Higher Education Studies as a Field of Research

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Abstract

The field of Higher Education Studies is a rapidly growing one in South Africa and abroad but there has been little systematic review of the form this growth is taking. This article presents a case study of higher education research by considering a newly formed Higher Education Studies doctoral programme. The programme comprises 29 PhD scholars in 2014, all engaged in research on some aspect of higher education. The description of the PhD programme, the PhD scholars and what their research topics are, reveals a picture of the broad range of concerns within the field of Higher Education Studies and suggests that the field is a region, in Bernstein's terms. This means that it draws on multiple disciplines and looks both to the values and structures of those disciplines and to the professional world of work. It is argued that the strengthening of the epistemological base of Higher Education Studies is necessary for higher education research to move forwards with enhanced relational and positional autonomy.

Introduction

In January 2010, Rhodes University launched a PhD programme in Higher Education Studies in the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL). The programme grew by word of mouth at a rapid rate. In 2014 there are 29 registered scholars, with 10 PhD scholars having graduated in the first four years of the programme. The programme came about for two main reasons. Firstly, the Dean of Teaching and Learning had completed supervision of 10 PhDs related to higher education and constantly received more requests. She believed that the development of a community of scholars engaged in the field would be beneficial. The design of the programme was thus primarily to provide peer-group support in ways that work against the 'lonely space' of the PhD journey (Harrison, 2009: 175).

The second reason for the development of the programme was the idea that there was a need for more systematic, rigorous higher education research in South Africa. In the context of increased efficiency demands on universities and multiple purposes emerging for higher education from an ever-growing range of stakeholders, it is perhaps unsurprising that higher education has emerged as a field of study. In South Africa, higher education is frequently constructed as having a particularly key role to play in the economic development and social transformation of the country. Given these various demands on the sector, there is undoubtedly a need for a 'theoretically sophisticated, empirically applicable approach' (Maton, 2005: 688) to self-reflection, as would be expected in a doctoral programme.

Keisler (1990: 66) argued through an analysis of 10 Higher Education Studies journals that the field (as reflected by its publications) failed to constitute 'a self-sufficient body'. Tight (2004) suggests that the increased interest in higher education as a field of research is because of massification and the fact that higher education is now 'big business' but his analysis of 406 Higher Education Studies articles found that 58% were 'wholly a-theoretical'. Tight concludes that 'there is a need for more theoretical engagement so that the field … can develop further, and gain more credibility and respect' (2004: 409). In a more recent analysis of publications in the field, Tight concluded that while higher education research is 'healthy and growing… it lacks a strong or disciplinary identity' (2014: 93). The desire to strengthen the field of Higher

Education Studies, such as through the PhD programme reported on in this case study, can thus be seen to have general echoes beyond its South African context.

Data collection and analysis

This article draws on various data sources to map out the field of Higher Education Studies as evidenced in a case study of a doctoral programme. The demographics of the current student body and an overview of their topics and their theoretical frameworks emerge from an analysis of their research proposals. The programmes and scholar evaluations of 12 Doctoral Seminar Weeks from 2010 to 2013 were also collected and analysed. This data was analysed to find out where the field of Higher Education Studies is focused and what its concerns are.

It is a clear limitation of this study that the data comes from one doctoral programme only, given that Higher Education Studies can be said to be undertaken both within such new and increasingly common formal postgraduate programmes, and also by academics across the sector. However, given that it is a characteristic of the doctorate that it needs to be of a quality that satisfies peer review and merits publication (DHET, 2013), this is a useful sample by which to get an insight into and overview of this rapidly growing field.

What is the programme?

In South Africa, the doctorate is by full thesis (DHET, 2013).2 The programme structures reported on here are thus about supporting the development of the research design, implementation of the research and writing of the dissertation rather than about accumulating credits. These supporting structures include three week-long meetings a year, known as Doctoral Weeks, which include guest seminars, debates, panel discussions, scholar presentations, workshops, etc. There is also an online classroom where readings and topical news reports are shared, questions are asked and support is provided. Critical readers, online meetings and other structures augment traditional supervision relationships.

Participation in these structures is voluntary. The attendance of between 25 and 30 people at the 12 Doctoral Weeks offered thus far, despite the financial implications of travelling long distances and taking leave from work, indicates that scholars find the

support useful. The evaluations of the Doctoral Weeks provide further support for this claim:

Every Doc week leaves me feeling motivated and also challenged about having to work harder and think deeper.

I love Doc weeks. I often find the discussions difficult but then I know this is what is expected of me on the PhD journey.

I love having others who are in the same boat to talk to.

CHERTL PhD Weeks are a privilege as we have a jam-packed week of the top speakers from across South Africa and even further afield. I have been exposed to discussions during these weeks that are not related to my topic but that have made me think about issues related to higher education and have made me more aware of how to develop academic arguments and understand the main debates that face the sector.

Having provided the briefest of descriptions of the programme structure, the article now turns to consider who these scholars are as an indication of who participates in Higher Education Studies as a research field.

Who are the phd scholars?
At undergraduate level, South Africa has made enormous progress in gender representation but at doctoral level only 42% of graduates are women (ASSAf, 2010). From this perspective, the field of Higher Education Studies is doing very well indeed: 23 out of 29 of the PhD scholars are female.

Most of the registered scholars (28 of the current 29) are studying part-time while holding down full-time jobs. This hinders the extent to which they can focus on their research but given that their average age is 45 years old, it is unsurprising that few can afford at this stage in their lives to be full-time students. The age of the scholars adds enormously to the life experience the programme can call upon but extends the number of years the scholars take to complete and also limits their access to funding,

most of which is only available to full-time students. Higher Education Studies, it seems, is not yet well enough established as a field to attract younger scholars who would be more likely to undertake full-time study.

Nine of the 29 currently registered scholars work in Academic Development (AD).3 It was not unexpected that these people would wish to undertake a PhD in Higher Education Studies because much of the existing research in Higher Education Studies has been done by AD practitioners and this particular doctoral programme is housed within CHERTL, the AD centre at Rhodes University.

Five of the scholars work in institutional Quality Assurance (QA) units. QA has grown rapidly in South Africa as elsewhere and most universities have set up structures from which to oversee QA processes, such as programme reviews, institutional audits and programme accreditation. Given the widely expressed concerns that QA processes can be technicist and managerial and often arise from neoliberal understandings of the university (Boyer, 2010; Clegg, 2009a; Shore, 2010), the participation of QA managers in this programme is most positive. The potential impact that their doctoral work can have on ensuring rigour in the QA field is enormous as it must be at the 'most advanced academic levels' (DHET, 2013).

Nine of the scholars come from across a wide variety of mainstream academic departments and bring with them knowledge of their particular disciplines along with a general interest in and experience of higher education practice. One scholar holds a high-level management position in his university and the remaining five work in research institutes and higher education related organisations.

Academic Development is often referred to in the literature as Educational Development (Clegg, 2009a: 403). In South Africa, Academic Development work includes both staff development and student development work of various kinds.

This diversity of workplace seems to be a benefit to the programme as the following verbatim comments from evaluations testify:

It is great that the Doc Weeks bring together scholars from all kinds of universities as

we have very different experiences.

I wish that I had studied Sociology because most of the theories we use are sociological. I feel like I am catching up on gaps in my education and I'm glad that there's others in the group to help me.

Not everyone comes from an advantaged university or from a traditional university or from South Africa. I think this helps to challenge those in the group who think their experience is the same as everyone else's.

What are their topics?

Significant work has been done to plot the scope of academic development research (for example by Boughey, 2007, 2009; Clegg, 2009a, 2009b; Scott, 2009; Shay, 2012) and the importance of academic development to Higher Education Studies is undeniable not least because 'the discourse of academic development has shaped the ways those in the [higher education] sector think about teaching' (Clegg, 2009a: 403). But the naming of this PhD programme as being in 'Higher Education Studies' indicates it to be broader than 'academic development'.

The 29 PhD topics in this study could be categorised in a number of different ways and the complexity of doctoral level study means that a single thesis typically addresses a number of different issues; the table below is thus partial and somewhat reductive. The table uses five categories and various sub-categories to group the topics being researched by the scholars.

Table 1:

Categories and sub-categories of research topic by scholar

Category	Sub-	No. of
Pedagogy (Total 7)	Pedagogy – Teaching and Learning Practice	4
	ICT and Educational Technology	2
	Postgraduate supervision	1
Curriculum (Total 13)	Structure of knowledge and knowers in different disciplines and programmes	9
	Entrance assessment	1
	Graduate Attributes	1
	Selection of content and issues of colonialism	1
	Values and Ethics	1
Quality Assurance	Internal Systems	2
	External Systems	1
Sector level (Total 5)	Managerialism	2
	Globalisation and Internationalisation	1
	National policy implementation	1
	Private higher education sector	1
Staff development (Total 1)	New staff induction	1

Shay (2012: 313) tells us that for academic development the 'shared project is the improvement of the quality and status of teaching in order to improve the quality of students' experience of learning.' And some of the PhD scholars in this programme are indeed investigating access and retention, curriculum and pedagogy and other topics that have been at the heart of academic development. Seven of the scholars have topics that have an explicit classroom practice focus. They are looking at what happens at a fairly micro-level of pedagogy with topics such as the role tutorials do or do not play in providing access to target epistemologies, the different approaches to postgraduate supervision or how the language of instruction policy plays out in the enacted curriculum.

Thirteen scholars could be broadly categorised as undertaking curriculum studies. They are looking at the development of open distance learning programmes, changes in teacher education curricula, the extent to which content is Eurocentric and so on. The majority of the studies categorised as curriculum studies are part of a National Research Foundation (NRF) funded project about social inclusion and exclusion in higher education, with a special concern for the role of the structure of knowledge. These studies use a shared ontological framework (Critical Realist4) and a shared theoretical framework (Legitimation Code Theory5) but then apply these to a range of disciplines across a total of 17 institutions.

The pedagogy and curriculum topics may well be characterised as having a greater or lesser focus on professional practice in the form of a concern with teaching and learning practices or even curriculum in the broader, theoretical sense of programme design and knowledge. But five of the scholars have explicitly meta-level concerns with topics such as managerialism in higher education, the university in a neo-liberal era, the implications of New Public Management for the university sector, the impact of the World Bank's structural adjustment programme on universities in Africa and the internationalisation of education. These latter topics are indicative that the field of Higher Education Studies goes beyond the interests of academic development to include all aspects of higher education.

This brief analysis of topics in one PhD programme evidences the great variance as to what constitutes a suitable 'research problem' in Higher Education Studies. Even the ontological status of the scholars' topics can vary; the units of analysis in the studies range from students' perceptions of exclusion through to structural systems of funding, with a myriad in between. Similarly, the data collection methods in these studies range from the historical and policy document analysis, classroom observations, interviews with students and so on. The range of the scholars' topics and approaches echoes the comment by Tight (2004: 407) that the field of Higher Education Studies 'exemplifies the sheer variety of theoretical perspectives available and in use'.

As the investigations by current scholars in the programme call on a range of disciplines and fields such as Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Economics

and Education for their research topics and theoretical frames, it has been necessary for the programme to access supervisory expertise from across a number of faculties and even institutions. Haggis (2009) in her review of higher education publications suggests that there is a lag between disciplinary knowledge and its re-theorisation into higher education research. This may contribute to the need for supervisors from across disciplines that can introduce the most current thinking to the programme. This combining of disciplines within one programme suggests that Higher Education Studies might comprise what Bernstein refers to as 'a region' (2000). This has a number of implications for the field.

Higher education studies as a region

3 Regions, in Bernstein's explanation, are a grouping of disciplines in a field. Furthermore these disciplines are recontextualised to operate both within the intellectual fields of the constitutive disciplines and in the field of external practice (Bernstein 2000: 52). Higher Education Studies, as a field illustrated by the PhD programme discussed in this article, meets this definition. It draws on multiple disciplines and it faces the world of work, which in this case is the university itself and the practices within it. work of Bernstein and Bourdieu, which is used to analyse social and cultural practices across an increasingly broad range of contexts.

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4 Critical Realism is ontologically realist in that it argues that there are real mechanisms and structures in the world, separate from human knowledge of them, however it is epistemologically relativist as it understands knowledge of the world as being fallible and partial. It has been developed by Bhaskar, Archer and others.

5 Legitimation Code Theory is a framework developed by Maton, drawing on the

Regions can at times be characterised as 'diffuse, fluid and less organised' and send out 'ambiguous, contradictory signals' (Muller 2009: 214). Muller (2009: 213) clarifies that regions form around a purpose, which might be an intellectual imperative but is more commonly to support a sphere of professional practice. Muller argues that regions are often 'strong on practice-oriented "know-how" necessary for professional tasks, but without a disciplinary core, the knowledge base will be weak on "know-why"' (2009: 214). As the brief overview of topics above illustrates, the extent of focus on professional practice in this programme varies considerably. While the focus on professional practice is strong in some of the topics selected by the PhD scholars, particularly those related to pedagogy, the studies categorised as 'sector level' are not directly related to professional practice. And those studies with a focus on curricula are more concerned with developing an understanding of how knowledge and knower structures privilege particular groups of learners, rather than making direct recommendations to improve professional practice.

Regions are seen to threaten the pedagogic cultures of the constitutive disciplines and often raise issues of legitimacy (Bernstein, 2000: 52). Maton (2014) argues that disciplines are legitimated through their recognition of particular knowledge structures and through valuing particular knower structures; but regions by their nature draw on multiple disciplines, each with their own legitimation principles. It is therefore not unusual for regions to be spaces of contention because various disciplines' languages of legitimation (Maton, 2010) jostle for recognition and the tensions between the world of practice and the intellectual endeavour are felt. Developing the strength of a region requires strengthening its disciplinary foundation (Muller, 2009).

However, this is not a simple matter of demanding high levels of conceptual and theoretical engagement in the field of Higher Education Studies. Striving to develop Higher Education Studies as a region through strengthening its epistemological base has the undesirable potential to narrow the set of practices available to higher education scholars. Clegg (2009b: 60) suggests, in a discussion about academic development, that in developing themselves into a new region, academic development may well have adopted an identity and a set of discourses that 'denies other ways of understanding and thinking. Indeed this is what new regional practices do'.

Knowledge structures can simultaneously build depth and rigour in a research area and also exclude those who have not acquired such structures (and the requisite language of legitimation). Such acquisitions are typically through an apprenticeship of undergraduate and lower postgraduate degrees. However, in line with Harland's assumption about who studies higher education, most of the scholars in this programme 'have been educated first in another field or discipline' (2009: 579). That most of the scholars come to Higher Education Studies PhDs without previous Higher Education Studies qualifications or even a track record of research in this area is both a testimony to the field's inclusiveness and a potential concern that this might 'devalue the enterprise' (Harland, 2009: 580) by perpetuating the idea that Higher Education Studies has no theoretical base.

Since the scholars in this Higher Education Studies PhD programme are mainly staff members of one or another university,6 they are 'insider-outsiders' (Harrison, McKenna & Searle, 2010: 177) in that they are studying aspects of a system to which they already belong. They are 'half in' as they bring a wealth of experiential knowledge about higher education but they are also 'half out' in that they are novice researchers who typically have no previous qualifications in the area of Higher Education Studies. Harland argues that in trying to be inclusive, Higher Education Studies has 'undermined its own disciplinary basis' (Harland, 2009: 582). However, Rowland (2009) disagrees with Harland that the lack of epistemological precision in Higher Education Studies is peculiar to this field and argues that many university departments cannot be easily ascribed to a discipline and are multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary (2009: 583).

The tension between inclusivity and the kind of deep theorising which can move the region forward is acknowledged by Rowland (2009: 584) who says that when Higher Education Studies researchers 'represent their ideas in ways which are readily accessible to others from any disciplinary base [they] may risk over simplification and lack of subtlety. Alternatively they may draw freely upon the insights of their own discipline, and risk not being understood by those who lack familiarity with their discipline's ideas and ways of representing them.'

Axiological versus epistemological charges

Shay (2012) draws on Legitimation Code Theory's characterisation of intellectual fields to describe the practice of academic development. I believe this is a useful language for characterising the field of Higher Education Studies too. Martin, Maton & Matruglio (2010) describe fields as being predominantly axiologically-charged, where the emphasis is on moral, ethical and ideological concerns, or mostly epistemologically-charged, where the emphasis is on the explanatory power of knowledge. Maton (2014) indicates that while all regions have both epistemological and axiological charges, the dominant charge determines which kinds of theories and research approaches are taken up and which are discredited or ignored. The Higher Education Studies PhD programme feels the tensions between these charges and attempts to address the two can be found by looking at the content of the Doc Week programmes.

An analysis of the 12 Doctoral Week programmes indicates a mix of axiological and epistemological charges. Guest seminars on the topics of social justice, the university as a public good, grappling with privilege, developing voice are all examples of an axiological charge underpinning the programme; as, possibly, was the use of Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* as the class reader for 2011.

But the guest seminars on ontological positioning, critical realism, social realism, knowledge structures, and Legitimation Code Theory arguably reflect an epistemological charge. The desire to develop a programme that can not only add to a body of knowledge in Higher Education Studies but also develop critical academics who can contribute meaningfully to a sector suffering severe capacity shortages and many vexing problems is a complex one.

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6 The only exceptions are that five of the scholars work in research

Some of the axiological charge can be traced to the origins of this particular programme. The Higher Education Studies PhD Programme emerged out of an Environment and Sustainability Education Doctoral programme at Rhodes University that was developed to cultivate a scholarly community of practice and which a few early Higher Education Studies PhD candidates had been attending in the absence of a programme specifically focused on their own field. The Environmental Education programme was started because, in the words of that programme's coordinators, 'the socio-ecological condition of late modernity, currently characterised by fragmentation, individualisation, risk, overconsumption and greed …requires an intellectual community that is orientated towards public good and prepared to put people first, before profit and pollution' (Lotz-Sisitka, Ellery, Olvitt, Schudel & O'Donoghue, 2010: 131). These concerns are still evident in the Higher Education Studies programme.

This balance between the axiological charge and the epistemological charge is probably best understood by looking at the funded project entitled 'Social Inclusion in Higher Education' being undertaken within the PhD programme. Ten of the PhD scholars in the programme are attached to this NRF funded project that looks at the ways in which knowledge structures serve to include or exclude students.7 The programme draws on the work of Bernstein, Bourdieu and Legitimation Code Theory 'to understand the norms, values and structures of different kinds of knowledge and knowers and to ask questions about how students come to acquire such knowledges and become such knowers' (Boughey & McKenna, 2010). Each of the scholars within the project is asking the same research question:

How do disciplinary knowledge structures and knower structures and their associated practices serve to include or exclude students?

Each scholar asks this question of a different discipline and within or across different institutions and they call upon a range of substantive theories beyond the shared conceptual framework. A strong epistemological charge thus frames the project but the rationale is explicitly within the context of low retention and high student failure, which is an axiological concern. The Social Inclusion project is an example of the development of epistemological strength in service of an axiological agenda.

Strengthening the epistemological charge

While the programme as a whole remains committed to an axiological agenda of social justice, it has the aim of strengthening the epistemological base of higher education research. Shay (2012) recognises that many programmes in Higher Education Studies at lower levels (Postgraduate Diplomas in Higher Education and accredited staff development short courses, etc.) are largely along the lines of 'principles of good practice' and argues that there is a place for this. However, she goes on to point out that this is 'not the kind of knowledge which constitutes a professional field'. Vorster & Quinn (2012) make similar arguments in their call for better-theorised work from the early levels of Higher Education Studies programmes. It can be argued that much of the research being undertaken by the scholars in this PhD programme focuses on developing more rigorous theoretical accounts and this, perhaps, begins to address Clegg's concern that much higher education research has been 'too cautious and self-referential in the questions it asks of higher education and its own practices' (2009a: 413). Similarly, Scott (2009) argues that our craft knowledge approaches to solving the major problems facing higher education are insufficient, what is called for is systematic knowledge.

The need for a strong epistemological charge in Higher Education Studies can probably best be understood by referring to another concept in Legitimation Code Theory: 'autonomy'. Positional autonomy refers to the relationship between positions within a field and positions in other contexts. If the key agents in the field of Higher Education Studies come from industry or politics, Maton explains (2005), the positional autonomy of the field is weak. If the key agents come from within higher education itself, then the positional autonomy of the field is strong. Developing strong competence in the scholars within the programme, some of whom hold key positions within their universities, has the potential to increase the future positional autonomy of Higher Education Studies.

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7   In the earlier table, nine of these studies were classified as 'Curriculum' and one was classified as 'Staff Development'.

Relational autonomy refers to the extent to which the principles within a field – the 'practices, aims, measures of achievement, etc.' (Maton, 2005: 697) - come from its own contexts or are imported from other contexts. Where higher education's measures arise from other fields (for example through the adoption of business values to evaluate higher education), the relational autonomy is weak. But 'where the field's principles of hierachization look inwards to its specific activities…it exhibits stronger relational autonomy' (Maton, 2005: 697). In an era of corporatisation of universities and the increased role of the state and industry in the academy (Badat, 1998; Boughey, 2009), the field of Higher Education Studies will need to strengthen its ability to look inwards for its principles of hierarchy.

This strengthening of the epistemological base could thus be seen as an endeavour to increase both forms of autonomy in Higher Education Studies: relational and positional autonomy. The PhD programme might play some small role of increasing the positional autonomy of Higher Education Studies, through the development of credible scholars who can take up key positions in the field, while also enhancing the relational autonomy of the field by driving an agenda of the university as a public good with a transformative role to play in post-apartheid South Africa.

Conclusion

A single case study of a programme designed around a formal qualification is limited in the degree to which it can be used to understand a field as a whole. However, this snapshot look at a PhD programme in Higher Education Studies, and the scholars and their topics within it, does suggest that this field is a region, having to adhere to multiple disciplinary norms and navigate the contestations between these, while also looking outwards to the practices of the profession. The scholars come to the field at a later age and undertake their studies without a strong background in higher education research. This is both an indication of the field's broad interests and inclusive nature and also a cause for concern in terms of epistemological depth. In the case of this programme there is evidence of an epistemological base being developed through a strong theoretical focus, but this is being explicitly undertaken to the benefit of the axiological project, which is one of social justice.

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