

The changing concept of doctoral education: an insight from Portuguese universities

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Doctoral education in Europe has undergone profound transformations over the last two to three decades, influenced by broader reforms in higher education policy, growing demands for accountability, and changing academic labor markets. This paper investigates how these changes have shaped the concept of doctoral education in the Portuguese context, with particular focus on the extent to which an instrumental understanding of the doctorate has taken root. Using a systematic content analysis of institutional websites from 118 doctoral programmes – covering all scientific domains and representative of the national doctoral offer – the study assesses how doctoral education is framed and presented publicly by universities. The results reveal the prevalence of a hybrid conceptualization: in some cases, doctoral programmes align with a traditional model centred on individual research and academic apprenticeship; in others, they reflect an instrumental logic, emphasizing transferable skills, employability, and structured training. Most commonly, both logics coexist, resulting in mixed messages about the purpose and structure of the PhD. This hybridity suggests that Portuguese universities are navigating between academic traditions and external pressures – including academic capitalism and isomorphic influences – such as international standards, performance metrics, and stakeholder expectations. The article contributes to the understanding of how national doctoral systems adapt to global trends while maintaining local specificities, and highlights the tensions embedded in the evolving purpose of the doctorate in contemporary academia.

