

28 Skills and employability: Convergence of doctoral experiences in the global transformation of doctoral education

Líliá Mantai¹, Sónia Cardoso²

¹The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia. ²The University of Lusófona, Porto, Portugal

Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

In recent decades, doctoral education has grown in strategic importance for the knowledge society and economy. This resulted in the massification of the doctorate and its related professionalisation, with a focus on doctorate's ability to develop skills beyond research competences and to enhance employability outside of academia.

We examine how this context influences doctoral candidates' experiences and perspectives of the doctorate, using interview data obtained between 2000 and 2022 in Portugal, Germany, and Australia. Five narratives emerged in candidates' perspectives on agency, precarity, hope, demands and value of the doctorate.

Findings reveal that regardless of their national, institutional, and academic contexts, candidates see the doctorate as a place for professional and transferable skill development, making it relevant not only to academic research but also to work-settings beyond academia. This suggests that candidates are actively redefining the doctorate, with the global doctoral education transformation becoming the cornerstone of the doctoral experience.

Full paper

Introduction and context

Driven by several factors doctoral education has undergone a deep transformation in the past few decades. Massification of higher education has impacted doctoral education, resulting in increased enrolments, greater number of doctorates awarded (Carvalho & Cardoso, 2020; Nerad, 2014), and more diverse doctoral candidates' profiles, backgrounds and expectations towards the degree. Such factors affect the career prospects and future employment of PhD holders (Bernstein et al., 2014; McAlpine, 2020). Simultaneously, changes in the academic profession e.g., greater precariousness, deterioration of working conditions (Deem, 2020), have contributed to the expansion of doctoral graduates' career paths beyond academia, including in public, private and non-profit sectors (Bernstein et al., 2014; McAlpine, 2020). This emphasises the link between employability, attainment of competences and doctoral education (Balaban, 2020; Carvalho & Cardoso, 2020) in a context where it further emerges as a fundamental resource for the knowledge society and economy. Such forces influence the 'definition' and 'design' of doctoral education, in Europe and worldwide targeting its organisation, delivery, funding, and quality.

Higher education contexts of each country vary in its structure, governance, funding, scale, etc. National, regional and local governments often shape the institution and the doctoral program on offer. The academic socialisation processes in turn shape and form the candidate, their doctoral experience, their identities, and ultimately their personal and professional futures (Gardner et al., 2014).

In this study we examine how the dimensions of doctoral education transformation, which relate to skill development and employability, are perceived by doctoral students from different countries, hence, situated in varying higher education contexts. In the presentation we will provide an overview of skill and employability related aspects of doctoral education transformation, report on our study, elaborate on and discuss the findings.

Methodology

In view of doctoral education transformation across the globe, particularly the focus on employability and skill development, we were interested to examine how this affects the doctoral experience, the way candidates navigate it, their behaviours and actions. We drew on three sets of interview data, collected in three different countries: Portugal, Germany, Australia. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 42 candidates were conducted in these three countries in 2020-2022 and data was thematically analysed. While the interviews addressed various research foci pertinent to skill development during candidature, five themes emerged where doctoral experiences were similar despite national differences.

Findings

Regardless of the national, higher education, and doctoral education contexts, doctoral candidates' experiences, perspectives, and behaviours appear to be surprisingly similar leading us to believe that global doctoral education transformation has indeed become the cornerstone of the doctoral experience. Specifically, our PhD participants' perspectives suggest that doctoral education worldwide is experiencing a move to 'professionalisation', as candidates recognise the need to prepare for careers outside academia while simultaneously fulfilling the requirements of academic research training. This is evident in the five narratives we identified in our data:

Agency: Doctoral candidates demonstrate significant agency in driving their skill development in both areas, research competencies and transferable skills, because of the need to possibly work outside academia.

Precurity: Doctoral candidates perceive academic careers are precarious across the world and keep a firm focus on developing their employability, through seeking non-academic work experiences, preferencing applied research, networking, etc.

Hope: Doctoral candidates engage and invest considerable time in additional activities outside their PhD research in hope to enhance their chances in and outside academia that might lead to opportunities, career capital, etc.

Demands: Doctoral candidates expect more support from the university in employability and career development

Value: Doctoral candidates see value of PhD training beyond academia whereas non-academic employers do not.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite different national higher education and doctoral education contexts, doctoral candidates' expectations and perspectives in three different countries appear to converge. Doctoral candidates in Portugal, Germany and Australia share similar experiences, perspectives and behaviours in relation to skill development and employability for diverse careers. This study provides qualitative evidence for the transformation of doctoral education in the context of the knowledge society and academic capitalism (Cardoso et al., 2022). The doctoral degree while traditionally presented as training for academic careers is actively reshaped by candidates as a site for professional and transferable skill development. As such, doctoral education is experiencing a shift in purpose as training for academic and non-academic careers. Aside from offering qualitative evidence on the shifting purpose of the doctorate, the study seeks to spark further debate on what can be learnt from multinational comparative insights on the subject.

References

Balaban, C. (2020). Diversifying the mission and expectations of doctoral education: Are we losing the distinctive 'added value' of the PhD? In S. Cardoso, O. Tavares, C. Sin, & T. Carvalho (Eds.), *Structural and institutional transformations in doctoral education: Social, political and student expectations* (pp. 325–345). London, UK: Springer Nature.

Bernstein, B., Evans, B., Fyffe, J., Halai, N., Hall, F., Jensen, H., Papeiva, K., & Ortega, S. (2014). The continuing evolution of the research doctorate. In M. Nerad & B. Evans (Eds.), *Globalization and its impacts on the quality of PhD education: Forces and forms in doctoral education worldwide* (pp. 5–30). Sense Publishers.

Cardoso, S., Santos, S., Diogo, S. et al. The transformation of doctoral education: a systematic literature review. *High Educ* 84, 885–908 (2022). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.sydney.edu.au/10.1007/s10734-021-00805-5>

Carvalho, T., & Cardoso, S. (2020). Conclusion: The transformation in doctoral education – A comprehensive and critical approach. In S. Cardoso, O. Tavares, C. Sin, & T. Carvalho (Eds.), *Structural and institutional transformations in doctoral education: Social, political and student expectations* (pp. 375–389). London, UK: Springer Nature.

Deem, R. (2020). Rethinking doctoral education: University purposes, academic cultures, mental health and the public good. In S. Cardoso, O. Tavares, C. Sin, & T. Carvalho (Eds.), *Structural and institutional transformations in doctoral education: Social, political and student expectations* (pp. 13–42). London, UK: Springer Nature.

McAlpine, L. (2020). Views on the usefulness of the PhD outside academia: What do we know and need to know? In S. Cardoso, O. Tavares, C. Sin, & T. Carvalho (Eds.), *Structural and institutional transformations in doctoral education: Social, political and student expectations* (pp. 241–274). London, UK: Springer Nature.

Nerad, M. (2014). Introduction: Converging practices in PhD education. In M. Nerad & B. Evans (Eds.), *Globalization and its impacts on the quality of PhD education: Forces and forms in doctoral education worldwide* (pp. 1–4). Sense Publishers.