

# Funding the Future

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Simon Jenkins is one of the most annoying columnists in the newspaper world. On occasion he offers deep common sense. On others he writes pure drivel that suggests a profound lack of understanding of the world he observes and comments upon. [His comment in today's Guardian](#) falls into the second group.

He has written about universities and is scathing about university based research, which he patronisingly describes as being the basis for universities' claim that they are investing in the future and concludes:

*If I were an academic I would stop pretending I was "investing in the nation's future". I would stop using such language. I would try to give students what they want for their money, usually a well-rounded education and a mild sense of obligation to society, and tuck my research into my spare time. That would be my "rate of return". As long as universities play the investment game, they will find students and taxpayers alike asking to scrutinise their accounts.*

This is commentary as close to crass in analytical terms as I expect to ever find in a newspaper. First, let's ponder for a moment what a university actually teaches? Is it knowledge, or is it a way of thinking? If it is the former then this education is a waste of time: knowledge is transient at best, is often wrong at the time it is proffered and is almost always so on recall. So 'knowledge transfer' is a poor justification for such an education in very many cases.

What universities should instead do is prepare the student to ask questions, challenge assumptions and formulate answers based upon observation and experimentation, whatever the subject matter. This is what makes them useful employees, capable of dealing with the challenges of the real world of employment as Jenkins sees it.

But that only happens if their education is undertaken in an environment where those teaching them have real experience of that process. And that happens through research. So Jenkins wants to remove the vital skill set from university life that imparts the real value they have to offer.

This really is small minded market logic at its worst.