In the fall of 2015, the first class of PhD nursing students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) began their program through a partnership with Emory University’s Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing (SON). With the signing last year of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the SON and AAU, the first Ethiopia conferred PhD degree nursing program was established.

While a small number of PhD nursing programs were already available in the country of more than 90 million, before 2015, Ethiopia had never had a nursing doctoral program that conferred a degree from an Ethiopia university. This new partnership has allowed individuals, unable to train further than a master’s degree, to expand their repertoire of nursing abilities and knowledge, in addition to conducting valuable research.

A commitment from the Ethiopian government to improve the quality of education in Ethiopia, as well as the desire and need for additional training and experience, warranted the establishment of a program that would allow students to further their professional growth and improve upon their skills and research expertise.

Dr. Kenneth Hepburn, Professor at the Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing, serves as the main advisor at Emory for this program.

Current students, Fekadu Aga and Daniel Mengistu, began pursuing their doctorate degree while each holding a master’s degree in nursing and having experience working in clinical settings. Both students also had a distinct skill set – they each taught at AAU for many years. Having not had a PhD program available previously, the establishment of this Emory partnership allowed Aga and Mengistu the opportunity to further their training and gain research experience in their home country.

During the first year of the program, students focused on coursework, working with professors at both AAU and Emory. They were able to gain...
knowledge in a number of areas, including health determinants, measurement and design in clinical research, the study of clinical phenomena, and advanced quantitative research. They will continue with their coursework during the second year of study, in addition to conducting research.

In the program, courses through Emory are taken virtually. While located in Ethiopia, the AAU students attend each lecture by using the videoconferencing software Skype. Through this unique immersion into an Emory classroom, these students are given the opportunity to learn and interact with their peers and professors.

Despite the success of this particular learning experience, there are a number of challenges. Internet connection in Ethiopia is not ideal, which has posed difficulties for the students to always connect to the courses in real-time. Facing disconnections during lectures, students at AAU can miss critical information during lectures, causing stress and uneven instruction. To counteract this possibility, the program designers ensured all lectures were recorded and made available for download. Such a library resource of lectures is helpful in making sure the level of learning and engagement is aligned for all students, independent of their geographic location.

In addition to coursework, AAU PhD nursing students also conduct research during their time in the program. Previously, their nursing training and experience was focused on the clinical setting and, now that they have been provided the opportunity to receive a PhD, they are shifting to more research-based work. Each student in the program will prepare their dissertation in their respective country, and will participate remotely in courses during the fall semester that can be applied to their research.

Although dissertation committees have not been officially established, research advisors from AAU have been determined, and the identification of professors from Emory to serve as primary research advisors is underway.

Through this partnership, an exchange of knowledge and skills will positively influence the professional growth and experience of these highly-motivated individuals and, in turn, improve the quality of healthcare in Ethiopia. As stated by Mengistu, “I think the PhD Nursing Program is very important in shaping the future of nursing education and practice in Ethiopia.” This program has already rendered great success and appreciation, and will continue to provide education and opportunity to more students moving forward. “Working with Emory has been quite valuable and I would highly recommend this program,” Aga reflects. A plethora of applications have been submitted for the second class of the program, and courses will commence this fall.

The establishment of this program further strengthens the relationship between Emory and Ethiopia, one of the university’s priority locations. While reflecting on his experience with Emory, Mengistu states that “if the opportunity arises, it would be great to have the support of Emory to scale up to a fully-established PhD program.”

Moving forward, the continued intent of this partnership is to further educate driven individuals in the field of nursing and retain valued health care workers, which will ultimately positively impact the health of all Ethiopians.

“I think the PhD Nursing Program is very important in shaping the future of nursing education and practice in Ethiopia.” – Daniel Mengistu, PhD nursing student at AAU

Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in 2015.