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Goodwin, Matt. 2025. Bad Education: Why Our Universities are Broken and How We Can Fix Them. **London: Penguin Random House UK, 245.**

> '[T]he blunt reality is that we are becoming less willing to tolerate different viewpoints and perspectives. That needs to change, especially in the very institutions that are supposed to be training and encouraging our young people to do exactly this.'
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> Goodwin 2025, p. 5.

'A controversial book in turbulent times' – this phrase could serve as the briefest description of Goodwin's new book on the challenges facing higher education in the United Kingdom and beyond. He begins by reflecting on his own experience as a passionate academic who spent more than two decades teaching and working diligently at various universities before ultimately deciding to leave academia.[1]

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[1] Matt Goodwin is a political scientist whose primary research interests lie in party politics, populism, and the radical right. He voluntarily left his full professorship at the University of Kent on 31 July 2024. Since then, he has continued to publish books and essays but, as of the writing of this review in 2025, he has not taken up any new academic appointment, political role, or other professional position.

This personal experience may be methodologically justified, as its primary purpose is to introduce readers to the topic. Moreover, the author explicitly stresses that he is only one of many who have recently chosen to leave academia. In his view, the root of the problem lies in the rapid politicization of higher education, which he argues is 'harming [...] students, lowering standards, suffocating free speech, and transforming bastions of learning that used to be the envy of the world into biased institutions that are delivering a bad education' (p. 42).

After outlining the root of the problem in the first chapter, the author systematically examines the politicization of higher education and its consequences from multiple perspectives: scholars (chapter 2), students (chapter 3), and the education system as a whole (chapter 4). In the final chapter, he draws conclusions and suggests potential solutions to the issues he identified previously.

In the second chapter, Goodwin describes a series of events that led to his decision to quit his job at the university. Even though these events primarily focus on the Brexit campaign and the expression of political attitudes within UK academia, members of academic communities beyond the UK can easily relate to both the events and their consequences within universities. Namely, back in 2016, Brexit sharply divided British society between 'populists' who supported leaving the EU and 'liberals' who opposed it. At Goodwin's university, in his own words, 'more than 90% of academics and professors voted to remain in the European Union, largely because they saw the EU as a bulwark for defending minorities and immigration and because, clearly, many of them saw Brexit as a "fair right" project' (p. 43). However, Goodwin himself opposed the majority view at the university and publicly expressed his pro-Brexit stance on social media and in newspapers.[2] As a result, in the months and years that followed, he experienced 'a sustained campaign of abuse, intimidation and harassment, equivalent to how a religious cult treats a heretic', and was accused of being 'apologist' for 'far right', 'Tory stooge' and 'an extremist' (p. 44).

[2] He also co-authored *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Clarke, Goodwin, Whiteley 2017), which emphasizes that Brexit reflects deeper, structural divisions in British society and politics – across generations, regions, and social classes. The authors find, among other things, that older and less-educated voters were more likely to support Leave, and they argue that understanding these underlying cleavages is essential for interpreting contemporary British politics and the rise of populism.

In addition to sharing his own subjective experiences, Goodwin also points out certain objective shortcomings of higher education from a scholar's perspective, such as difficulties in publishing papers on certain topics and securing research funding. As evidence for this claim, he refers to the findings of Academics for Academic Freedom, which show that in recent years more than 200 academics and speakers have been dismissed, harassed, or disinvited from UK universities – 'almost all of whom violated the new ideology by voicing conservative, gender-critical or other unorthodox views' (p. 48). Moreover, Goodwin claims that he personally also faced difficulties in publishing and securing research funding after Brexit, while he was 'quietly removed' from senior administrative roles in his department, despite being among the most cited professors. Following Brexit, he was not invited to workshops or to give lectures at other universities, and he even found it difficult to interact with his colleagues – 'everybody at work just slowly starts to drift away from you and makes it clear you have been ostracized' (p. 47).

In the third chapter, Goodwin claims that this ostracization of (conservative) academics – i.e. their exclusion from teaching, organizational roles, and the selection of junior research fellows – deprives students of critical perspectives and diverse viewpoints. As an illustrative example supporting this claim, Goodwin describes a Brexit debate organized at the University of Kent, where he attempted to invite both pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit speakers, in order to enable students to hear contrasting opinions. However, before the debate, Goodwin was excluded from the organizing committee, and the event took place without any pro-Brexit speakers. According to Goodwin, many people would point to such events as clear evidence that 'students are being brainwashed by their left-wing, Marxist professors' (p. 104). While describing this event, Goodwin goes a step further by once again reflecting on his decision to leave the university. Namely, he claims that 'the new ideology is colliding with several other, longer-term factors that have been on the rise in higher education for years, if not decades. And now, this toxic cocktail is lowering academic standards, eroding free speech and academic freedom, and narrowing rather than expanding the minds of our students' (p. 104) – which is another reason he decided to leave.

In the fourth chapter, the author further develops his argument by claiming that the ostracization of (conservative) academics and the resulting lack of diverse perspectives available to students undermine the entire system of higher education. According to the author, this system is particularly endangered by a 'powerful bureaucracy' that is 'robbing [students] of a rich and balanced education' (p. 147). He supports this claim by providing data on the number of administrative staff and even their salaries – for instance, citing the former vice-chancellor of Bath University, whose annual salary

amounted to GBP 364,000. However, it appears that the author's primary concern is not the size or cost of the bureaucracy, but rather its role within the university. In his words, the bureaucracy is not interested in quality of education and has 'morphed into a kind of hyper-political and highly activist managerial blob that has moved to entrench the new ideology, politicizing the universities along the way' (p. 157). He argues that this trend is manifested, among other things, in the proliferation of political insignia on campus, such as rainbow lanyards and flags, the removal of racist statues, the imposition of politically motivated reading lists, and politically motivated implementation of the DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) policies.[3]

According to Goodwin, 'the rapid expansion of the university bureaucracy, the sharp shift to the left among university academics and the politicization of the wider system of higher education have left universities in a perilous state' (p. 192). He claims that these changes compromise institutional neutrality and independence, undermine free speech and academic freedom, and ultimately betray the university's original purpose. However, despite his extensive criticism of the bureaucracy, his colleagues, students, and DEI norms and policies, Goodwin neither defines free speech nor provides a justification for its protection. By contrast, Mill (2015, 18) contends that free speech should be protected because it allows truth to emerge within a marketplace of ideas. Schauer (1982, 15), however, warns that such a marketplace does not necessarily lead to truth, as harmful and false ideas (such as racism or propaganda) may also gain dominance in open discussion.[4] In light of this tension, it is left to readers to assess whether Goodwin's critique advances truth or reinforces harmful ideas within the academic community.

Despite the evident methodological shortcomings in the first four chapters (such as reliance on subjective experiences, limited empirical evidence, and the absence of clear definitions and justifications), in the final chapter Goodwin shifts to proposing solutions to the problems he identified previously. He outlines two complementary approaches: the liberal or

[3] Goodwin devotes particular attention to DEI norms and policies at universities, which he extensively criticizes as overly radical, biased, and reductive. He also denounces their implementation as deeply hypocritical, noting that while universities insist on DEI principles, they simultaneously 'adjust their reading lists and course content to please Chinese students and Chinese Communist Party censors from a lucrative overseas market' (p. 166). Even prior to this book, the author had been an outspoken critic of DEI policies, claiming that they suppress dissenting viewpoints and undermine free speech (Goodwin 2023).

[4] For more on Frederick Schauer's conception of free speech and its limits, see Spaić, Rabanos (2025).

defensive approach, and the interventionist or assertive approach. The former calls on academics to 'have a conversation', 'trigger a debate', have a 'meaningful discussion' about the challenges that Goodwin identifies in the book, with the aim of 'fixing universities' (p. 200). However, although Goodwin formally proposes dialogue and debate, he appears sceptical about the effectiveness of such measures and therefore swiftly turns to the second approach – state intervention. He suggests that universities should be forced, 'through government action' (p. 208), to sign up to the so-called Chicago principles – a set of rules designed to safeguard freedom of speech and freedom of expression on campus. According to these principles, among other things, universities should maintain neutrality on political and social issues, remove diversity statements (DEI Agenda) from research grant and recruitment processes, and ensure that 'recruitment panels give as much weight to the political diversity of their members as racial, sexual and gender diversity' (p. 211). Yet, by advocating such interventionist measures, Goodwin risks undermining his own critique: readers may wonder whether his concern truly lies with the politicization of universities as such, or rather with the marginalization of particular political views that he believes are insufficiently represented and protected.

In any event, invoking the 'powers of the state to restore justice and balance' (p. 207) on campus hardly seems compatible with the very principles of academic freedom and free speech.

Finally, consistent with his proposed solutions, Goodwin offers a Manifesto for every university committed to good, rather than bad, education. This Manifesto contains fourteen comprehensive and very strict provisions, including the following:

- 'Requiring that universities devote as much effort to *promoting political diversity on campus* as they devote to promoting racial, sexual and gender diversity. Where DEI is promoted, if it is promoted at all, *political diversity must be promoted* to the same degree.'
- 'Ensuring that all research grant selection panels and search committees for academic and senior administrative jobs are *politically balanced*.'
- 'Requiring universities to take *political discrimination* as seriously as they take racial, sexual and gender discrimination.' (pp. 217–218, emphases added).

Upon reading the full set of provisions, some readers may even wonder whether the same author wrote the first part of the book – where he blames the politicization of universities for lowering academic standards and producing poor education – and the last part, which insists on introducing

politicization. It could be, after all, that Goodwin was dissatisfied with the insufficient representation of his own political views on campus, and that this was the underlying reason for his departure from the university. Otherwise, his critiques, proposed solutions, and the Manifesto would make little sense.

Ultimately, this does not mean that universities are irreproachable. Even though they bring together the brightest minds around the world and foster their growth, higher education clearly has many shortcomings and will continue to face new challenges. Yet the marginalisation of populists within academia does not appear to stem from discrimination against their political views, but rather from the methods they employ: instead of relying on scientific knowledge and rigorous methodology, they tend to appeal to the masses. In this broader context, marginalisation is not an act of discrimination, but rather a form of recognition based on merit and contribution to science. In that sense, Goodwin and his book may serve as a telling example.

Apart from being methodologically weak, relying primarily on the author's personal experiences and impressions, this book is distinctive in that it advocates government intervention in support of free speech, aimed at preventing certain voices (namely, the majority of the academic community) from being heard, in order to 'save universities from progressive illiberalism'. Moreover, while the book frames its arguments through accusations and numerous catchy claims, it provides little evidence and fails to offer a clear definition or justification of both free speech and academic freedom. As a result, although the book may attract readers interested in pressing issues within academia, only a committed populist is likely to embrace its conclusions.

REFERENCES

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