

Debased coinage

I have always read with interest Felipe Fernández-Armesto's regular contributions to *Times Higher Education*, but was dismayed at his recent cover story ("Reassuringly expensive", 30 August). How could such an eminent scholar argue the effects of high fees with any degree of soundness while acknowledging that such "effects on the classroom atmosphere can only be judged impressionistically"? In fact, most of the piece is an ensemble of "impressions": had it been an academic essay, it would certainly have been censored for its lack of rigour.

Fernández-Armesto also commits the capital sin (for a professor of history) of considering British higher education culture as utterly homogeneous, thus disregarding its specific regional cultural histories (the Scottish one in particular, with its emphasis on education as a public good). The piece is not exempt from contradictions, either: on the one hand, Fernández-Armesto laments that his students do not question his judgement enough, assuming that because his services cost so much, he must be "unchallengeably well-qualified"; on the other, he later states (rather triumphalistically) that students listen to him not because he is always right, but because they know that his knowledge "is highly paid".

Putting a price-tag on credibility is such a blatantly questionable concept that it should be the mission of any educator to expose its flaws rather than sing its praises.

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