
BOOK REVIEW

Graeme Turner

Broken: Universities, Politics and the Public Good

Monash University Publishing, Clayton Victoria, 2025, 89pp.

Reviewed by Joel Griggs

The field of higher education studies has recently become in vogue. Not just in the broadsheets but within the academy too, researchers and writers are beginning to blow the lid on what many say is a crisis of higher education. The author of this new book is a seasoned academic whose work seeks to shine another fog light upon a dark horizon.

Broken attempts the difficult task of charting 40 years of university mismanagement and distilling it into an accessible form in a short book, as part of Monash University Publishing's *National Interest* series. Turner paints a familiar picture: universities have become places of fear, burnout, and institutional uncertainty, where academics are living among the ruins of a broken system that is getting worse. Writing from the vantage point of over 40 years in academe, Turner explains how the University has effectively become a victim of its own lack of identity. Before the 1980s, a clearer vision existed of higher education as a public good, a view that was shared broadly across many interest groups, including politicians, blue-collared workers and employers. Back then, universities existed in a 'binary system' alongside the now-defunct Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE). The universities handled research and teaching a traditional suite of university degrees, while the CAEs provided the more vocational training and were not meant to take on research.

That delicate ecosystem of funding arrangements and tight control of student places ultimately failed because of the structural impetus created towards competition between universities and the CAEs. Turner, like many others in this field, locates the point of rupture in the 1980s when John Dawkins, as Minister for Education in the Hawke government, drove a major reform process. Perhaps a little too charitably, Turner suggests that the long-term consequences of the Dawkins reforms were potentially

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unintended, but he argues that, nonetheless, they set the stage for decades of government divestment from universities and led to the loss of university identity as a public good.

Having established this well-known history just before the book's halfway point, Turner uses the rest of *Broken* to discuss what happened during the subsequent decades and to offer some possible solutions. The Howard government's contribution to divestment gets an early mention but Turner's main focus is on more recent issues, such as the deliberate philistinism of the Morrison government and its disastrous Jobs-Ready Graduate package; the imposition of an audit culture and the burnout caused by the burden on academics of unnecessary (and largely unsuccessful) grant chasing; the surge of corporate executives being appointed as Vice-Chancellors; and, of course, the unfettered proliferation of casual and fixed-term labour. All these issues are discussed in surprising detail for such a short read; and all are treated as part of the causes and effects of the current crisis.

Turner avoids the simplistic explanations that plague the various government-commissioned university reviews, which, he notes, often exclude students and academics, as if the University was nothing more than an employment opportunity for consultancy firms. Although there is a distinct materialism to Turner's methodology, however, there is little emphasis on higher education's relationship to the broader shifts in Australia's political economy. The clear lacuna is that the Dawkins reforms happened in tandem with the Hawke government's Accords, ostensibly controlling inflation processes affecting prices and incomes across the economy but also weakening the political economic position of organised labour. Recognising that, the connection between the rise of neoliberalism and universities losing their status as a public good would have been brought into sharper focus and had a stronger methodological foundation.

Broken is not a work of theory though and its description of the key issues of current concern serves its purpose. It enables Turner, moving beyond doom and gloom, to offer his insights into how at least some of these problems might be remedied. Ideally, according to Turner, the current higher education system would be dismantled in its entirety and rebuilt from scratch, but that is only achievable, he says, with expansion in government funding well beyond its current level of 35-40% of universities' total spending. Dismissing this as unrealistic, Turner offers a

more piecemeal approach, providing some potentially more politically feasible suggestions. Ending waste in various forms—such as eliminating the unnecessary duplication of departments and research institutes that are close to each other - is one such avenue. Another is a return to something resembling departmental block grants which would allow academics to spend less time chasing competitive research grants. Turner also argues, in line with the recommendation in the recent Universities Accord, that the creation of an Australian National Tertiary Commission is necessary to guide a national strategy for universities and re-establish their identity as a public good worthy of funding in their own right. Decasualisation, too, is mentioned as a realistic and urgently needed reform, one that Turner couples with the need to provide real career pathways for junior academics and university workers. More generally, Turner is explicit that economic competition and market logic must be ejected from higher education altogether.

Broken concludes with an eloquent quote from – of all people – John Hewson, the leader of the Liberal party in the 1990s before Howard re-took that role. It underscores Turner’s central argument about the University as a public good, leaving the reader with a clear message that we should all be taking to heart: ‘We have lost sight of the real purpose of education’ (Hewson, cited in Turner 2025:71). *Broken* is recommended as an accessible starting point for re-thinking that purpose and how best to reclaim that mission.

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