

Future Universities for Future Societies? What should they be?

A response to "Systemic Foresight for Romanian Higher Education",
written by Liviu Andreescu, Adrian Curaj, Radu Gheorghiu, and Marian Zulean

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Jim Dator
Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies
Department of Political Science
University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu
<dator@hawaii.edu>
<www.futures.hawaii.edu>

In contrast to early western universities, such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, or Harvard, the modern university was created in the mid 19th century for one specific purpose--to help transform their agricultural societies into industrial societies by transforming their rural farms into urban factories, their peasants into workers and soldiers, and their nobles into managers and generals. The modern university was a spectacular success in what it was originally created to do. One indicator of its success is the extremely rapid transformation of Germany and the US once the Humbolt/land-grant model replaced the old scholastic model. Another indicator is that the few countries like Japan which specifically copied the German/US model and reformed the Universities of Tokyo and Kyoto accordingly, achieved industrialization quickly, while those in the many parts of the world that did not transform their systems of higher education lagged behind in industrialization, militarization, and imperialism.

As the authors of the "Systemic Foresight" paper made clear, there have been many subsequent attempts to continue to transform universities, most recently by trying to push them from being exclusively industrially-oriented into being focused on information and knowledge so that universities can help transform their communities and nations into information--or knowledge--societies. In either case, the purpose of all major and most minor universities was and still is to help the societies who support them to achieve and sustain continued economic growth. Universities are supposed to be engines of innovation and economic growth in their society by producing ever-newer technologies of killing and commerce, and ever-eager producers and, now especially, consumers of the technologies produced. If that means transforming universities from institutions with what the authors call "Mode One" characteristics into those with "Mode Two" characteristics in order for them and their funders to stay competitive with other nation-states and corporations, then so be it. Continued economic growth is still the single-minded goal driving the world. The purpose of the educational game is the same, even though some of the rules of the game may have changed.

While some of the instructors, professors, and researchers--and even a few of the students--might actually be interested in what is often called "the pursuit of truth", in fact teaching and researching is basically just a job for many teachers and researchers--and is ONLY a job for the new-style professional administrators . For most students, universities are primarily an opportunity for the "pursuit of sex", and eventually jobs. In the case of the US, I would also have to add that universities are primarily a place of football championships for the alumni. As you continue to privatize your universities, you might want to consider his fact: Alumni give money for winning football teams. If your universities need more money, invest more in sports.

Structurally, for the most part, the roots of higher education remain fixed in the rhythms of agricultural societies on the one hand and the needs of industrial societies on the other. They are having a very difficult time coming to grips with what an information/knowledge society is, and what education for an information/knowledge society should be beyond what is taught in schools of engineering, technology, law, medicine, business administration, and finance--especially finance. These are the only disciplines that really count in the knowledge society.

I have been involved in futures studies for a very long time. I also visited Romania several times in the 70s and 80s where the futures of education were topics under discussion. So I have had a very longstanding personal interest in this country, its futures, and the role of education in shaping its futures.

As the authors of "Systemic Foresight" say in the first sentence of the abstract to their presentation, "As a paradigmatic wicked problem, reform in higher education seems particularly well suited to a large-scale, participative, systemic foresight exercise." And that clearly is what this project has been--impressively large-scale, participative, and systemically foresightful. I do not know of its equal anywhere in the world. Indeed, I do not know of any endeavor to think about and move towards better systems of higher education that have even thought of trying to do the many things this project did. It is awe-inspiring. In very many ways, it stands as a model for the rest of the world.

It involved more people, in more creative and involving ways, than any similar project I know of. It went well beyond the boring "talking expert heads" format academics typically seem to prefer, and used games, stories, videos, and superbly evocative graphics to engage not only the participant's minds, but also their hearts and souls. It was supremely aesthetically-satisfying.

The authors say, "After two decades of failed reform, what Romanian higher education needs is a vision of its future that should guide and govern coming changes." That is absolutely true, I believe.

Unfortunately, the Romanian educational enterprise was undertaken at a very unstable period for Romania and the world--a period even more unstable and potentially transformative than the collapse of communist systems twenty years earlier, which everyone in this room will admit ended very abruptly and unexpectedly many practices

that had been viewed, just a few years before, as very well fixed for existence into the future. Imagine, please, that a group like this had existed here in 1985. What kind of a future of higher education might they have considered and what kind would they not have considered at all? Almost certainly the future that actually came about from the 1990s onward would not have been envisioned, (or, if envisioned, would not have been articulated) by sensible, established people here in 1985. They probably would have proscribed reforms for a very different future from the one that came about in a few short years.

In my view, the future for which the present process seems to be planning ended in 2007, and is in the process of fading away. Global neoliberalism, which President George Bush the Elder correctly termed "Voodoo Economics" when he first heard of it, emerged from a handful of economists who were then considered to be marginal rightwing cranks in the early 1980s, and, yet, by the beginning of the 1990s, global neoliberalism swept aside the residue not only of socialism and/or communism, but also of moderately liberal Keynesian welfare political-economies as well. As one consequence, the ability of almost all nation-states to govern has been severely undermined while the effective ability of multinational corporations to govern the world in their own interests enormously increased.

It is within this context that the transformation from industrial to knowledge societies needs to be understood, and in whose service universities are expected to transform.

When communism collapsed in 1990, many people said it showed the triumph of this mode of capitalism. Some of us replied that, to the contrary, communism merely collapsed before the neoliberal version of capitalism did, but the collapse of both was inevitable since they were both competing roads and vehicles to only one future--continued economic growth. Such a system is unstable, we said, both in its own terms as an economy, and because of the unsustainable demands it placed upon the environment--the material resources, water, land, energy, and the ability of the planet to recycle the wastes produced by the economic processes.

The neoliberal global political-economic system has had many ups and downs and tottered very close to the abyss in 2007-2008 primarily because of the inevitable failure of the succession of exquisitely complex debt-instruments that clever technicians created and clever finance managers manipulated to their advantage.

Nothing has been done to repair or change the fatally-flawed global financial system. To the contrary, very effort has been made to prop it up. But it is no more prop-able now than were the old communist regimes back then. While the death agony of the neoliberal system might be prolonged, extending the agony to more and more people before it finally dies, it is over as a positive, guiding political/economy. However, unlike the collapse of communism, no new political/economic system is around now that is prepared to take over as neoliberalism collapses.

When communism collapsed, there was a magnificent chance to create new forms of governance and social systems generally. But this did not happen. Most people in the USSR and East Europe who wanted release from really-existing communism were wholly unprepared with appealing and workable new ideas that could take its place. So, for a while, there was a vacuum into which many hucksters rushed. But ultimately, the only entities willing and able to rule, with the personnel, structures, incentives, and advertising lure that enabled them to triumph, were the multinational banks and corporations.

And now, in 2011, their ability to rule positively is over though their power to persist and drain resources from viable reforms still lingers.

So let's look at the elegant educational reform process undertaken here from this perspective. What kind of a future did this unprecedentedly-magnificent forecasting process have in mind from start to finish? What kind of a world does it assume institutions of higher learning should be preparing its graduates for? I think the process clearly assumed from the beginning to the end the continued growth of the global neoliberal economy, with the continued weakening of the nation-state, and the continued movement of most people from farms and factories to offices and start-ups, and then to unemployment lines.

While the process developed several alternative futures, all of them seem to me to be variations of continued growth--some a little green, some a little local, some a little humane, some a little technological, but all intending to keep corporations and bankers happy with universities that produce inventors, engineers, technicians, lawyers, managers, accountants, entrepreneurs, doctors, generals, and most of all consumers.

But what if this is wrong? What if the global neoliberal world is ending? What kind of a world is likely to replace it? What kind of a future should universities be training people for instead? Should we be fitting our graduates for overalls, or for blue collars, or for white collars, or for aloha shirts and turtlenecks? Or maybe we should be fitting them for loin cloths with bows and arrows.

I think a very strong case can be made that we all need to learn how to farm, fish, hunt, and shoot; that there is a huge socio-environmental transformation in process which, if we prepare for it, can be fulfilling, meaningful, and vibrant. But if we are not prepared for it, can be a true Hobbesian war of all against all.

But what if *that* is not the case? What if the future that lies ahead is neither the continued growth of global neoliberalism nor its collapse, but the transformation to what some call a Dream Society--a world where most mental and all manual labor is done by robots, cyborgs, and artefacts? A world of material abundance and full UNemployment--but where "unemployment" does not mean denial of access to abundance, as it does now, but rather the honest recognition that not more than 10 to 20 percent of the human workforce is actually needed anymore and so, to be fair, we should disconnect access to goods and services from jobs, income, and debt.

We are fully capable of such a world now. Indeed, it has been achievable for at least the last several decades. There is plenty of food now. There is no reason for anyone to starve. It is the dying political-economic system that makes some people starve. There also are clearly plenty of consumer goods now for everyone to have whatever they want.

Indeed, we are told over and over again that what is needed to get out of the recession is for people to go further into debt in order to consume more. In other words, we are producing plenty of things without much human labor, and yet we are too stupid--or greedy--to imagine and invent ways for people to get those abundant things without either working or going into debt (in fact, the magnitude of consumer debt itself clearly shows that the rules of the neoliberal economy mask the operation of the real economy). A Dream Society would remove that mask, and allow all of us to create the only thing that is really important, once basic needs are met, and more, and that is our identity. A Dream Society is all about identity creation and re-creation.

A university system preparing people for a Dream Society would enable them to become more creative, able to live meaningful and peaceful lives not by "working" since their work is not needed, but by becoming creative players instead. The curriculum for a Dream Society is about art and philosophy, history and futures, peace and play.

That may sound silly, maybe irresponsible, to many of you, but have you looked at the possibility of a Dream Society carefully? Is it really any sillier and more irresponsible than the world of Voodoo Economics that once ruled us, and is struggling to hang on to its dying power?

So, to conclude, the truly impressive and inspiring process described in the paper in my view had three serious flaws that limited the contributions that it would make to Romanian higher education, and also as a model of a futures exercise for others to follow.

First, even though it produced and used many alternative visions of future universities, they were all aimed at fitting into one future--that of continued economic growth. If that future continues for the next 20 years--the time frame of the process--then that is OK. No harm done. But if the future is substantially different as it might be (and I only touched briefly on two very different ways it most certainly could be different), then the process may have ultimately failed to achieve its fundamental purpose of preparing people to succeed in the future.

Secondly, as a consequence, while there was much discussion during the process of how universities might change in the future, society somehow was apparently not seen as changing in any substantial way. Unfortunately, this is the way most institutions initially approach the future, and why their futures processes fail to be as useful as they could and should be.

Thirdly, while anyone can and most people will give an opinion about the future when asked, few people have been prepared for their answers by prior serious thinking about

the futures either on their own or within the context of the theories and methods of futures studies. The views they naively express allegedly about the future are most often instead about current challenges worrying them and/or past grievances unresolved. For a participative futures exercise to succeed, it is necessary to engage participants in some kind of exercises that enable their responses to be more informed, reasoned, and robust--most certainly NOT to say "more accurate" because we do not live in a society where it is possible to "predict the future". So while there is no "correct" view about the future, some views are more useful than others.

I hope future processes that attempt to consider the futures of universities will follow the Romanian model very carefully, but will add these elements in order to increase the chances of producing something even more useful for all concerned.

Thank you.