COVER SHEET

'Silly, Soft and Otherwise Suspect': Doctoral education as risky business

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There is nothing like a public accusation directed at a doctoral program to mobilise university managers and academics. 'Super PhD Loses out to Blondes and Vampires'[1]. 'Dumbing Down Charge Denied'[2]. 'Academic Stripped of Doctoral Title'[3] - headlines such as these, whether they appear in the tabloid press or in more 'respectable' media sources, trumpet to all and sundry that something's rotten in that highest of higher education credentials, the doctorate. In so doing, they strike at the heart of any university's claim to quality research and teaching. Little wonder then that such headlines so often evoke a spate of defensive denials (including predictable counter-accusations about the erosion of academic freedom) and/or a rush of re-assurances on the part of the university in question, followed closely by a flurry of quality assurance paperwork within the said university, and a frisson of nervousness in other universities on guard against guilt by association.

In this paper, we are seeking to provide an account of doctoral education that is unusual in that it is focused on the seamy side of doctorates – on scandal and its minimisation. Our interest is in what counts as scandal, and what is done either to ensure against the danger of scandal or to control reputational damage to a doctorate once it has occurred. Before moving to a thematic reading of the doctorate-as-scandal, we provide a conceptualisation of risk as an organisational logic for producing the practices of reputational management, and we briefly recover the 'forgotten history' of doctoral education in Australia, focusing on the doctorate a controversial newcomer to the academy. This historicising move, when taken together with contemporary theorising of rationalities of risk, allows for a thematic reading of current risks for doctoral education that is knowing rather than naïve, situated rather than self-evident.

Risk and higher education
Scandal is one effect of the failure to manage risk. As Anthony Giddens (2002) reminds us, the idea of risk – of "hazards that are actively assessed in relation to future possibilities" (p.22) – is a modernist notion necessary to a society that "lives after the end of nature" (p.27), that is, after magic, cosmology and the fates have given way to scientific calculation and/as insurance. Giddens understands the modernist notion of risk as giving rise to "a new moral climate" in which social organisations are increasingly focused on danger – the danger of failing to perform in ways that are morally and politically, as well as organizationally, acceptable.

This risk consciousness does important work as a focus of organizational knowledge and thus for staff development and performance. As Beck (1992) argues, risk society is characterized by negative logic, a shift away from the management and distribution of material/industrial 'goods' to the management and distribution of 'bads', i.e., the control of knowledge about danger, about what might go wrong and about the systems needed to guard against such a possibility.

Concerns about the capacities of Australian universities to self-manage around risk – its identification and its minimization - have been a theme of successive governments in recent times. They are made explicit in government bureaucrat Michael Gallagher's (2000) summation of outcomes of discussions between the Australian Federal

[1] *Sun Herald* 13 July, 2003, p.15
[2] *Australian Financial Review*, 3 Nov 2003, p.33
[3] *The Courier Mail*, 6 Jan, 2004, p.3

Government's Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, now DEST) and senior university executives. He states that these discussions pointed to "a number of failures" (p.38) that he links to the "trial and error dimension" of university management practice to date. According to Gallagher, it is the lack of uniformity of practice within universities that is the key culprit in producing failure. "The next phase of development", Gallagher concludes "…can be expected to be more formalized and professionally risk managed" (p.38). This sentiment is echoed in the Higher Education Management Review Committee in Australia (Hoare, Stanley, Kirkby and Coaldrake, 1995) and in the Dearing Report (1997) in the United Kingdom. Both Committees foreground the failure of universities to develop the sort of management culture necessary to self-regulation in relation to organizational performance.

Risk management-as-risk-minimisation has now achieved the status of a high priority, institution-wide system of communication in all Western organisations, including universities. It is a system into which the local, disciplinary-specific or 'craft' knowledge of academics, administrators and auxiliary others must be plugged in order to count as the proper knowledge of the truly professional worker. It is not that local knowledge is being displaced altogether. Rather it is being made over as 'professional expertise' through a process that Ericson and Haggerty (1997) describe thus:

> [P]rofessionals obviously have 'know-how', [but] their 'know-how' does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p.104)

As 'professional experts', academics know, among other things, how to manage their teaching and research so that scandal is highly improbable. In the unlikely event of an accusation becoming public, the clear audit trail that is the hallmark of the true professional can be put to work to shore up institutional and individual reputation against the slings and arrows of outrageous and damning publicity.

The idea that academe is being made the subject of "routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions" may well be viewed as an Orwellian development in education. However, we are not seeking in this paper to make any moral or ideological judgment of this type. Thus we are not seeking to point the finger at 'managerialism' or any other sort of 'ism'. Nor are we seeking to advocate 'more effective' risk management. We are seeking rather to understand what doctoral practices come to count as so risky as to be scandalous, and with what effects on the nature of the work that academics and academic managers do in a doctoral program.

Risk-as-waste
Strategies for managing risk in higher degree programs around the world are not uniform. 'Post-welfare' higher education systems such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand tend to exhibit more overt regulatory pressure from government than those in Europe or the USA. This reflects a shift in the positioning of government with respect to higher education, as certain governments move from being patrons of universities to being buyers of higher education services and products (McWilliam and O'Brien, 1999). For 'post-welfare' governments (e.g., Australia, New Zealand and the UK), the

twin imperatives of maximising the productivity of higher degrees and improving the risk management practices of universities are a crucial part of the new agenda. According to the *Knowledge and Innovation* policy statement (Kemp, 1999), the training of HDR students constitutes a major resource in terms of research productivity, academic renewal and dissemination of "knowledge and skills within and between the research and wider communities" (p. 17). Part of this new risk management agenda involves "reduc[ing] the high rates of drop-out and significant waste of both talent and investment" (DETYA, 2000: 10), through new models of government funding that "recognize and reward those institutions that provide high-quality research training environments and support excellent and diverse research activities" (DETYA, 2001a: 4). The effect is to render higher degree programs operating within publicly funded universities more financially accountable to government as the representative of the tax-paying public.

The rise of a public demand for waste identification and eradication is argued by Lawson (1999) to be one marker of greater public interest in the funding of higher education in general and research training in particular. Lawson elaborates thus:

> Because higher education is valued, it is potentially a commodity. But it is only a commodity worth paying for if it can be made to seem scarce. Once it is scarce it can be competed for, accounted for, and subject ed to audits that will inevitably disclose how those scarce resources are being wasted…higher degree education…has been redefined as a 'scarce' commodity which we can ill-afford to 'waste'. (p.11)

Lawson goes on to demonstrate the ways in which conflations of postgraduate student data relating to attrition and completion rates render the field vulnerable to accusations of waste. Most importantly, he notes how such accusations, once made, continue to be fed by dubious claims about the irrelevance of much higher degree study and employer dissatisfaction with higher degree graduates (p.11).

Public suspicion around the possibility that doctoral standards might be in decline work through a similar 'waste-identification' logic. Such allegations are made both within and outside the sector, and may target 'alternative' doctoral programs (eg, professional doctorates, honorary doctorates) and alternative pathways within the PhD (eg, PhD by Publication) by raising questions around the extent to which they are deserving of the award 'doctorate'.

Concerns about the exact nature and purpose of honorary doctorates are long-terms within and outside the academy and would thus demand fuller analysis than can be accomplished within the confines of this paper, although we do allude to some public unease in relation to 'silliness' and honorary doctorates later in the discussion. Alternative pathways within PhD programs are certainly a source of consternation in terms of their management within the higher education sector, but the matter of whether or not a particular journal is of high enough standing, or a number of publications is sufficient, or whether publications are of sufficient length, or whether and how co-authored articles should be accommodated – all high stakes issues that pre-occupy academics and higher degree managers - are unlikely to be of interest outside the sector. Journalists looking for 'scandalous' copy have shown themselves to be much less interested in such matters than they are in odd PhD topics and forms

of academic dishonesty and/or malpractice such as plagiarism or 'bogus' qualifications.

However, professional doctorates, as relative newcomers to the doctoral program ensemble, have had a more recent and troubled passage to legitimacy, and have thus been a prime focus for gleaning evidence of 'declining standards'. In 'DBAs dogged by uneven standards' (*The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 4 March, 2002), Jim Buckell foregrounds a Monash University report that raises just this sort of suspicion in relation to 'variations' across the 20 Doctor of Business Administration degree programs operating in Australian universities:

> Until a benchmark of admission criteria, teaching and research standards, and expected outcomes at the DBA level is established, then poorer quality DBA degrees will continue to compromise the integrity and acceptability of the DBA as a suitable alternative to the PhD. (p25)

The article goes on to note the number of equivalent full-time students enrolled in such degrees and the average cost for a degree ($35,000). What is implied here is that, as a financial investment, such programs may give poor returns. Our point is not to become part of a debate about whether or not such claims are justified, but to foreground the work they do as a discourse about doctoral education, framing it as a suspect terrain ripe for risk management.

In the context of substantial cuts to public funding support for universities, such claims have been made as part of a strong call from governments, and within the sector itself, for universities to "be highly business aware" (Considine et al., 2001: 32), and to focus more squarely on the needs and priorities of industry, rather than pander to 'in-club' academic fads and fashions. While the imperative here is not a simple matter of the university operating as a business, nevertheless universities are to provide the public (and private) goods (education and training of knowledge workers) that underpin the production of private goods by other agents (Considine et al., 2001). In terms of higher degree training, this means ensuring that no student must fail to acquire the skills and knowledge to undertake research in diverse settings (including industry) and in the context of the new global knowledge economy (DETYA, 2001b). Thus, identification of "deficiencies in the current structure and performance of higher education research and research training" has focused squarely on unacceptable waste of resources associated with long completion times and low completion rates (Kemp, 1999: 2). Waste is danger, and accusations of waste, whether as 'silly' topics, 'soft' programs or credential skulduggery, is always potentially scandalous.

Risk events
The cultural theorizing of risk is a conceptual field which allows us to investigate the conditions of possibility for doctoral practices **to become vulnerable to accusations of waste, and thereby** to become scandalous. Put another way, risk theory can help us understand how a particular research topic, teaching practice or program can be *thinkable* as a serious danger, and with what effect on universities.

The conceptual model of "the social amplification of risk" provided by Kasperson et al (1998) is helpful here. Working out of the assumption that the investigation of risk is both "a scientific activity and an expression of culture" (p.149), these scholars fill a

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gap in risk research by explaining how an apparently minor risk (e.g., an unusual thesis topic) might produce massive public reactions. They use the term "risk events" to describe "occurrences that are manifestations of the risk and that initiate signals pertaining to the risk" (p.150). A risk event is usually "specific to a particular time and location", but comes to "interact with psychological, social and cultural processes" in ways that "heighten or attenuate public perceptions of risk and related risk behaviour" (p.150). An allegation gains the status of a "risk event" if and when it interacts with other socio-cultural processes to produce behaviours that serve to increase the perceived danger, triggering demands for "additional organizational response and protective actions or impeding needed protective actions" (p.151). This explains, at least in part, the doubleness of the play of risk, as it loops back up on itself, thereby proliferating the actions and reactions that constitute its management.

As a risk event, a particular allegation is initially neither a 'true' (absolute) nor a 'distorted' (socially determined) risk within the academy. Risk events signal practices that are then discovered to exist in universities and become the object of damning publicity. For example, the practice of providing extra support to international students with English as a second language may well be 're-invented' as a 'soft' doctoral program, just as the requirement that an examiner take account of cross-cultural issues when examining the products of a doctoral program may well be re-invented as 'soft marking'. This is not to say that 'soft marking' is entirely fictive – merely to argue that it is a term which arises at this point in history to make a particular kind of sense (about assessment processes) and so to do a particular kind of work in governing academic practices. As a knowledge object, 'soft marking' works through a negative logic that mobilizes more efficient surveillance practices in universities which understandably fear negative attention from potential markets, governments, other funding bodies and the general community. When something happens that is alleged to be an instance of 'soft marking', a whole organizational culture is mobilized by the naming of this occurrence – it is now a risk event and thus in need of risk management.

Risky history
Risk events mobilised by doctoral education practices are not new. It takes only a limited foray into the doctorate's shady past to begin to see that the doctorate, far from being the gold standard of university programs, has been a very risky enterprise indeed for universities. Certainly at the turn of the twentieth century, it was deemed within the academy that original investigation, the art and science of true research, would never be forthcoming from "mere training" of the sort that was represented by the PhD (Rae, 2002). Training could only mean "damage to originality that slavish pursuit of [a]degree has caused" (Hoyle, cited in Rae, 2002: 131), and so the PhD remained suspect for decades in terms of its legitimacy as an induction into the mysterious and tightly bounded world called 'research'. 'Training-in-originality' was clearly oxymoronic, and was declared to be so by many distinguished persons within the academy. As a teaching qualification in earlier times, the doctorate also suffered from the fact that "bribery was by no means unknown" (Haskins, 1963: 230) in its conferral.

Having shrugged off some of the more dubious aspects of its past (or alternatively handed them on to the emerging 'professional doctorate'), the PhD now occupies a

much more noble symbolic position, and this means that it is highly vulnerable if and when an allegation of waste, low standards or otherwise shonky practice, can be made to stick. In our reading of recent media allegations that relate to doctoral practice in Australia and elsewhere, we have been able to identify three broad thematics **which are characteristic of a discourse of waste** – namely, allegations of 'silliness' in relation to thesis content, allegations of 'softness' in relation to entry, rigour and assessment, and allegations of suspect conduct and/or credentials.

Silly doctorates
One key marker of doctoral education-in-trouble is the identification of a particular thesis topic or dissertation as inappropriately trivial. A trawl of recent media allegations related to thesis topics reveals the unsurprising finding that most accusations of inappropriateness target the humanities in general and cultural studies in particular. Such allegations are likely to pit apparently serious, weighty and industry-relevant topics against apparently vapid and ephemeral ones. For example, "Super PhD Loses out to Blondes and Vampires" (*Sun Herald*, 13 July 2003, p.15) frames a "boring though worthy" PhD about superannuation being written by a "talented commerce graduate" as losing out to "a PhD about the supposed homosexuality of Jesus", "the desirability … of blondes", "Tattoos", "the divorce of Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise", the "neo-spiritualism of Wonder Woman and Xena, Warrior Princess", the "surf culture of Bali" and "vampires" (ibid). What is assumed in all of these media reports is that the content and quality of the thesis in its entirety can be understood and endorsed or dismissed on the basis of the title or an idea that is important within the larger dissertation.

In the *Sun Herald* article, the list of unworthy topics above precedes the assertion that there are currently "1550 Australian Postgraduate Awards at a cost of $87 million", with "more than 36,000 students studying for their PhDs" and so "competition is stiff" (ibid). The proposition in this article, then, is that one PhD student's thesis in a particular university, **whether 'silly' or not**, is in direct competition for places with those in a different faculty in a different university, and that universities are more likely to fund "fun" than substance. And that this is so despite the call for more industry relevance, all of which begs the question, "Are we getting value for money from our nation's most educated brains?" (ibid). The article concludes with a suggestion that a new formula for funding PhDs be applied to ensure that "the more 'fun' a topic, the less chance of funding" (ibid).

In essence, the allegation made in the media article is of waste through a failure of quality control, but it is more than this. In setting up a binary formulation in which 'sober' PhDs lose out to 'silly' ones, the risk becomes amplified as a failure of moral and ethical sensibility on the part of the university sector which cannot - or chooses not - to see its own folly and the injustice of its patronage. The writer of the sober and industry relevant doctorate is depicted as abjectly "leav[ing] his little room each day on campus to hunt for industry funding and work as a part-time tutor", "breaking [his]backside" as opposed to "people researching [silly] things that "attract funding".

The high protestantism of this appeal is reflected in similar media reports, e.g., "Thesis preaches gay gospel on Jesus" (*Hobart Mercury*, 29 May 2003, p.2), "Cappuccino courses not Nelson's cup of tea" (*South China Morning Post*, 25 Oct, 2003, p.2), "'Silly' degrees face the chop" (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 19 Oct 2003, p.1). In

these media articles the same PhD topics recur as exemplars of silliness and self-indulgence. "Gay Jesus" is particularly effective as a risk event because it works as both a signifier of silliness and a symptom of post-Christian moral decay. As "whacky subjects" (*South China Morning Post*, 25 Oct, 2003, p.2) or "bizarre degrees" (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 19 Oct 2003, p.1), the thesis titles come to stand for the stupidity of universities in general i.e., "[i]f a university is silly enough to offer a particular course…." (ibid), and thus constitute a direct assault on the processes and practices that universities use to manage their programs.

As Giddens (2002) reminds us, the moral climate of risk is characterised by a push and pull, in that claims of negligence, waste and cover-up are inevitably accompanied by counter-claims of scandalmongering and needless interference. Little wonder then that academics are cited in these same articles as "warn[ing] against students being banned from freedom of thought" (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 19 Oct 2003, p.1), or that a political opponent of the federal Minister threatening to intervene declares this to be "an astounding attack on academic freedom" (ibid). Of course, this is not all that universities need to do by way of a response but it is certainly important that some public response is made and this is an imperative arising out of demands for greater public accountability from universities in general. In reconstituting "academic freedom" as self-indulgence and the squandering of public funds, 'Gay Jesus' and similar risk events create work for the university, and it is work that is often unprecedented and demanding.

'Soft' doctorates
A similar push and pull has been evident around allegations of 'soft' or 'dumbed down' doctoral programs in general. It goes without saying that 'silly' doctorates would, ipso facto, be vulnerable to charges of 'softness'. But 'softness' is an allegation that extends its reach beyond questionable research topics. In recent years, accusations of 'soft marking' in the Australian media, e.g., "Failed students make the grade" (*The Courier Mail*, 3 February, 2001: 1), "Universities' testing times" (*The Advertiser*, 10 February, 2001: 67), "Marking inquiry exposes glitches" (*The Australian*, 6 June, 2001: 23), "Unis get poor marks for evaluation practices" (*The Australian*, 27 June, 2001: 31) tend to target one alleged instance, but implicate all public universities in "perpetuating a fraud" (*The Courier Mail*, 3 February, 2001:1), and thereby abusing the public trust that is made tangible in government funding. Importantly, such reportage serves not merely to target the activity but to identify particular client and stakeholder groups as 'riskier' than others in terms of the threat to standards.

In Australia, an often reiterated connection continues to be drawn between 'soft marking' and "exclusive, fee-paying overseas students" (*The Courier Mail*, 3 February, 2001: 1). Allegations that "Students' free ride Unis 'favour fee-payers'" (*Herald Sun*, 16 May, 2001: 29), and that this constitutes a "dark side to export boom" (*The Australian* 20 June, 2001: 34) in Australian higher education, have prompted the question "Are international students getting a better deal?" (*Australian Financial Review*, 13 Sept, 2003, p.19). The call to "Lift Uni Standards…" (*Australian Financial Review*, 27 Oct, 2003, p.1) cannot be allowed to go unchecked by universities, who need to show how responsive they are to any potential danger from assessment activities involving international clients. The University of New South Wales, for example, felt the need to provide an assurance that the "enforcement of

English language requirements for international students [would]…be tightened", in line with "toughened written English requirements" (*The Australian*, 6 June, 2001: 23). The risk to universities here is a double one - "exclusive, fee-paying overseas students" is a population category which comes to signify high risk not just in relation to standards ('soft marking') but in terms of the potential loss of income for the university sector if this highly profitable client market is threatened.

The issue of organizational 'softness' has been extended to questions of workforce planning in universities. Allegations that markers of student exam papers are mainly casual staff who are "untrained, undervalued, underpaid, unsupervised and in some cases, inexpert" ("Unis get poor marks for evaluation practices", *The Australian*, 27 June, 2001: 31), foreground dangers in casualisation as 'soft staffing'. The culprit is held to be a lack of uniformity in the organizational practices of universities:

> Casual marking staff range from young postgraduate students who [do] not possess the qualification in which they [are] marking, to retired professors with a wealth of knowledge and expertise, through industry practitioners with lots of experience in the field but no educational background, and all stations in between. (*The Australian*, 27 June, 2001: 31)

A third level of risk comes into play when accusations involving low standards and international students are directed specifically to doctoral education. This has taken the form of an allegation that the 'softness' malaise is responsible for the failure of postgraduate international students to serve the interests of Australia as a 'knowledge nation', see "Dark side to export boom" (*The Australian* 20 June, 2001: 38). The evidence provided for this in media reports is that the number of potential international students doing postgraduate research degrees is falling and so too is the proportion of international students in doctoral and research masters programs (ibid, p.38). 'Soft' entry, 'soft' courses and 'soft' assessment for international students mean scant pay-off in knowledge production, so the argument goes.

While international students continue to bear the brunt of scrutiny in relation to allegations of softness, the honorary doctorate has a more long-term history of competing for space in terms of allegations of both softness and silliness. Claims that honorary doctorates are merely marketing devices or "publicity stunts" ('Unis roll out their honours" *The Courier Mail*, 3 Jan, 2004, p.1) and constantly fuelled when key sporting or other 'non-academic' public figures are the recipients of the award. The resultant fire demands immediate hosing down by Vice Chancellors whose counter-claims point to the ignorance of those who "[do] not understand the difference between an honorary award and a PhD" (ibid). The recent awarding of an honorary doctorate to actor Pierce Brosnan ("The Name's Bond, Dr. Bond", *ShowBiz Ireland News*, 6 March, 2004, p.1) was treated in the international media with mild incredulity, with Brosnan depicted as a "cheeky character" awarded for his "entrepreneurial and humanitarian achievements" (ibid).

Honorary doctorates become even more destabilizing as risk events when they implicate more long-term political and/or ideological struggles. The recent move by the Chinese University of Hong Kong to award an honorary doctorate to Singapore's Lew Kuan Yew prompted allegations that the university had conducted itself shamefully, in failing to take into account Lee's reputation for being "someone who is

good at using the law to suppress people" (*South China Morning Post*, 19 Nov, 2000, p.1). This allegation is an echo of earlier times in Queensland, when Premier Sir Jo Bjelke-Petersen's honorary doctorate of laws was met with strong resistance from within and outside universities.

Otherwise suspect
Of all the allegations that can erupt around doctorates, perhaps the one that is most potentially damaging is the allegation of a fraudulently obtained or claimed doctoral degree, the fabrication of research results, or a fraudulent claim to research done by others. As the most prestigious university degree, the doctorate is a desirable commodity in a university marketplace – and increasingly a corporate marketplace - characterized by academic inflation. Headlines such as "Academic stripped of doctoral title" (*The Courier Mail*, 6 Jan, 2004, p.1), "Trivial reprimand dulls learning's light" (*The Australian*, 29 December 2003, p.1), "Universities must act against fraud" (*The Australian*, 17 April, 2002, p.8), "Professor guilty of misconduct" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Dec, 2003, p.2) speak of the intensification of risk in the doctoral domain.

Of significance in terms of scandalworthiness is the extent to which a particular university is thought to have covered up or trivialized a serious breach of ethics and/or misconduct rather than simply being tolerant of a minor misjudgment. Where doctoral students become 'whistleblowers', alleging misconduct against their supervisors or fellow academics (e.g., (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 Dec, 2003, p.2; *The Australian*, 29 December 2003, p.1), reputational damage is swift and reputational rehabilitation is a long and difficult process. For those who are publicly named as falsely claiming a doctorate (*The Courier Mail*, 6 Jan, 2004, p.1), such rehabilitation is unlikely for the individual academic involved, because of the stigma that attaches to bogus qualifications as a signifier of untrustworthiness. Academic John Carmody argues the 'insider' perspective:

> There is nothing more important to the life and work of universities than truth. They are also, as Disraeli said, places of light, of liberty and of learning but all these must rest on a foundation of truth or everything is futile. That, inevitably, is why the UNSW Governing Council was so disturbed by …allegations of scientific dishonesty, financial fraud and bullying…(*The Australian*, 29 December 2003, p.1)

Better *and* worse
According to the logic of risk management, universities can guard against allegations of scandal only when there is more self-scrutiny, regularity and control within and across the entire organizational sector. This has been manifest in an "audit explosion" in universities (Strathern, 1997), as a defense against the sort of systemic arbitrariness that may allow misconduct to go unremarked or unchecked. For better *and* worse, academics are to 'plug in' to audit technologies, those "supremely reflexive" practices through which the university can make sense of itself as an organization, and "perform being an organization through the act of self-description" (Strathern, 1997: 318). This alignment of individual self-management practices and organizational management practices is crucial in preventing allegations of scandal, with all the harmful effects such allegations can produce.

Because doctoral awards are widely understood to be the most prestigious awards the university offers, there is more at stake when doctoral practices are alleged to be scandalous. It has become too dangerous for supervisors or students to indulge in the sort of arbitrary, maverick, quirky or idiosyncratic behaviour that is the stereotype of the Oxford don or the boffin graduate. We neither endorse nor bemoan this state of affairs. We do, however, note the "charming absurdities" (Hobart, 1993) that are produced when audit is mapped onto academe. Strathern (1997) gives a nice example when she cites the concerns expressed by a 1992 Academic Audit Report on the performance on Cambridge University. The Report upbraided the University for "not stating its 'aims and objectives'; for its 'informal and uncodified understanding about academic quality' and for the fact that 'the course and examination system does not lend itself to a tidy and straightforward procedure for programme design'" (p.311-312). In the singular consensus logic of audit, discontinuity prevents the organisation from being visible to itself and others – in Strathern's words, "the auditors could not see how Cambridge University worked" (p.312).

While hyper-rational systems of audit may be new for universities, it is useful to remember that accountability itself is not. It has always been expected that professors take professional and personal responsibility for good tutelage, that the good tutelage should have scholarship as its product. On medieval campuses, teaching guilds set rigorous standards for the conduct of pedagogical work and for admission to the profession of teaching, a vulnerable occupation in which a 'living' was dependent upon an academic's capacity to attract and hold students. The fact that a 'junior lecturer' (*batchelor*) often paid students "to attend his lectures and to criticise him so that he might see and rectify his mistakes" (Wiles, 1966, p.148) is testimony to this. This is a level of 'real world' accountability that would be risky indeed for many modern-day academics.

Fortunately or unfortunately, the logic that pertains in contemporary times is that it is only possible to know that a university is performing its educative function properly if its workings are made visible on the brightly lit forensic table of audit. So too the work of individuals in the university is made visible to themselves and others, including those who provide the public funding for universities. It is no accident that government policy-makers increasingly evoke the public interest in their calls for more guarantees that universities are 'performing'. Any residual monasticism that may still be lurking in sandstone corridors must be flushed out into the bright light of accountability – rendered visible to all, and most importantly to the academics who still have so much (self) work to do. Without this work, it is impossible to make all aspects of the academic self available for (risk) management.

Much time is currently spent by academics in universities bemoaning the 'audit explosion' that accompanies risk management, and particularly as it impacts on the changing nature of academic work, and the changing nature of the supervisor-student relationship. The "pervasive emphasis on external audit and quality assessment, mirrored by systems of internal quality assurance and control" has been criticised from a range of quarters (Davis, 1999; Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997; Kenway and Bullen, 2000; Shore and Wright, 1999) for adding a huge bureaucratic burden to an already stressed profession.

In broad terms, the tenor of the 'anti-audit' argument is that the instruments of accountability used to define and improve quality in higher education impose models

> **Comment [FoE1]:** z has been used previously

of organization that are incompatible with traditional academic work, particularly in the creative arts. Such arguments stress the "unbusiness-like nature" of academic endeavour, insisting that regulations for business practice are both "formulaic" and "shallow" as mechanisms for verifying academic labour (Davis, 1999: 7).

As a 'hyperactive' culture, risk management certainly makes for an intensification of work. What we have attempted to explore, by foregrounding 'scandal' in doctoral education is the risk minimizing dynamic in which *both* academics and academic managers are implicated, for better and worse. It is too easy to blame academic managers for the intensification of audit mechanisms focused on waste minimization. As publicly funded organizations, universities must guard against the possibility that allegations of waste (through silliness, softness or suspect practices) could become risk events. They must be prevented from occurring, because of the reputational damage that can result, and the impact of that damage on funding as well as on the capacity of the university to attract students.

The newly made, self-managing, hyper-rational doctoral 'expert' becomes less likely to be the target of allegations of silliness, softness and other suspect conduct, and is more likely to know how to respond appropriately if such allegations find their way into the public domain. What is less clear is whether and how the very same arbitrariness, maverick behaviour, quirkiness and idiosyncrasy that seems as important to intellectual life as it is anathema to audit, can be tolerated at all as a condition of doctoral education. Perhaps it may yet survive in some as yet unreconstructed sandstone cloister.

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Abstract:

This paper investigates how certain doctoral practices come to count as scandalous and with what effects on universities. To do so, it engages with a number of recent media allegations that relate to doctoral practice in Australia and elsewhere. The analysis of these allegations is developed in terms of three broad categories, namely allegations of silliness in relation to thesis content, allegations of softness in relation to entry, rigour and assessment, and allegations of suspect conduct and/or credentials. The impact of such allegations on university governance is then addressed.