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***On Being Accountable: Risk-consciousness and  
the doctoral supervisor***

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## ***On Being Accountable: Risk-consciousness and the doctoral supervisor***

### **Abstract**

*This paper analyses the imperative to greater accountability for doctoral supervisors as the effect of a regime of truth (Foucault, 1980) that we call risk management. It draws on new sociological theorising of risk to argue that risk management works as a moral climate that offers academics new ways of being properly professional by being more risk-conscious. Risk-conscious academics are increasingly on guard against student failure, declining standards and waste of resources. Thus they come to regulate themselves and their students in ways that are closely aligned to the ethos of the post-millennial university as a risk-conscious organisation. The paper considers the implications of this greater accountability for doctoral supervisors.*

Accountability in academia is nothing new. It has always been expected that professors take professional and personal responsibility for good tutelage, that the good tutelage should have powerful learning as its product, however powerful learning is understood in any historical time and place. On medieval campuses, teaching guilds set rigorous standards for the conduct of pedagogical work and for admission to the profession of teaching, a precarious 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) indicates the very high pressure on academics to be personally and professionally accountable for their teaching. Indeed, it could well be argued, notwithstanding the "audit explosion" in universities (Strathern, 1997), that academics today are under a great deal less pressure than their predecessors to produce high quality pedagogical goods.

This does not mean that medieval academics were universally good teachers. In commenting on his experience as a new staff member in a twelfth century university, Peter Abelard was disappointed to find that the pedagogical practices of his ageing mentor, William of Champeaux, were well below his own high standards:

I was at first welcomed but later cordially disliked, when I tried to refute some of his opinions and...argued against him and sometimes seemed superior in disputation...I a mere youth, conspired to conduct classes...with what envy our Master began to grow green.... For one that had earlier had some students, such as they were...he lost them all and was so compelled to give up teaching.... [He was an] old man for whom long practice rather than ingenuity had made a name. To whom if anyone went uncertain as to any question, he came away more puzzled. He was indeed a wonder in the eyes of his auditors but of no account in the sight of those who asked him questions. He had a wonderful command of language but contemptible sense and no reasoning power. When he lit the fire, he filled the house with smoke, not with light...(in Thorndyke, 1975, pp.3-6)

While envy and suspicion of youthfulness may well be seen to be as an unfortunate but understandable product of an ageing ego, there are other allusions in Abelard's reflection which speak quite directly to the matter of supervisory quality. 'Losing all one's students' was a stark and irrefutable symptom of pedagogical failure directly attributable to the low esteem in which one was held in terms of one's capacity to shed scholarly light. Then, as now, students were attracted to rigour and energy; they eschewed pomp and tediousness and literally voted with their feet. Thus high student attrition rates were explicit evidence of poor quality teaching in the part of an individual academic.

Peter Abelard certainly attracted more than his share of admiring students, but not without achieving notoriety in the process. And we know that he suffered dearly for his sexual dalliance - more dearly than most would consider proper or appropriate today, despite the now ubiquitous discourse of "the lecherous professor" (O'Brien, 2000). It is, however, possible to understand his transgressive relationship with student Heloise as other than a narrowly personal failure. It could also be judged by modern standards as a negative consequence of the medieval university's failure to be flexible, adaptable and inclusive in relation its student clients. After all, university rules did not allow Heloise to mingle with thousands of other (male) students at the Ecole de Cloitre de Notre Dame, and the "private lessons" she was to receive in the

philosopher's room were "much more likely to go beyond the didactic sphere than a public lecture" (Le Doeuff, 1977: 3).

In contemporary times such 'dalliances' are not countenanced. There are a few, however, who have argued, somewhat dangerously for themselves and others, that 'amorousness' is the stuff of which good pedagogical relations are made. Lacanian scholar Jane Gallop argued this case when formally responding to charges of "quid pro quo sexual harassment" made against her by two of her female postgraduate students. In her book *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (1997), Gallop, "Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin" (cover notes), elaborated the case for "amorous consensual relations" as follows:

At its most intense -- and I would argue its most productive -- the pedagogical relation between teacher and student is, in fact, a 'consensual amorous relation'. And if schools decide to prohibit not only sex but 'amorous relations' between teacher and student, the 'consensual amorous relation' that will be banned from our campuses might just be teaching itself. (1997: 57)

Her student complainants, both women, accused Gallop of what she herself acknowledges to be "serious crimes -- sexual harassment, discrimination, and abuse of power" (p. 96). Gallop does not argue that such crimes could not exist, or that they could not be perpetrated by a woman. While one complaint was dismissed by the university as improbable, the university found Gallop to be at fault in relation to the other complaint. At no stage did Gallop deny the act of kissing one of her postgraduate students. Indeed, she insists that the kiss was "both brazen and public" (p. 92), having taken place in a "local lesbian bar" (p. 88) full of participants from a graduate student gay and lesbian conference that had just ended. Her defence was that:

It was a performance. By that I don't mean that I wasn't really kissing her or that I didn't find it sexy. What I mean is that we didn't just happen to be seen kissing, but we kissed like that because we knew we were being watched. And it was precisely the knowledge of being watched that made it sexy. (pp. 90-91)

Gallop used her powerful command of Lacanian theory – and her capacity to historicise the problem - to argue that a kiss can be seen as both positive (a proper pedagogical act) and negative (the improper act of a pedagogue). Needless to say, her argument would be unlikely to convince any risk-conscious university manager in postmillennial Australia.

While the ‘good’ teacher/student relationship is itself a concept that continues to move around, it also retains some traces of the past. As Yun Lee Too (1995) understands it, the idea that the relationship between teacher and student needs to be “observed, suspected, regulated, controlled and disciplined”, is the outcome of “the pedagogical contract and concomitant idea of unworldly and disinterested teacher” which we have inherited from Greek antiquity. Socratic disapproval of any commodification of the pedagogical relationship as “give and take” was expressed in that philosopher’s opposition to the practice of sophistic teachers of giving public instruction for a fee. However, it should not be assumed that the sophists were men who cared less about virtue than the philosophers who criticized them. While their content varied in terms of its wisdom, the sophists “professed themselves as masters of virtue” (Untersteiner, 1954: xv), the measure of virtue in this case being the ability of the teacher to overcome all physical and intellectual passions. Untersteiner cites Georgias as one Sophist who apparently achieved this state in his 109 years:

[Georgias] explained his longevity as being due to “never having done anything for the sake of giving pleasure to another” . . . he did not allow himself to be deflected by anything which might injure his health . . . but also refused to be troubled by other people’s praise or blame or by the intervention of a fact which might disturb his thought . . . His moral character and his genius attracted to him such affection that he was followed by many disciples.  
(p. 94)

In the modern university, the idea that the moral fitness of a teacher involves “never having done anything for the sake of giving pleasure to another” would be deemed arrogant teacher-centredness. However, what was important here in terms of maintaining standards is the strength of the claim to ‘indifference at its best’.

Georgias, while teaching for money, could not be lured away from his own high standard of pedagogical accountability. True pedagogical accountability meant ignoring student desires in order to focus entirely on the ‘proper virtue’ of seeking after truth. The most significant risk lay in ‘being distracted’ by the students from this most important work.

In drawing attention to the long university tradition of demanding quality teaching and learning (including exemplary interpersonal conduct from academics), I am seeking to re-present accountability *as both old and new*. Whether we look to ancient Greece or to medieval Europe or any other time and place to ‘remember’ accountability within the pedagogical contract, it is clear that some of the ways in which we have now come to *think* accountability are different in many respects from understandings in these different times and places. I am seeking to understand the current “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1980) for producing propriety in doctoral education in Australia – that is, to understand contemporary rationalities for enacting accountable doctoral supervision in this time and place. To do so, I want now to foreground contemporary academic practices that *do not have* historical equivalents, newly fashioned as they are out of the modern concept of *risk* and its minimisation.

### **Risk and modernity**

It is not that the pedagogical contract has suddenly been invented or even re-invented. Rather, rationalities of risk now require academics to think, do and say certain things in order to be seen to be accountable in the university as a risk-conscious organisation. 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 given way to scientific calculation and/as insurance.

At a time when risk management is so focused on danger and its minimisation (Douglas, 1992), it is useful to be reminded that the original derivation of the word ‘risk’ is the Portuguese verb ‘to dare’. Risk-as-daring evoked a condition of excited anticipation in relation to sixteenth century sea-faring. This focus on risk as excited action has a much more proactive spin than the more contemporary understanding of

risk management as danger minimisation. For Giddens, the modernist notion of risk gives rise to “a new moral climate...marked by a *push and pull* between accusations of scaremongering on the one hand, and of cover-ups on the other” (p.29, emphasis added). This push and pull of risk is enacted both within and outside the social world. Claims and counter-claims work together to constitute certain matters as more or less ‘risky’ or certain people as more or less ‘at risk’. Inside the push and pull, according to Giddens, we cannot know beforehand “when we are actually scaremongering and when we are not”. (p.30). Statistics may well materialise that ‘confirm’ both the accusations of scaremongering and of cover-up. Anecdotal evidence may be piled on top to support or refute claim and counter-claim. These are the discursive conditions in which we think, speak and otherwise conduct our professional and personal lives.

It is easy to see this push and pull of risk enacted in accusations that target universities’ accountability in relation to doctoral education in general, and the humanities in particular. Allegations such as “Super PhD Loses out to Blondes and Vampires” (*Sun Herald*, 13 July 2003, p.15) pit apparently serious, weighty and industry-relevant topics against apparently vapid and ephemeral ones, by framing a “boring though worthy” PhD about superannuation being written by a “talented commerce graduate” as playing second fiddle 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). The predictable response, the standard but necessary reply that emanates from academic sources cited in these same articles, is to “warn against students being banned from freedom of thought” (*Sunday Herald Sun*, 19 Oct 2003, p.1). Thus the ‘push’ of scandal claims get countered by the ‘pull’ of counter-claims about the desirability (and fragility) of academic freedom.

The issue is not whether the risk that is named in any particular media article is ‘real’. Rather, what is of interest is how risk as a moral climate provides a logic for *thinking* social good. In Michel Foucault’s (1985) terms, risk works a modern “game of truth and error” rather than as Truth itself (p. 6). A moral climate of risk-as-danger (Douglas, 1990) produces ‘risk-consciousness’ as a professional and personal ethic. This logic appears in “prescriptive texts...that elaborate rules, opinions and advice as

to how to behave as one should” (p. 12), allowing all of us to “question [our] own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape ...[ourselves] as ethical subjects” (p. 13). As prescriptive texts, rationalities of risk offer new ways of being *properly professional*, the most important of which is alertness to potential dangers. And this, in turn, means paying attention to the work of minimising the possibility that something might go wrong.

### **The risk-conscious university**

Because a “risk society” (Giddens, 1990) is focused on danger (the danger of failing to perform in ways that are morally, politically and organizationally acceptable), risk consciousness has become a dominant logic for developing and assessing professional skills. Risk society, according to both Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992), is characterized by a negative logic, a shift away from the management and distribution of material/industrial ‘goods’ to the management and distribution of ‘bads’, ie, it is about the control of knowledge about danger - about what might go wrong and about the systems needed to guard against such a possibility. So risk management-as-risk-minimisation is now a high priority, institution-wide system of communication in all Western organisations, including universities.

While the logic of risk management has been characterized as negative, it is interesting to note the ways in which this negative logic is re-framed in policy documents and employer directives in positive terms. As “a system of regulatory measures intended to shape who can take what risks and how” (Pigeon, et al, 1992: 136), risk management comes with the most rational and balanced of epithets in educational policy documents. Its “developmental knowledge” (Hobart, 1993), is “couched predominantly in the idiom of economics, technology and management” (p.2), rather than the idiom of academic, theoretical or disciplinary knowledge, drawing on conceptual models that are “generalisable or appear to offer the greatest predictability or the semblance of control over events” (p.9). Because publicly funded organisations like universities must manage reputation as vigorously as they manage their internal processes, they “have to work within pre-established guidelines and assume that particular conditions fit a general mould” (p.9). In Vitebsky’s (1993) terms, this that the knowledge that counts as developmental “appl[ies]...to everywhere and nowhere, everybody and nobody” (p.100).

The current fascination with risk management as economic, technological and management knowledge is occurring, not co-incidentally, at a time when Western governments are re-positioning themselves as buyers of education services rather than patrons of education. In the new educational market, Australian universities are scrambling to demonstrate their utility to any potential sponsor. This means, among other things, a new vision of the university and its management, which demands, in turn, the denunciation of traditionally accepted forms of organisation (du Gay, 1991; 1994).

Since the late 1990s, Australian universities have been 'revised' as workplaces where client-driven activity is the norm. Paul Ramsden's (1998a, 1998b) work has been highly influential as a call to entrepreneurship in university teaching. In 'Out of the Wilderness' (Ramsden 1998a), Ramsden made a call for the pedagogical and administrative transformation of Australia's universities by way of a more professional -- and less "bureaucratic" -- approach to leadership and management. The promised land is, as Ramsden sees it, the "effective university", and the effective university is one which can "manage change...to produce, in all its endeavours, the qualities of excellence" (p. 39). Learning how to manage change to this end means, according to Ramsden, learning from "studies of other businesses" about the relation between employees' attitudes and company performance (p. 39). A key proposition here is that universities "are not intrinsically different from other organisations", and so the following applies as much to universities as to commerce more generally:

The better the attitude the better the profitability and the productivity. The better the staff development and people management, the better the capacity of the organisation to adapt to new demands, new technologies and to maintain its position in the market. (p. 39)

Improving the performance of universities, according to Ramsden, demands "new ways of inspiring academics to work both independently and collaboratively", a problem that is solved, he argues, by "good leadership", understood thus:

Good leadership can transform the commonplace and average into the remarkable and excellent. It has the effect of making everyone feel personally responsible for the standard of work produced by themselves and their colleagues. (p. 39)

### **Risk-conscious academics**

“Feeling personally responsible” is a very important idea for translating risk management as an organisational imperative into modes of conduct. It is the means by which the university and individuals within it become aligned, and it is through this alignment of values, attitudes and behaviours that university can best manage its activities. Thus “feeling personally responsible” is a tactic for changing local, disciplinary-specific or informal ‘craft’ knowledge ‘professional expertise’. Ericson and Haggerty (1997) explain this imperative to ‘professional expertise’ in the following way:

[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’, risk-conscious academics are on guard against student failure, declining standards and waste of resources, and so come to regulate themselves and their students in ways that are understood to be closely aligned to the ethos of the post-millennial university as a risk-conscious organisation.

As risk managers, academics are to be familiar with the policies and practices that are approved within the university’s risk management framework. Most Australian universities currently draw on the Australian Standards Organisation’s scales of risk to develop their risk management frameworks, which will normally include an overarching policy statement, a risk assessment plan, a plan for conducting internal audits, and possibly a business continuity plan. These produce, in turn, a cascade of measures that mean new work and new responsibilities for academics. Environmental scanning, business impact analyses, report-writing, load management, review cycles –

all this is a particular kind of work that is very different from engagement with disciplinary scholarship but it is crucial if the the university is to become more visible to itself (and thus more capable of self-regulating self-audit). As Ericson and Haggerty (1997) point out, it is through such mechanisms that expert knowledge becomes sufficiently standardised and routinised to be useful in diagnosing, classifying and treating potential dangers.

### **Risk and academic relationships**

Engagement in responsible risk management does not simply involve the academic in *more* work or *even* different work. It actually changes the focus of professional service from the client to *information about* the client. Put another way, the target of practice is displaced - it is no longer an individual student/client, but *factors* which have been deemed by institutional policy to be to be those most liable to produce risk to the organization. According to Robert Castel (1991), it involves the *mutation of the practitioner-client relationship* from a 'direct' relationship to an indirect one ie, *practitioner-to-information*. Castel elaborates on this phenomenon:

The essential component of intervention no longer takes the form of the direct face-to-face relationship between the...professional and the client. It comes instead to reside in the establishing of *flows of population* based on the collation of a range of abstract factors deemed liable to produce risk in general....These items of information are then stockpiled processed and distributed along channels completely disconnected from those of professional practice, using in particular the medium of computerized data handling. (Castels, 1991: 281; 293, emphasis original)

While Castel's analysis of the impact of risk on practitioner/client relationship draws research in medical organizations, parallels can be drawn with the changing supervisor/student relationship within risk-conscious universities. The claim to be a 'good supervisor' cannot be made by those for whom supervision remains a private, idiosyncratic contract between the candidate and the supervisor. While the supervisor is expected to be no less expert than previously in terms of relevant scholarship, there is now a further expectation that the supervisor will be very focused on the flow of

information about their doctoral ‘client’ within the university, and the need to contribute to and monitor that flow of information. This includes paying attention to the collation of a range of abstract factors that, when taken together, come to define a student/client as a case of (more or less) potential risk. Through statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements, differentiated student population categories (part-time, off-campus, mature-aged, low SES, HDR, on-line), a supervisor can assist the university to develop and enact new modalities of intervention commensurate with the risks deemed to be associated with that population category.

The good supervisor is no longer the thoughtful sage or mentor tucked away in a private office surrounded by sandstone and ivy. S/he is now part of a team, in touch with the university’s systems and management requirements, a dexterous and capable user of, and contributor to, the university’s systems for monitoring student throughput, and attentive to the changing needs of students as they progress through the program. S/he understands the importance of timely completion, and the special needs of each milestone in terms of what it requires administratively, not just pedagogically. So the measures of ‘effective supervision’ come to reflect the importance of alignment between the good (risk-conscious) supervisor and the good (risk-conscious) university. A ‘satisfied’ client is above all the measure of high accountability, because this minimizes the possibility that allegations about low standards, student failure or resource wastage will arise.

A high level of ‘student satisfaction’ (Harman, 2003) is now a crucial marker of accountability, and this sets up new tensions in the supervisory relationship. An issue that needs to be pre-empted here is the extent to which a supervisor ‘fails’ when they fail to ‘satisfy’ students’ need for re-assurance and support, and the extent which a supervisor ‘fails’ when they fail to require sufficient struggle on the part of the student. This is special conundrum for supervisor accountability and it is one that is not easily resolved. How much difficulty is necessary to the successful completion of a doctoral program? When is enough difficulty too much?

This is not an issue to be investigated further within the bounds of this paper, but it is certainly an issue that is increasingly on the agenda for supervisors, as it is indeed for teachers more generally. At a time when claims to ‘workplace bullying’ are

proliferating, the pedagogical contract is placed under unprecedented stress. The idea that ‘high quality’ doctorates might be produced without personal and professional stress does seem to be oxymoronic. Likewise the idea that doctorates require a level of pain that is profound and on-going must be questionable.

## **Conclusion**

Academics have for some time now resented the creep - or indeed the gallop - of audit cultures into their workplaces. The “pervasive emphasis on external audit and quality assessment, mirrored by systems of internal quality assurance and control” has been commented on negatively by a number of scholars (Davis, 1999; Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997; Kenway and Bullen, 2000; Shore and Wright, 1999), and depicted as one of the major sources of stress in universities. The National Tertiary Education Union points to unprecedented levels of stress among academics brought on by “increased workload, and decreased job satisfaction” (Myton, 2002: 6). The problem of academic stress and burnout is commonly depicted as having a two-fold cause: the inadequate funding of universities in a ‘more-for-less’ government policy environment (Rodan, 2001); and, the unwillingness or inability of university managers to protect shrinking departments from the chill winds (economic, technological, administrative) that are disfiguring academics’ work and identity (Roe, 2001). There is unlikely to be a breakthrough moment for academics in doctoral supervision or anywhere else. What I have argued is that risk-consciousness is – for better and worse - a *new condition* of academic work, not a problem amenable to a simple solution.

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