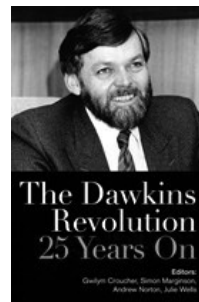


REVIEWS

You say you want a revolution /
Well, you know we all want to
change the world /
You tell me that it's (higher)
education ... (Lennon, McCartney – and Dawkins)



***The Dawkins Revolution 25 Years On* by Gwilym Croucher, Simon Marginson, Andrew Norton & Julie Wells (Eds.).**

ISBN 9780522864151, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 339 pp., 2013.

Reviewed by Paul Rodan

It used to be said that if you could remember the 1960s, you probably weren't there. It is possible that a similar psychological condition may attend some memories of the reforms or revolution effected by federal Education Minister John Dawkins in the late 1980s. The value of this volume goes beyond its treatment of the past 25; it is also extremely useful in detailing the condition of the sector pre-Dawkins: what it was that was being reformed.

This is of no minor importance because misinformation still abounds, a problem easily evidenced by a glance at any web-based discussion in which the name Dawkins appears. An earlier review of this book prompted comments (from supposedly informed people within the sector) that confused colleges of advanced education (CAEs) with technical and further education (TAFE) colleges and demonstrated ignorance of the fact that while CAEs were not specifically funded by government for research, some research was still done in those institutions, a factor (among many) that had led to the blurring of the binary divide. Similarly, the flawed assumption that almost no one in the CAEs had any qualification above a bachelor's degree overlooked the emerging glut of PhDs, usually snapped up (especially in the social sciences) by those colleges making new appointments.

While one might normally rely on the grim reaper to remedy this problem, it appears that some of these self-serving myths are being handed down to new generations. The tenacity with which golden age academics cling to such misperceptions persuades this reviewer that

Dawkins' assessment of the uneven quality of the academy at the time may have been more accurate than I had given him credit for.

The first chapter, by Stuart McIntyre *et al.*, effectively paints a picture of a system that had run its race, being no longer able to deliver the education and training necessary for the nation's economic growth. Dawkins proposed and secured a unified national system with increased access and expanded provision, underpinned by a (deferred) partial user pays system. Vice-chancellors mostly misread the political situation, aligned themselves with the moribund higher education bureaucracy and copped a beating. A few, such as Don Watts (Curtin) and Mal Logan (Monash), had read the signs more astutely and came out ahead. This theme of political ineptitude and division is also taken up by Greg Craven (in his customary entertaining style) in the book's final chapter, a recurring theme for the Australian Catholic University vice-chancellor, who presumably excludes himself from the ranks of the politically naïve.

Other areas covered include structures/systems, participation, funding, student experience, regulation, research, quality and international education. Chapters on the often-neglected areas of the regions and industrial relations are especially welcome. While arguments about the fairness or otherwise of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS, and its subsequent nomenclature), are probably headed the way of the VCR, one of the system's least equitable features – the advantage secured by the affluent through the up-front payment option – is only

mentioned in passing. The playing field may be more level, but the starting lines (post-graduation) can still be some distance apart. In a case where the Australian Labor Party government did act in accordance with its 'principles' – the Rudd government's discontinuation of domestic undergraduate student full fee places – the reversal is noted without comment or explanation (p. 99), yet this was a clear example of the role of Labor values in eliminating what the Party saw as unwarranted privilege for the more affluent.

Andrew Norton's chapter deals with the Liberal-National coalition's attitude to this policy area over the period in question. As a right wing ideologue and activist, Norton is well placed to plot the conservative reaction to Dawkins and the extent to which the Liberals were able to progress a debate about a market-based system. Ultimately, missed opportunities, lost elections and a lack of political resolve effectively rendered the coalition spectators as much as players, certainly when in opposition. Norton concedes that the short lifespan of shadow ministers (seven from 1987 to 1996) betrayed a lack of genuine political interest.

In his comments on overseas students, Norton is surprisingly silent on the unintended consequences of the nexus between international education and immigration, which followed from changes under John Howard. The coalition government's liberalisation enabled several universities (and, subsequently, other providers in the vocational education and training [VET] sector) to offer a migration outcome disguised as education, to the detriment of educational quality and Australia's reputation. This feature of a less regulated market might have merited a mention.

Norton's chapter is distinctive in its lack of any end-notes or references, an anomaly in a scholarly publication of this nature, for which no explanation is offered, a point made more curious by Norton's status as one of the editors. This leads to some contentious assertions for which no authority is cited. For example, John Hewson is said to have offered 'the most comprehensive policy manifesto ever put to the Australian electorate' (pp. 289–290), but

some might see a superior claim for Gough Whitlam in 1972. How do we know? Has Norton counted the sentences?

Institutional mergers, amalgamations and/or takeovers probably constituted the most dramatic symbol of the Dawkins era, certainly for those who experienced a change of employer. This area is well covered by Simon Marginson and Ian Marshman, who observe that some amalgamations took more than a decade to bed down, but Monash University's recent retreat from regional Gippsland pushes the dust-settling from the mergers out to a quarter century. In his chapter, Ross Williams makes the important point that while mergers led to some economies of scale, 'diseconomies of scope were underestimated, especially where large universities amalgamated with colleges' (p. 94). In reality, not all mergers were rational and sometimes seemed more about overall student numbers and the pre-empting of territorial claims by rivals. The inspiration may have been more Metternich than Newman.

Importantly, Marginson and Marshman also outline the manner in which the regulatory aspect of Dawkins' policies effectively narrowed the scope for 'autonomous institutional initiative', with the result that '[T]he UNS [Unified National System] has become one of the most homogeneous systems in the world' (pp. 62–63).

The editors are on firm ground in asserting that the 'structures, cultural norms and practices of the UNS of higher education remain defining features of the system in 2013' (p. 3). Subsequent changes have been incremental, student contributions have been broadly stable, as has the make-up of public institutions, the research-funding environment has become more competitive and vice-chancellors have become more powerful. For better or worse, John Dawkins and his 'revolution' continue to define the Australian higher education environment.

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