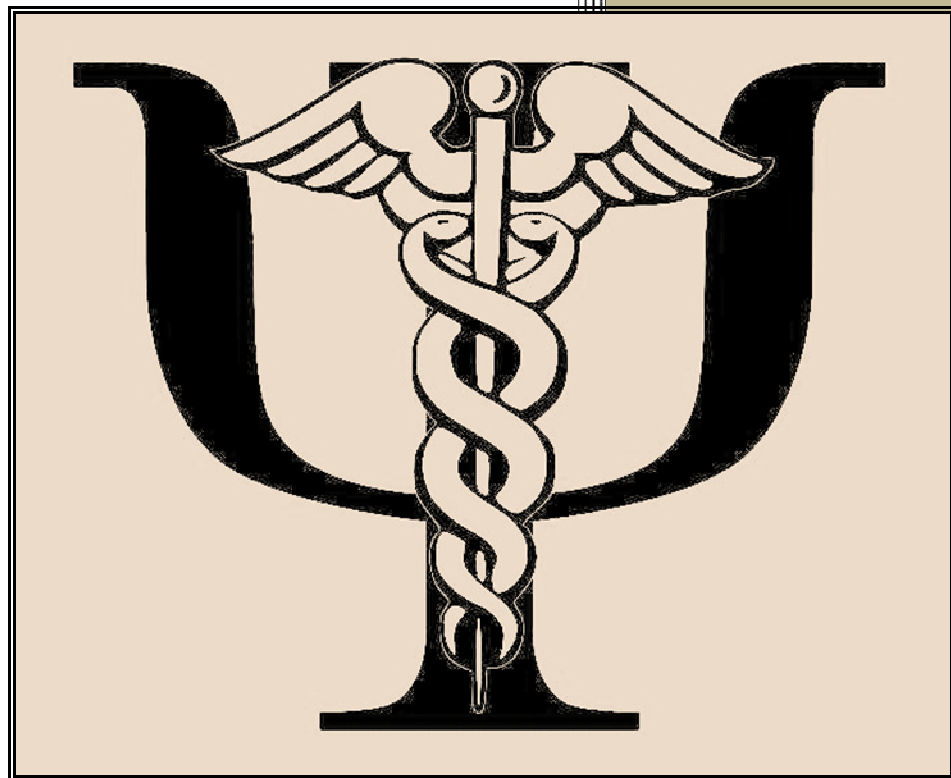


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SUPERVISORS AND STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF THE NATURE AND VALUE OF THE DOCTORATE

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Abstract

The boom in doctoral programmes, the changing nature of doctoral journey, the growth of different forms of doctorates and the different students' profiles reinforce the urgent need not only in understanding what is quality in the doctoral supervision process, but also in designing proper tools to evaluate this practice so the quality of the process is enhanced. With the aim of knowing the conceptions that doctoral students and supervisors share in terms of the nature and value of the doctorate, and the implications those conceptions may have on the definition of doctoral supervision quality, as well as students and supervisors' quality profiles, a study was designed. Results of the content analysis of data collected through focus groups with doctoral supervisors and students showed that both doctoral students and supervisors share very close perspectives. A dichotomy arises: the 'intrinsic' or epistemological meaning they attribute to the doctorate and the significance the doctorate has nowadays, considering intrinsic and extrinsic factors. These results stress the strong urgency in understanding the conceptions both actors of the doctoral research process have on this particular phenomenon, so their supervision practices and competences' profiles may be adjusted to the process, promoting the overall quality of this intense learning experience.

Keywords: doctorate; supervision process; quality assessment; student; supervisor.

Resumen

El boom en el número de doctorados, la modificación de los programas de doctorado, el surgimiento de distintos tipos de doctorados y de diferentes perfiles de estudiantes, no sólo refuerzan la necesidad perentoria de abordar la evaluación de la calidad del proceso de tutorización de la investigación en el doctorado y dirección de tesis, sino también del diseño de instrumentos de evaluación apropiados para ello de modo que faciliten implementar mejoras en el proceso. Se planificó un estudio con los objetivos generales de identificar las concepciones compartidas por estudiantes y supervisores sobre la naturaleza y el valor del doctorado, así como las implicaciones de esas concepciones en la definición de calidad de la supervisión y en los perfiles de calidad. Los resultados del análisis de contenido de los datos obtenidos por medio de la técnica de "focus group" con doctorandos y directores de tesis mostraron que ambos compartían perspectivas muy similares. Sus discursos enfatizan una dicotomía: la esencia epistémica atribuida al doctorado y la significación del doctorado, considerando factores intrínsecos y extrínsecos. Los resultados enfatizan la necesidad de la consideración de las concepciones que doctorandos y directores tienen sobre la naturaleza y utilidad del doctorado para que las prácticas de supervisión y los perfiles de competencias puedan ajustarse al proceso promoviendo, de este modo, la calidad.

Palabras clave: doctorado; dirección de tesis; evaluación de la calidad; doctorando; director de tesis.

What is the essence of 'doctorateness'? What factors must be present for a particular degree to fit into the category of 'doctorate'? (...) How effective are current systems for assuring the quality standard of (...) doctoral awards? (Park, 2007, p. 37, and p. 39)

Introduction

These are in fact emergent questions that focus on the importance and relevance in understanding, among other issues: a) the 'essence' of the process of doing doctoral research; b) the extension and impact of research at postgraduate level (both inside and outside Academia); c) the quality of doctoral programmes, and d) the quality of the overall training process which closely involves two main 'actors' of the postgraduate research process: the doctoral student and the supervisor.

Internationally, the Higher Education (HE) agenda is revealing a growing concern with the extension and impact of research at postgraduate level. Doctoral studies are acquiring a renewed conceptual understanding and are gaining a greater significance and value (Chambaz, BiauDET, & Collonge, n.d.). Following this idea, McAlpine and Norton (2006) have already highlighted: "epistemological questions are being raised on the nature of the doctorate, which has traditionally included lengthy study, original research and thesis preparation" (p. 4).

Also, the international and especially the European contexts have been emphasising the existence of an increasing number and a greater diversity of research students enrolling in postgraduate studies in general, and in doctoral programmes in particular, after finishing master programmes (Harman, 2003; Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004). The 'boom' of doctoral programmes is promoting more discussions and enriching reflections within (and even outside) Academia. The growth of different forms of doctorates and the diversity in students' profiles reinforce the need to redefine and continue the discussion about the understanding of the nature of the 'doctorateness', and the quality in the research supervision process at a doctoral level (Brew, 2001; Enders, 2005; Frick, 2009; Park, 2005).

Therefore, it is essential to engage doctoral supervisors and students in critical reflections about their own experiences, concerns, difficulties and expectations, as well as the complexities of their role, and the competences they need to develop and also

stimulate, so the supervision and research practices achieve high quality levels. At the same time, a bigger effort and commitment from HE institutions are required, so the design of suitable and context-grounded evaluation and monitoring process concerning this practice, as well as public and engaged discussions are promoted.

An attempt to describe the purposes of the doctorate

We consider it is pertinent to draw an overview about the description of the doctorate, considering political documents from different parts of the globe (mainly from different spaces where there is already a tradition in publicly reflecting, discussing and carrying out empirical research on this subject): United States of America (Council of Graduate Schools of the U.S., 1991), Australia (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board, 2007), and Europe (Joint Quality Initiative Informal Group, 2004), in particular the United Kingdom (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008). When analysing those four documents we conclude that the descriptions and purposes of the doctorate share most of the same features. We must point out the following which have deserved our closest attention:

- The production of original research which should give a significant contribution to knowledge and/or that should extend “the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice discipline”.
- “The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship” that deserves to be published and that is recognised by peer reviews.
- The development of high-level communicative skills, both writing and oral presentation skills.
- Deep understanding of the field of knowledge, mastery of appropriate research methods according to the academic domain, and conscious recognition of what constitutes scholarly integrity and ethical issues.
- The development of transferable professional/academic competences that may be applied at different settings, namely outside Academia. Competences such as the capacity for solving problems, analysing complex issues and achieving an innovative approach are essential.
- The development of other transferable or generic professional/academic and personal competences which may also be applied and used in diverse settings –

inside or outside Academia, namely: the capacity to deal with and solve “unforeseen problems” and “unpredicted situations”. Thus, both personal and professional/academic flexibility and open-mindedness acquire a high importance.

- The conceptualisation, design and implementation of projects, autonomously, which may contribute “substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas or approaches”.

Although the quotations we have used in the previous topics emerge from the document of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2008), we must underline that the other three documents stress the same issues, namely by using identical words. Therefore, it seems that doctoral research is almost ‘composed’ by the following interconnected aspects: a) the enhancement of a set of personal, social, academic and professional competences which will be essential to be successful both in a doctoral research and in a future professional path, which may be inside or outside Academia (thus, we may be talking about a set of high-level transferable competences); and b) the creation of a final product that is mostly characterised by originality, which may be considered one of the most important aspects that define the nature and/or purpose of the doctorate.

Even though these may be contested ideas and perspectives, it seems essential to frame this reflection on documents that also contextualise most of institutional perspectives on the doctorate (and which may also shape public opinion). This assumption also leads us to assume that more discussions among different stakeholders on this issue are essential to be stimulated.

Main focus and objectives of this article

Considering the generic overview of the subject, this article is built on some findings of a broader research that is being carried out at a Portuguese Higher Education institution. The main goal of this research is to design a reference framework that will allow the understanding of the construct ‘quality of doctoral supervision’. Thus, to achieve this main objective, we have assumed that an essential topic to be addressed (which is focused on this article) is the nature and the value of the doctorate from doctoral students and supervisors’ point of view (the main actors of the process). This specific aspect helps us to contextualise the overall reflection, and to approach and

discuss the issue on students and supervisors' quality profiles from a more 'grounded' perspective. In fact, we have always considered that the perspective one has on the nature and value of the doctorate will influence the way the supervision process and the roles of both students and supervisors are defined.

Accordingly, with this particular study, we intend to present some results that arose from data collected through focus groups with doctoral supervisors and doctoral students of several academic domains with diverse experiences and at different stages of their academic and professional career. We have the purpose of: a) presenting the conceptions both doctoral students and supervisors share in terms of the nature and value of the doctorate, particularly by analysing the similarities and differences of their discourses; b) reflecting on some implications those conceptions may have to the definition of 'quality of doctoral supervision' (in general) and quality profiles (in particular). To conclude, we may highlight that, with this article, we aim to contribute to a broad international discussion on this issue, which has been under-discussed.

Method

Participants

Due to the 'essence' and goals of the research we are carrying out, the participants are doctoral students and supervisors from the University of Aveiro, from several academic domains and with heterogeneous academic and professional experiences. As the main actors of the doctoral research and supervision process, their voices are crucial to be heard, gathered, analysed and conceptualised, so a grounded discussion is developed.

Due to the unexplored nature of this research topic in Portugal and non-systematic approach at an international level, we have considered that we could largely benefit from a 'social' approach to the subject. In this article, we will approach the data collected through focus groups with doctoral supervisors ($n = 25$) in a first moment, and doctoral students ($n = 26$) in a second moment, of all academic domains (among the ones that exist at the University of Aveiro) and with diverse characteristics.

Instrument: Focus groups

This strategy of data collection - focus groups - was adopted, because it stimulates interaction, discussion, self- and meta-reflection among the participants. Due

to “the dynamic nature of the process” (Greenbaum, 2000, p. 13), the research has benefited from this qualitative research technique, since it had enabled and encouraged participants to be actively involved and ‘think conceptually’ (Greenbaum, 2000). This moment of data collection has allowed us to gather in-depth perspectives around several interconnected topics, grouped into 2 main dimensions, which we have previously identified in the literature as important to be explored: the context of doctoral research and supervision (a part of this dimension is explored in this article), and the quality of the doctoral supervision process.

Heterogeneity of each group was considered a factor that needed to be assured. Therefore, six focus groups with doctoral supervisors, and eight with doctoral students were carried out. The discussion in each group had the duration of approximately two hours. The focus groups did not have the same number of participants, due to reasons of availability. Also, we have always tried to gather very small groups, since we wanted to provoke an intense and open discussion around several topics on those identified dimensions. This was the first time such subject was openly discussed and systematised.

Procedure of content analysis of focus groups’ data

After informed consent and all participants’ approval, all focus groups’ discussions were audio taped and then fully transcribed. Thereafter, the transcripts were sent by e-mail to the participants of each focus group so they could validate them. After this procedure, we carried out focus groups’ content analysis with the support of the software NVivo7. This software was important for us to organise the data, since we had long transcripts and many evidences to support each category and subcategory. In fact, this software was very useful, because it enabled us to visualise the tree of categories, to record the categorisation and make changes/ amendments in the categories’ tree as well as in the process of content analysis.

We have engaged in a thorough content analysis, trying to find semantic patterns in the data, so it could be easier to compare and to understand the extent of both similarities and differences between the different voices (doctoral students and supervisors) that contribute to the design of the framework. The main dimensions of analysis were selected from the international literature on the topic (as previously referred), when we were elaborating the focus groups’ guides. So we could establish a dialogue and semantic parallel between students and supervisors’ voices, the focus

groups' guides were almost identical. We have decided to follow semi-structured focus groups, since it was essential for us to follow certain dimensions and questions, but allowing diversity, flexibility and openness in the discussion. In fact, our major objective of engaging the participants in an in-depth reflection and discussion was fully accomplished. Although each particular group had its own dynamics, all the same topics were approached in all focus groups with doctoral students and supervisors. This fact facilitated the semantic search for patterns, despite the heterogeneity of voices and huge amount of data to be systematised and conceptualised.

In fact, the major challenge in the process of content analysis was to achieve semantic consistency and suitable subcategories, descriptions and indicators that reflected the 'essence' of each group dynamics (a more specific perspective) while keeping a broader semantic connection among all discussions, since the main goal was to give an important contribution for the conceptualisation of the framework. Therefore, to achieve a categorisation that made sense and answered each of those three aspects, we passed through different phases in the content analysis' process in order to reach a coherent semantic pattern and organisation. Thus, the interactive and reflective process was constituted by: analysing -> systematising -> reviewing -> analysing again -> systematising -> and trying again to reflect on the semantic organisation.

Although the international literature had a great influence in the definition of the main to dimensions (and the more generic categories), the subcategories and contextual definition of the entire content analysis have emerged from the contextual interpretation of the data. In this interpretative process, we must assume the existence of our own values, practices, experiences, personal, academic and professional history, and influence of the context in which we are integrated. In this case, we are not able to verbalise the entire extent of our own background in the semantic interpretation and search for patterns.

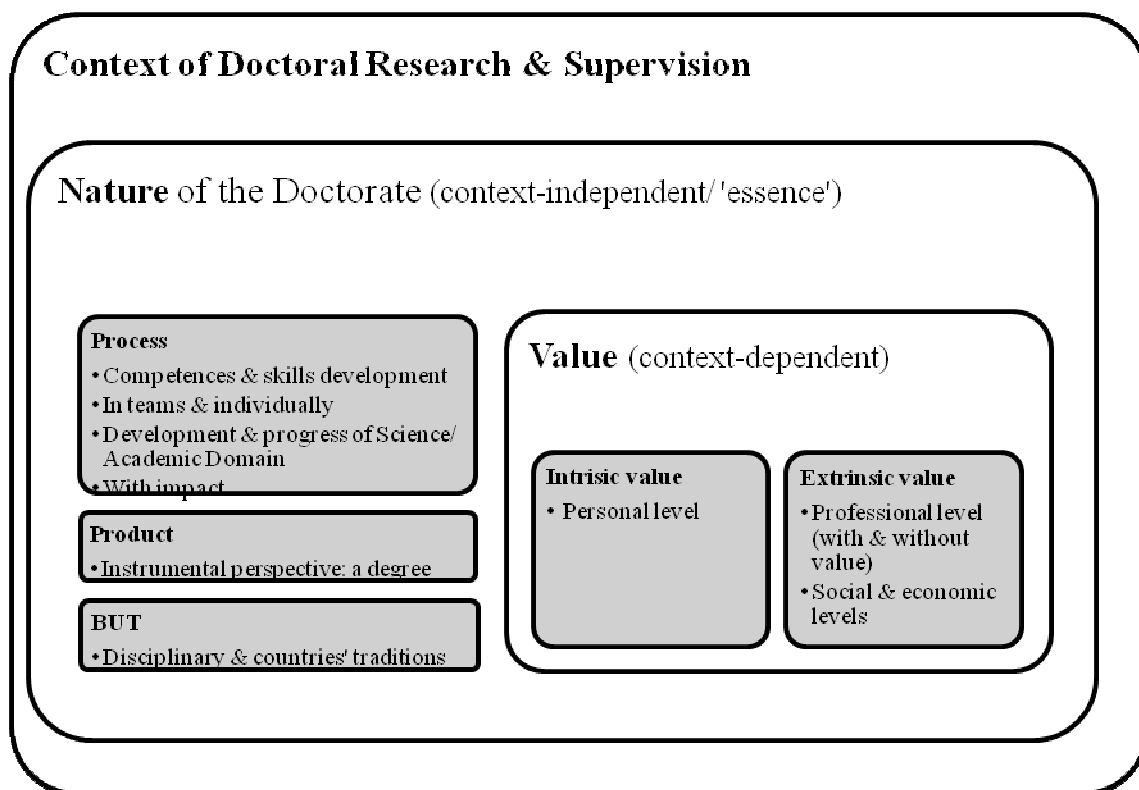
Due to the complexities of this issue, the intense process of analysis and possible bias from the researchers, we have produced a document with the overall categorisation and undergone through a validation process of the content analysis. We identified 5 experts on the topic, nationally and internationally recognised, and we have received their validation on the categorisation. Thus, the conceptual schema we present in the next section is a result of an intense interactive process which has been externally validated.

Results

Description of the conceptual schema: The nature and value of the doctorate

From the content analysis, we observe that both doctoral students and supervisors share very close perspectives on the nature and value of the doctorate, maybe because they are integrated in the same institutional culture, and have intrinsically absorbed the broad academic culture and ‘norms’. We may synthesise the main conceptual ideas of the content analysis in the following figure:

Figure 1. Semantic Schema of the Nature and Value of the Doctorate.



Since those aspects will be the same when describing both students and supervisors' perspectives, we consider beneficial to describe this semantic schema at this point, so the ideas will not be always repeated throughout this analysis.

Firstly, this specific analysis must be framed considering a broader topic - the context of doctoral research and supervision – which was one of the dimensions we have selected to integrate the focus groups' guides (as previously highlighted). As we will point out in the section entitled 'discussion', this dimension must be properly considered when discussing quality issues regarding the doctoral supervision process

and/or when designing doctoral students and supervisors' quality profiles. We strongly believe that the conceptions students and supervisors have on the nature and value of the doctorate will influence their conceptions on quality in general, and on their practices in particular, despite of being more or less conscious about this fact and effective consequences.

Secondly, a dichotomy (that may be considered semantically hierarchical – as may be observed in Figure 1) arise from students and supervisors' discourses, corresponding to a category and a subcategory which will have particular descriptions, as follows:

- a) The nature of the doctorate refers to the intrinsic or epistemological understanding both students and supervisors attribute to the doctorate. This may be therefore considered the 'essence' of the doctorate and may be linked with their perspectives on the meaning of 'doing research'. Three aspects become relevant from their perspectives: the doctorate as process, considering four inter-related features (as we will explore in the next subsection); the doctorate as product (in this case assuming an instrumental point of view); and the doctorate taking into account disciplinary and countries' traditions.
- b) The value of the doctorate, which should be considered context-dependent, refers to the significance the doctorate may have in terms of three different perspectives, which may be semantically grouped into an intrinsic and extrinsic value.

In the next subsection, we will present some evidences that demonstrate the conclusions we have described.

Doctoral students and supervisors' own voices: Focus groups' evidences

In what concerns the nature of the doctorate, there are evidences that reveal that the doctorate may be conceptually understood as a process, particularly in terms of the development/ enhancement of several competences and skills.

- SUPERVISORS: “In fact, I really think that the doctorate – as the advanced training is organised in Europe nowadays – continues to be a privileged space – if not the only one - of people 'creation' – more specifically, the development of intelligent, critical, active, reflective and engaged people/ citizens (...)” (Focus Groups [FG] 2).

- STUDENTS: “I think that we already have a certain profile when we start the doctorate... But the doctorate clearly shapes our profile: it gives us competences we probably thought we didn’t have but after all we are able to develop and demonstrate them... Well, when we begin a doctoral research it is important that we already have many competences, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to carry out our research...” (FG6).

Many times that process takes place in research teams (a) although both students and supervisors consider that it is also a lonely/ individual process of knowledge appropriation and/or (re)construction (b).

- a) SUPERVISORS: “(...) in order to do a quality research, I must be exposed to ‘radiations’ in a quality environment” (FG1).
- a) STUDENTS: “(...) they are studying a particular phenomenon and they are doing it as a part of an international network where several people study a phenomenon from different perspectives and give several types of contributions (...) so in the end that can achieve a bigger goal...” (FG7).
- b) SUPERVISORS: “(...) the doctorate, the process of doing a doctoral research, has a lonely component... And more particularly at a certain stage, the doctorate is a solitary process – it has to be!” (FG1).
- b) STUDENTS: “From doctoral students’ point of view, there must be knowledge production – this is the main objective of a doctorate – but there is also an important part related to our own development [in terms of identity].” (FG3).

Additionally, the doctoral research process is deeply associated with the development and progress of Science. This perspective may be observed by the semantic relationship with ‘principles’ such as innovation and the evolution of a specific academic domain. Also, the students highlight that, in this process, dissemination is essential.

- SUPERVISORS: “I clearly believe that there will always be a doctoral ‘agent’ where recent and new ideas want to be achieved and where it is intended to develop a certain area...” (FG5).
- STUDENTS: “I really think that our doctoral research must be disseminated... (...) Knowledge must be disseminated... We must be able to spread out the knowledge we have developed about a topic to other people... Otherwise all that research doesn’t make any sense...” (FG1).

Moreover, when understood as a process, the doctoral research is associated with an impact, namely in society.

- SUPERVISORS: “Nowadays, it is consensual that Science has/ must have a social vocation and impact: it is important for people to live better and happier (...) Therefore, I do not consider that Science is different from one disciplinary domain to another. I strongly believe that there is a common perspective, that is, the epistemological understanding is more or less the same: people try to broaden their understanding and try to do that Science has a positive impact in social well-being.” (FG2).
- STUDENTS: “Nowadays, I clearly consider that doctorates are a way of providing society, industry, and other types of contexts the possibility of benefiting from the research work that is being developed at the doctoral degree.” (FG3).

On the other hand, the doctorate is also understood as a product. In this case, the definition of the doctorate is restricted to the idea of academic degree.

- SUPERVISORS: “The doctorate is a sequence of training, formative and academic steps. I still believe that it continues to be one of the last steps that can be achieved in the educational [University] system.” (FG6).
- STUDENTS: “I think that, nowadays, the doctorate is another degree (...)” (FG3).

Finally, many supervisors consider that the definition of the doctorate depends on the difference between academic domains (a), and on practices and conceptions from different countries and research traditions (b) (this last aspect particularly arises from supervisors’ words).

- a) SUPERVISORS: “For example, for us, that dimension of Science that has a direct and visible application does not exist... (...) I cannot justify my research considering a short-term impact (...) I understand and agree with that idea: Science must have an impact in people’s well-being. It is important... But in Literary Studies, in Literature and Humanities in general, this kind of perspective cannot be formulated in the same manner, comparing with other academic domains.” (FG2).
- a) STUDENTS: “I have a very individual and lonely research. I work alone with lots and lots of books... (...) But I believe that, in hard sciences, it isn’t the same...” (FG6).

- b) SUPERVISORS: “According to a British perspective, the doctorate is frequently understood as a training process to be a researcher. (...) That idea of achieving or discovering something important (...) is one of the main requirements of a doctorate: to give a significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge. However, it is the process... more important was the process of learning how to research (...) I remember that here [in Portugal] the doctorate was more focused on knowledge ‘per se’, in order to dominate an area and to be an expert in that area – it was visible in theses’ sizes, right?” (FG4).

The value of the doctorate relates to the significance given to the doctorate. Accordingly, both students and supervisors recognise an intrinsic value that specifically has to do with the importance/ significance it may have at a personal level.

- SUPERVISORS: “There are school teachers (...) who really feel the need of illuminating, of introducing another enthusiasm, another perspective into their professional and daily lives. They are also trying to get away from a negative professional routine and to access a challenging high level research.” (FG1).
- STUDENTS: “I may look to the doctorate as a process of personal development, since we have to make a contribution and advance with a scientific domain (...). It is for each one of us a way of personal development as well as a way to grow.” (FG2).

Additionally, it may be attributed an extrinsic value to the doctorate. On the one hand, in terms of professional work, we find two distinct perspectives. Firstly, the doctorate may not be important at all at a professional setting, being considered not relevant.

- SUPERVISORS: “Still today, the owner of a great Portuguese company does not give much value... does not [professionally] recognise someone who holds a doctorate (...)” (FG4).
- STUDENTS: “If doctorate holders go to the job market, they will be considered over-qualified.” (FG7).

But, the doctorate also acquires a semantic positive characteristic of necessity and professional requirement to enter and/or progress in a career.

- SUPERVISORS: “Nowadays, everybody has a master degree and thus (...) we observe that many people want to achieve a doctoral degree so they can positively distinguish themselves from their peers in the job market.” (FG3).

- STUDENTS: “It is the kick-off to start an academic/ scientific career (...)” (FG8).

On the other hand, there is another ‘type’ of external value linked with the significance the doctorate may have at a social and economic levels. This may be, in some cases, related to the perspective already stressed on the positive impact on society (especially from supervisors’ point of view).

- SUPERVISORS: “(...) when doing a doctorate, I understand the development and growth in a more profound and holistic way... In fact, it is the progress of the global society, of the technique, and so on.” (FG6).
- STUDENTS: “People are finishing their courses and are starting to have the idea that the research domain (as professional path) is developing/ growing in Portugal...” (FG6).

Discussion

Considering the participants’ voices, whose conceptions we have grouped in the previous subsection, we must conclude that there are many similarities between them. As we have previously referred, we may explain this fact by highlighting they all are from the same institution, sharing an institutional culture and being embedded in the same institutional mission.

However, a question should be pointed out, especially because the participants came from different disciplinary cultures, and possessed several types of (academic and professional) experiences – we emphasise that all groups were formed following the principle of heterogeneity of characteristics. We could thus ask how it was possible for them to express such similar visions. We do not possess any evidences to support our answer and point of view. However, from the contact with all the participants and from an intense conceptual exploration in terms of literature review, we may consider that it has happened, because, more than sharing an institutional culture, they have been ‘acculturated’ by what we may call ‘implicit norms’ of the doctorate and postgraduate research process.

Moreover, we may stress an important conclusion, in what relates to the perspective of the doctorate understood both as a process of competences/ skills’ enhancement and as the advancement/ contribution to Science or the academic domain

(in which the student is carrying out his/her research). In fact, internationally we find several discourses that point out this kind of ‘dichotomy’.

On the one hand, the doctorate is valued and considered essential to the advancement of an academic domain, by giving a (worthy) contribution to the already existing body of knowledge. In this case, knowledge developed within the ‘traditional route’ of the PhD may be frequently related to the ‘ivory tower’ (metaphor to refer the University), and thus may be usually considered irrelevant, namely to the general public opinion or economic spheres. However, if knowledge is developed or (re)created within practice-based doctorates and/or professional doctorates, it has been observed as having a visible impact (particularly at short-term) in industry, business, society and/or public domains of professional activities.

This sort of discourses have been arising very strongly lately, due to several types of reasons – we can name a few: a) the growing number of doctoral students and the increasing diversity of types/ forms of doctorates; b) the greater necessity of accountability in terms of funding to pursue doctoral research and, above all, of products that result from doctorates; and c) the rising number of discussions about the benefits doctorate holders may have to economy, labour market and social well-being (or social capital). Related to this latter topic, we may observe a great emphasis on the “original contribution to knowledge”, but mainly on the “value-added component of the doctoral research (degree) to the needs of a wider market of purchasers” (Burton, Duxbury, French, Monks, & Carter, 2009, p. 423).

Therefore, we become aware of increasing discussions regarding: a) collaborations between university and industry, by emphasising the importance of professional doctorates; b) the relevance of the doctorate (particularly its products) to the knowledge economy, giving a “competitive national advantage in an internationalised market place” (Halse, 2007, p. 326), thus emphasising the “commercial value of the doctorate” (Lloyd-Williams, 2012, p. 3); and c) the commitment of doctoral education to social development and well-being, and so on (Burton et al., 2009; Casey, 2009; Fink, 2006; Halse, 2007). Consequently, knowledge, within these discussions, acquires more and more an economic perspective, following the ideas that knowledge must be ‘relevant’ (Tennant, 2004), and must be considered in relation to ‘performativity’ (Usher, 2002), leading to improvements in the economic and professional systems.

On the other hand, we find that the skills' discourse follows the one we have been mentioning. Assuming that the "PhD requires broader professional preparation to prepare students for a variety of career options" (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000, p. 6) and for a variety of contributions "to society in many ways" (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000, p. 8), the Research Councils (UK GRAD Programme, 2001) have published a joint statement on skills training requirements, regarding seven domains of transferable skills: research skills and techniques; participation in research environment; research management; personal effectiveness; communication; networking and team working; and career management. Even though this statement puts the emphasis on what we may consider the 'traditional Ph.D.', we could conclude that the pertinence in achieving and enhancing all those skills is also related to the perspective of the doctorate from an economic, social and professional perspective.

In fact, talking about the doctorate, its nature, essence and value, is extremely challenging, multi-dimensional, even overwhelming and ambiguous, since many perspectives can be pulled out from many updated discussions. From our point of view, the perspective of Nyquist and Woodford (2000) who contextualise this and other sort of debates in a 'continuum' is quite prudent and reflective. Focusing on their words: "The composition or 'essence' of the Ph.D. needs to be defined. Some members of this sector believe that the Ph.D. is a selective, specialized degree with the singular focus of producing a creative, self-initiating, independent scholar and researcher for academia. Others believe that the degree should produce graduates who can consider an array of options in terms of careers and contribute to society in many ways outside the academy" (Nyquist & Woodford, 2000, p. 8).

We thus believe that in any discussions on the nature, value, purpose of the doctorate, its multi-dimensionality must be always considered, particularly because today we observe great transformations in this and previous degrees. Halse (2007) has in fact highlighted that "the doctorate is in a phase of radical transformation" (p. 331). Nevertheless, the quality of the learning experience (from students and supervisors' perspective), and of the overall process and product must be assured. But we could ask: considering all this multi-dimensionality, how can we define doctoral supervision quality and, in particular, students and supervisors' quality profiles? We strongly believe that this complexity, contemporary transformation and multi-dimensionality must be assumed, discussed and contextualised so suitable studies and enriching dialogues may be promoted, thus contributing to the (interactive, integrated and

contextualised) definition of doctoral supervision quality and to the (systematic) design of quality profiles.

However, considering the research we have been developing and what we have presented in this paper, we must conclude that the doctoral supervision quality should be described as a path of shared responsibilities and a common goal: to develop and grow, not only from scientific and cognitive points of view, but also from personal and social perspectives. In this line, the metaphor of a path towards knowledge and the journey through intense personal and cognitive development and knowledge suits itself of a deeper significance - and this may be applied to every type of doctorates. This path towards knowledge must be understood as made of a close dyadic relationship between the student and the supervisor – which is still considered the most important factor of success for the supervision process (Eley & Murray, 2009; Murphy, Bain, & Conrad 2007).

Consequently, when designing students and supervisors' quality profiles an inter-related perspective on their roles must be contemplated and guaranteed, since this is indeed a dialogic relationship. Taking into consideration what we have presented and discussed in this paper, the social aspect of science/ academic research must be considered: a) the process of 'doing research' and (re)constructing knowledge is made by a symbiosis between a team and a person alone; b) that process must be disseminated and discussed with peers (within and outside Academia); c) the product or output must improve knowledge, from an original, innovative and/or creative point of view; and above all, d) the entire process (which is reflected in a product) must provoke an intense learning journey, which will be characterised by changes and growth (at personal, cognitive, affective, professional, psychological levels).

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