

# LIGHTING FUTURE DAYS: THE SWINBURNE FORESIGHT PROGRAM

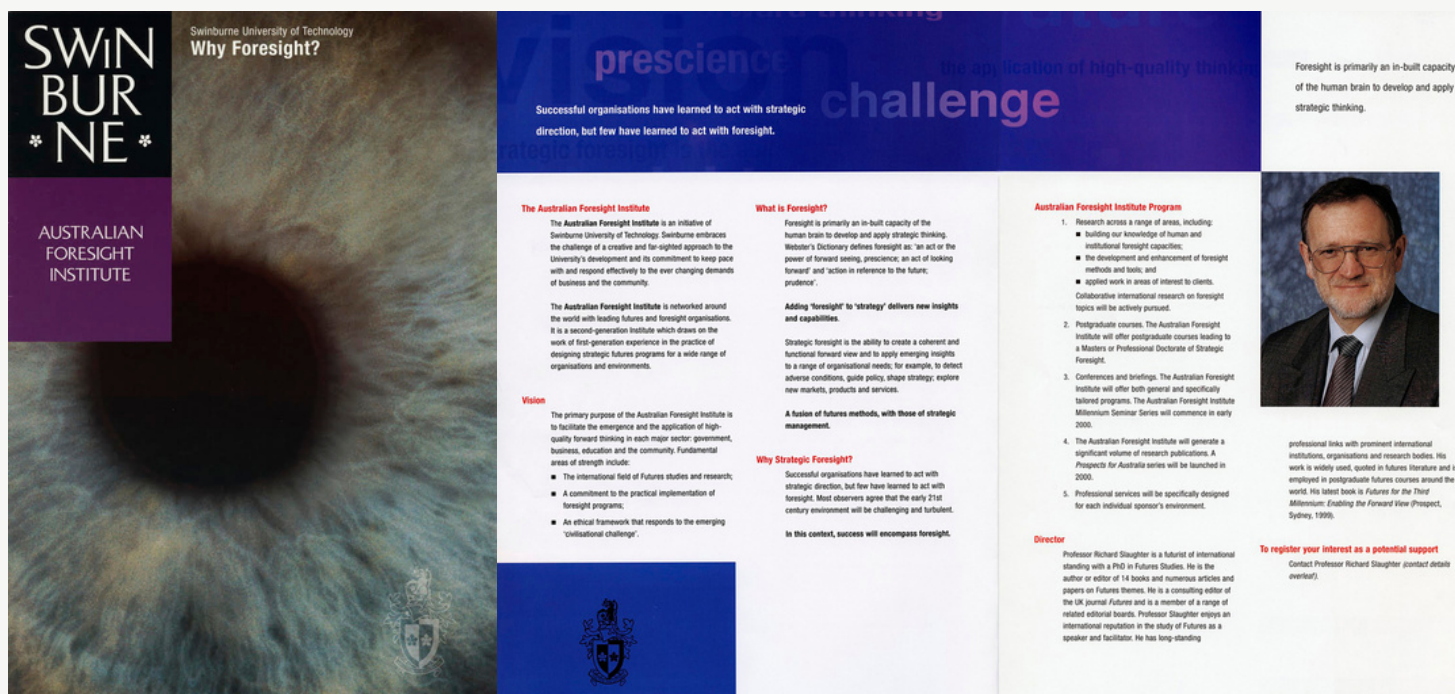
Richard Slaughter

The Swinburne Foresight Program (SFP) was established at the Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) in Melbourne, Australia, during mid-1999 and ran for a period of 17 years. During that time it attracted successive cohorts initially comprised of mid-career professionals. Overall, the program broke new conceptual and methodological grounds and achieved international recognition.

The original 'spark' came from a member of Swinburne's International Advisory Board who asked if the university had ever considered "doing anything about Futures Studies." This caught the attention of the Vice Chancellor who discussed it with a trusted advisor, Adolph Hanich, whose many qualities included that of having been a CEO of an international company. A series of discussions ensued, following which he and I were commissioned to write a feasibility study. After due consideration this was accepted and I was invited to become the first Director of what became the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI).



AFI Brochure



AFI Brochure

## STARTING POINTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The AFI was established primarily to explore and promote social foresight in Australia. It was understood that this would take time. New course materials would be needed to support a new generation of foresight practitioners. International contacts would be vital. An aspiration to promote methodological renewal (in the theory and practice of applied foresight) implied that original research also would be required. Related assumptions were that, first, there was a significant untapped market for high quality post-graduate courses in advanced futures work and, second, that we were not 'starting from scratch.' Two sources were of primary interest. Australia's own Commission for the Future (CFF) and other university departments teaching Futures Studies.

Back in 1985 the Australian government had established the CFF but little more than a decade later it was closed, mainly for quite banal political reasons.

A detailed study of its 12-year experience suggested a number of useful lessons for subsequent initiatives. Further details of that work are [here](#). In October 1999, I flew to Houston to spend time with Peter Bishop, Oliver Markley, Wendy Schultz and others involved in the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL) futures program. What might be called "an ideal wish list" for running a successful futures / foresight program were beginning to emerge. For example, short to medium-term goals included:

- Defining core purposes
- Establishing a diversified funding base
- Applying prior knowledge gained elsewhere
- Ensuring quality control, including qualified employees
- Employing of a range of robust methods
- Building constituencies of support
- Effective communication between centers
- Collaborative research
- Social and professional legitimation



Drafting course units, developing resources and the accreditation process took about a year. It also was considered helpful for the AFI to have its own external board as this would provide access to some high quality professional external expertise and support. Ideally it would be a sounding board and a forum for dialogue that would enhance our own decision-making. Very fortunately, the Hon. Barry Jones (often referred to as the ‘father’ of the Commission For the Future) agreed to be our patron. Some key aspects of the emerging model were:

- Post-graduate focus
- Emphasis on strategic-, and social foresight (not Futures Studies per se)
- Emphasis on implementation (dialectic between theory, tools and practice)
- Board and patron as powerful actors in their own right
- Ability to report directly to the Vice Chancellor

After various discussions we felt that the focus on “strategic foresight” made sense. While “strategy” had become a generic requirement within most organizations, strategic planning seemed to have become routinized and hence problematic. The point was, and is, that adding ‘foresight’ to ‘strategy’ expanded the time frames employed, generated richer understandings and opened the way for new methods and approaches. These notions were then compressed into a very brief declaration, namely that “foresight refreshes strategy.”

## PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND KNOWLEDGE BASE

We originally developed a three-year course structure (see below). Four modules, or subjects, were to be taken each year.



**Foresight class**

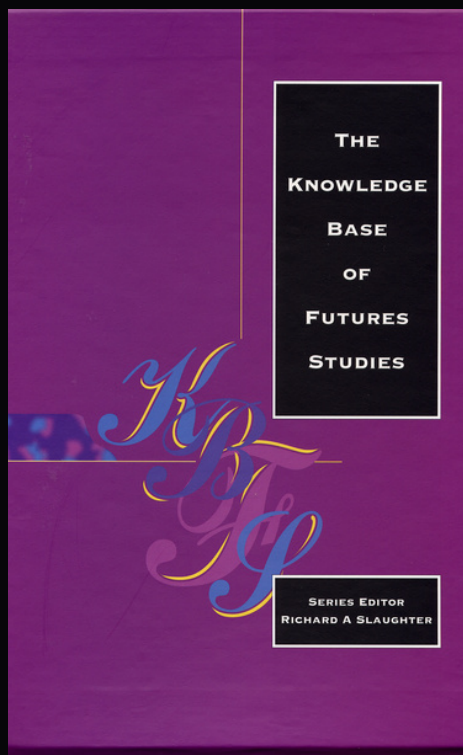
Each unit was taught in what was termed “block mode” -- five full days, normally separated by a period of weeks (in year 1) or by a weekend (in years 2 and 3). This structure appealed to the early cohorts as classes could occur in short combinations of full days, rather than through an extended sequence of evenings. Overall, 10 taught subjects were developed plus a number of options, including self-study units in the second and third years. Overall, the program consisted of:

- 10 taught subjects/units + projects and other options
- Assignments related to real world projects, products, processes
- Centrality of the knowledge base as a frame of reference and a pedagogic tool
- Critical futures orientation opening to integral futures
- Overall, multiple models and frameworks

Similarly, the [Knowledge Base of Futures Studies \(KBFS\)](#) played a prominent role throughout year 1 (the Graduate Certificate year). A CD-ROM copy was provided to the first cohort well in advance of the first class. This ensured that each had sufficient time to explore the material.



**Futures Special Issue  
March 1993**



**Slip Case Cover 1996**



**Digital Edition 2020**

When classes convened for the first time each person's learning journey immediately became a point of reference for others. The result was a marvelously rich set of interactions, overlays and interpretations. The KBFS brought together rare and difficult-to-access material in one accessible and diverse package. As such, it provided a substantial sample of futures material that was neither culture-bound nor simplistic in content or approach. It sought to represent a variety of Futures Studies paradigms and to exemplify the generic qualities associated with positive critique and critical practice in general. Subsequent editions continued to reflect developments in the field which includes welcoming "new voices." An overview of the history and development of the KBFS can be accessed [here](#).

## RESEARCH AND RENEWAL

The details of these aspects of the early years are too numerous to be recounted in a brief article but are readily accessed [here](#). Very briefly, priority interests included digital continuity (with the university library), futures in education and social entrepreneurship. The central focus, however, was a three-year program on "Creating and Sustaining Social Foresight in Australia." Funded by a Melbourne-based philanthropic foundation, it considered in some detail how social foresight could emerge through a series of distinct stages. During 2003 – 2006, a set of ten foresight monographs edited by Rowena Morrow was published on these and related topics. The full set can be downloaded free of charge [here](#).





**Monograph Launch, 2003**



**Monograph Full Set, 2006**

Possibly the most significant of the AFI's research interests in the longer term lay in an entirely different direction. Extended reviews of futures work around the world provided evidence of superficial thinking, dated methods and redundant paradigms. Consequently, there appeared to be significant gaps between the complex, embedded, nature of futures-related problems and the quality of human and methodological resources that had, at that time, been devoted to addressing them. Critical futures work, however, did not seek to criticize surface features so much as to embody a genuine aspiration for greater depth, analytical clarity and potential for innovation. Thus, during 2002, the program included the first course unit anywhere on

Integral Futures. It was offered again the following year, which was also when Peter Hayward and I, along with Andy Hines, offered a pre-conference seminar on this topic at the World Future Society conference in San Francisco.

From the outset, Integral Futures was not merely regarded as an alternative to more limited and partial approaches. It valued, and brought together work from many different streams and traditions of enquiry. Some took this as evidence of overreach or worse. However, one of the guiding precepts was that "everyone is right." The corollary -- that "not all truths are equal" -- is where questions of inevitable ranking and professional judgments occur. Which is again where expressions of resentment and outright misrepresentation can emerge. A decade and a half later, Finnish scholar JK Jakonen re-examined this early period with clarity and restraint and, in so doing, provided an elegantly informed interpretation that can be accessed [here](#). The main point of real consequence has, to the best of my knowledge, never been contradicted, i.e., *that integral futures perspectives allowed us, for the very first time, to balance external phenomena with internal ones.*



**Laurie Wheldon and Richard Slaughter with Ken Wilber, Denver, 2003**

DIAGRAM 4  
The Four Quadrants in Humans



The Four Quadrants in Humans, Wilber, Cosmic Consciousness, 2003

This was and remains a very significant shift. Futures work that takes as its major focus the study of continuity and change in the external world could now be balanced by work that recognizes the equally powerful, but very different, dynamics that shape and condition the inner worlds of people and cultures. Perhaps the most significant notion that emerged was that *it is depth within the*

*practitioner that evokes depth and capability in whatever method is being used.* This clearly shifted the focus away from methodologies per se to the transformative potential of practitioners themselves. This theme was again picked up and elaborated in later iterations of the program.



## CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL

The many-sided task of creating a new Institute, complete with a new set of courses, to say nothing of the KBFS upon which, in many ways, the whole enterprise was founded, was, without doubt, the greatest pleasure and privilege of my professional life. Hence, we were totally unprepared for the events of early 2004. The Vice Chancellor who had backed and supported us all the way announced his retirement. After an awkward gap, a new Vice Chancellor was appointed but, rather sadly, came with a background in empirical science. Unlike his predecessor, he was neither interested in, nor supportive of, our program. On top of this, and for reasons of their own, his newly-influential in-house advisors took the view that it would be “good policy” to abolish all the institutes that had been painstakingly set up within the university. We weren’t picked out for special attention or demonized in any obvious way. The Foresight Institute simply happened to be in the “wrong” category. The writing was on the wall and it was time to leave. At my farewell, however, I suggested that the event should be seen not as “the end” but merely the “end of the beginning.” Which is, in fact, what happened.

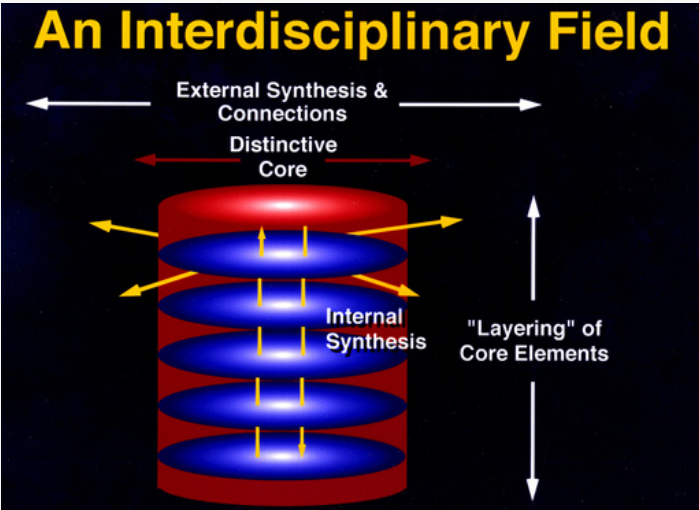
Fortunately, Peter Hayward, who had recently completed his foresight-related PhD, along with Joseph Voros and Rowena Morrow were able to take over the reins. A 2012 paper co-authored by them outlined some of the continuities and changes that ensued. The original design parameters of the Masters in Strategic Foresight (MSF) were revised and it was also noted that a number of the original purposes and assumptions had stood the test of time. They described how the course evolved, both through design and necessity. Three particular continuities can be briefly mentioned here. One was the commitment to methodological renewal. As part of this process, attention was given to broadening the potential of the [Generic Foresight Process](#) first outlined by Voros some years earlier. Rather than viewing it simply as ‘menu’ of pre-given methods, a wider range of options was brought into play. It was also used for a new and different purpose. That is, to help diagnose previous foresight interventions and assess how well or badly they had been performed. Greater attention also was given to the shaping role of the philosophical foundations upon which various methods were founded.



Foresight Foursome, John Corba, 2016

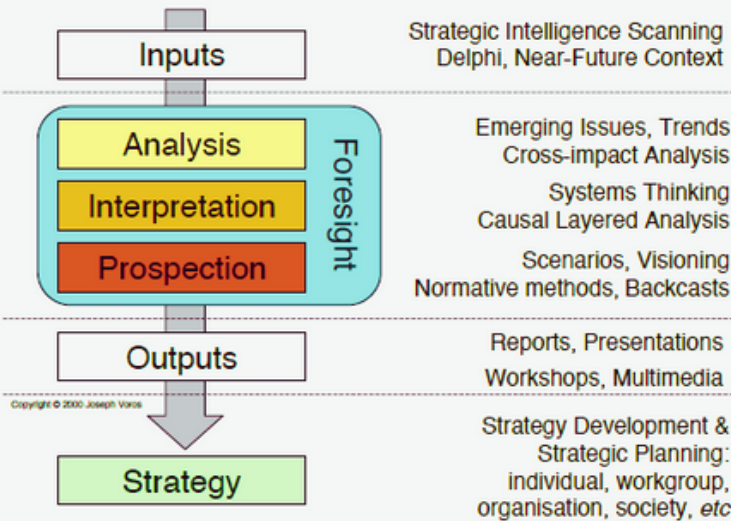
Similarly, the focus that had originally been given to Integral Futures per se evolved into a sharper focus on *the subjective nature of perspective-taking itself*. Hence, use of the term “integral” shifted away from identification with Ken Wilber’s formulation to mean something like “the broadest possible approach or view.” A final example is the way the KBFS “remained foundational to the Masters’ program.” So long as it continued to be “an evolving process” that was open to, and encouraged new voices, it was deemed to have a continuing role in any Futures / Foresight Program. As successive updates occurred the KBFS came to be seen as “home territory” within a potentially unlimited map of human knowledge. If it can be refreshed every five-to-ten years, it will continue to enrich and sustain the field.

Some of the changes that took place concerned optimizing the structure and content of the units and in what ways they were offered. Clearly the program gained in sophistication and depth. At the end of the 2012 paper the authors concluded that “Seven years on, while we cannot say ‘mission accomplished’ we can at least say that the dream is still alive and on track.” The paper, which is worth reading in full, can be accessed [here](#).



**Futures Studies - an Interdisciplinary Field with Distinctive Core**

It’s also helpful to recall that three ‘Oz Foresight’ conferences were held during the first couple of decades of the 21st Century, one of which took place at Swinburne. Similarly, Peter Hayward and others facilitated an active alumni group throughout the duration. One particular highlight was the “10 in 2010” celebration. Another is going from strength to strength as this paper is written. I’m referring, of course, to the continuing success of [FuturePod](#), a valuable online resource comprised of interviews with futurists and foresight practitioners around the world. Some other examples can be found in the panels below.



**Figure 3: The foresight framework, with some representative methodologies indicated**

**Generic Foresight concept, Joseph Voros, 2005**



## PRODUCTS OF THE SWINBURNE FORESIGHT PROGRAM

2003. Voros, J. A generic foresight process. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Title-%3A-A-generic-foresight-process-framework-Year-Voros/ffd5a52cc3dd7e5ed566f5ff199658f3eebca99b#:~:text=researchbank.swinburne.edu.au>

2008. Floyd, J. & Hayward, P. Community development for ecological sustainability: Working with interiority in the cultivation of social foresight. Paper for the stream Community Development and Building Social Movements. Community Development and Ecology: Engaging ecological sustainability, 26-28 March 2008.

2008. Floyd, J. & Morrow, R. Future Communities through the Eyes of a Child. Report to the Smith Family on governance, participant engagement and operating framework for a social innovation incubator, Strategic Foresight Program, Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship, SUT. [https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/SFP\\_Social\\_incu...sion\\_080207.pdf](https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/SFP_Social_incu...sion_080207.pdf)

2009. Slaughter, R. The state of play in the futures field: A metascanning framework, Foresight 11, 5, 2009: 6-20. [https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RS\\_SoPiFF\\_Oview.pdf](https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RS_SoPiFF_Oview.pdf)

2010. Slaughter, R. The Biggest Wake-up Call in History, Brisbane, Foresight International. [https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BWCH\\_Intro\\_Contents.pdf](https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BWCH_Intro_Contents.pdf)

2012. Slaughter, R. To See with Fresh Eyes: Integral Futures and the Global Emergency, Brisbane, Foresight International. [https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TSWFE\\_Foreword\\_Contents.pdf](https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/TSWFE_Foreword_Contents.pdf)

2012. Hayward, P. Voros, J. Morrow, R. Foresight education in Australia. Time for a hybrid model? Futures 44 (2012) 181-188. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Foresight-education-in-Australia—Time-for-a-hybrid-model.pdf>

2014. Descent Pathways (Editorial). Floyd, J. & Slaughter, R. (Eds) Foresight (special issue) 16, 6, 2014. [https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Floyd\\_Slaughter\\_Descent\\_Editorial\\_Fsight\\_16\\_6\\_2014.pdf](https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Floyd_Slaughter_Descent_Editorial_Fsight_16_6_2014.pdf)

2016. Conway, M. Surfacing the intangible. Published as Chapter 15, in Slaughter, R. & Hines, A. (Eds) The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies 2020.

## PRODUCTS OF THE SWINBURNE FORESIGHT PROGRAM (CONTINUED)

2016. Hayward, P. Voros, J. The Master of Strategic Foresight at Swinburne University 2001-16. (Unpublished paper.) [https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Hay\\_Vor\\_MSF\\_Overview\\_final.pdf](https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Hay_Vor_MSF_Overview_final.pdf)

2017. Hayward, P. & Candy, S. The Polak Game Or, Where do you Stand? Journal of Futures Studies 22, 2, 2017. 5-14. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-Polak-Game-2017.pdf>

2018. Hayward, P. et al, Launch of FuturePod, <https://www.futurepod.org>

2018. Alexander, S. & Floyd, J. Carbon Civilisation and the Energy Descent Future. Simplicity Institute, Melbourne.  
<https://beyondthisbriefanomaly.org/2018/10/18/carbon-civilisation-and-the-energy-descent-future-life-beyond-this-brief-anomaly/>

2020. Slaughter, R. & Hines, A. (Eds) The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies 2020, Association of Professional Futurists / Foresight International.  
[https://foresightinternational.com.au/?page\\_id=16](https://foresightinternational.com.au/?page_id=16)

2021. Fuller, T. (Ed), Career Overviews of Slaughter, R. Futures Virtual Special Issue. Contributions by: Bowman, M. Burns, A. Bussey, M. Dator, J. Gary, J. Hines, A. Jakonen, JP. Van der Laan, L. Morrow, R. Riedy, C. & Smith, C. Futures 132 (2021)  
[https://foresightinternational.com.au/?page\\_id=3459](https://foresightinternational.com.au/?page_id=3459)

2021. Slaughter, R. Deleting Dystopia: Re-Asserting Human Priorities in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism, University of S. Queensland.  
<https://usq.pressbooks.pub/deletingdystopia/>

2021. Morrow, R. A priceless gift – Reflections on Richard Slaughter's influence on working and living with the future. Futures 132 (2021) 102786.  
<https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Morrow-A-priceless-gift---reflections-on-Richard-Slaughters-influence-on-working-and-living-with-the-future.pdf>

2022. FuturePod, Interview with Peter Hayward by Dupont, S. (Ed), APF Compass, February. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Compass-Feb-2022-Futurepod-interview.pdf>



## THE TEACH-OUT (AND BEYOND)

What the authors of the 2012 paper could not possibly have known at the time was that four years later, in May 2016, the university, as part of a review of all post-grad programs, announced that the Master of Strategic Foresight would close the following year. An informal, unpublished, paper by Hayward and Voros, provides vital insight into some of the highs and lows of the story and is available [here](#). It describes how every aspect of the foresight program was evaluated, re-designed and re-accredited three times over the entire post-2004 period. It's a testament to human vision, determination and courage, though the full history has yet to be told.

What is clear is that the program made a significant difference in the lives of the approximately 250 people who experienced it over a 17-year period. But it's also fair to say that, apart from the early years when it was accorded a degree of prominence, it became viewed as peripheral to the host institution. As the years passed it became increasingly difficult for limited staff to cover all the subjects that had evolved. By 2015-16 "student numbers were falling and costs were rising." Ironically, the authors note that "by the time that we had hit upon



Wall of Wonder Workshop, 2010, Alumni Celebration

a sustainable model the edifice of Higher Ed was coming down." Even then, however, Joseph Voros, who'd played a central role in the program almost from the beginning, had a final success by virtue of creating a double-unit undergraduate subject on [Big History](#). Although it only ran for short time it was highly successful. Moreover, he made an interesting discovery: Namely that "students get, and I mean really 'get' 'civilizational futures' as a result of being introduced to the 'Big History perspective.'" He added, "After a 14-billion-year run-up the thinking does not, and cannot, stop in the present...."

## CONCLUSION: LIGHTING FUTURE DAYS

The Swinburne Foresight Program was established at a specific time in history. It pre-dated the "9/11" attack in New York and the Global Financial Crisis (to say nothing of the Climate Emergency) but coincided with the peak of the Neo-Liberal ascendancy. Among many other influential measures, the latter subjected universities around the world to damaging economic theories and unrestrained "market forces" that pushed some to the wall and put an end to many promising careers. It was a period characterized, in part, by diminished ways of understanding and operating that imposed huge and continuing costs. Our collective prospects for sustainable human futures have yet to fully recover.

My own view is that our careless, expansionist, high-tech, civilization has driven the global system beyond previous limits. It therefore cannot but fall back, retreat or possibly collapse after the present peak of over-consumption and over-exploitation of natural resources. But, hopefully, not to the point of no return. Managing such prospects, however, will be far, far harder than most are willing to admit.

Nevertheless, if nuclear war, global genococide or one or another nascent 'tech dystopia' can be avoided other, more viable, futures remain tantalizingly possible. Equally, understanding in depth the pathways from here to there may well very be among the most powerful drivers of constructive innovation and recovery ever. Which is how the longer-term value and significance of the Swinburne Foresight Program may finally be judged.

In one of his early papers, the late [Robert Jungk](#) described what he termed Institutions of Foresight as "seeds of change." Thinking back to 2000 and then forward over two or more decades, it's obvious that many such "seeds" have indeed emerged, each with their own potential, each waiting for the right combination of circumstances to take root and begin anew. Or, to change the metaphor, we might suggest that, over time and properly used, such gifts to humanity can help "illuminate" ways forward in future days and years. That, at least, is consistent with the views of some of those who experienced the program (as [here](#) and [here](#)). Along with others, such processes and materials bring inspiration and hope to future generations when they will be needed more than ever before.

This, surely, is an inspiring epitaph for the Swinburne Foresight Program. I'm proud to have had a hand in it at the very beginning and grateful to all those whose energy and inspiration allowed it to continue thereafter.



#### RICHARD SLAUGHTER

*Richard Slaughter, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized futurist/foresight practitioner, author, editor, teacher and innovator. He is Director of Foresight International, based in Brisbane, Australia. To reach Slaughter, visit: [foresightinternational.com.au](http://foresightinternational.com.au).*

*Also consider listening to Richard Slaughter on The FuturePod (episodes 113 and 116) at [futurepod.org](http://futurepod.org).*