

Education fit for the futures.

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The purpose of education is unchanging and universal: to help learners live successfully according to the norms, requirements, and possibilities of the societies in which the learners will spend their lives.

While the purpose is unchanging and universal, societies change, sometimes very rapidly and drastically, and societies differ considerably from one another at any point in time. What might be a valuable skill or attitude at one time might become unnecessary or dysfunctional at a later time. Thus educational forms and substance change—or should change—in order to enable learners to be successful in new and changing societies. Indeed, ideally, educational institutions should guide and lead the changes of societies, but in fact seldom do.

The modern university might be an exception. In contrast to the traditional, largely religious-based, universities of the past, the modern university was specifically created in the first third of the 19th Century with one primary purpose: to help transform agricultural polities into industrial nation-states by turning peasants into workers and soldiers, and nobles into managers and generals. For over one hundred years, the future was clear for every nation, and for all modern parts of every nation, especially education, almost everywhere in the world: to “progress” and “develop” in order to promote, obtain, and perpetuate continued economic growth. All other purposes of universities—including the promise of upward mobility of graduates—were either subordinate to or part of that overarching goal of enabling faculty and graduates to acquire the attitudes, learn the skills, and invent and diffuse the technologies necessary to obtain and sustain the continued economic growth of their nation.

Since the early 1960s and 70s, as some nations were shifting from being “industrial societies” towards being “information societies” (ICT of course plays a huge role in that change), universities (and all national educational programs) have struggled to deal with the differences and indeed conflicts between education suitable for one or the other. Few if any universities have fully transitioned to focusing on the skills and ideas necessary for information societies, and of course in many parts of the world nations have not yet fully made the transition to industrialism, such less to informationalism.

Nonetheless, a survey of the long-range plans and policies of many universities in many parts of the world made it clear that almost none of them envision any other future for themselves and their graduates than continued (or renewed) economic growth.

And yet it is also clear to me from my experience for over forty years as Director of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies within the Department of Political Science of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, in Honolulu, Hawaii, that continued economic growth is only one possible future of the world and all parts of it. It is not even “the most likely” future. Rather, it is one among several “alternative futures.” Educators need to survey the literature supporting the profoundly different images of the futures before committing to any long-range plan and the policies facilitating it.

It is absolutely essential to determine first what the futures of society generally might be before deciding what the futures of education should be. Few if any educational institutions do this.

While the number of competing images of the future is vast, our research has shown that each image is a specific example of one of four, “generic” images of the future. We label the four Grow, Collapse, Discipline, and Transform.

Grow is the widespread, nearly official view of global continued economic growth, mentioned above.

But more and more people are worried about the viability of such a future. Many very serious and plausible arguments are being made that the 200+ years era of continued economic growth is over. Energy, environmental, economic, and governmental insufficiencies or failures may be pulling it down. While many people bemoan (or deny) this possibility, others affirm and even welcome it.

Largely in hopes of forestalling collapse, there have been many calls in recent decades for sustainability, self-sufficiency, and harmony. We label that image of the future “Discipline”—the belief that nations and communities need to stop the mad and unsustainable pursuit of mindless growth, and return to or create values and institutions that allow us to live lives of meaning and contentment based on personal and local self-reliance, environmental and social sustainability, and an overall sense of “enoughness”, instead of reeling from endless innovation and precarious change.

Others—though their numbers are few, their arguments are powerful—give evidence that shows that indeed continued economic growth is over, that collapse is avoidable, and that discipline, as defined, unnecessary. Rather, accelerating and merging electronic, biological, nano- and space-based technologies, among others-- are pushing all societies into a world as novel, unpredictable, and surprising as is

the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly for those who have never seen or heard of that metamorphosis. Humans seem to be creating their own artificially-intelligent successors, while environmental pressures on Earth as well the new environments of Mars and elsewhere will mold new species out of old *homo sapiens*, *sapiens* as the Holocene Epoch morphs more fully into the Anthropocene Epoch.

From our years of work in futures studies we firmly believe that “futures of education” should never be undertaken until the alternative futures of the societies in which future graduates will live have been identified. Then, after a careful consideration and evaluation of the full array of alternatives has been made, plans, policies, and actions that will make educational institutions robust over ALL futures (rather than only one, mistakenly assumed to be “the most likely”) should be undertaken.

For more information on this process please see: Jim Dator, Ray Yeh and Seongwon Park, “Campuses 2060: Four Futures of Higher Education in Four Alternative Futures of Society,” in Munir Shuib, Aida Suraya Md. Yunus, and Shukran Abd. Rahman (Eds.). *Developments in Higher Education: National Strategies and Global Perspectives*, Universiti Sains Malaysia Press and National Higher Education Research Institute, Penang, Malaysia, 2013;

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Jim Dator, "Alternative futures at the Manoa School" *Journal of Futures Studies*, Vol. 14. No. 2, November 2009, 1-18;

Jim Dator, "Campus Futures," published simultaneously in *Planning for Higher Education* (Journal of the Society for College and University Planners), Vol. 34, No. 3, April-June 2006, pp. 45-48; *Business Officer* (Journal of the National Association of College and University Business Officers), Vol. 39, No. 10, April 2006, pp. 24-17; and *Facilities Manager* (Journal of the Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers), Vol. 22, No. 2, March/April 2006, pp. 24-27; and

Jim Dator, "Universities without 'quality' and quality without 'universities,'" *On the Horizon*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2005, pp. 199-215. (Voted the outstanding paper for 2006); also in Marcus Bussey, Sohail Inayatullah, and Ivana Milojevic, editors, *Alternative Educational Futures: Pedagogies for Emergent Worlds*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008, Chapter 6, pp. 90-110