What you do and where you are: A comparative analysis of postgraduate education research (1995–2004) from three South African higher education institutions

N. Madiya
College of Education
University of South Africa, South Africa
e-mail: madiyn@unisa.ac.za

A. V. Bengesai
Academic Support and Advancement Programme (ASAP)
Faculty of Engineering
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
e-mail: bengesai@ukzn.ac.za

J. Karlsson
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
e-mail: karlsson@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract
This article explores the postgraduate educational research undertaken at three South African higher education institutions during the period 1995 to 2004. The institutions are Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, the University of the Witwatersrand in Gauteng, and the University of Zululand in KwaZulu-Natal. They are located in geographical and social contexts that differ in terms of centre-periphery relations, economic conditions, and spatio-histories. Spatial theorists have contended that, inasmuch as we configure and develop our surroundings, our contexts constitute us and influence our practices and social relations. In applying this to higher education institutions we might say that they perform their context in and through their research. On this basis we compare the body of postgraduate educational research from each institution to understand how these institutions relate to, and are a performance of, their contexts. We consider the meanings of strong or weak performance in the correlation of research to context.

INTRODUCTION
Social relevance and responsiveness to context are important hallmarks of social science research agendas. Some international scholars define education research as a social science in terms of these measures (Kamper 2006). In South Africa decades of social inequality have yielded acute education needs that make the connection between social context and education research a compelling imperative. Strydom
and Fourie (1999) push this connection further when they posit that an understanding of the context in which higher education works is a first step for setting up a research agenda. Still others (such as Vally, Motala and Ramadiro 2009) point to the importance of historical and contextual analyses, and the use of local approaches and experiential knowledge for research that serves a social justice role. All these perspectives imply that there is a geo-spatial dimension about education research, in that there is an interaction between the researcher, the institution and the local or national context. This suggests that ‘what you do’ in education research (the pools of research topics and research agendas that are pursued) is linked to the institutional and social setting of ‘where you are’ (the researcher and his/her institutional base).

In this article we consider the geography or ‘spatial distributions’ (Elden and Crampton 2007, 1) of knowledge generation, namely the link between ‘what you do and where you are’, by exploring the postgraduate education research emanating over one decade (1995–2004) from three South African higher education institutions (HEIs) located in geographically and socially diverse settings. We question how the burning issues and social needs that characterise the complex geographical and socio-economic settings of the three institutions find a place (or not) in the knowledge generation process of postgraduate education research. The institutions we selected for this exploration are Rhodes University, a small university located in a rural provincial centre; the University of the Witwatersrand, a large institution based in the urban economic hub of South Africa; and the University of Zululand, which is the youngest of the three institutions and situated in a rural area. After tracing their geo-histories as institutions established within the spatial and socio-economic system of racial segregation and identifying the organised research units within each faculty or school of education, we juxtapose these against the main trends from our survey of their postgraduate education research.

We are not overlooking the fact that institutional space may be more complex, with local, national and international attributes than the narrow local lense through which we view them in this article. However, our aim is to illuminate the geography of knowledge generation within the South African higher education context and understand the strength of the dialogic connection between the institutional setting and the research agenda of supervised postgraduate students.

There are five sections to this article. The first part sets out the theoretical framework informing our investigation. This is followed by a section that describes our methodological approach. The third part focuses on describing the geographic, institutional and socio-economic settings of the three selected institutions based on various documentary sources. In the fourth part we present the findings from our survey of the topics that form the cores of each institution’s postgraduate education research. In the final section we discuss these findings in relation to the socio-economic, spatial and historic conditions of the locale of the institution in order to draw a conclusion about the strength of the dialogic relation.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our exploration of the dialogic relationship between the problems being explored among postgraduate education researchers and the locale or contextual setting is essentially a question about the spatial geography of knowledge generation underpinned by the assumption that most postgraduate education researchers studying at a particular institution are from the local or surrounding population. Therefore they take up problems of the local context as topics for their research projects. The education researcher’s engagement in and response to problems in the social context constitute what we refer to as a dialogic relationship. Our theoretical assumptions about the dialogic relationship are based on two ideas that emerge among spatial theorists.

Firstly, the spatial notion of centre-periphery is central to understanding development and production. This idea sees a greater proportion of resources and power as residing at a central point and a lesser proportion at the periphery to that centre and this gives rise to differences between conditions at the centre and the periphery (Lefebvre 1991; 1996). Thus, the city metropolis holds a central position with a hub of resources such as infrastructure, technology, varieties of expertise, grand libraries, as well as economic wealth and portals or gateways to other centres of urban power. Within itself the urban centre is also a place of contrast, diversity and inequality, with an underbelly of the dejected, powerless and poor struggling masses (Massey et al. 1999; Tonkiss 2005). By contrast, at the periphery of the rural town and countryside there is less accumulation of wealth, technology and infrastructure, and hence the diversity of people and number of experts is not as great as in the city and social problems may be related to isolation, under-development, poverty and powerlessness (Ministerial Committee on Rural Education 2005; Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005). Pinch (1998) asserts that people in particular geographical spaces may adopt particular ideas and technologies that may form knowledge communities in those particular spaces or places. Thus, we anticipate finding differences in the volume of the postgraduate knowledge generation and the topics being studied at the three selected institutions owing to their different geographic positions in relation to the centre and periphery. Our assumption is that the different geographical locations and socio-economic conditions of the areas local to the higher education institutions might have influenced what researchers focused on and the amount and diversity of knowledge they generated.

Secondly, spatial theorists accept that the past leaves traces and imprints that can be found in the present and which shape or influence the present (Lefebvre 1991). Indeed, the present is built upon, and is a reaction to, the past. Thus, in South Africa the apartheid past that pre-dates the period of research generation in our study is inscribed in institutional histories. In the post-apartheid period the national ethos and social priorities as well as the higher education landscape have been revised in order to overturn and eradicate the values and practices of apartheid. Each higher education institution has responded in its own way to how that national social transformation process has played out locally. Thus, we see the institutions whose research we
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are exploring, in one way or another, to have been created on the historical racial and socio-economic segregations in South Africa. We expect to find traces of this apartheid past still evident in the post-apartheid knowledge generation era. To find these and to determine the extent at which research and geographic and socio-economic contexts speak to each other, we used a comparative survey methodology which we describe next.

**METHODOLOGY**

Our study involves a comparative survey of Doctoral and Masters theses and dissertations produced at the three institutions of Rhodes University, University of Zululand, and University of the Witwatersrand over the period 1995–2004. These years constitute the first decade after 1994 when democracy was adopted in South Africa. Our survey was confined to this political period because these were years characterised by rapid change in government, education policy, higher education institutions, and society in general. Our criterion of selecting three institutions from contrasting geographic and socio-economic contexts was to explore the possibility of the dialogic trend within the postgraduate education research.

To construct the institutional descriptions we used data from official websites, documents and reports. Data about the postgraduate educational research was generated through a survey of theses gathered from each of the institutions in 2008 and 2009. Qualitative content analysis was used as the primary approach to generate the survey database. Codes, in the form of keywords, were assigned on the database by members of the research team to indicate the topic/s that formed the primary focus of each Masters and Doctoral thesis. Keyword frequency reports for each institution indicate the number of studies that focus on each keyword or subject category. The findings were compared and analysed across the three institutions and we thereby gleaned information about the trends of research topics. Through a closer content analysis of the thesis texts in particular keyword categories, we generated data about where the field work of those studies was conducted. This yielded correlations between the phenomenon or problem being researched and the geo-spatial locus of such phenomena or problems. In addition, we used title and acknowledgement pages of the thesis texts to identify supervisors/co-supervisors of these studies. This served to identify any alternative patterns of influence in the geographies of knowledge generation. Before discussing the data and findings, we turn to the descriptions of the three institutions and their contextual settings.

**GEOGRAPHIC, SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS**

An intellectual of the ruling party in South Africa, Matthews Phosa, commented on the relationship between universities and their contexts in his Archbishop Desmond Tutu Lecture on 11 August 2004 at the Vaal University of Technology. Phosa (2004, 55) said:
The higher educational institutions and their host communities must be able to differ, and yet be complementary to each other. In this relationship, the role of institutions of higher learning must be clearly defined. Such a role should include producing and reproducing meticulous narratives through teaching and research on how to live justly with oneself and others. ... Institutions of higher learning are delicate arenas within, and between, competing discourses. To this end, responsive and competent higher educational institutions take advantage of this delicacy and rework meanings, interrogate existing beliefs and truths, as well as struggle for better knowledge and fairer education for their societies.

This indicates the need for research to be responsive to the socio-economic and geographic contexts in which the institutions are located. Our brief descriptions below of the three institutional contexts point to possibilities available to postgraduate education researchers.

**UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND**

The University of Zululand (commonly referred to as UniZul) is based in a rural area of KwaZulu-Natal, one of South Africa’s most populous yet poor, underdeveloped and disease-challenged provinces. UniZul was founded in 1960 (Morrow 2007) as a ‘bush college’ or Bantustan university (Reddy 2004). It was intended for training people of Zulu ethnicity who would be useful to the apartheid state in its efforts to establish the self-governing territory of Zululand and its public services and administrative departments. This meant that academic activities within the institution were not necessarily aligned to all the developmental needs and social transformation aspirations of local communities. In addition the UniZul campus was a site of violent clashes between student supporters of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (Morrow 2007). Thus, when it was a Bantustan university, UniZul was discredited in the eyes of many South Africans as well as those of the international academic community and was regarded as unworthy to be included in the community of universities (Welch, Yang and Wolhunter 2004). A further point about UniZul’s poor and rural setting is that it is far from the major cities and centres of the South African economy. Under such conditions the university struggles to attract significant research funds and senior scholars to lead research programmes.

The population resident in UniZul’s locale predominantly speak isiZulu as their mother tongue. Thus, the setting can be characterised as fairly monolingual. Although the area is densely populated it is one of the most underdeveloped and poverty stricken parts of South Africa (Ndizimande 2003). Hence, education, health, agriculture and small businesses are social sectors in need of development (Mkhize 2003). In the education sector, illiteracy among adults and un- or under-qualified educators have been cited as critical areas needing redress (Mkhize 2003). All these issues of the political history and the distressed local conditions render UniZul as a higher education institution on the social periphery.
Despite these challenging conditions, after 35 years of institutional life, UniZul’s total postgraduate education research output for the period under investigation (1995–2004) is a significant contribution to knowledge generation: 20 Doctoral, 93 Masters theses, with an additional four that do not indicate the degree. In a later section we explore the extent to which those studies dialogically relate to the contextual conditions surrounding UniZul.

Rhodes University

Rhodes University (RU) has a longer institutional history than UniZul. First founded in 1904 as Rhodes University College, it was established as an independent university in 1951. Thus, by the end of the period under investigation (1995–2004), RU had achieved a century of post-school educational engagement in the area that now falls within the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. RU is situated in Grahamstown. This town has an early history associated with British settler farming communities who were sent to populate the remote border of the former Cape colony. At that time the district was the site of several border conflicts between the colonial authorities and the Xhosa communities (Oakes 1988). This socio-political history led to Grahamstown developing as an English-settler centre of cultural, educational and economical significance. Nevertheless, the geographic and socio-economic conditions of the surrounding district are similar to those pertaining to UniZul: predominantly poor and underdeveloped.

The population in the rural districts of the Eastern Cape is similarly monolingual, with the local language being isiXhosa. Agricultural lands are poor with low food production (Whyte 1995). In addition to these problems, Pillay (2004) posits that poverty in this region is due to an unequal distribution of skills, high levels of illiteracy and, to an extent, the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The majority of the population have not completed all school grades. There is also a shortage of qualified teachers. Thus RU faces the demand of having to ‘develop a co-ordinated strategy for the province around expanded in-service training (INSET) and pre-service (PRESET) programmes’ (Pillay 2004, 92).

Despite the challenging local rural conditions, RU is in the company of important national and international educational, cultural and research centres that are also based in Grahamstown, such as the South African National Library for the Blind, the National English Literary Museum, the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity, the International Library of African Music, and the Institute for the Study of English in Africa. This concentration of organisations enhances the intellectual and research climate of RU and attracts many visiting scholars and cultural tourists, as well as investments in research. However, with high levels of poverty and under-education in the surrounding rural area, few people are able to enter higher education. This is a challenge that has pushed RU to focus on developing skills and competencies, especially in areas related to maths and science, among local communities (Pillay 2004). In addition to these, Environmental Education has also become one of the key subjects with regards to teaching and research at RU.
Thus, in 1990 RU established the first professorial chair in Environmental Education on the continent and developed a postgraduate Environmental Education programme focused on social transformation through various research themes (Lotz-Sisitka and Schudel 2007).

Based on this institutional description, it is evident that, while RU faces similar rural poverty and under-development challenges as UniZul, it enjoys the advantage of being in a cosmopolitan centre that brings with it continental and international networks, and the collegiality and intellectual projects of other research and educational institutes. This urban-rural duality and the socio-political history of its border town setting position RU at an important middle-ground within the spatial construct of centre-periphery social relations. RU’s long history and established reputation as a higher education institution in South Africa may account for its greater postgraduate education research output of 133 theses (18 Doctoral and 115 Masters) compared with that of UniZul. However, in simple numerical terms, RU’s postgraduate knowledge generation in the education field is modest when compared to the University of the Witwatersrand, to which we now turn our attention.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND

The situation of the University of Witwatersrand, commonly referred to as Wits, is different from that of RU and UniZul, both geographically and socio-economically. Wits started initially as a school and later became a college, until in 1922 it was granted full university status (University of the Witwatersrand 2000). The need for the establishment of Wits was recognised after the discovery of minerals in the Witwatersrand and surrounding areas in the 19th century, which resulted in the demand for mining engineers and researchers. As a result, from its inception, Wits has regarded research as one of its top priorities and Nongxa (2004) reports that this institution is among the top research-producing universities in the world. By 2006 it had 9 research institutes, over 20 research units and 13 recognised research groups (Council on Higher Education 2008). Nongxa (2004) states that the institution’s research priorities are determined by academics, research funding, and senior academic managers of research, within the framework of national and societal needs and social transformation. Such research priorities may be supported by the fact that Wits, unlike UniZul and RU, is located at the centre of economic activity in Johannesburg, Gauteng province. Gauteng is, geographically speaking, the smallest province in South Africa, but it has often been labelled as the economic and financial powerhouse and centre of the country’s commerce and industry (Mboweni 2007). In particular, Johannesburg is the economic hub of the Southern African region, clustered among major industrial, commercial, mining and educational centres. It comprises a variety of resources, different kinds of human expertise and grand libraries that are resourceful to researchers from the educational centres in the region, including Wits. Industries in Johannesburg’s environs, such as information technology, contribute to the socio-economic development of the
area. In addition, a big percentage of major companies in South Africa have their headquarters there. These add potential for financial aid and support to researchers and especially students studying at Johannesburg’s education institutions. It is not surprising, therefore, that Wits produces far more postgraduate theses (33 Doctoral and 373 Masters) in education than UniZul and RU.

The description of Johannesburg as a ‘financial powerhouse’ and ‘economic hub’ does not mean that the area has a homogeneous population. On the contrary, the diverse economic activities central to this area attract people of different socio-economic conditions from national, continental and even international contexts. Therefore, the area is multicultural, multilingual and characterised by various forms of inequality. Together with urban poverty, patterns of inequality shaped by decades of political and racial division have been increasing steadily since the 1970s (Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell 2000; City of Johannesburg State of the Environment Report 2008). Only the financially secure and stable societal sectors are benefiting from the available economic opportunities. Data from a community survey conducted in 2007 (City of Johannesburg State of the Environment Report 2008) indicate a high population density in Gauteng province, which results from an average population growth rate of about 12,5 people per km² per annum. Such population trends impact on service delivery in the province. As a result, there has been a noticeable increase in socio-economic problems such as inadequate housing, unemployment, different forms of pollution and inadequate sanitation and sewage facilities. Although the City Council is responding to these challenges in different ways, research has a valuable role in generation new knowledge that can be applied to address these issues.

In the next section, we focus on determining whether there is a dialogic relationship between contextual issues and the knowledge that has been produced during the decade 1995 to 2004 at Wits, RU and UniZul.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS FROM THE COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF THESSES AND DISSERTATIONS

Our analyses of theses and dissertations brought to the fore three findings related to the theoretical framework, the focus and sub-focus of the research, and the influences of context and supervisors in determining that focus. In brief these are:

Firstly, centre-periphery distributions of power and resources, which we noted in the contextual descriptions of the three institutions, play out in the varying levels of research production from each institution.

Secondly, there is more research at RU and Wits that is focused on curriculum compared to UniZul where management attracts more research attention. When we examine theses with the curriculum focus more closely, we find that many of these theses are about mathematics (at Wits) and environmental education (at RU).

Thirdly, research conducted by the postgraduate students is not necessarily about the geographic and socio-economic context of their respective universities. Although we do not have conclusive evidence, the data points to supervisors possibly being a
greater influence than contextual needs and factors when the student determines the main focus areas of his/her research.

Centre-periphery distributions of research production

Our analysis of the research production from each institution reveals a pattern that follows the centre-periphery relations that we outlined in the theoretical framework and found in the contextual conditions of the institutions. In our national survey of postgraduate research completed between 1995 and 2004, we identified 402 education theses and dissertations from Wits, 133 from RU, and 98 from UniZul. The number of postgraduate education studies is greatest at Wits, which is the largest institution with many experienced scholars able to provide supervision support and attract research funding, and located in South Africa’s largest urban conurbation. RU’s research output over the same decade is only 133 theses and dissertations, about one third that of Wits. This marked decrease can be attributed to RU being a smaller institution with fewer staff members available for postgraduate supervision purposes. RU’s location in a remote provincial town may also be a contributory factor in terms of its lesser capacity than an institution such as Wits to attract staff, students and research funding. UniZul’s postgraduate education research output of 98 theses and dissertations over the 1995–2004 decade is a mere quarter of Wits’ output. Of the three institutions, our description of UniZul showed that it holds the most peripheral position of the three institutions in terms of South Africa’s centre-periphery power relations, its struggle to shed its political history, and its size and infrastructural attractiveness for potential staff and students.

To sum up, we attribute the centre-periphery pattern of postgraduate education research output at these institutions to factors such as funding and library resources, technology and access to diverse people and number of experts. At the economic core of the country these factors are not in short supply in comparison to conditions in a provincial town or rural district. Having identified and given an account for the difference in research production, we turn to explore trends in the topics of the theses and dissertations.

Research focus

Our finding, presented in Figure 1, about topics that form the focus of the postgraduate studies from the three institutions, is that there is a significant amount of research on curriculum from RU and Wits and there is a focus on education management in the research emanating from UniZul. We found that over a quarter (113) of the 402 theses and dissertations from Wits were about curriculum and at RU it rose to almost half (60) of the 133 theses and dissertations. However, at UniZul only around 15 per cent (14) of the postgraduate studies were about curriculum.
We explored the total of 173 studies on curriculum from both RU and Wits in order to identify sub-categories within curriculum. Of the 113 Wits curriculum studies, we found that Mathematics attracted the greatest single research focus in almost one quarter (24.7%; 28) of the theses or dissertations. There were 15 (13.2%) studies on the teaching and learning of Natural Science and 8 (7%) on English.

We account for the greater attention to Mathematics and Science research in the education field on the basis that Wits experiences a high interest and demand for skilled researchers in these disciplines and teaching subjects due to its location at the centre of many technology-rich and industrial enterprises.

The postgraduate education research from RU also has a significant focus on curriculum issues with 60 curriculum studies completed over the ten-year span of the survey. We found that Environmental Education was the main sub-area of focus, comprising 24 (40%) of the 60 theses, with a few studies in other sub-areas such as Mathematics (5), Science (5) and English (4) (see Figure 2). We attribute the trend towards Environmental Education research to RU having an Environmental Education and Sustainability Unit, which interacts with local and sub-continental NGOs and community projects to promote Environmental Education (Rhodes University 2008).
Another explanation for the concentration on curriculum research at these two very different institutions over the 1995–2004 period is that this coincided with major curriculum policy changes in South Africa. In 1997 the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) curriculum was introduced and progressively phased in to school grades under the Curriculum 2005 programme (Department of Education 1997a; b; c; 1998).

In contrast to the predominant curriculum focus in postgraduate research emanating from Wits and RU, UniZul studies focus predominantly on education management, with 24 (21%) of 117 theses and dissertations being on this topic (see Figure 2). Our analysis using sub-categories of education management showed that greater focus was on school principals (11, 45% of the 24 theses) and School Management Teams (4, 16%). Issues relating to parents also fall within the sub-categories of education management and account for 14 (58%) of the 24 theses. The pre-eminence of education management theses may be due to the institution’s history of serving the administrative needs of the apartheid Bantustan. In the theory of social space, such traces from the past can become imprints that shape or influence the present (Lefebvre 1991). As Bunting (2006) points out, South Africa’s historically black universities were established during the apartheid era to provide homeland institutions with administrative and managerial expertise. Such a history would have firmly established education management as an important discipline and area of expertise among the scholars at UniZul. However, based on the data generated within the survey, we are unable to substantiate this correlation. Nevertheless, this suggests a rich seam for future research.

**Socio-economic and geographic contexts**

Our third finding concerns a link between context and focus in the postgraduate education research from the three institutions. We did not find a strong link within the Wits and RU postgraduate education research between the research focus and the institutions’ geographic and socio-economic contexts (as described above). Indeed, we found that some theses and dissertations focused on South African provinces other than Gauteng (for Wits researchers) and the Eastern Cape (for RU researchers), and there were also studies that focused on other African countries. For example, 14 (23.3%) of the 60 RU theses on curriculum carried a sub-focus on other South African provinces. Of these, the adjacent province of the Western Cape was most frequently the setting for the researchers’ field work. Twelve (20%) of the 60 curriculum theses from RU were about settings in other African countries. We suggest that this continental outlook is a high proportion for a small university located in a small country town within a poor and under-developed province. Three of these theses were regional or about southern Africa and nine were about particular countries, with Namibia attracting the greatest research attention (5/ 8.3%), and Lesotho, Kenya, Malawi and Uganda being the focus of one thesis each. This regional scope may be due to the Environmental Education and Sustainability Unit’s interaction and activities involving NGOs and communities across the sub-continent. Nevertheless,
one reason for the high number of theses with a regional focus is suggested in an interview when one RU supervisor said:

> The full time course – if I may say, not many South Africans come to that, South Africans just don’t get leave and it’s quite hard for them to get funding because they need seventy-five to eighty thousand Rand to study full time. ... South Africans are not able to get leave or the funding – so [it’s] usually Namibians or Zambians or Kenyans [who register for full time research studies at RU].

This account suggests that access to funding is a barrier that prevents local postgraduate students from researching localized issues. This seems pertinent in the case of RU and its poor rural communities.3

A similar trend was evident at Wits. Our finding of the 113 curriculum theses and dissertations from Wits is that only eleven (9.7%) studies were explicitly about contextual issues in Gauteng. Although this evidence of the postgraduate education research from Wits is a lower percentage compared to RU, Wits researchers show the same trend as RU researchers in their focus on other provinces. For example, there is one thesis each focusing on North West, Northern Cape, and Limpopo provinces, and two on the Eastern Cape Province. While many theses produced at Wits are not explicit about the geographical area of data collection, a number of them focused on other SADC countries such as Mozambique (3), Swaziland (3) Lesotho (2) and Botswana (1). In this article we are not in a position to account for the limited research on Gauteng or Johannesburg’s issues in postgraduate education research during the period under investigation. This is an issue that deserves further research.

Contrary to the Wits and RU postgraduate research trends, we found that at UniZul research was locally based. All studies focussing on education management were conducted at sites in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. This may suggest that UniZul’s postgraduate students are predominantly or entirely from the KwaZulu-Natal province.

What emerges in our content analysis of the UniZul education management studies is that school governance is defined in narrow terms that justify stakeholder participation on the basis of efficiency. Grant Lewis and Naidoo (2004) point out that this form of participatory school governance fails to promote democracy.

As a result, though these studies are set in local sites and appear to take local conditions into account, their focus is distanced from the context in that they foreground education for education sake and are inattentive to local developmental imperatives. For example, issues such as management of: curriculum change, teaching and learning, staff development and classroom seemed to be of major concern.

An alternative perspective is that institutional supervision constitutes a ‘local context’ component in the dialogic relationship with the postgraduate education researcher. In this argument the supervisor, rather than the geographic context, influences the subject focus and orientation of the student’s study. Thus, we explored
whether our survey revealed the development of an epistemic community of students around one or more supervisors. To do this we considered the supervisors named in the theses and dissertations about curriculum (at RU and Wits) and management (at UniZul). Based on the information available to us at the time of writing this article, we were only able to identify supervisors for 48 of the 60 students at RU. From the RU theses and dissertations over the ten-year period of 1995–2004 we found that a group of 18 academics were responsible for the supervision of 48 students. Within the group of 18, a core set of four academics were responsible as the sole or primary supervisor for 5 or more students each. Two of these academics supervised 13 (over 50%) of the 24 students who engaged in research about Environmental Education. This is significant because it is more than 20% of all the education theses and dissertation from RU, and includes half of the 8 doctoral studies. Six of the 13 (46.1%) theses have a local Eastern Cape focus and five are about the southern African region or an African country.

At Wits we were able to identify 40 supervisors for the 113 theses and dissertations on curriculum. Twenty-three of these academics supervised 55 studies that were identified within the most researched sub-sets of curriculum i.e. the subjects of Mathematics, Science and English (see Figure 2). We found that the distribution of supervision was relatively uniform across the 23 supervisors, with each having supervised one or two students. However, it is noticeable that in studies about Mathematics there was a relatively higher clustering of 3 or more students around three particular supervisors. Thus, although the expertise and area of interest of supervisors usually informs which individual student is assigned to a supervisor, the evidence is that in some fields academics nurture groups of students who then collaborate and pursue particular research agendas. This evidence was confirmed in an interview with one of the Wits supervisors who stated:

In the humanities there is an expectation that the supervisor creates a structure and expertise within which the student, independently with support, generates their own research questions and just guided to the best knowledge in the field and just guided in terms of methodology. In the sciences it’s very different because you become attached to the research project of your supervisor. You don’t ask questions, you just accept authority and it’s like an apprenticeship.

What the situation with the sciences implies (according to what the interview reveals) is that if the supervisor’s research agenda is not informed by the students’ and or university’s local context, chances are limited of the local issues to be part of the research agenda.

Our finding in relation to UniZul is that of the 24 theses and dissertations on education management, 13 (54.1%) were supervised by one academic. On issues of parental participation, however, we found that supervision of theses and dissertations was undertaken by several academics.

Despite our finding that a supervisor may be associated with several theses and dissertations on topics in one particular disciplinary field and hence may be a significant influence in developing the body of research in that field, we have
insufficient evidence from our survey for a conclusive argument that supervisors are a key determining (local) influence in the research topics of several postgraduate students over several years. Case studies would be necessary to verify such an argument.

**CONCLUSION**

In this article we explored postgraduate education research from three institutions, UniZul, RU and Wits, to understand whether or not there is a dialogic relationship between the burning issues and social needs that characterise the complex geographic and socio-economic settings of the three institutions and the knowledge production process of postgraduate education research in these institutions during the period 1995 to 2004. This section highlights conclusions that came to the fore as we explored different aspects of the data.

First, the contrasting centre-peripheral locations of the institutions create unequal opportunities towards the resources and power necessary for the development and production of knowledge. We see the higher volume of research produced at Wits, compared to RU and UniZul, as a confirmation of this theoretical understanding. Furthermore, even though there is no evidence in our data to suggest that these opportunities and power created by centre-peripheral differences also determine the kind of knowledge that is generation, we see Wits’ research focus and the industries in the metropolitan area surrounding Wits as indicative of a supply and demand relationship. Our hunch is that research on Mathematics and Science at Wits, may be less of a response to the socio-economic issues in the locale of Wits than it is attention to developing the human capital needs for the business and industrial enterprises that provide the financial resources for research. Although the resources to produce education research may be more available at Wits than at RU and UniZul, the availability of such funding is usually subject to research agendas set by those with power. Thus, we conclude that higher education institutions are responsive to the locale. However, there are competing local interests and those issues supported with greater financial capital may receive more research attention within the institution and this may be led by research centres and units established within the institution.

Having said that, it is a common trend across the three institutions that problems of the local context are not necessarily taken up as topics for postgraduate education research projects. We find that there is little dialogic link to burning social issues in the main bodies of interest in postgraduate research. We conclude, therefore, that even though resources and power reside at a central point, for example at Wits, and diminish at the periphery, for example at RU and UniZul, such differences are significant primarily in terms of the volume of research production and not in terms of the research topics. The socio-economic conditions of education in the area local to these higher education institutions do not necessarily influence a postgraduate researchers’ focus. Indeed, any negative socio-economic conditions surrounding institutions appear to hinder the involvement of local postgraduate researchers who
might take up such issues in their research. The implication is that, unless those with financial power support local researchers to access higher education, such local problems will be marginalised in postgraduate education research.

Finding that some postgraduate education research did not necessarily focus on issues local to institutions’ contexts challenged and extended the notion of context as we understood it. For example, in the case of environmental education at Rhodes, the context becomes much wider as students from other countries are attracted to study in this area. We conclude therefore that geographies of knowledge are not necessarily only local. The institution might still be addressing ‘contextual issues’, but in a regional or continental context. Institutions are not situated in only one context (local) but in multiple contexts, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, with different demands.

NOTES

1. An earlier draft of this article was presented at the Kenton Education Association’s annual conference held on 5–8 November 2009 in Stellenbosch. We acknowledge the useful comments received from participants at the conference. The views and findings expressed in this article are our own.

2. Karlsson, Balfour, Moletsane and Pillay (2009) provide a more detailed description of how the national survey was conducted and how the archive and database of postgraduate education research was established and structured for future analytical purposes.

3. When we presented our draft findings at the Kenton Education Association’s 2009 conference in Stellenbosch, an RU academic put this point forward as a possible explanation.

REFERENCES


What you do and where you are: A comparative analysis of postgraduate education research


