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‘Graeme Turner, Broken: Universities, Politics and the Public Good’

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Graeme Turner, *Broken: Universities, Politics and the Public Good* (Monash University Publishing, 2025), 96pp. Paperback. A\$19.95. ISBN: 978-1-9231-9227-0.

Broken makes for sobering reading. In relatively few pages, Graeme Turner eviscerates the whole Australian university system. His assessment, in miniature, is that ‘students are dropping out, academics are burning out, and governments have been tuning out for decades’ (p. 2). Universities are, in this telling, institutions characterised by duplication and waste, exploitation and wage theft, pointless competition and inadequate national planning.

Even allowing for some of the things Turner omits – the Vice-Chancellors with private-sector side-hustles, the consultancy firms making millions from the provision of strategic advice, the intimidation of staff and student representatives on governing councils, the impact of Artificial Intelligence on all aspects of university life – the picture is a disturbing one for those who care about the role that universities perform.

What role for workers in all of this? Turner describes the plight of today’s early career researchers with considerable empathy. Aside from the problem of casualisation, Turner says, academic labour was largely ignored in the Universities Accord *Final Report*. To be fair to the Accord panel, they did propose some modest improvements for the career trajectory of Australian academics, including more research grants whose duration is five years in length, along with a boost to the base rate of postgraduate scholarships. But the stopgap nature of these ideas arguably reflects the deeper truth that Turner is articulating: the system has benefited from the ambition and industriousness of young academics, many of whom could not imagine doing anything else. Those days seem to be up.

Turner is a reliable guide through the swamp of the modern university sector. He has been one of Australia’s leading cultural and media studies experts for the past forty years, with first-hand experience of several of the institutions and processes he describes in *Broken*. His account of the making of a more corporatised, neoliberal university system – including the rise and fall of the Colleges of Advanced Education, the Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s, the massification of Australia’s universities, the quest to plug ever-receding public funding levels using international student fees – is leavened by a personal, richly reflective quality. He mourns the key ideals that were lost along the way, such as the quest for truth and the importance of preserving cultural knowledge and memory, but he guards against the excesses of nostalgia. After all, the days of ‘collegial’ university governance did not always lead to total happiness for everyone involved (p. 39).

The current picture is, overall, depressing. But as Turner reminds us, there are things we can do to remedy our ailing university system. We could stop pretending that higher education is a market rather than a public service delivered, ideally, in the national interest. We could let universities chart genuinely different paths for themselves so that they specialise in the teaching or research that best serves their communities. (Teaching-only universities will always, of course, be a contentious idea.) Other ideas on offer in *Broken* include a ‘planned investment system’ to subsidise the cost of less popular courses at regional universities (p. 70); the revival of the old block grant system of funding for research (p. 72); redistributing the federal money spent on the Research & Development tax incentive (p. 74); caps to limit casualisation rates (p. 74); and a

national oversight body to steward the whole system. Some of these ideas are more compelling than others, but they certainly help to drive the national conversation forward.

It is worth noting that Australia's higher education crisis is not unusual. On 17 July 2025, *The Economist* reported that 'Britain's bankrupt universities are hunting for cheaper models'. Six in ten British universities ran at a loss last year, and hundreds of jobs are now on the line as executives figure out how to streamline the operations of these institutions. A broken fee system has ensured that students are slugged with growing debt even as that revenue fails to keep pace with operational costs. There is more of the same across the Anglosphere. Academics in Aotearoa New Zealand describe the erosion of research funding as nothing short of a 'crisis'. Universities in the United States of America might benefit from old endowments and benefactors' deep pockets, but they are still vulnerable to political interference and the pitfalls that come with treating higher education as a market, not a public good.

These are systems crying out for change. Whether a change is going to come, and whether it is helpful or harmful, depends on the choices governments make now. There is little to be lost and much to be gained from tackling the sector's problems head on. In this respect, Australia can be a world leader if it so chooses.

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