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Risky doctorates: managing doctoral studies in Australia as managing risk

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Introduction

This paper draws on work by the author as part of a team undertaking an ARC Discovery project entitled: *The Impact of Risk Management on Doctoral Research Policy and Pedagogy in Australian Universities*. The team is Erica McWilliam, Peter Taylor, Terry Evans and Alan Lawson, with Eluned Lloyd and Karen Tregenza. Some of the ideas in this paper reflect our discussions, reading and other work as part of this project.

Arguably, part of any manager's work involves the identification and assessment of risks and then working to minimise or manage them. However, never has this been more important than is the case today for the manager of doctoral studies in Australia. Partly this is related to the rising risk consciousness and risk aversion in contemporary societies, but more particularly it is related to the dangers and harms that have been infused by the Australian government into its policies on 'research training' (that is, principally doctoral education) and quality assurance. This article explores the consequences of these two trends, one general and one specific, on the management and nature of doctoral research in Australia.

Managing doctoral studies in Australia

Managing doctoral studies in Australia has become a complex judgemental exercise. The nature and predilections of prospective students are guessed, the needs of the university and the demands of the 'stakeholders' are balanced. After enrolment, supervisors are monitored, progress reported, resources marshalled, services deployed and, finally, examiners corralled until a Completion is obtained. The Completion is all: especially a Timely Completion. To a degree, these steps have been often been characteristic of the management of doctoral studies. Commonsense suggested previously that most of these elements were required in some form. However, since 2002, the implementation of the Research Training Scheme (RTS) in the Australian university sector has focused the minds and honed the skills of the managers of doctoral studies to these ends. These managers consist of people in positions, such as, deans or directors of graduate studies in universities, postgraduate program co-ordinators in departments, schools or faculties, and also persons with research and research training management roles, such as, Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Research), Associate Deans (Research) and Directors of Research. The RTS and the new quality assurance and assessment processes implemented through

the Australian Universities' Quality Agency (AUQA) have had a marked effect on the attention given to the detail and documentation of doctoral students and their experiences.

The RTS has principally increased the risks involved in doctoral education by rewarding universities whose students complete their doctoral programs on time (within four years full-time equivalent) and by punishing universities whose students do not complete. It does this by making the number of completions a university has worth fifty percent in the formula for the provision of future research degree places to that university. It also required that, if a RTS student withdraws from a university, that place is returned to the national 'pool' of places and is not re-allocated within the university. In these ways both the risks (the probability of a harmful event occurring) and the harms (the number and severity of damaging events) are increased.

The AUQA process requires universities (as part of systemic reviews of all their activities) to monitor and review the doctoral experience, document its strengths and weaknesses, and to demonstrate that the latter are remedied. In some respects, the AUQA processes can be seen as harmless, and even beneficial, to the management of doctoral education. For example, they can encourage universities to identify weaknesses in aspects of their doctoral programs and, by remedying them, then risks are reduced. However, exposure to AUQA scrutiny and the public reporting of the outcomes carries with it increased risks to potential harms from such exposure to scrutiny. AUQA reports are public documents, available on the AUQA website. Therefore, a public 'shaming' of an aspect of institution's doctoral program is a real risk.

In some respects, the new approaches can be seen as good stewardship of public funds for doctoral education. It seems axiomatic that, if a university is publicly funded for people to undertake doctorates, then the public should expect that the doctorates are achieved. However, this is akin to expecting that every athlete or sportsperson supported by government funds should compete successfully (and even win) and not become injured and withdraw from competition. Although doctoral education is not a race or game, it is not an inevitable process that leads to the doctorate being awarded. Students, especially part-time students, have other legal and moral obligations (to work, family and community) in life apart from their doctorates and, occasionally, these things may delay or prevent completion. Such obligations and considerations—which are lauded in other aspects of government policy and rhetoric—have no 'weighting' in the RTS formula. It is assumed that, if a student does not complete, it is their university's responsibility. That is, they could have minimised the risk of these events occurring.

By pressing the responsibility for individuals' withdrawals from doctoral courses on to the universities, and by creating a tuition funding formula which only recognises doctoral completions (as the doctoral factor in the formula), forces universities to adopt risk minimisation approaches. In so doing, they often fall into approaches that are naïvely scientific and assume that contemporary human and social characteristics can be identified and measured in ways that can produce reliable predictors of success in doctoral programs. Therefore, they seek the types of students' characteristics that correlate with completion or withdrawal and then select students on these bases in the

future. However, across a sufficiently large group of students it is possible to find ones who complete who exhibit characteristics that correlate with withdrawal, and ones who withdraw who exhibit characteristics that correlate with completion. The same sorts of problems can be found in the characteristics associated with the field of research and research topics, the research environment and so forth.

Risk society: contemporary life in late-modernity

As the Australian government and universities move to deal with managing the RTS scheme, then the management of doctoral education appears akin to other aspects risk culture in contemporary society. Beck (1992), in particular, characterises contemporary society as a 'risk society' or, more recently, as a 'world risk society' (Beck, 1999). In the latter respect, he posits that both the developed and developing worlds are experiencing the consequences of the power of multinational corporations, the de-regulation of economic activities, the 'flexibilization' of workforces (with the attendant un(der)employment) and the loss of legitimacy of the nation-state (1999: 3). It is in this context that risk society is understood as the embedding within contemporary cultures—arguably as a feature of that might be described as global(ising) culture—the quantification of harm-probabilities, and the measures taken to manage or minimise them. Beck (1999) describes this as: 'Risk is the modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences of human action, the various unintended consequences of radicalised modernization. It is an (institutionalised) attempt, a cognitive map, to colonize the future. Every society has, of course, experienced dangers. But the risk regime is the function of a new order: it is not national, but global' (pp. 3–4). It is important to recognise that there this is not fundamentally a rational process—although it often assumes the air of bureaucratic rationality—of quantifying the risks and the severity of harms, and then dealing with them in relation to their probabilities of particular severities of events occurring. Rather, as Bauman explores (1998, 2000), there are considerable social and political forces at work to shape people's understandings and worries about particular risks. That is, to maximise or minimise them where it serves (often global) political and/or economic interests so to do.

For example, the risks associated with tobacco smoking (of respiratory and cardiovascular disease) or the use of motor vehicles (injuries and deaths from collisions, environmental damage from vehicle manufacture and exhaust emissions) have been subjected to scientific claim and counter-claim for several decades between economic stakeholders and their political apparatchiks. If a world risk society were based on rational processes democratically (fairly, equitably?) applied, then maybe both tobacco and motor vehicles would occupy rather different (lesser?) positions within our lives. Arguably, work itself would be differently configured if rational processes were fairly and equitably applied. The harms of over-employment (excessive hours of work, stress, lack of parenting for children) to the health and well-being of workers and their families would require that over-employment cease; likewise the harms of un(der)employment (poverty, low self-esteem, malnutrition etc) would require that this also be eliminated. Logically, the solution (reduce work hours) to the former seems to be the corollary

(increase work hours) of the latter. However, the flexibilisation of labour does not usually allow the flow of work from the over-employed (usually in professional and managerial positions) to the un(der)employed (usually in low skill positions).

Similarly, it can be argued, as both Giddens and Beck do, that uncertainties (and risk) are 'manufactured' by the industries and institutions that respond to what Giddens calls the 'energising principle' of risk and uncertainty. The challenge to find and commercialise new products, for example, is energised by various 'entrepreneurial' risks associated with making a successful product that will turn a profit. (As is argued below, such an energising effect can be found in the conduct of research and doctoral studies.) However, each new product or service can be seen to produce its own (often unknown or unintended) consequences in terms of future risks and harms. Therefore, the furtherance of economic and social development can be understood in terms of the pursuit of tradeable benefits that contain within them consequences and risks, which future developments will be produced to fix for some other tradeable benefit, and so forth. This description conveys a degree of linearity that is somewhat misleading in that there is a considerable number of these processes underway at any one time, and the interactive effects between them can lead to chaotic and unpredictable consequences that are characteristic of late modernity. (Beck (1999, p. 8), for example, sees the Chernobyl nuclear reactor meltdown and the associated consequences in these terms.) The significance here is that this chaos or uncertainty is a fertile ground for research and doctoral studies as people seek to find solutions or benefits to the ever-changing array of risks.

Within the fluidity and chaos of late-modernity resides a plethora of 'rationalised' processes trying to manage its various aspects. Arguably, nowhere is this more problematic than in the area of risk management and risk minimisation. Although risk management and risk minimisation are portrayed as rational managerial practices, they are produced by social, political and economic conditions that value particular risks being assessed and managed, and others ignored. These practices are also deployed where the predictability and manageability of risks is difficult at best, if not impossible. For example, what risk management system could have predicted SARS? Once SARS was evident, there were many attempts to minimise the risks of it spreading. At one level these may well have been successful. For example, the health workers involved in the care of SARS patients were vulnerable to infection (some were infected and died), but once strict infection control measures were in place the risk to health workers was reduced. However, controlling the spread of SARS was a much more uncertain process. People were unsure of exactly how it could be transmitted and to whom. Perhaps worst of all, the chaotic nature of human contact and movement was such that within twenty-four hours it was possible that someone or some people almost anywhere on the globe could be at risk. It is a matter of debate as to whether SARS was controlled by the risk management practices deployed, or by the nature and life-cycle characteristics of the corona virus itself. It is probable that both played their parts, but that the risk management practices (mass body temperature measurements, for example), some of which remain in place today, are those that we are culturally disposed to favour. It seems

better to trust the science and the rationality of the processes, rather than the unpredictability of the unknowable and unseeable corona virus.

This disposition toward the rational risk management of indeterminable risks can be identified in many aspects of society, even in the area of the management of doctoral education to which we shall now turn.

Doctoral research as risk and danger

Research, as we currently understand it, can be seen as a fundamental feature of the Enlightenment-modernist period. The rise of positivism and its forms of science is grounded in a pursuit of truth, certainty and predictability. Although this mission still prevails in some quarters, there is at least a greater sense that we know more now about what we do not know, than might have been the case (hope) in the middle of the 20th Century. If nothing else, the emergence of theories of postmodernity from Lyotard (1985) onwards (for example, Bauman, 2000; Bauman & Tester 2001), have disturbed the certainties in many fields of scholarship, including the natural and physical sciences. A feature of university life in the developed world from the mid-20th Century is the emergence of doctoral studies as ‘research training’. (The first PhD in Australia was awarded in 1948 at the University of Melbourne, see Evans, Macauley, Pearson & Tregenza, 2003). This coincided with a time when research was placed as a central, defining characteristic of ‘the’ university as an educational institution. Therefore, research and doctoral education were important related elements of the rise of the modern university in the 20th Century to the extent that, nowadays, the most prestigious universities (almost?) invariably have strong and powerful research profiles in terms of research projects, funding, publications and doctoral students.

Research and doctoral studies have emerged as risky areas of university practice. In another paper (McWilliam, Lawson, Evans & Taylor 2004) we explore the risks posed to universities by the ‘scandals’ that emerge around the research processes (laboratory accidents, contestable animal experiments, plagiarism, financial lapses etc). Whilst these sorts of risks are evident in doctoral studies, doctoral candidates face some particular risks that are associated with the choices they make during their research and scholarship, and its communication; choices they expect to reward them with their doctorate: failure being an unbearable consequence.

A doctoral candidate is expected to demonstrate that they have conducted an appropriate piece of research and scholarship on a topic to which they have made a ‘significant original contribution’. In this sense, a doctoral candidate typically has a lot more invested in their doctorate than a university staff member has invested a research project. The risk for the doctoral candidate is not just that their research may not produce worthwhile findings—something that is a risk with any research’—but that, if they do produce worthwhile findings, they will be ‘gazumped’ by another researcher producing the same or similar results and publishing them before their thesis is examined. There is also the risk that their findings may not be seen as significant and original by the examiners. In many respects, some might think that the risks of ‘failure’ are too great.

However, Kiley and Mullins's evidence suggests that very few fail their PhDs at examination (as distinct from withdrawing from candidature before a thesis is completed or submitted) and that, indeed, examiners are generally understanding of the risks and problems associated with doctoral candidature. Also, with the profound consequences of failure, hence they are inclined to recommend a pass or revisions that will achieve a pass (Kiley & Mullins, 2002).

It appears that doctoral examination is as a less risky process than is often feared by the candidates. In reality, the risks are much greater during their candidature and it is here that the supervisor can be cast in the role of the risk manager and/or risk minimiser. The doctoral requirement for the candidate to produce a significant and original piece of work is often intensively risk-managed by both the supervisor and the organization. This is increasingly the case in the light of the contemporary performance monitoring, rewards and punishments for universities discussed earlier in this paper. The supervisor typically ensures that their candidate is pursuing a potentially worthwhile topic in a manner that is methodologically sound; that is, they are almost assured of making a significant and original contribution to knowledge if they undertake all the work required in an appropriate manner. However, even a passing understanding of the sociology, politics and philosophy of science (for example, the work of Kuhn, 1970; Mulkey 1970; Schon, 1969) indicates that the most significant and original ideas can be those that are most likely to challenge the *status quo* or the scholarly paradigm within which they are examined. The risk of rejection of a thesis is thus profoundly greater where such ideas are being argued in a doctoral thesis, than if the research was making a more modest—albeit, significant and original—contribution within the paradigmatic and ideological orthodoxies of the field in question. In this sense, the 'best' doctoral research is likely to be much riskier than more modest research. It is also more likely to consume more time and effort as the candidate has to manage the greater risks and work with less supported ideas and methods. In this respect, the more intensively risk-managed contemporary doctoral environment is likely to eschew the riskier, 'paradigm-shifting' doctoral research. It does so on the basis that it is not worth the risk of either consuming more than the funded candidature or being failed and, thus, losing the financial reward of a completion. If this is the case, then gradually science and scholarship loses unknown incalculable benefits, however, because they are unknown losses they do not count in the risk management formulae of contemporary bureaucratic government.

In other respects doctoral research is also being increasingly perceived as a risky activity that needs to be managed. The strictures of animal and human ethics committees have been in evidence for some years and, in some areas of research, the 'occupational health and safety' measures required have been a matter of common practice, too. However, in some universities, all doctoral research projects have been subjected to risk assessments even in fields where the risks of undertaking the research are no greater than those of everyday life. (For example, a doctoral student driving to a school to interview a teacher for doctoral research, as compared to the same person as a parent undertaking similar actions in order to discuss their child's progress). Likewise, universities now concern themselves with 'managing' the candidate's (and other's) rights to intellectual property in their thesis because of their concerns for the risks of competing claims and lost potential

revenue. They also manage the risks of inappropriate or inadequate supervision by instituting rules, registers, progress reviews, etc. However, the risk management undertaken by institutions assumes the regulation of a personal relationship, the purpose of which is to produce a unique thesis. Therefore, it is debatable how effective risk management practices can be in these circumstances, and what the negative consequences might be of (unduly invasive) risk management.

The individualisation of doctoral students' risk and danger

As the works of Bauman (1998, 2001), Beck (1992, 1999) and Giddens (1991a, b) illustrate, within societies or communities exposed to the forces of contemporary globalisation, there is a propensity for shifting the responsibilities for risks to individuals. Beck, in particular, makes a strong argument that 'individualisation' is central feature of globalisation. It assumes that, whether in consumer markets or in human services, individuals are expected to make choices and accept the consequences for themselves. In this vein, risk management requires informing individuals of the risks to which they expose themselves *when* they exercise choices. There is no choice not to make choices, hence the emphasis on *when*. That is, to participate in contemporary late-modern societies, choices have to be made; whether they are trivial phone button or mouse-click choices to connect to a particular financial or other service; or whether they are signatures on workplace employment contracts, surgical authorisations, or doctoral candidature agreements. The new world requires the individual to be informed (even if it is through pages of online banking agreements, or volumes of doctoral regulations, procedures and codes of practice), and then to choose to accept. Once they have accepted, the individual assumes much of the risk, much as the doctoral candidate does by signing their candidature agreement, ethics forms etc.

Notwithstanding the argument in the previous section about the institutional and supervisory forms of risk management and risk minimisation that are deployed, a good part of the risk management of doctoral studies, especially nowadays, concerns the individualisation of the risks, that is, shifting some of the risks to the candidate. This shifting can be seen to have occurred soon after the first PhDs were awarded in Australia. Some current research by Evans and Tregenza (2004) into early Australian PhDs shows that the first PhDs in Australia did not include the typical 'signed declaration page' which became commonplace by the late 1950s. In essence, this declaration is statement that the candidate has done the work represented in the thesis, unless acknowledgement of others' work is given, and that they have not used the work represented as original in the thesis for another award. This is an early sign of a trend in the research training process in Australia whereby the candidate is expected to knowingly declare, in writing, that they are aware of their individual responsibilities within the research process and community into which they are being inducted. As claims of plagiarism, fraud and ethical misconduct can produce much damage to the reputation, operation and funding of universities (see McWilliam & Lawson, 2004; McWilliam, Lawson, Evans & Taylor, 2005) the intention is partly to ensure the candidate knows the risks to themselves (disciplinary action, which may include exclusion, failure or the removal of an awarded doctorate), but also to ensure

that the responsibility for a particular action, is individualised, rather than institutionalised.

In order to achieve the individualisation of risk, universities spend increasing amounts of time and other resources, bureaucratising the risk management and risk minimisation processes in doctoral education. Universities produce written documents for candidates, some of which the candidates are required to sign to say they have read, understood and accept. These and other documents are also provided on websites, sometimes with the advice that the candidate is responsible for checking the latest information and requirements on such websites. Candidates are routinely asked to sign progress reports on their candidature, laboratory workbooks, ethics applications and reports, library copying declarations, etc. Each step can be seen as an attempt by universities to minimise the risk by individualising the responsibility to the candidate. This is not to say that this is wrong, but rather that it is important to understand that such individualisation can be viewed in terms of the change to a global risk society. For example, it is important that a candidate understands the ethical implications of their research and conducts their research ethically. However, the bureaucratisation of the ethics clearance process can be seen to lead to a check list conformity, and to shifting much of the responsibility for the ethical conduct of the research to the candidate, although they are precisely that: a candidate. That is, the institution actually is legally responsible for the ethical conduct of all research conducted by its staff and students. This responsibility is one that is less easily individualised to candidates than others (data fraud or plagiarism, for example). Therefore, typically the supervisor is a signatory to ethics applications by their candidates and to annual reports etc.

Conclusion

The policy directions of governments around both research and doctoral education in the past few years can be seen as indicative of what Beck (1999) describes as a world risk society. The desire to measure the harms and benefits (quality) of both research and doctoral education (as research training) can be seen as somewhat naïvely scientific and rooted in a modernist view of the measurability and predictability of human and social behaviour. In fact, research and doctoral education, especially, are about uncovering the unknown and finding the original and significant. Therefore, they are highly elusive in their potential and outcomes, and defy measurability. Indeed, attempts to measure and predict are likely to reduce the potential of significant, paradigm shifting, originality because people are encouraged to keep to safe territory where more new knowledge can be produced by taking less risky steps, rather than by giant strides.

The problem for universities concerns whether they have taken stock of the impact of risk management and risk minimisation strategies on the conduct of research and doctoral studies. In effect, the risks involved in the deployment of what might be described as conventional modernist practices are that the research and research training processes will become inured against creativity and innovation.

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