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Examining Academic Vs. Applied Doctorates

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The role of formal education in general and of university education in particular is often discussed nowadays. We have engaged in this debate previously, arguing that although it is bound to change, university education is here to stay. We have developed a model of education, in which universi-ties and corporate universities play complementary roles, and the competent practitioner develops going back and forth between the two. Most recently we are looking into further examining how this conception works at the doctoral level.

The outcome of the university is a semi-specialised cultivated mind. By semi-specialised we mean that it is not a balanced and comprehensive knowledge, but engineers can still read, know some history, and some of them will appreciate arts while others will play football with their friends. Some are more narrowly focused than others, but all of them will have knowledge limited to the part of their respective disciplines that can be taught and learned. At the university the students acquire the basic concepts of their disciplines, developing these concepts from scratch. These con-cepts are validated in an intellectual context by the means of thinking. Subsequently the students join various organisations, starting their working lives. At the workplace, and in the corporate uni-versities, the previously acquired concepts are redeveloped, and they are validated in an applied context by the means of practicing. The practitioners then may occasionally go back to the formal education to acquire further concepts, either to cover new developments in their existing fields, or to extend their fields into neighbouring disciplines. Then they go back to the applied context, and so forth. In reality these phases will usually work with some overlap and often in parallel but the model is easier to understand as a back-and-forth process.

Currently we are looking into how these principles can work at doctoral level. In this sense the doctoral degree is different from the previous levels of education in being more driven by problem-solving. However, the primary goal of academic doctorate (PhD) is creating new academic knowledge. While developing a solution to a problem is a necessary component, the focus is the solution, it does not matter too much what problem is solved. In contrast, the applied doctorate is focused on the real-life problem, and it is necessary that this problem is resolved, while it is less important whether this solution creates new academic knowledge. Perhaps even more important-ly, it does not really matter whether the solution is 'scientifically' validated, as long as it works in practice. Therefore currently we are looking into the possibility of creating an applied doctoral degree, outside the remit of the traditional academia, similarly to the relationship of corporate universities to the universities as academic establishments. This topic is both a research topic that we are tacking as academics, but at the same time also a 'real-life' project that we are trying to make happen.