

South African trends in masters and doctoral research in Public Administration

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Abstract

It is safe to assume that research by masters and doctoral students in Public Administration is meant to contribute to meeting the need for scholarly knowledge and insights by public administration practitioners. It therefore makes sense to ask whether dissertation and thesis research by South African postgraduate students in Public Administration focus on the issues that are of real importance. This article reports on an analysis of information available on the Nexus database of the (South African) National Research Foundation (NRF) about completed research for masters dissertations and doctoral theses in Public Administration from 2000 to 2005. The analysis shows that the profile of completed South African masters and doctoral research in Public Administration is dominated by Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape, which are together responsible for 38.3% of the total research output. Research masters degrees currently form the bulk (52.63%) of postgraduate research output in Public Administration. Doctoral research, with 22.22% of the postgraduate research output, seems to be well represented. The two institutions excelling in doctoral research output (the University of Pretoria and the University of KwaZulu-Natal) are not the top two Public Administration research institutions in South Africa as the number of doctoral degrees awarded are far fewer than the number of masters degrees awarded. The analysis also shows that the bulk of the research is concentrated in three categories of research topics, of which two correspond strongly with the needs for knowledge expressed by government. This analysis of the Nexus database provides a profile of Public Administration postgraduate research in terms of institution, type of qualification and category of topic that will set the scene for further research, specifically with regard to the quality of the research.

Introduction

It seems to be common for scholars in Public Administration to reflect on research issues within the subject from time to time. Most articles evaluating the quality of doctoral research, especially, focus on research by scholars in the United States of America (US). As far back as 1986, Stallings, a scholar from the University of Southern California, addressed the nature of research in doctoral programmes in Public Administration in an article in the *Public Administration Review* (Stallings, 1986:235–240). In the same issue of that journal, White focused on doctoral research as a source of new knowledge in the field and concluded that dissertation research (actually referring to doctoral research) has little influence on the dissemination of knowledge through publishing (White, 1986:227). Three years later Kraemer and Perry reflected on the quality of research and concluded in their article on institutional requirements for academic research in Public Administration that academic institutions need high quality staff members (faculty) and support for proposal development (Kraemer & Perry, 1989:9–16). Still on the topic of quality, Cleary, in a 1992 article, asked whether the quality of doctoral dissertation research in Public Administration within the US had improved over the past decade (Cleary, 1992:55–61). In their reflection, Adams and White (1994:565–576) also focused on quality by comparing the methods and quality of doctoral research in Public Administration with cognate fields.

The value of high quality research for practice is illustrated by the investigation of Brewer, Douglas, Facer II and O'Toole (1999) on how Public Administration doctoral programmes can train more productive research scholars, given that research is the first step to improved practice. Felbinger, Holzer and White came out strongly in their support for doctoral research as a source for new knowledge by arguing that doctoral education in Public Administration should be enhanced (Felbinger et al, 1999:459–463). After evaluating 1998 doctoral dissertation research in Public Administration, Cleary concluded that the subject ‘has made measurable improvements in the use of the doctoral dissertation as a research tool to educate students while contributing to knowledge in our field’ (Cleary, 2000:454). A year later, Public Administration research was evaluated from a practitioner perspective by Streib, Slotkin and Rivera (2001:515–525). Although they focused their research on articles published in the *Public Administration Review* rather than on dissertations or theses, it is noteworthy that they concluded that there ‘is

no invisible hand guiding researchers to areas where their efforts are needed the most' (Streib, Slotkin and Rivera, 2001:522). The article by Bolton and Stolcis (2003:626–630) in which they discuss the lack of congruence between academic research and practice in the field of public administration relates directly to the aforementioned conclusion.

It seems then that at least two themes can be identified in the abovementioned articles on Public Administration research in the US. The first is the research issues and their relevance to the needs of the practice of Public Administration. The second theme is that of methodological quality.

The same two themes can be identified in articles by South African scholars reflecting on Public Administration research (Wessels, 2004; Mabin, 2004; Clapper, 2005; Wessels, 2005; Khalo, 2006). However, none of these articles has made a specific study of dissertation and thesis research. In a recent issue of the (South African) *Journal of Public Administration* (volume 41, number 3.1), ten articles were published on research related topics. As they focus on issues related to research design, they are not considered as contributing to the discourse on the relevance or quality of Public Administration research in South Africa. In the South African context the value of especially doctoral research in general is illustrated in a document by the National Research Foundation (NRF) with the title 'Institutional Research Development Programme (IRDP): programme framework (2007–2011)'. In this document, 'the production of *large numbers of high quality PhDs*' is identified as a key driver for all its programmes (NRF, 2007a:8).

Taking into consideration the article by Streib, Slotkin and Rivera (2001:522) it is safe to assume that research by masters and doctoral students in Public Administration is meant to contribute to meeting the need for scholarly knowledge and insights by practitioners. Therefore it makes sense to ask whether dissertation research (for a masters degree) and thesis research (for a doctoral degree) by South African postgraduate students in Public Administration focus on issues that are of real importance — on issues related to the promotion by government of the various rights enshrined in the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

Consequently, this article reports on an analysis of information available on the Nexus database of the NRF about completed masters dissertations and doctoral theses in Public Administration from 2000 to 2005. The purpose of this article is to provide a profile of South African masters and doctoral research in Public Administration in terms of institution, type of qualification and research issues/themes.

Research design

A survey of previous evaluations of research in Public Administration shows that the different studies had different purposes and that different designs were consequently used. Adams and White (1994:565–576) focused on the methods and quality of dissertations (theses), while Box (1992:62–69) compared Public Administration to other fields, assessed the style of scientific writing, the usefulness of research and the issues of central concern to Public Administration. Brewer et al (1999:373–382) developed a model of graduate research productivity. Brooks (2002:259–266) and Callahan (2001:493–499) discussed the ‘big issues’ or ‘big questions’ as means of research classification. Cleary (2000:446–455) analysed doctoral dissertations in terms of research purpose, validity, theory testing, causal relationship, importance of topic and cutting edge. He used dissertation abstracts as units of observation. Perry and Kraemer (1986:215–226) classified articles (not dissertations) according to subject matter, for example administrative theory, public management, citizen participation, public policy, planning, accountability, personnel, finance, intergovernmental relations, urban and regional government, state government, federal government and others. This approach is more or less similar to the approach I used in categorising articles published in a peer-reviewed journal (Wessels, 2005:1505). In that case, the categories used were unit standards for Public Administration and Management, which can also be regarded as ‘subject matter’ and as a framework for classification of the topics or the research issues of the articles.

As the aim of this article is to provide a profile of South African masters and doctoral research in Public Administration, it was necessary to develop a design specifically applicable for that purpose. Consequently, the following questions were taken as points of departure:

- Which institutions of higher education in South Africa offer masters and doctoral programmes in Public Administration?
- What is the ratio between completed doctoral theses, research masters and coursework masters dissertations in Public Administration?
- What is the trend of completed masters and doctoral research in Public Administration from 2000 to 2005?
- What are the most popular research themes/issues researched by masters and doctoral candidates?

The unit of analysis and unit of observation for this article

The unit of analysis for this article is South African masters and doctoral research in Public Administration and the unit of observation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:174) is the Nexus database administered by the NRF.

The time dimension of this research

As this will be the first analysis of South African masters and doctoral research in Public Administration on this scale (a previous study in this regard was done in 1986 by Brynard and Brynard [1986:68–125]), it was decided to do it over a fixed period, from 2000 to 2005. The reason for not including 2006 in this study is that the records of all the completed masters and doctoral research for that year have not yet all been captured in the database (Van den Berg, 2007). The advantage of such a longitudinal study over six years is that it makes an analysis of the trends in terms of research institution, type of qualification and research topic possible (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:93).

Points of focus

The unit of observation, namely the Nexus database, is observed in terms of the following characteristics: subject, year of completion, type of qualification, institution and topic. For the purpose of this study, only the following records in the database were selected for observation:

Subject:	Public Administration
Year of completion:	From 2000 until 2005
Type of qualification:	Either a doctorate, a research masters or a coursework masters degree
Institution:	Any institution of higher education where a masters or doctoral study in Public Administration has been completed
Topic:	The topics are categorised in terms of the categories of unit standards for Public Administration and Management (Wessels, 2005:1504).
Intended publication:	Either a dissertation or a thesis

Profile of South African Public Administration research

An analysis of the selected records of the Nexus database revealed the following profile regarding masters and doctoral research at South African universities for the period 2000 to 2005:

Type of qualification

As the unit of analysis for this article is completed masters and doctoral research in Public Administration, it is perhaps appropriate to start this profile sketch by focusing on masters and doctoral research output for the period under review. An analysis of the Nexus database shows that various masters and doctorates are offered by South African universities in Public Administration, Development Management, Development and Management, Development, Public and Development Management, Development Planning and Political Management. A closer reading of the database shows that all these terms refer to or are related to the subject field of Public Administration.

Various types of masters and doctorates are offered. Among the doctorates we find DPhil, DAdmin, DCom, DLitt et Phil, DPA, DTech and PhD. For the purpose of this analysis all these qualifications were coded as one category: doctorates. Where only one category of doctorates was identified and coded, the investigation revealed two categories of masters degrees, namely research masters dissertations and dissertations of limited scope as part of coursework masters. The following qualifications were coded as research masters: MAdmin, MA, MA (Public Management), MA (SW), MAdmin (Openbare Bestuur), MCom, MComm, MM, MSc, MSc (Development Planning), MSocSc, MTech, and MSocSc (PolDevStud). The third category is the coursework masters, which includes the following qualifications: MDev, MDevMan, MDevManag, M in Development and Management, M (Public and Development Management), MM (LGD), MM (P & DM), MM (P and DM), MM (P&DM), MMil, MPA, MPhil, and MPhil (Political Management). For all these coursework masters degrees the Nexus database indicates that the intended publication is a dissertation – not a dissertation of limited scope, a mini-dissertation or a research paper. In fact, the Nexus database does not make any distinction in the records between dissertations of research masters and dissertations of coursework masters. The above distinction is then the result of a cursory survey of the various institutions' official web pages to determine whether a specific qualification is a research degree or a coursework degree.

When the results of this research were presented at a conference to co-scholars, the selection of the MM (P&DM) offered by the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) as well as the MPA offered by the University of the Western Cape (UWC) as part of the category ‘coursework masters’ were questioned. According to the Nexus database Wits produced nearly 80 Masters of Management (MM) degrees, which were initially classified as coursework masters (dissertations of limited scope) during this period. However a revisit of the brochure for the MM degrees (Wits 2007:online) has shown that the MM degree is a ‘degree by dissertation’ and the MM (P&DM) is a coursework masters. The brochure also indicates that the coursework masters does not include a dissertation of limited scope, but only a research paper. Consequently the ‘dissertations’ as indicated in the Nexus database for the MM (P&DM) cannot be regarded as dissertations of limited scope and have to be removed from the calculations of postgraduate research output for the purpose of this article. A visit to the NRF also revealed that the Wits graduation programmes, which served as source documents for the Nexus database, indeed indicate the intended publication for the MM (P&DM) as being a research paper and not a dissertation of limited scope as indicated on the Nexus database. Consequently, all records of the Wits coursework masters with a research paper as intended publication have been removed from the list of records used for the purpose of this analysis.

According to the Nexus database the UWC produced 41 dissertations as part of the MPA degree during the period from 2000 to 2005. A more in-depth investigation of the information regarding the MPA of the website of the School of Government at UWC shows that the dissertation of the MPA is in fact a mini-dissertation (SOG 827 MPA Mini Dissertation) which carries a weight of 15% (confirmed on 4 June 2007 by Dr M Esau). A visit to the NRF also revealed that the UWC graduation programmes, which served as source documents for the Nexus database, indicate the intended publication for the MPA as being a dissertation, as indicated on the Nexus database, and not as a mini-dissertation as indicated on the official website. Consequently, irrespective of the fact that the Nexus database indicates the records for research through a MPA degree at UWC as a dissertation, the records of all the MPA ‘dissertations’ have been removed from the list of records used for the purpose of this analysis.

After the records of the Wits MM (P&DM) as well as the UWC MPA had been removed from the list of 470 records, the total number of records for this research was reduced to 342 records.

Table 1 reveals that during the period under review 342 doctoral and masters degrees were awarded by South African institutions of higher education, of which 22.22% were doctoral degrees, 52.63% were research masters and 25.15% were coursework master's.¹

Table 1: South African Public Administration post graduate research output, 2000–2005

<i>Qualification</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Cumulative frequency</i>	<i>Cumulative %</i>
Doctoral degrees	76	22.22	76	22.22
Research masters	180	52.63	256	74.85
Coursework masters	86	25.15	342	100.00

South African institutions of higher education offering masters and doctoral programmes in Public Administration

Table 2 shows that 18 institutions of higher education (which include five former Technicons, recently renamed as Universities of Technology) awarded masters or doctoral degrees which included dissertations or theses in the period 2000 to 2005. Stellenbosch University awarded the most degrees (23.68%), UWC was in second place with 14.62% and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) was in third place with 9.65%. Table 2 reveals that no less than 57.87% of all degrees awarded in the period under review were awarded by these three institutions. The institutions that awarded the fewest masters and doctorate degrees in Public Administration were Cape Technicon, Technicon Free State, University of Fort Hare, University of Venda and Vista University, which awarded only one each. These five institutions (22.72% of the total of 22 institutions) were responsible for 1.05% of the total number of masters and doctorates in Public Administration.

Table 2: South African institutions of higher education offering masters and doctoral programmes in Public Administration

Institution	Frequency	%
Stellenbosch University	81	23.68
University of the Western Cape	50	14.62
University of KwaZulu-Natal	33	9.65
North-West University	27	7.89
University of Cape Town	26	7.60
University of Pretoria	22	6.43
University of South Africa	21	6.14
University of Limpopo	17	4.97
University of the Witwatersrand	17	4.97
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	16	4.68
University of the Free State	14	4.09
Tshwane University of Technology	6	1.75
Cape Technikon	4	1.17
University of Johannesburg	4	1.17
Technikon Free State	1	0.29
University of Fort Hare	1	0.29
University of Venda	1	0.29
Vista University	1	0.29
Total	342	100.00

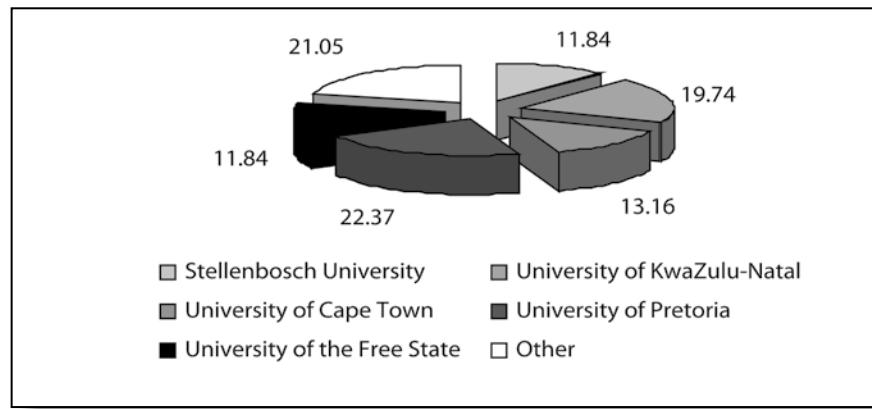
Types of qualifications per institution

What is the distribution of types of qualifications awarded per individual institution? Table 3 reveals a slightly different profile of the distribution of research output per institution if the three different types of qualification outputs are taken into consideration.

Doctorates

Of the 76 doctoral degrees awarded, the most (22.37%) were awarded by the University of Pretoria (Graph 1). UKZN was second with 19.74% of the degrees awarded, the University of Cape Town (UCT) was third with 13.16%, while the University of the Free State (UOFS) and the University of Stellenbosch were concurrently fourth with 11.84% each. Only five institutions (28% of the total) awarded no less than 78.95% of all the doctoral degrees. Another five did not award any doctorates in this period.

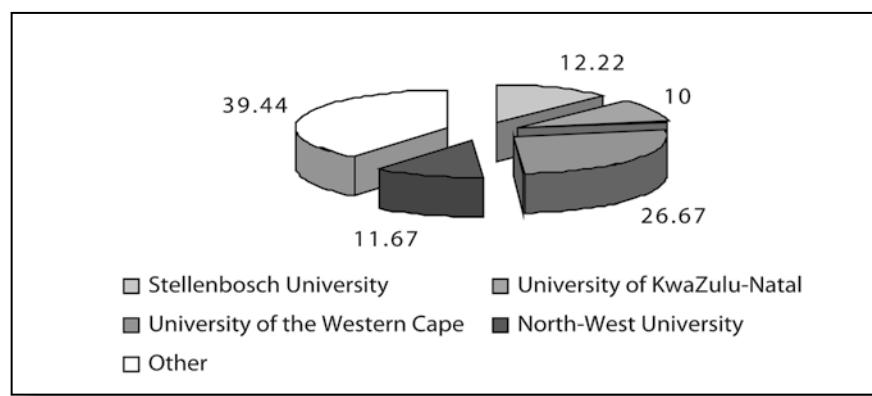
Figure 1: Doctorates per institution



Research masters

Of the 180 research masters in Public Administration awarded from 2000 to 2005, UWC awarded the most (26.67%) while Stellenbosch University was in the second place with 12.22%, the North-West University was third (11.67%) and UKZN was fourth (10%) (Figure 2). These four institutions (22.2% of the total number of institutions) were responsible for 60.56% of the total number of research masters for the particular period. Three institutions (16.7% of the total) did not award research masters during this period. In other words, of the total number of research masters awarded, 39.44% were awarded by 61.1% of the institutions.

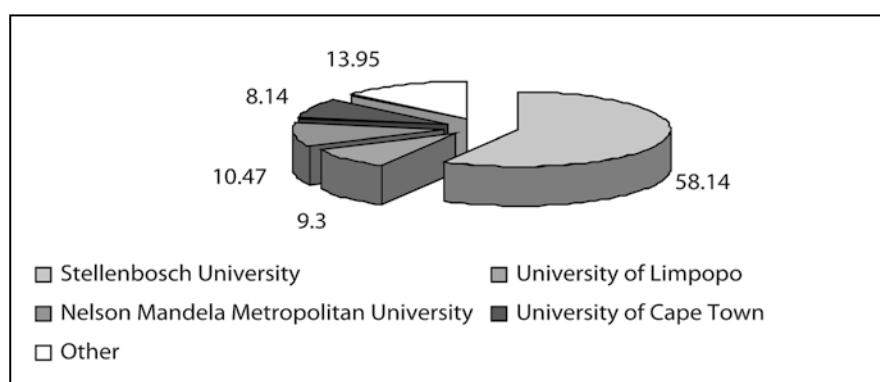
Figure 2: Research masters per institution



Coursework masters

With regard to the coursework masters it is important to note that not all coursework masters degrees include a dissertation of limited scope. The Nexus database lists only those in which dissertations of limited scope were submitted as part of the degree (e.g. MPA, MM and M Dev Man) and the titles of these dissertations appear on the graduation programmes of the particular universities. Of the 86 coursework masters dissertations in Public Administration listed in the Nexus database from 2000 to 2005, the majority were awarded by Stellenbosch University (58.14%), with the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in second place (10.47%), the University of Limpopo third (9.30%), and UCT fourth (8.14%). All together, these four institutions (22.2% of the total number of institutions) awarded 86.05% of all coursework masters for this period. No less than eight of the listed institutions (44.44%) did not award any coursework masters. This means that 33.33% of the institutions listed awarded 13.95% of the coursework masters.

Figure 3: Coursework masters per institution



Type of qualification per annum

Where Graphs 1-3 give a picture of the type of qualification awarded by the various institutions, Table 3 focuses on the type of qualification per annum. It shows a steady increase in Public Administration postgraduate research output since 2000 in terms of masters and doctoral degrees, with a total of 42 records. There was a peak of 80 records in 2003 and a sharp decline since then, with 46 in 2004 and 61 records in 2005. The steadiest annual growth of output is in

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doctorates, with the exception of 2004. That year also saw the lowest output of doctorates for the University of Pretoria, UKZN and UCT, which are also the best performers as regards doctoral research output (Addendum).

Table 3: Type of qualification per annum				
Year	Qualification			Total
Frequency percent Row Pct Col Pct	Doctoral degrees	Research Masters	Coursework Masters	
2000	6 1.75 14.29 7.89	19 5.56 45.24 10.56	17 4.97 40.48 19.77	42 12.28
2001	11 3.22 17.74 14.47	38 11.11 61.29 21.11	13 3.80 20.97 15.12	62 18.13
2002	16 4.68 31.37 21.05	28 8.19 54.90 15.56	7 2.05 13.73 8.14	51 14.91
2003	15 4.39 18.75 19.74	48 14.04 60.00 26.67	17 4.97 21.25 19.77	80 23.39
2004	10 2.92 21.74 13.16	20 5.85 43.48 11.11	16 4.68 34.78 18.60	46 13.45
2005	18 5.26 29.51 23.68	27 7.89 44.26 15.00	16 4.68 26.23 18.60	61 17.84
Total	76 22.22	180 52.63	86 25.15	342 100.00

Research masters show a steady increase, from 19 in 2000 to 27 in 2005 (Table 3). However, this trend is characterised by two sharp peaks, one in 2001 (38 degrees awarded) and 2003 (48 degrees awarded). The institutions responsible for the peak in 2001 were the Stellenbosch University and Wits, which both experienced their own peaks in research masters during that particular year. The institutions responsible for the peak in 2003 are UWC and UKZN, which both experienced their individual peaks during that year.

Coursework masters is the only category that remains more or less the same, with 17 awarded in 2000 and 16 awarded in 2005 (Table 3). However this trend is characterised by a sharp decline in 2002 when only seven degrees were awarded.

Category of topics

It may be interesting to know what the profile is with regard to masters and doctoral research output per institution over a specific period. It is perhaps of greater value to know what the important issues are on which the various researchers focus their research. There are various ways of determining the most important issues in Public Administration scholarship. As far back as 1986 Perry and Kraemer (1986:217) analysed articles published in the *Public Administration Review* inter alia by subject matter, such as the following:

1. Administrative theory
2. Public management
3. Citizen participation
4. Public policy
5. Planning
6. Accountability
7. Personnel
8. Finance
9. Intergovernmental relations
10. Urban and regional government
11. State government
12. Other

A more recent example is a report by Michael McConkey (with Patrice Dutil), published by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada during 2006 under the title ‘The top ten topics in Public Administration scholarship: an international perspective’ (McConkey 2006). In this study 48 scholarly journals from around the world were selected and the contents of the last two years were analysed. The report lists the following 10 topics as ‘the ones that have attracted the most interest’ (McConkey, 2006: Executive summary):

1. Regulation
2. Health policy
3. Organisational culture
4. Environmental policy
5. Democratic dialogue
6. Public administration of quasi-public organisations
7. Governance
8. Technology change and policy
9. Municipal and urban public administration
10. Performance evaluation

For the purpose of this study the same classification system was followed as that which was used to provide a profile of research issues reported in the *Journal of Public Administration* (JOPA) from 2000 to 2004, namely the 11 main categories of the proposed unit standards for Public Administration and Management (Wessels, 2005:1504–1505). This classification system is far from flawless and ideal, but is still a workable tool. The 11 categories are as follows:

1. Policy analysis and management (POL)
2. Development management (DEV)
3. Public organisational development and management (ODM)
4. Managing public service delivery (PSD)
5. Human resources management (HRM)
6. Financial management and procurement (FMP)

7. Information, knowledge, communication and technology management (ICT)
8. Public Management Ethics (ETH)
9. Public Administration and Management History, Theory and Research (HTR)
10. Disaster studies (DIS)
11. Inter-governmental relations (IGR)

A pilot study showed a need for at least two additional categories so the following categories were added for the purpose of this study:

12. Public participation (PP)
13. Other

Table 4 on the next page reveals the following profile regarding the popularity of category of topics for masters and doctoral studies over the selected period. The most popular categories for research were PSD and ODM, both with 20.18% of the total research output falling within this category. Research masters constitute 46.38% of the research on PSD as well as ODM and seems to be the main reason for the popularity of PSDs and ODMs. In the third place is HRM with 18.42% of the total research output falling in this category. Again, research masters contribute 58.73% to the popularity of this category. No less than 58.78% of the total research output has been devoted to research on topics falling in three of the 13 categories. This profile of the top three research topics corresponds with the profile of ‘research issues reported in the *Journal of Public Administration* (JOPA) in the period 2000–2004’ (Wessels 2005:1505).

Table 4: Category of research topic by qualification type

<i>Category of topics</i>	<i>Qualifications</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Frequency</i> <i>Per cent</i> <i>Row Pct</i> <i>Col Pct</i>	<i>Doctoral degrees</i>	<i>Research Masters</i>	
PSD	19 5.56 27.54 25.00	32 9.36 46.38 17.78	18 5.26 26.09 20.93	69 20.18
HRM	8 2.34 12.70 10.53	37 10.82 58.73 20.56	18 5.26 28.57 20.93	63 18.42
ODM	19 5.56 27.54 25.00	32 9.36 46.38 17.78	18 5.26 26.09 20.93	69 20.18
POL	9 2.63 27.27 11.84	17 4.97 51.52 9.44	7 2.05 21.21 8.14	33 9.65
FMP	3 0.88 13.64 3.95	14 4.09 63.64 7.78	5 1.46 22.73 5.81	22 6.43
PP	1 0.29 6.25 1.32	13 3.80 81.25 7.22	2 0.58 12.50 2.33	16 4.68
DEV	6 1.75 35.29 7.89	8 2.34 47.06 4.44	3 0.88 17.65 3.49	17 4.97
Other	5 1.46 20.00 6.58	7 2.05 28.00 3.89	13 3.80 52.00 15.12	25 7.31

Table 4: Category of research topic by qualification type

<i>Category of topics</i>	<i>Qualifications</i>			<i>Total</i>	
	<i>Frequency</i> <i>Per cent</i> <i>Row Pct</i> <i>Col Pct</i>	<i>Doctoral degrees</i>	<i>Research Masters</i>	<i>Coursework Masters</i>	
ETH	5 1.46 33.33 6.58	8 2.34 53.33 4.44	2 0.58 13.33 2.33		15 4.39
ICT	2 0.58 25.00 2.63	5 1.46 62.50 2.78	1 0.29 12.50 1.16		8 2.34
HTR	4 1.17 40.00 5.26	5 1.46 50.00 2.78	1 0.29 10.00 1.16		10 2.92
IGR	2 0.58 66.67 2.63	1 0.29 33.33 0.56	0 0.00 0.00 0.00		3 0.88
DIS	1 0.29 33.33 1.32	2 0.58 66.67 1.11	0 0.00 0.00 0.00		3 0.88
Total	76 22.22	180 52.63	86 25.15		342

Category of topics per qualification

Is the popularity of specific categories of research topics the same for all the types of qualifications? For doctoral studies Table 4 shows that the most popular categories of research topics are PSD and ODM, both constituting 25% of all the doctoral output in each category. In the third place is POL with 11.84% of the doctoral output and fourth is HRM with 10.53% of all theses. In total, 72.37% of all theses falls within the boundaries of these four categories.

The profile for the research masters studies is slightly different (Table 4) with HRM as the most popular research category constituting 20.56% of the research masters output. In the second place are PSD and ODM, each constituting 17.78% of the research masters output. In the fourth place with 9.44% is POL. These four categories form 65.56% of the total output for research masters.

The profile for the coursework masters shows an equal preference of 20.93% each to topics in the categories PSD, HRM and ODM. The fourth most popular category of topics for coursework masters is POL with 8.14% of the total number of coursework dissertations on topics in this category. Together these top four categories comprise 70.93% of the total number of coursework dissertations.

Where all four categories of topics can be described as practice biased, the category HTR is more ‘theoretical’ in nature. Although this category is the 10th most popular category overall (2.92% of dissertations and theses), it might be worthwhile to analyse its profile in terms of type of qualification. This analysis shows that when a topic in this category is researched, 50% of the candidates do it for research masters and 40% for a doctoral degree. It is actually the 40% preference for the doctorate that is significantly higher than the total average of 22.22% preference for doctoral studies. Only the category IGR has a higher preference (66%) for doctorates. On the other hand, of the candidates doing research in the following categories of topics, fewer than the average of 22.22% do it for a doctoral degree: PP (6.25%), HRM (12.70%), FMP (13.64%) and PSD (18.97%).

A comparison of the respective profiles of the three types of qualifications shows that the four most popular categories of topics are more or less equally popular for all these types of qualifications, although there is a lower than average preference for doctoral studies in the categories HRM and PSD. It also shows that the less popular categories of topics (eg HTR and IGR) tend to be researched more by doctoral candidates.

Category of topics per institution

Under this heading we want to determine whether there is a possibility to identify institutional preference for specific topics. Although it is difficult to determine such a preference in the less popular categories of topics, it may be possible to determine such a preference in the three most popular ones, namely PSD, HRM, ODM and ODL.

The research shows that with regard to doctoral research in PSD, four

institutional leaders can be identified. Stellenbosch University produced the most (27.27%) of all the doctoral research on issues within this category, followed by three institutions with 18.18% each, namely UCT, UKZN and UOFS. UWC produced the most research masters dissertations in this category (29.03%), followed by Wits (25.81%), and Stellenbosch University produced the most coursework masters dissertations in this category (50%).

In the HRM category, UKZN takes the lead in doctoral research with 37.5% of all the doctoral theses on topics in this category. The University of Pretoria takes the second position with 25%. UWC produces the bulk (29.73%) of the research masters in this field, followed by Stellenbosch University with 21.62%. Stellenbosch University produced the majority of the coursework masters on HRM (83.33%).

In the ODM category the institutional leaders are as follows: the University of Pretoria produced 36.84% of all doctoral research in this category while the North-West University produced the majority of research masters in this category (21.88%) and Stellenbosch University produced most of the coursework masters dissertations on topics in this category (50%).

<i>Table 5: Institutional leadership in research topics</i>			
<i>Categories of research topics</i>	<i>Types of qualifications</i>		
	<i>Doctorates</i>	<i>Research Masters</i>	<i>Coursework Masters</i>
PSD	Stellenbosch University 27.27%	UWC 29.03%	Stellenbosch University 50%
HRM	UKZN 37.5%	UWC 29.73%	Stellenbosch University 83.33%
ODM	University of Pretoria 36.84%	North-West University 21.88%	Stellenbosch University 50%

Discussion

What are the most striking characteristics of the South African profile of masters and doctoral research in Public Administration? The characteristics of this

profile are revealed in terms of the following: type of qualification, research institution, year and category of topics.

Type of qualification

Table 1 shows that doctoral theses form 22.22% of the total number of masters dissertations or doctoral theses completed in the period under review. Does Public Administration produce sufficient doctorates, bearing in mind that doctoral research can be regarded as a ‘tool to educate students while contributing to knowledge’ (Cleary, 2000:454)? It is especially its characteristic as a source for new knowledge (Felbinger et al, 1999:459–463), its original contribution to a subject field (University of South Africa, 2007) and the fact that it is regarded by the NRF as a key driver (NRF, 2007a:8) that makes doctoral research an invaluable part of the research output of academic institutions. The statistics show that South African Public Administration’s ‘tool to educate students while contributing to knowledge’ forms 22.22% of the total research output. Is it too low? In his keynote address at the international conference entitled ‘Postgraduate supervision: state of the art and the artist’ in April 2007, Johann Mouton used the number of masters dissertations necessary to produce a doctoral thesis as a criterion to measure the efficiency of higher education institutions (Mouton, 2007). According to Mouton the South African average for the past 15 years (including all disciplines) is one doctoral thesis for every six masters dissertations. A further recalculation of the data in Table 4 shows that the Public Administration fraternity has converted approximately every sixth masters graduate into a doctorate in 2000. This figure improved in 2005 to approximately every second masters graduate. The average for the period 2000 to 2005 is one doctorate for approximately every three and a half masters graduates. In comparison with the total South African picture, the average of 22.22% doctorates for this period can be regarded as very positive.

In comparison, 25.15% of the total number of research output is the result of coursework masters (in other words, dissertations of limited scope). It is common knowledge that coursework masters are primarily used for advanced professional education and not for generating new knowledge. It seems reasonable to deduce from the above that there is a fair balance in South African Public Administration postgraduate research between contributing to the body of scholarly knowledge and advanced education for professionals.

Research institution

Although 18 institutions of higher education in South Africa produce masters or doctoral research in Public Administration, it seems that only two institutions dominate the research output in terms of numbers. These institutions are Stellenbosch University (23.68% of total research output), followed by UWC (14.62%), which are together responsible for 38.3% of the total research output. In the case of Stellenbosch University, 50% of output was generated by coursework masters dissertations, while 96% of the output of UWC was generated by research masters dissertations.

Category of topics

With regard to the observation by Streib, Slotkin and Rivera (2001:522) about the lack of an ‘invisible hand guiding researchers to areas where their efforts are needed the most’, it seems to be appropriate to ask whether the masters and doctoral research by South African Public Administration scholars focus on issues that are of real importance. Is there the necessary ‘congruence between academic research and the field of practice of public administration’ (Bolton & Stolcis, 2003:626–630)? In other words, are the most popular issues as reflected in Table 4 also a reflection of the needs of the practice of public administration, namely the South African government in all its spheres? An analysis of the *Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the second joint sitting of the third Democratic Parliament*, Cape Town, on 11 February 2005 reveals ‘a considerable overlap of issues of importance for the government of the day and research preferences by Public Administration scholars’ (Wessels, 2005:1510). In fact, the two categories of topics receiving the most attention in the address were PSD and HRM. These two categories were among the three most popular research categories for South African masters and doctoral research (Table 4). The fact that there seems to be a considerable overlap between the South African government’s knowledge needs and the research preferences of postgraduate researchers in Public Administration may perhaps address concerns within government about the relevance of Public Administration research. On the other hand, it may create another type of concern, namely that researchers in Public Administration may not be busy with activities of science and that they may not be contributing to scientific knowledge (Wessels, 2005:1502). Only an analysis of actual dissertations and theses will provide some form of clarity on this issue.

Conclusion

This article analyses the records on the Nexus database of the NRF on completed masters dissertations and doctoral theses in Public Administration from 2000 to 2005. The following profile of completed South African masters and doctoral research in Public Administration emerged:

Public Administration masters and doctoral research seems to be dominated by two institutions (Stellenbosch University and UWC), which are together responsible for 38.3% of the total research output. There is an equal distribution between coursework masters and doctoral theses with the bulk of the output generated by research masters dissertations. More research is necessary to determine whether there is a difference in the quality and type of contribution made by coursework dissertations and research dissertations respectively.

Bearing in mind that the NRF regards doctoral degrees as a 'key driver for all its programmes' (NRF, 2007a:8), the numbers of doctorates and masters produced in Public Administration compares very well with the South African average. The two institutions excelling in doctoral research output (the University of Pretoria and the UKZN) do not occupy the top two positions in the overall list of postgraduate research output in Public Administration as the number of doctoral degrees awarded is far less than the number of masters degrees awarded. With regard to research topics it seems that South African researchers in Public Administration are indeed guided by an 'invisible hand ... to areas where their efforts are needed the most' (Streib, Slotkin and Rivera, 2001:522), as the analysis has also shown that the bulk of the research is concentrated in three categories of research topics, of which two correspond strongly to the needs expressed by government.

As this research has not touched on the theme of methodological quality, which was identified in the introduction of this article, additional research is necessary to provide a South African profile of the research methods used by masters and doctoral researchers in Public Administration. Future research should also analyse the specific topics within these categories to determine whether this research, although devoting some attention to the knowledge needs of government, indeed addresses and solves real problems and by doing so leads to the improvement of practice. Furthermore, additional research is needed to evaluate the 22.22% of the research output that is doctoral research to determine whether it indeed contributes to new knowledge in the field of Public Administration (Cleary, 2000:454).

This analysis of the Nexus database has provided us with a profile of Public Administration postgraduate research in terms of institution, type of qualification and category of topic. This profile sets the scene for further research.

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Note

- 1 Mr. R.N.G. Hall, Head of Research Support at Unisa’s ICT Department, is responsible for the data processing and the compilation of all tables except Table 5.