availability of electives in major.

### **The Program Satisfaction Model**

“The Model for Doctoral Student Program Satisfaction” demonstrates that the motivation doctoral students input into pursuit of a doctoral program filters through satisfaction detractors and distracters. The depth and density of these factors may reduce motivation. As these increased factors reduce motivation, increased time is spent completing a doctorate degree and program satisfaction is reduced.

The Program Satisfaction Model can be summarized as follows:

**Input: Motivation →Filter: Satisfaction Detractors & Distracters →Outcome: Satisfaction**

### **Satisfaction Detractors & Distracters**

The above model for program satisfaction suggests practical strategies for doctoral students to increase program satisfaction and decrease time spent completing a doctorate degree.

These strategies include reducing “detractors” and “distracters” when logically and humanly possible, with detractors being the action of hindering from achieving the purpose as the result of a “distracter” or obstacle faced which can range from a

personal level such as a sickly mother or sibling at home, to a full employment condition.

Practically applied, this theory-based model of program satisfaction suggests to doctoral students ways to increase their program satisfaction and time spent on completing a doctorate degree. This theory suggests doctoral students carefully select their doctoral advisors, dissertation committee chairs, and committee members and make concerted efforts to foster amenable collegial relationships with these professors. This theory also suggests that deliberate actions by doctoral students must be taken to stabilize positive supportive peer relationships with fellow doctoral classmates. These strategic steps taken by doctoral students may reduce motivation detractors. Doctoral students may decrease the negative impact of detractors with increased peer support.

The second practical strategy suggested by this theory addresses motivation distracters. Doctoral students should address existing distracters prior to enrolling in a doctoral program and evaluate these distracters as they relate to program satisfaction and degree completion. Once perspective or new doctoral students have identified these distracters, it is incumbent upon the student to decide whether completion of the doctorate is still logical and feasible.

Doctoral students now actively engaged in doctoral completion should consciously work to keep detractors and distracters few. Therefore, unless doctoral students develop and maintain a collegial professional relationship and personal friendship with doctoral advisors, doctoral students should not feel compelled to discuss new developments with regard to distracters. Furthermore, the discussion of personal distracters with one's advisor may interfere with the ultimate goal of the advisement

relationship, doctoral completion, so doctoral students should discuss personal life experiences with faculty carefully and purposefully.

## **Methodology**

This research paper follows the qualitative method and adopts a case study design. It uses narrative inquiry which is a story-based approach used in research resting on the assumptions that human beings make sense of a random experience by the imposition of story structure on them (Bell, 2002). Data were mainly collected through our own direct reflective observations of the weekly multi-disciplinary sessions, conferences and workshop attendance, and general meetings that normally served as what the university calls orientation sessions. Data were also collected through focus group interviews with students currently enrolled in the program; interview with the program director; and through document analysis and examination of relevant policies and procedures.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), qualitative research focuses on the interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings to make sense in terms of the meanings people bring to these settings. Qualitative research involves collecting information about personal experiences, introspection, life story, interviews, observations, interactions and visual text which are significant moments and meaningful in peoples' lives.

Qualitative research data focus on the individual's perspectives of events. It is more 'rich', time consuming, more concerned with deepening the understanding of the phenomenon to be studied and less attached to generalizing the findings. This leads to generating a theory from findings which roots our study in the grounded theory

paradigm. Grounded theory is a research method that offers a comprehensive and systematic framework for inductively building theory. A grounded theory is one that is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to a particular phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

As for the research design followed, we adopted the case study design for data collection and analysis presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). Yin (2003) defined the critical case study as research that involves critical reflection on current practices, questions taken-for-granted assumptions, and critiques the status quo based on the theories.

The narrative inquiry approach is set in human stories of experience. According to Webster & Mertova (2007), it provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories. To paraphrase the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre from his book *Words* (1964):

*People are always tellers of tales.  
They live surrounded by their stories and  
The stories of others; they see everything  
That happens to them through those stories  
And they try to live their lives as  
If they were recounting them.*

Thus, narrative is well suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in teaching and learning.

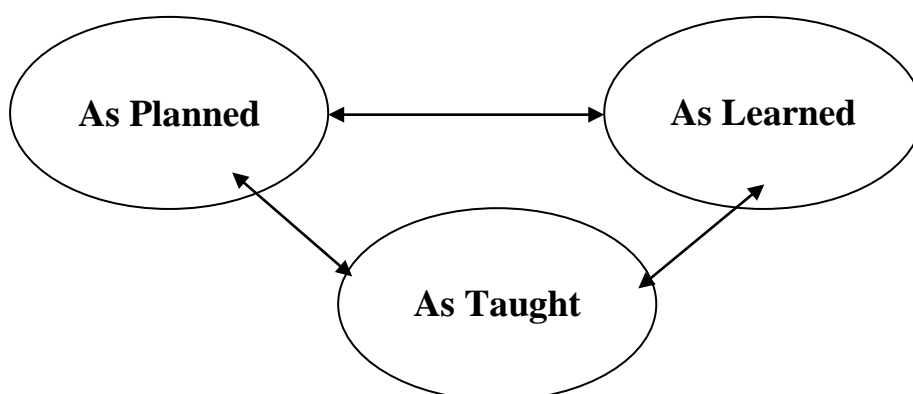
### **Narrative and human experience**

Narrative records human experience through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories; it is well suited to addressing the issues of complexity and cultural and human centeredness because of its capacity to record and retell those events that have been of most influence on us. Narrative allows researchers to present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collection followed a specific cycle consisting of three major phases which are: "as planned", "as taught", and "as learned" as it shows in the figure adopted from Sergiovanni & Starrat (2007).

**Phases of Our Doctoral Journey**



#### **Phase One: As Planned**

At the very beginning of this journey, we had very high expectations from enrolling in the doctoral program at the Doctoral School of Humanities, Literature and

Social Studies at the Lebanese University due to its great reputation and the difficult path any student must go through in order to be admitted in there.

In fact, only high achievers at the master's degree have the right to apply according to a strict condition imposed by the Admission Terms (Appendix A). Since we meet all the conditions having scored outstanding GPAs, we got accepted after our academic profiles have been evaluated by an academic committee at the Lebanese University.

After being accepted, we were called for a general assembly for first year students at the Doctoral School to be acquainted with the program requirements. Hence, we already formed our own expectations from the coming experience at the Doctoral School out of many readings of other doctoral programs at both European and American universities to get a glimpse of what is happening elsewhere. However, reality at the Doctoral School was different from expected. Nearly 200 doctoral students were present that day, from several majors in different faculties, waiting impatiently for the dean's announcement. The moment the Dean of the Doctoral School took the floor, he started his speech by talking about the importance of multidisciplinary subjects in the doctoral experience to shape modern and global Ph-D holders who have acquired in-depth, comprehensive, and above all critical knowledge in all the fields surrounding their majors. However, in order to embark on this "interesting worldwide" journey, each of us had to submit a so-called proposal of his/her dissertation in a two-month deadline that must be signed by a "full professor in the field of his\her major". After hearing such a shocking announcement, dissatisfaction started showing and group discussions were triggered. After all, we were just stepping in. As for the list of advisors with which we were provided; it

contained the names, phone numbers and the specialty of a limited number of advisors who were full professors from the Lebanese University and already filled their load of advisory hours with five doctoral students. So, we were not on our best days. The general assembly ended, students rushed to grab an advisor in case they were lucky to find one. Others left the room mumbling. As for us, we decided to look elsewhere since the clock started ticking from the very first day.

### **Phase Two: As Taught**

We had a "Lebanese University wide tour" in order to find our "dream advisor" who, once again, should be a full professor in the field. Unfortunately, the number of available full professor in the field is either non-existent or already taken. You cannot imagine how fast an aspiration can turn into a burden. We were alone, with no help provided, knocking every possible university office doors haunted by the deadline, finding a suitable topic which must confirm to the Lebanese University's terms of originality, modernity, and added-significance, or lose the privilege of getting formally enrolled as first year students. Lebanon turned out to be small not only in matter of kilometers, but also with regard to the numbers of full professors. So, we had no other choice but to search abroad. We contacted full professors from many universities in the field in Jordan since it is the closest country to Lebanon in case we had to travel and meet an advisor there. We were "lucky" to find a full professor who kindly accepted to look after us on this journey which began to seem grueling even at its very beginnings. We were exhausted after a month of many here and there, pondering over the topics, consulting with experts in the field of educational leadership who were cooperative to offer their advice. The issue of advisory was

solved; we had less than a month to write our dissertation proposals. The burden started transforming into a nightmare. All we had is a guideline of the proposal requirements in Arabic, no resources at all and very little time to read. If we didn't have the extra "inch" determination inside, we would have quit. We lived a month of concerns, doubts, fears, and worries. We only had each other to support and encourage. We were really a "cohort". We sent our proposals to our abroad Jordanian advisor, hoping for some kind of feedback concerning our work, but this never happened. The defense day was announced. We were given phone calls and were excited about that. However, we were to face a panel of strict and professional professors who were real experts in the field. We took turns not in raising hands but in having doubts ; either to present the proposal that was done within days without any support from the advisor and take the risk, or dropping the idea altogether and sparing ourselves such a confrontation. Since we are here sharing our experience with you, it is obvious that we opted for the first choice. Though, the defense was tough, we had the golden opportunity to meet an amazing expert lady who believed in us, respected our persistence, and agreed to assist us in the rest of the doctoral journey. In other words, Dr. Rima Karami Akkary agreed to become the technical advisor for both of us, and from that day on, everything changed, to the better of course.

Let's go more a bit back to the doctoral program itself and how the sessions were going on. We need to mention that no courses were enlisted as we read previously in the syllabus of other universities abroad, or as was the case in the fellow private universities in Lebanon. What confirmed our previous expectations was the conference held by the Doctoral School of Humanities, Literature and Social Studies at the Lebanese University back in April 5&6 2012 entitled "Preparing for Ph-D:



Scopes and Challenges" in which we got to learn in details about the doctoral programs offered by a number of foreign as well as national universities in the private sector.

As for the weekly sessions that we had to attend in order to get the 80 credits (aside from the dissertation's 100 credits to be earned) they were at the very heart of our doctoral journey. They were supposed to widen our scopes and open new horizons. Unluckily, most of them consisted of lectures presented by passive "full professors" in which information went back to the 80's or 90's if we want to give credits or be rather optimistic. It is true we had the chance to communicate our concerns or share questions at the end of each session, but most of the time the lecturers were too proud to accept an opinion from a "student" who lacks their experience. However, some lectures were quite interesting, interactive, and fun.

Regarding the doctoral days and scientific ones mentioned in the credit sheet (Appendix D) that we attended, they were quite eventful. Our peers who had to present their work during such days were supposed to be supported by their advisors. To our surprise, the advisors, except for ours, were the ones who vehemently attacked the whole work! How could this happen? Our colleagues felt intimidated and found themselves in a weird and unexpected situation.

Methodology is another issue. It was kind of non-existent, and the advisors criticized this point on the very day of the presentation. This happened for two main reasons due to our colleagues' accounts. First, the advisors gave no feedback on the work done by their students, and some others were hearing about the work for the first time; second, we are not given any methodology course before attempting this academic work. So, a question raises itself: how fair it is to judge a doctoral student at

the Lebanese University Doctoral School on his/her lack of methodology when he/she is not given a course to master such an essential skill?

Concerning the challenges we faced during this journey, they were also confirmed by our colleagues during the interviews we have conducted with them. They fall into different categories and can be summarized as follows:

1. Absence of any kind of orientation for graduate program
2. Unavailability of recent resources
3. Lack of clear-cut guidelines
4. Shortage of well-established policies
5. Deficiency of a professional helping center
6. Limited number of field-expert advisors
7. Large number of candidates per class
8. Favoring certain majors on the detriment of others under the alibi of insufficient specialists in the field of educational leadership

### **Phase Three: As Learned**

This phase is so dear to both of us. It wraps up what we have learned so far as doctoral students at the Doctoral University at the Lebanese University. You might be expecting to hear more criticism or whining, but this time, your expectation won't be met. This previous year has had a series of teachable moments. First, we have learned what resilience really means, and that there will always be a glimpse of light at the end of the darkest tunnels.

Next, we have built a strong cohort of work, support, and harmony. This solid and complementary partnership is getting stronger every day through sharing experiences, planning projects together, evaluating the work done, revising and editing it, and all in very high spirits. Among all we learned from each other, enriched our minds, and experienced the true value of collegial work. In brief, we both came to a grounded belief that two minds are always better than one.

In addition, self learning is one of the gains we have earned in this experience. We learned to depend on ourselves and push ourselves further and learn more and more by always referring to the very source of things in every research work. After all, this is what builds and shapes a genuine researcher.

Coming to our fourth lesson, we came to a belief that challenges generate maturity, and by maturity we mean scientific reasoning, critical thinking, and natural inquiry. Hence, methodology is what distinguishes any authentic researcher. We did grow this year; and it is the kind of growth that triggers a whole lot of happiness and brings forth high levels of satisfaction, and not the one that reminds us of the time we have already lost of our biological age.

Also, it was a year in which we have encountered a memorable lady who contributed in shaping us as researchers. She added more exactitude and sharpness to our work and believed in us in the bleakest moments.

Last but not least, our faith in God got far stronger because even when the road was blocked by thousand hurdles, we kept on believing that what doesn't kill us, make us stand firmer than before. We do believe that the more and unwrapped the way is to achieve our goals, the more satisfaction we perceive.

## **Significance of the Study**

We believe our study is of great significance for a number of reasons. Firstly, this research paper constitutes a first in Lebanon since no studies have tackled the issue of program satisfaction on the doctoral student level through a reflective narrative journey. It captures a real-life experience of two doctoral students who persevered in pursuing their goal of completing their degree despite of all the difficulties faced on the way and felt the urge of sharing their journey as a motivation for any of our colleagues who ever thought of withdrawing. Secondly, it can inform other doctoral students on the nature of the challenges they face and provide them with lessons learned and various strategies that we followed to navigate and overcome these challenges. Thirdly, through exploring the nature of the challenges from the perspective of the students it provides university leaders with insight on the conditions the students are facing. Therefore, it serves as a feedback for our doctoral program' administration and offer them recommendations for improvement that are grounded in the real life experiences, the needs and views of their students.

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## **Appendixes**

Appendix A: The Admission Terms



Appendix B: Writing the Proposal

Appendix C: The Scientific Guide to Write the Dissertation

Appendix D: The Credit Sheet

Appendix E: The List of Advisors

Appendix F: The Interview Questions