

Futures Studies and Higher Education

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It is at least twenty-five years since the first university approved futures courses were taught.¹ Later, such courses proliferated - only to fall back subsequently. The reasons for this are not well understood.² What is certain is that the legitimacy of futures work at the tertiary (university/college) level is not yet fully established. This, in spite of clear evidence that such courses can be rigorous, popular and successful.

What strikes one here of course is the old problem of 'temporal lag'. It has long been a truism that educational innovation and change is slow, problematic and uncertain, particularly when compared with the speed and dynamism of macro-change in the wider world. It is unfortunately rare for educators at any level to have a broad global outlook and a well-developed futures perspective. It is rarer still for such individuals to find an institutional location where new initiatives can not only be tried out but successfully implemented over a period of time. So it is highly appropriate for this special issue of *Futures Research Quarterly* to focus on several contexts where such innovations have been attempted and, to a large degree, have succeeded. In some ways twenty-five years is a long time. But in the broad sweep of social and cultural change it is a mere moment. Nor should we expect every futures-related initiative to succeed or to last. Some will invariably be short-term experiments, while others may endure for long periods of time and themselves act as seedbeds for further work.³

What is clear is that successful innovations depend upon particular individuals being in the right place at the right time. Given a supportive context and a long-term commitment to a given innovation, much can be achieved. On the other hand overstatement, the absence of a substantive foundation, lack of political acumen and the like can marginalise a new program very quickly. For futures work to succeed in tertiary contexts, it must necessarily meet all the standard criteria evoked by the term 'scholarship'.

While some have doubted if scholarship is essential to futures, it seems clear that without it such studies will find it difficult to survive. In this context it is important not to obscure, or underestimate, the problematic nature of futures work.⁴ Yet, at the same time, a thorough appreciation of the problematics of an area should not freeze its practitioners into immobility. We take it for granted then, that prediction is impossible (or at least, foolish) since to achieve it rules out the possibility of human agency. We understand that our attempts to gain 'knowledge' of possible futures are subject to critical scrutiny. But, as readers of *Futures Research Quarterly* will appreciate, that is not the end of the story. As futurists we do have access to a common core of ideas, theories, concepts, methodologies, a literature, organisations and meetings. A forthcoming issue of *Futures* explores this core in some detail.⁵

While futures questions may at first sight appear to tilt at the impossible, further reflection shows that they are intimately bound up in countless ways with everyday life and culture. So the whole enterprise of futures work offers insights, tools,

understandings that could, perhaps, be gained in no other way. Futurists have much in common with historians and ethicists in that their subject matter is elusive. But that is not an indication of the values involved. The material here shows that our attempts to explore the unknown are neither undisciplined nor fruitless. Indeed, if there is a common theme to these papers it is simply this: that when carried out carefully, futures study, research and teaching can be highly productive. They therefore have a legitimate claim to be included on the contemporary map of knowledge.

The papers give a fascinating overview of work in progress. Rogers and Tough provide us with a timely overview of student responses to a course at the University of Toronto. Such studies are important for establishing the legitimacy of futures programs and evaluating their results. Jones outlines some key elements of the Manoa School of Futures Studies program in Hawaii. His portrait makes it clear that Jim Dator's pioneering work in the USA was well-founded. Holbrook outlines the case for a futures pedagogy and describes a couple of courses offered at the University of Newcastle in Australia. She argues forcefully for the development of a true futures pedagogy.

Schultz' piece on Dubrovnik is inevitably touched by the tragedy of that place. Yet the processes and learnings which derive from the World Futures Studies Federation annual futures workshops should not be forgotten. The success of these events is evident. They provide a valuable pattern which can be, and is being, emulated in other places. Slaughter considers recent work at the University of Melbourne and attempts to draw some distinctions between critical futures study and research. Finally, Dahle provides an account of participatory futures studies in Scandinavia in the context of a government-funded project. Among other points, he stresses the need for a common core of knowledge about what constitutes futures studies.

Taken together, these papers suggest that some futures programs have not only survived the cold climate of the 80's and early 90's but that they have also thrived. It is difficult to estimate how representative these examples may be. Yet the fact that they exist, that there are a number of futures people working successfully in higher education, is significant. As the world-wide network of futures researchers, writers, academics, teachers and so on emerge from obscurity to take a more prominent place in academic and public life, so we may look forward to a steady growth of interest in this area.

In some ways the success of futures in higher education is overdue. In others it is about par for the course. The important thing now is to build on these achievements and make sure that, like history, futures is integrated into the mainstream concerns of education at every level. As we approach the twenty first century the task becomes more urgent.

Notes

1. See Dator, J. Hawaii 2000, the World Futures Studies Federation, and Me: Thinking Locally and Acting Globally, in Marien, M. and Jennings, L. (eds) *What I Have Learned: Thinking About the Future Then and Now*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1987.

2. See Slaughter, R. *An International Overview of Futures Education*, Futuresco, OECD, Paris, 1992.
3. The work of Bob Jungk is a good example of this seeding process. See interview with Jungk in Issue 6 of *21C*, Commission for the Future, Melbourne, 1992.
4. Two contrasting examples of productive explorations of the problematics of futures work are Michael, D. N. The Futurist Tells Stories, in Marien and Jennings 1987, op cit; and the introduction provided by Judge, T. to *The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, K. G. Saur, Munchen, Germany, 1991.
5. Slaughter, R. (Ed) The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies, *Futures* 25, 3, 1993.

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Contents

Rogers, M. & Tough, A. What happens when students face the future?

Jones, C.B. The Manoa school of futures studies.

Holbrook, A. Teachers with vision and visions of teaching: the role of futures studies and research in post-graduate teacher education.

Schulz, W. Futures amid stone palaces: the annual WFSF futures course at Dubrovnik's inter-university centre.

Slaughter, R. Futures study and research at the university of Melbourne.

Dahle, K. Participatory futures studies: concepts and realities.

Book Review

Taylor, C.W. *A World 2010: A New Order of Nations*. Reviewed by Coates, J.