

In recent years there has been increasing criticism about how relevant PhD research is to the real needs of industry.

At the same time, we are witnessing a rapid expansion in executive doctorates such as the DBA (Doctor of Business Administration), which have provided the field of doctoral studies with more practical knowledge and a different approach to doctoral education.

This calls for a reflection into the meaning and implications this change may have for business schools.

PhDs make an original contribution to knowledge; therefore, they are considered as the standard and traditional degree. Non-traditional degrees produce knowledge in the context of practice, providing a direct link between what managers or organisations demand and the world of academia.

This contrast between what can be considered a traditional doctorate degree versus a non-traditional one has become an on-going debate in the academic world and a distinction that is far from being commonly acknowledged. Moreover, it also raises many controversies and debates among scholars, programme managers and institutions.



PhDs & DBAs: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

Laura Maguire, Elena Revilla and Angel Diaz look at the differences (and even more the similarities) between the traditional PhD programme and the newer Doctor of Business Administration



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The three most salient differences between the programmes are the type of knowledge they generate, the profile of the students involved and the aim that each fulfils.

PhDs produce knowledge that is disciplinary-based, theoretical and explanatory. Academically recognised through validation by peer-review journals, this type of knowledge enables researchers to clarify constructs and relationships in a broader context.

The DBA, on the other hand, delivers applied knowledge that is designed to solve problems that arise within organisations. Such applied knowledge combines the academic rigour of a traditional PhD with managerial relevance. This practice-based approach to knowledge allows executive doctorate students to provide answers to practical problems using the theoretical frameworks of traditional PhD knowledge. In other words, it values a form of "knowledge" beyond the usual bounds of academic knowledge.

The second feature that highlights an important difference between the two programmes relates to student profiles.

PhDs focus on young, high-calibre students with great academic potential who have both the focus and motivation needed to devote their lives to working as researchers and academics.

DBAs, however, are aimed at professionals with at least eight to ten years' experience in managerial positions and who normally already hold an MBA, a qualification intended to provide the basic foundation, analytical skills and tools that a manager uses on an everyday basis.

The ultimate goal of the DBA student is not to build an academic career but rather to continue as a working professional (although they do often accept part-time positions in academia). The DBA qualification helps managers to acquire reflective skills to improve and enhance their professional conduct and also provides them with the status and prestige of a doctoral degree.

The third characteristic that differentiates these programmes concerns the expected learning outcomes of each.

A PhD student is trained to provide exhaustive reviews of literature and to formulate and theoretically frame research questions and then apply the appropriate research methodology and data analysis to analyse their findings.

The aim of the DBA is to provide managers with reflective and analytical skills to enable them to conduct research within their professional environment. DBA students are also expected to combine this practice-based approach to research with the more scholarly learning outcomes of PhD research.

Both programmes complement each other by providing the required link between academia and the professional conduct demanded by organisations.

PhDs are based on rigour, theory and disciplinary knowledge; DBA outcomes are applied and based on rigour and relevance. In other words, a PhD student will become a “professional researcher”, while a DBA pupil will be trained as a “researching professional”.

Delivering both types of programme at the same institution provides the means to answer the research issues demanded by organisations (practical knowledge) by incorporating them into a traditional PhD theoretical approach to produce academic knowledge.

IE Business School’s implementation of PhD and DBA programmes exemplifies how an institution can offer both programmes simultaneously to generate both types of knowledge (academic and applied) by taking advantage of PhD and DBA synergies and sharing similar resources such as course structure, content, faculty and staff.



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IE launched its first doctoral programme in 2004, a PhD in Management. Soon afterwards, the direction of the programme highlighted two main requirements:

- the real demand of an alternative audience (mainly senior managers with support from their organisations) to conduct applied research and who wanted to develop personally and professionally through the acquisition of the highest doctoral degree obtainable
- the urge to depart from what can be called the traditional doctoral format into something more flexible, with an alternative means of delivery but with the same rigour

As a consequence the DBA programme started in October 2006.

Both programmes, although different in nature, do not differ vastly in content and structure. They start with a coursework stage lasting two years, followed by a two-year dissertation stage and completion of the doctoral dissertation. The methodological aspect of the doctoral degree is considered critical and students undertake both quantitative and qualitative training.

Although the research-method courses are similar in both programmes in terms of developing skills in data collection and analysis, DBA students tend to make less use of sophisticated multivariate analytical techniques such as structural equation modelling. (Since the academic outcome is based on reflecting upon a particular business problem using rigorous academic methods, these students tend to focus on their own organisations, using restricted or limited samples, and favour a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques.)

The two programmes do differ, however, in terms of delivery, target audience and profile, and employability.

The PhD is a four-year, full-time programme designed to train academics and researchers for permanent positions. In contrast, the DBA is a four-year, part-time course in which IE has opted to apply a blended format, currently the most popular delivery method in executive education.



Participants follow “blended” sessions (so named for mixing face-to-face and online learning). Students attend online sessions using an asynchronous interactive dialogue platform accessible 24 hours a day and moderated by an IE professor. Participants log on at their convenience and participate in live discussions with both the professor and fellow classmates, thus allowing the flexibility required by this type of target audience.

The typical PhD student at IE has an average age of 27 with three years’ working experience and, sometimes, previous research exposure. On average, the typical DBA student is 42, holds an MBA or other masters degree and has around ten years’ experience in managerial positions, the most common of which are functional managers, general managers, partners and even CEOs.

Diversity is common to both programmes. The PhD currently has a 100% intake of international students (21% from Asia-Pacific, 51% from Europe and the remaining 28% originally from the Americas).

The diversity breakdown of the DBA programme is somewhat similar with an 82% intake of international students (7% from Asia-pacific, 44% Europe, 44% Americas, 7% Africa).

As different as both targets might seem, our experience has taught us that the different profiles and approaches to research of these students provide a satisfactory output when both groups share a course as the PhD provides the theoretical framing to the practical research questions posed by DBA students. This emphasises synergies and the need for both types of knowledge in research.

Different academic outcomes and reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree imply a different approach to employability. While the aim of the PhD is to facilitate an academic career, DBA students will continue with their professional careers after completing the degree.

Data from the 2013 EQUIS accreditation report shows that 93.7% of our PhD graduates found jobs as full-time academics (31% in the top 50 Financial Times ranked schools). The majority of our DBA graduates continued working in industry; however, 39% were hired as part-time professors.

At IE both programmes finish with the satisfactory completion of a doctoral dissertation.



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PhD research is normally published in academic journals and therefore assumes a tangible level of both theoretical and methodological rigour in terms of academic excellence.

The rigour of DBA research relies on the relevance of its contribution to professional practice and this causes some difficulty when academics need to measure how significant DBA research is and also jeopardises the status of DBA programmes by suggesting that they might be inferior to a PhD in germs of research.

Programme managers, doctoral committees, faculty members and, especially, advisors must all strive to safeguard the methodological and scientific rigour of doctoral dissertations. The IE DBA programme requires students to present an academic paper at a prestigious conference (such as AOM, SMS, INFORMS) before graduation and participate in an annual doctoral consortium where PhD and DBA students and IE faculty interact to share research ideas and to present and review their research papers.

Executive doctoral degrees have a more applied focus, a different profile of students and a different aim overall compared to traditional PhDs. However, the academic community must agree to value the type of knowledge these programmes generate and must accept the market demand they fulfil.

More importantly, they must also commit to setting the quality standards of these programmes so that no rigour is sacrificed.

Failure to do so will not only severely compromise the academic industry and deceive our students but also temper our ethical attitude towards the academic world.

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