

Mapping the field of Higher Education Research using PhD examination reports

Sioux McKenna, Lynn Quinn & Jo-Anne Vorster

To cite this article: Sioux McKenna, Lynn Quinn & Jo-Anne Vorster (2018) Mapping the field of Higher Education Research using PhD examination reports, Higher Education Research & Development, 37:3, 579-592, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2018.1428178](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1428178)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1428178>



Published online: 29 Jan 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 771



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Mapping the field of Higher Education Research using PhD examination reports

Sioux McKenna, Lynn Quinn and Jo-Anne Vorster

Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The PhD is the highest formal qualification and signifies a scholar's rite of passage as a legitimate contributor of new knowledge in a field. Examiner reports make claims about what is legitimate in a thesis and what is not and thus articulate the organising principles through which participation in a field is measured. The authors analysed 39 examiners' reports on 13 PhDs produced over a five-year period by scholars from the Higher Education Research doctoral studies programme at Rhodes University in South Africa. Drawing on aspects of Karl Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), this study uses the dimensions of LCT:Specialisation and LCT:Semantics to explore what kinds of knowledge, skills and procedures and what kinds of knowers are validated in the field of Higher Education Research through the examination process. The study found that despite concerns in the literature about the a-theoretical nature of the Higher Education Studies field, examiners valued high-level theoretical and meta-theoretical engagement as well as methodological rigour. In addition, examiners prized the ability to demonstrate a strong ideological position, to use a clear doctoral voice, and to recognise the axiological drive of the field. The analysis showed that examiners were interested in strong contextualisation of the problem-spaces in higher education in South Africa but also commented positively on candidates' ability to move from troubling an issue within its context to being able to abstract findings so as to contribute to the field as a whole.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 November 2016
Accepted 7 December 2017

KEYWORDS

Higher Education Research;
Higher Education Studies;
doctoral; PhD examination;
Legitimation Code Theory

Introduction

All fields have boundaries, some stronger than others, whereby certain knowledge and certain ways of knowing are deemed legitimate, that is, worthy and appropriate, and others are deemed irrelevant or inappropriate. This study explores what is legitimated in the specific field of Higher Education Research by asking questions about what kind of knowledge is expected to be drawn on and developed and what kind of knowers are recognised as credible participants within the field.

Because the PhD is the highest formal qualification and in many ways determines who it is that contributes to future knowledge production (Mowbray & Halse, 2010), examiners can be seen as gatekeepers to the field, or alternatively as the welcoming party. Their

reports give us insights into what is regarded as appropriate in the field. This study asks the question: what is being legitimated in Higher Education Studies as evidenced in examiner reports? When examiners write their reports, they are making claims about what was legitimate in the thesis and what was not, and in doing so they are in some way setting out the organising principles through which participation in the field should be measured and the criteria whereby such participation should be approved or withheld. In this, we concur with Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007, p. 684):

Rather than the current focus on generic skills in research degree programmes, undertaking a doctorate would be understood as learning ways of being that are appropriate to research within a particular field or discipline ... practices of knowledge production, including how knowledge is organised and generated, are contingent upon traditions of knowledge. Becoming a researcher involves entering into these ways of thinking, acting and being.

The focus of this paper is on what we have learned about what PhD examiners value in the emerging field of Higher Education Research. While there is an extensive body of research on PhD examiner reports that has focused on various aspects of the doctoral examination process, there does not seem to be much research on what examiner reports legitimate in terms of specific disciplines or fields. The wide-ranging research project conducted by the Study of Research Training and Impact (SORTI) research team has included, *inter alia*, studies into what doctoral examination reports from across a range of disciplines and universities reveal about the thesis examination process, the role of context in the examination process, how examiners view their role, the nature of examiner comments on different aspects of the PhD thesis, the values and assumptions that underpin the examination of PhDs.¹

Drawing on aspects of Karl Maton's Legitimation Code Theory (LCT; 2014), this study uses the dimensions of Specialisation and Semantics to ask what knowledge structures and knower structures emerge as valued in a sample of 39 examiners' reports on Higher Education Research PhDs. In other words, what kinds of knowledge, skills and procedures and what kinds of knowers are validated in the examination process?

Section one: the problem and rationale for study

Higher Education Research is a relatively new field with multiple focus areas, from teaching and learning to the role of the university to policy analysis. In some spaces, the field is referred to as Higher Education Studies (see, for example, the Centre for Higher Education Studies at University College London) and in others as Higher Education Research; we use the terms interchangeably. It draws on varied disciplines, such as psychology, linguistics, sociology, economics and history. The emergence of this field is evident not only in the proliferation of literature focused on multiple aspects of the university but also in the establishment of Higher Education Research doctoral programmes. In South Africa, where this study is positioned, there are specialised 'Higher Education Studies' PhD programmes at Rhodes University, University of the Free State, University of KwaZulu-Natal and others. Similar programmes are offered across the world, for example, at Stanford University, Pennsylvania State and Lancaster University, though often with a focus on university administration or institutional leadership. Boston College in the United States has offered a doctorate in Higher

Education Research since the late 1960s. The emergence of Higher Education Research (McKenna, 2014) as a field of study is thus of interest.

Given the massive upheavals in the role of the university (Shore, 2010; Barnett, 2000) and the increased complexity of the university's relationship with the state and society (Di Leo, Giroux, McClennan, & Saltman, 2014), it is perhaps unsurprising that there is an interest in scholarship specifically about the higher education sector. The field incorporates what has become known as SoTL, the scholarship of teaching and learning, but also looks more broadly at issues of funding, the university as a public good, the contribution of the university to the knowledge economy and so on. It contributes largely to the practice-focused research of education development and also to the fields of sociology and politics.

Clegg (2012) argues that it is perhaps a mistake to consider the various concerns of Higher Education Research as belonging to one field and suggests that they may, in fact, be overlapping regions, with a major one being academic development (also known as educational development). She suggests that:

the further we get from a focus on teaching and learning, and the further we get from the day-to-day concerns of academic development, then the more research in higher education becomes a site where the questions that are asked are more similar to those posed in other areas of educational research (about, say, social stratification), and are asked about other organisational systems (in terms, for example, of power). (Clegg, 2012, p. 669)

Amid the rapid growth in the field of Higher Education Studies have been concerns about the a-theoretical nature of much of the research emanating from it. In 2004, Tight argued that much of this research lacks in-depth engagement with theory and functions as a series of overlapping communities of practice without a clear boundary. Ten years later in 2014, Tight described the field as enjoying rapid growth but expressed ongoing concern about its lack of theoretical depth. Shay (2012) is more explicit in expressing her concerns about the kind of research being undertaken and argues that 'unless we strengthen our knowledge base we will not emerge as a professional field able to engage rigorously and systematically with the problems of higher education' (2012, p. 311). Clegg (2009) similarly argues that Higher Education Studies lacks a strong research base to its accounts of educational development practice. She does not call for a move away from the normative position evident in much of this work, but rather challenges it to be less cautious and self-referential. Haggis (2009) is also concerned that the field is very loosely theoretical. Such calls for rigour, and a stronger theoretical base have also been made by Vorster and Quinn (2015), Peseta (2011) and Boughey (2007). There is thus contention as to what constitutes the field of Higher Education Research, whether it is sufficiently scholarly, and what its concerns and theoretical approaches should be. As researchers in this field and as supervisors of PhD scholars whose work must contribute to building the field, we are concerned that there is little agreement as to what 'counts' as legitimate knowledge in Higher Education Studies.

The Salzburg II recommendations regarding doctoral programmes in Europe indicate that the main outcomes of doctoral education are the graduates themselves and 'their contribution to society through knowledge, competences and skills learnt by undertaking research, as well as awareness and openness towards other disciplines' (EUA, 2010, p. 4). The document does, of course, also refer to the research project which needs to be original and 'suitable for dissemination within the scientific community' (EUA, 2010, p. 4). The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework in South Africa,

where the study takes place, indicates that a PhD must make a ‘significant and original contribution at the frontiers of a discipline or field’ (Council on Higher Education, 2013, p. 41). Given that such documents clearly indicate that the PhD serves as a means of recognising both a scholar and their work as legitimate within the field, it seemed useful to consider PhD examiner reports to get a sense of what is indicated to be the ‘frontiers’ for Higher Education Research.

Section two: theoretical framing and methods

The purpose of this analysis was to identify what is legitimated in the field of Higher Education Studies by looking at PhD examiner reports. We used two aspects of LCT, Specialisation and Semantics, to analyse what doctoral examiners regard as the organising principles of knowledge production in the field. LCT is a ‘conceptual toolkit and analytic methodology for substantive research’ (Maton, 2014, p. 3). It provides a language for describing knowledge practices and a framework for the analysis of data. According to Maton, practices are influenced by ‘epistemic logics’ which ‘regulate the delocation, refocusing and relocation of antecedent knowledge to become “new” knowledge in the production fields’ (2014, p. 52). Our research, therefore, aimed to uncover the epistemic logics that underpinned how the various examiners viewed the work produced by our scholars in the emerging field of Higher Education Research. This means that we wanted to ascertain the kinds of things that PhD candidates are able to claim and the conditions under which they are expected to make those claims (Maton, 2014, p. 52).

LCT:Specialisation

Maton argues that in every field there is always knowledge and there are always knowers. Knowledge claims are made about something, so there are always epistemic relations (ER) to the object of knowledge. And knowledge claims are always made by someone, so there are always social relations (SR) to the subject of knowledge. ER refers to the extent to which ‘possession of specialized knowledge of specific objects of study’ is valued, while SR is about the extent to which ‘the attributes of actors’ are valued (2013, p. 13). Where the object of study is strongly circumscribed, the ER is said to be relatively strong (ER+), conversely, in cases where there is great latitude in relation to the focus of study and method, the ER is weaker (ER–). Where specific characteristics of actors are highly valued, the SR is said to be stronger (SR+); and when there are relatively few prescriptions about the kind of knower that produces the research, the SR is weaker (SR–).

Notions of classification and framing (Bernstein, 2000) are used to map the relative strengths and weaknesses of both ER and SR and thereby to plot out the dominant specialisation codes at play within the reports. Classification relates to the extent to which the field is bounded in relation to other fields of study, and framing refers to the extent to which the internal structures of the field are strongly prescribed. The relative strengths or weaknesses of both the ER and SR generate codes: a *knowledge code*; a *knower code*; an *elite code* and a *relativist code* (see Figure 1). A knowledge code is one in which the emphasis is largely on theories, concepts, principles and procedures. A knower code privileges a particular gaze or disposition. Legitimation in an elite code is on the basis of having particular knowledge and practices as well as being a particular kind of knower.

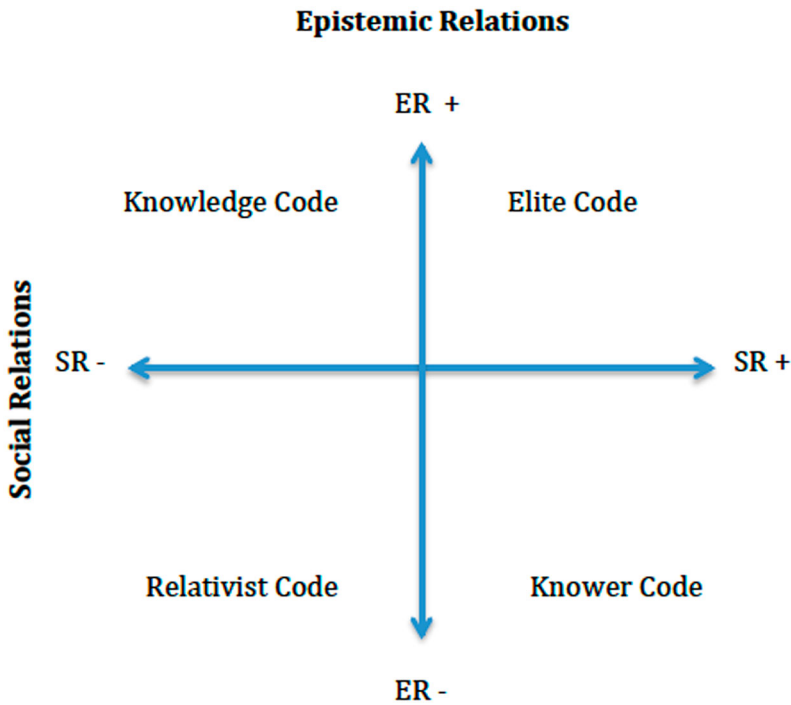


Figure 1. Specialisation codes (Maton, 2014, p. 30).

A field that values neither specific knowledge nor specific kinds of knowers is one where the relativist code is dominant.

As explained earlier, the field of Higher Education Research draws on multiple disciplines and has many objects of research so it is generally agnostic about which methodologies are used in its production (McKenna, 2014; Tight, 2014). Using the concepts offered by Specialisation, we can see that this constitutes weak classification and framing (Bernstein, 2000) in relation to the knowledge and procedures (ER–). On the other hand, the field has always valued knowers of a certain kind, people who are concerned with issues of social justice, who care about the quality of education offered to students and so on (Shay, 2012; McKenna, 2017) (SR+). It thus seems possible, on the basis of the literature and reflecting on the emerging field to loosely characterise Higher Education Research as a knower code (ER–, SR+). However, as noted above, there has been a concern about the lack of rigour in current approaches. In order to address the vexing problems in higher education, which are the focus of this field, it is arguably necessary to strengthen the ‘epistemic spine’ of the field (Shay, 2012).

In this study, we thus brought the Specialisation tool to bear on the data to identify what code was most strongly legitimated by PhD examiners.

LCT:Semantics

To add analytical depth to our analysis, we decided to also view our data through the lens of a second LCT tool, namely that of Semantics. LCT:Semantics enables an analysis of the

extent to which knowledge claims and meanings are strongly tied to a particular social or symbolic context or whether abstraction is valued in knowledge claims. The extent to which meaning is tied to context is termed semantic gravity. The stronger the focus on context, the stronger the semantic gravity (SG+); while the less dependent the meaning is on a particular context, the weaker the semantic gravity (SG-). Semantic density (SD) refers to the extent to which knowledge claims and concepts are condensed into disciplinary terminology or symbols. The more complex and theoretical the terminology and symbols, the stronger the semantic density (SD+); the less complex and theoretical, the weaker the semantic density (SD-).

Data collection

The data for this study comprise the examiners' reports of 13 Higher Education Studies PhD students who completed their doctorates at Rhodes University in the last 5 years. Each PhD is examined by three examiners. The University requires that at least one and preferably two examiners must be international and that the same examiner cannot be used twice within 5 years. Consent for using the reports as data was obtained by circulating the draft article to the examiners quoted within it. Data quotes used in the article have been anonymised and any identifying characteristics of PhD scholar or examiner have been removed.

The data thus comprise examiner reports from 39 different academics. In addition to making a summative judgement on whether the thesis is worthy of the award of a doctorate, examiners are required to write a narrative report in which they provide qualitative commentary on the following aspects of the thesis: appropriateness and scope of the research question, the candidate's command of the theory, the appropriateness of the research methodology, the adequacy of the findings and whether the research is publishable. Reports vary in length from about three to eight pages.

It is acknowledged that the focus of this study was one PhD programme in 'Higher Education Studies' in one South African university, with a particular ethos shaped by a social justice agenda that aims to make a contribution to the South African higher education context (McKenna, 2017). Some findings may thus relate to the particular approaches privileged by this programme at a specific time in its history. In addition, it could be argued that some of the findings relate to the nature of PhD examination and the genre of the PhD thesis in the social sciences in general rather than relating to what is being legitimated in Higher Education Research specifically. However, we believe that the potential limitations of the study are mitigated by the fact that the study examined in depth 39 reports written by examiners from a range of universities across the world.

Data analysis process

We collectively developed an external language of description as a means of translating between the analytical concepts and the data (Bernstein, 2000). To do this, we developed a shared understanding of the coding process by first all analysing the same report on our own. We then came together to interrogate our separate analyses and from this deliberation, we developed an external language of description table to guide our analyses of the rest of the examiner reports.

In the external language of description table, we described what would constitute each of the coding categories to be assigned to our units of analysis. The categories were developed using the main concepts from LCT:Specialisation – Epistemic Relation (ER++, ER+, ER–, ER––); Social Relation (SR++, SR+, SR–, SR––); and LCT:Semantics – Semantic Gravity (SG++, SG+, SG–, SG––); Semantic Density (SD++, SD+, SD–, SD––).

We coded all the reports and plotted the frequencies of each of our coding categories. From this process, we developed a scattergram of coding frequencies. This enabled us to make claims about the dominant specialisation and semantic codes privileged by the authors of the 39 doctoral examination reports. To help us to understand what was and what was not being legitimated by the supervisors, we looked for comments from examiners which commended what students had done in their dissertations and also for comments which pointed out what they considered to be shortcomings in the dissertations.

Section three: findings and discussion

Legitimation of conceptually dense high-level knowledge (ER++ and SD++)

The data analysis showed that examiners valued and expected strong to very strong ER alongside a high-level engagement with semantically dense theories and concepts from the field of Higher Education Research (and related fields):

... commended on a thesis that makes a significant contribution to grand theory ... mid-level theory ... , and to the field of literacy and teacher practice.

Double morphogenesis is well explained to allow its use as a construct in the data analysis.

Also highly valued by the examiners was the use of robust conceptual and analytical tools related to research methodologies. In particular, examiners indicated a high regard for concepts and analytical and theoretical tools which enabled knowledge building in the dissertations. Their reports included comments such as:

The thesis provides a useful contribution to the fields of Higher Education and academic language learning. The focus on unpacking the knowledge structures and epistemologies of two analogous programs ... is interesting. The use of [analytical framework] is a valuable contribution to the field.

The thesis reflects an excellent theoretical grasp, the research design is logical and the analysis is nuanced.

These are complex and sophisticated resources that are clearly developed.

The comment from the examiner quoted below seems to indicate that the field generally is in need of more ‘depth’ and ‘rigour’ and that this is what s/he expects from a PhD in Higher Education Research:

The depth of her scholarly investigation ... the rigour of scholarly research ... Her onto-epistemological framework *could serve as an example to other doctoral scholars in the field of HES.* (emphasis added)

Highlighted by a number of examiners is the need, in a PhD journey, for exploration of semantically dense, philosophical meta-theories for underpinning a study.

... demonstrates scholarship of a very high order. In particular, the exposition of [theoretical framework] is strong, clear, powerful and exemplary.

The importance of very strong ER (ER++) and the need for engagement with conceptually dense concepts (SD++) was also signalled by the external examiners through criticism of those studies which did not achieve this. In the quotation below, it is clear that the examiner expected much deeper and more nuanced engagement with potentially conflicting theories:

An explanation for the use of seemingly incommensurate notions is provided on page 57, but it is rather vague, stating that the theorists do not share the exact definition of discourse. This is a significant understatement. A case would have to be made to explain how the work of [theorist A], who believes that discourses construct reality, is reconciled with that of [theorist B].

Some examiners expressed frustration when semantically dense concepts were introduced but were not then fully explored in scholars' work:

The term 'culture' is used many times in the thesis but nowhere is it dwelt upon.

[X] and [Y] are important concepts ... but from the loose summing up of the different authors the argument for distilling these concepts is rather weak.

I would suggest more exemplars with a higher level of theorisation would enhance this chapter.

For some examiners, it was not sufficient to introduce semantically dense ideas without making an argument for why these specific theories or concepts were useful for examining their object of study:

You do not explain sufficiently why this ontology is appropriate for the phenomenon you are studying.

Also, evident were examiners' expectations that scholars not only use strong theories but that they are also able to critique the theories they use, thus positioning themselves critically:

... thoughtful examination and convincing critique of the literature.

At a PhD level, the student should grapple with these issues rather than present the theoretical surface as smooth.

Some candidates were criticised for being 'evangelical' in their theoretical frameworks by taking on one strong framework and not considering alternatives.

The emphasis on high-level knowledge production required at PhD level can be misunderstood to automatically signify both stronger ER and the use of semantically dense concepts. However, different disciplines achieve such high-level knowledge production in very different ways, and not all would expect this to be manifested in stronger ER. Some disciplines, such as Cultural Studies (Maton, 2014) and Historical Studies (Lockett & Hunma, 2014), value stronger SR and weaker ER (i.e., a knower code) as the basis of specialisation and this is what would presumably then be legitimated at PhD level in these disciplines.

While it was clear that Higher Education Research, as articulated in these reports, strives for ER++, SD++, a minority of examiners expressed concerns about some students' writing being too theoretically dense:

I found the thesis too ‘theory heavy’ ... written from deeply within a particular paradigm and this might prevent others from being able to access it and terms not always explained in an accessible way.

We wondered whether such critique arose because of the relative newness and unevenness of the field (Clegg, 2009; Shay, 2012) which made it difficult to identify examiners who themselves have engaged in Higher Education Research at ER++ and SD++ levels. Harland (2009) argues that the field is extremely inclusive with people from any number of disciplines participating in the knowledge construction process. Rowland (2009) suggests that the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of *all* fields of study means that Harland’s concerns about the field of Higher Education Research should not be over-emphasised. He does, however, acknowledge that the inclusiveness of the field demands a particularly careful consideration of readers (Rowland, 2009). While a PhD is generally written for a specialist audience of disciplinary members, Higher Education Research dissertations may need to be written in a way that is accessible to a fairly broad readership because the field does not have a clear set of disciplinary members.

Our findings thus show that the field of Higher Education Research is legitimated largely through the use of semantically dense, stronger ER.

Legitimation of knowers

While we identified legitimation of very strong ER in the data from the examiners, we also saw some interest in the *kinds of knowers* the scholars were becoming as a result of their engagement with the knowledge of the field and in the process of their doctoral journeys. Some examiners clearly wanted the claims to new knowledge to be made in a particular kind of voice, or through a particular ‘gaze’ (Maton, 2014). Some examiners expressed interest in the attributes, values and ‘ways of being’ deemed appropriate and valued by the field.

One examiner expressed her experience of the scholar ‘as a person’ in the following way:

As a reader I was drawn into the process of her own experiences in [the area being researched] ... the experiential and agentive aspects of the process of writing ... I felt as though [the scholar] was right beside me ... this is a wonderful quality and something that ought to be cherished.

While a particular kind of knowing was valued, it was clear that this should never be at the expense of the strength of the ER:

Her text reflects tact and care. And yet, critical engagement is not compromised.

Another examiner lamented the absence of any clear evidence of SR in the scholar’s writing:

I also felt that all the theory obscures the researcher’s own voice ... I had hoped to hear more about the experience of doing the research, her own locatedness, biases, etc.

In this case, stronger SR is seen to add greater legitimacy to the scholar’s knowledge claims. Conversely, weaker SR, referred to in the quote below, is seen to reduce the legitimacy of knowledge claims:

Nothing on positionality of the researcher ... no serious reflexivity ... The candidate seems actually quite convinced that she was the most perfect researcher. No methodological humbleness, holding back or problematizing here!

Most of the examiners who validated stronger SR did so explicitly in connection to ER; they seemed to be looking for knowers who are capable of 'serious self and intellectual reflection' in order to produce more rigorous arguments. The importance of the doctoral student developing the 'voice and confidence' to make strong claims seems to be about not just knowledge gained from the process but also about strengthening their identity as a knower in the field:

The authorial voice is confident without being folksy ... Scholars often grapple with how best the social world should be explained ... It is often messy, uncertain.. and the doctoral candidate needs to explain and convince the scholarly community of his/her research and claims.

Some examiners thus seemed to be articulating that a 'cultivated gaze' (Maton, 2014) is needed to be considered a legitimate knower in the field. A cultivated gaze is one in which 'dispositions of the knower can be inculcated; for example, in literary or art criticism, legitimate understanding has often been held to result from prolonged exposure to a range of great cultural works' (Maton, 2014, p. 95). In Higher Education Research, a cultivated gaze emerged from the data as being one in which a scholar is able to confidently express an argument in her own voice while being critically reflexive of her positionality. Maton (2014, p. 122) argues that the development of a cultivated gaze 'requires prolonged and guided immersion in numerous and diverse context situations'.

Every report had examples of both stronger and weaker ER and stronger and weaker SR. The fractal nature of LCT means we could analyse individual phrases within a report and also map out the dominant coding for each report as a whole. These processes led us to conclude that the data set of 39 examiner reports evidenced primarily a Knowledge Code, in which stronger ER is the central means of legitimation. However, there was also evidence of stronger SR in some reports, such that we have coded these reports as examples of an Elite Code, where it is the strength of both the relations to the object of knowledge (ER+) and the subject of knowledge (SR+) that determines legitimacy. This is depicted in [Figure 2](#) below, which is a fairly crude rendition of the range of dominant coding we identified in the reports.

We have argued thus far that the reports demonstrated the dominance of a Knowledge Code where stronger ER was legitimated by the examiners. Furthermore, we have indicated that at times there was evidence of an Elite Code in that relations to both the object of knowledge (ER) and the subject of the knowledge (SR) were valued.

However, there was in a few reports a seeming anomaly where the emphasis was on the formatting and surface level correctness of the thesis with little emphasis on either knowledge or knowers, and these reports bordered on being relativist codes. In these reports, the emphasis on surface level issues was at the expense of examiners engaging at a conceptual level with the thesis. Although we agree that PhD dissertations should be well written, for examiners to predominantly comment at this level seems to indicate that the examiners themselves misrecognise what constitutes both knowledge and knowers in the field; they appeared predominantly able to comment on the display of conventional academic writing 'skills'.

There were no cases where all three reports on a single thesis focused at this superficial level, leading us to suggest that major problems with the thesis did not lie in its grammar

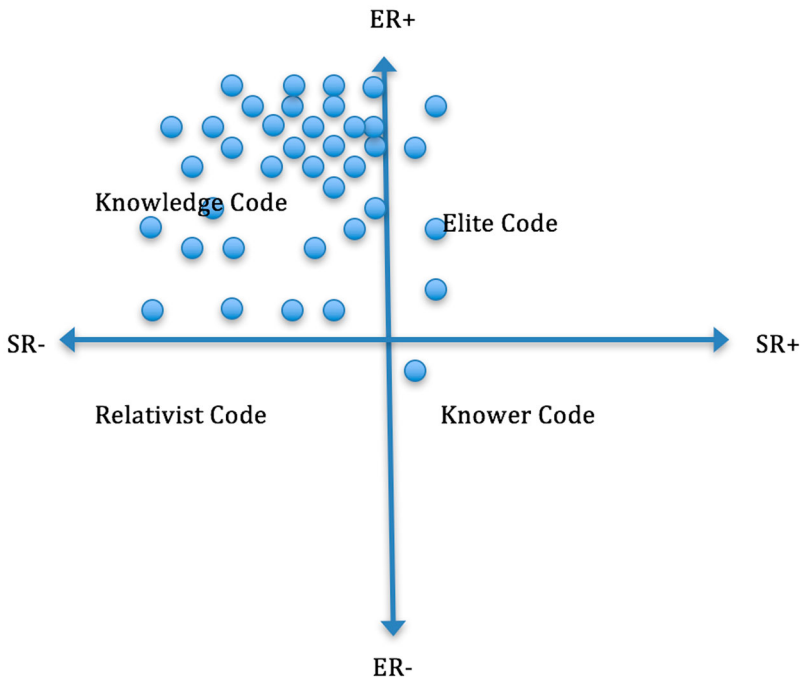


Figure 2. Dominant coding of 39 PhD examination reports.

and presentation errors. That one of the three examiners for a particular thesis wrote a report engaged only at this superficial level might indicate evidence of the fledgeling nature of the field whereby there is not yet a consensus as to the principles of legitimation. Given that Higher Education Research has unclear boundaries, it is perhaps unsurprising that some examination reports do not make explicit what is most valued in the field.

Legitimation of both context and abstraction (SG+ and SD+)

As discussed earlier, semantic density was legitimated across almost all reports as the PhD scholars were expected to draw on fairly sophisticated condensed concepts and understandings. But also highlighted by examiners as important was the *context* of the research. In the field of education, research is always situated within a specific historical, social, political context. Often the very focus of the research is about understanding the educational contexts better. Some examiners thus commented specifically on the importance of in-depth engagement with the contexts of the studies.

We would argue that nuanced and in-depth understanding of context (both historical and contemporary) and at all levels (macro, meso and micro) is particularly important in South African Higher Education Research as, due to our history of denying so many people access to higher education, a transformation is crucial. For example, this examiner notes the candidate's ability to move from international to national, institutional and disciplinary contexts in her study:

The candidate ... foregrounds different understandings of the functions of higher education, ... and outlines the politics of merged institutions both at the level of institutional challenges

and disciplinary context. ... distinguishing clearly between the international context and the contemporary South African context.

A number of examiners signal the importance of context in comments such as the following:

... a reflection and discussion on relations between economic class and education in SA would have been appropriate here

... The question is whether this understanding is sufficient when the context is narrowed [to South Africa] ...

.. theorization of [X] ... in SA, is conceptually limited ... this thesis brings the field forward

... clearer periodization of HE reform as a local ... historical process [is needed]

... The movement of the argument between the HE system and [the study site] should have been done more systematically

It would be good if the context section could be expanded ...

The commendation of, or call for, very explicit contextualisation (SG+) was found in almost every report. However, as Maton points out (2014, p. 116), if students 'remain rooted within their contexts ... cumulative learning may be constrained'. Maton further argues that a condition for cumulative knowledge building is 'the capacity to master semantic gravity, in order for knowledge to be decontextualised, transferred and recontextualised into new contexts'. This may have particular implications for knowledge building in the PhD and probably accounts for why many of the examiners comment on the importance of scholars using semantically dense concepts (SD+) to make sense of complex contextual challenges (SG+).

For example, this examiner comments on insufficient engagement with macro contextual factors, linked to sociological theories:

... I was interested that the study does not mention poverty as a structural mechanism in the rural areas. I'm not sure if there was a clear reason for describing hunger as an issue, but not linking this to the bigger structural mechanism of poverty (This is a gap in the thesis / argument) ...

Of interest to some examiners is the way in which candidates use semantically dense epistemic concepts (SD+) to better understand and theorise social contexts (SG+), for example:

... The candidate rightly asserts that for emancipatory practice we need to identify the structures at work ...

What is called for is not simply the positioning of studies within a detailed discussion of its context (SG+) but rather the call is for 'semantic waves' (Maton, 2014) where the thesis moves from a critical engagement with the immediate contextual issues (SG+) to an abstraction of the findings for the field more generally (SG-).

Scholars who failed to acknowledge the ways in which the context was complex and had bearing on the emergence of the study phenomenon were criticised in the reports, but so too were scholars who remained at the level of the immediate context and failed to extrapolate to the broader field.

Conclusion

There are many ways to make sense of what is legitimated within a field. From our analysis of the 39 reports, we were able to suggest a few conclusions about what PhD examiners legitimated in Higher Education Research. The study found that despite concern in the literature about the a-theoretical nature of the field, there was a great deal of emphasis on the object of knowledge, and scholars were expected to engage with knowledge in a condensed theoretical way. Most examiners commended high-level theoretical and meta-theoretical engagement as well as methodological rigour. We thus came to the conclusion that the field, as it is legitimated by these PhD examiners, is a Knowledge Code in which it is the use of and contribution to rich theory that is most valued.

However, this is not to say that SR was deemed unimportant. The ability to demonstrate a strong ideological position, to use a clear doctoral voice, and to recognise the axiological drive of the field were also regularly commended in the reports. In LCT terms, this suggests that while Higher Education Research is a Knowledge Code (ER+, SR–), it has some occupation of Elite Code topography (ER+, SR+).

The achievement of a doctoral degree signals candidates' rite of passage into an expert disciplinary community; as such, the doctorate is as much identity work as it is knowledge creation work. Some examiners commented on the evidence (or lack thereof) in the thesis of the scholar's identity as a researcher. Examiners wanted to know how the doctoral journey has changed the way the scholars view the world; they wanted to know how scholars' engagement with the knowledge-building process has helped them to develop a particular cultivated gaze.

Examiners recognised that doctoral studies are concerned with addressing particular problems in relation to higher education in the South African context. This allegiance to a problem is privileged in examiners' judgements of the theoretical and methodological focus of the thesis. Where an examiner felt that more theoretical rigour was required, they strongly suggested how this might have strengthened the thesis.

Our analysis also showed that this focus on problem-spaces in higher education in South Africa necessitates strong contextualisation. However, remaining at a focused contextual level was insufficient. There was evidence that what is valued is the ability to move from troubling the issue within its context to being able to abstract findings so as to contribute to the field as a whole.

Engaging in this research project has confirmed for us, as researchers and as supervisors, the importance of growing our field, both in terms of the knowledge generated and used but also in terms of the kinds of knowers required; knowers who will develop deep understandings of the contextual challenges facing higher education.

Note

1. For an overview of the scope of the research published since 2002 by colleagues, Sid Bourke, Allyson Holbrook, Terry Lovat and others, see <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-and-innovation/centre/sorti/publications/research-into-phd-examination>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Barnett, R. (2000). *Realising the university in an age of supercomplexity*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control, identity: Theory, research, critique*. Critical perspectives series (Rev. ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Boughhey, C. (2007). Marrying equity and efficiency: The need for third generation academic development. *Perspectives in Education*, 25(3), 1–11.
- Clegg, S. (2009). Forms of knowing and academic development practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(4), 403–416.
- Clegg, S. (2012). Conceptualising higher education research and/or academic development as ‘fields’: A critical analysis. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(5), 667–678.
- Council on Higher Education. (2013). *Higher education qualifications sub-framework*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
- Dall’Alba, G., & Barnacle, R. (2007). An ontological turn for higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 679–691.
- Di Leo, J. R., Giroux, H. A., McClennan, S. A., & Saltman, K. J. (2014). *Neoliberalism, education, and terrorism: Contemporary dialogues*. London: Routledge.
- European University Association (2010). *Salzburg II recommendations. European universities achievements since 2005 in implementing the Salzburg principles*. Brussels: European University Association.
- Haggis, T. (2009). What have we been thinking of? A critical overview of 40 years of student learning research in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(4), 377–390.
- Harland, T. (2009). People who study higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(5), 579–582.
- Luckett, K., & Hunma, A. (2014). Making gazes explicit: Facilitating epistemic access in the humanities. *Higher Education*, 67, 183–198.
- Maton, K. (2013). Making semantic waves: A key to cumulative knowledge-building. *Linguistics and Education*, 24(1), 8–22.
- Maton, K. (2014). *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge.
- McKenna, S. (2014). Higher education studies as a field of research. *The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 9, 6–17.
- McKenna, S. (2017). Crossing conceptual thresholds in doctoral communities. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(5), 458–466.
- Mowbray, S., & Halse, C. (2010). The purpose of the PhD: Theorising the skills acquired by students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(6), 653–664.
- Peseta, T. L. (2011). Professing in the field of academic development: Is content a dirty word? *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(1), 83–86.
- Rowland, S. (2009). A sense of audience in response to Tony Harland. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(5), 583–585.
- Shay, S. (2012). Educational development as a field: Are we there yet? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(3), 311–323.
- Shore, C. (2010). Beyond the multiversity: Neoliberalism and the rise of the schizophrenic university. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 18(1), 15–29.
- Tight, M. (2014). Discipline and theory in higher education research. *Research Papers in Education*, 29(1), 93–110.
- Vorster, J., & Quinn, L. (2015). Towards shaping the field: Theorising the knowledge in a formal course for academic developers. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 34(5), 1031–1044.