

Need and Feasibility of an Open University for Futures Studies in Europe

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Abstract

Since some 50 years, futures studies has grown to become a field in its own right (Masini, 1993), especially in Europe and more precisely in France where there is a strong tradition of thinking the future, namely the French "Prospective" (Goux-Baudiment, 2001).

As every field of knowledge needs to progress not only through practicing but also through teaching and training and researching, it might be obvious that futures studies has a rightful place in parts of the university curriculum, such as marketing, communication sciences and other new fields. Yet this is not the case in Europe! This paper aims to clarify the reasons why futures studies is not featured in the European university, and considers whether there is need to change this situation. In conclusion, this paper sketches the main lines of the current evolution and the project euroProspective is developing.

Shaking the mammoth

Within most of the old European countries, the educational system is above all the guardian of traditions and culture, as old and slow and often inappropriate to the present world as a mammoth (Serieyx, 1999). In such a system there is no space for such a disturbing field as futures studies. Should and could this change?

The mammoth into deadlock

The current educational system in Europe is still anchored in the past, when the Prussians laid the foundations for modern science. Four characteristics of this vision of the science are facing their limits today (Gibbons, 1999) and explain why futures studies cannot find a place in the traditional educational system of the countries the most influenced by this conception.

- Within the Prussian paradigm, every scientific field in the social as in the exact sciences is firmly separate from the others, its boundaries being somehow the proof of its scientificity. Thus, for two centuries at least, a sectorial vision of the world has been prevalent.
- Moreover, the scientific process itself was driven to become a sectorial way of thinking. To put it simply: that is the way every complex problem has to be reduced to its smallest components which should be solved one-by-one in

order to get the global solution.

- On the other hand, the social and intellectual model generated by such a vision is a very hierarchical and rigid one in which the teacher has to tell the unconditional truth (the knowledge) and provide textual exegesis when needed, while the pupil has to learn, often by heart, without questioning too much (no time for that).
- Finally, the last pillar of this paradigm is the uniqueness of truth. Mathematical science, as taught at school, shows that there is always only one solution to a problem and the practice of different ways to reach it is not encouraged.

This set of characteristics, especially in France, has brought three main consequences concerning futures studies:

- The first one is the fact that there is no room at school or at university for a syllabus of futures studies because, as a multidisciplinary field, it can not be encapsulated in a single box (economy, sociology or political sciences, etc.), so its "scientificity" can not be proved (Goux-Baudiment, 2002). Biology, one century ago, and informatics and marketing more recently have known the same difficulties in gaining recognition as an academic field. At the end, they succeeded in proving their value because they have a "real" object, a measurable one (vaccine, hard- and soft-ware, and return on investment or market share). But how to show or measure the real object of futures studies?

The second consequence concerns the fact that the professorial body cannot accept being challenged by a field so contradictory in its structural conception. A conception in which there is no place for the basics of futures studies: systemic and holistic thinking rather than the sectorial; a global approach of complexity (cf. the "futures nodes method" in Goux-Baudiment, 2000) rather than sectorial; a questioning and collaborative approach rather than hierarchical; constructive criticism rather absolute knowledge; alternative futures rather than a deterministic one; capacity to choose and build the future rather than to suffer it. Consequently, traditional teachers show absolutely no willingness to push the educational system to change in order to introduce futures studies. That would not be good for their certainties nor for their careers.

The third consequence concerns the students themselves. When some teachers in higher education try to overcome these limits, the four pillars of this paradigm have already structured the student's inner conception of the knowledge. However attractive the presentation of futures studies is made by the professor, students feel often uncomfortable with it, because it is too far from the intellectual standards with which they have grown up.

This is, thus, the situation in several European countries. Futures studies being unrecognized as an academic field, there can be no teacher, no student, no funding, and no researcher... in the public school or university—at least officially. Should this situation change?

The turning point

Several reasons could plead for changing this. Yet two appear to be the most important.

The first reason regards the field of futures studies itself. For several years, young and old futurists join their claim to develop research in futures studies (Lum, 2002). We all feel that we need concepts, methods, tools for practice, more accurate, more adapted to the new problems we encounter, e.g., the participative process and the futures work based on representations rather than on expertise. Without professional academics and researchers, without substantial funding, we fail to structure the field, accumulate the corpus, benefit from practices from all over the world and make significant steps forward. Yet we need this not only because futures studies are our job, but above all because human survival can depend on our ability to master the worse aspects of the future to which we have already given birth (Slaughter, 1990). To build a better future rests with our responsibility: we need better tools, but, above all, "better" means to convince decision-makers to take the future into account. We need now a world battalion of very competent young professional futurists, well-trained for the best methods of marketing. France was about to reach this turning

point, forty years ago, when the EHESS (Grande Ecole of Higher Education in Social Sciences) decided to create the first professorship of futures studies for Gaston Berger; but the founder died some days before his first lecture (13 November 1960).

The second reason is the fact that futures studies are not only a field of structured knowledge. It is also an individual attitude, as Gaston Berger, the French inventor of the French prospective, explained it (Berger, 1958, 1962), that helps to face problems in a constructive way and to elaborate sustainable solutions. This is one of the best ways both to benefit from one's freedom and assume one's responsibility. Yet, the broad promotion of this attitude goes mainly through the educational system.

Today, many demands for the modernization of the traditional educational system in Europe as well as in North African countries have emerged. This claim comes from parents, as well as decision-makers and teachers themselves, and expresses the need to take into account, within education, the deep mutations experienced throughout the world in every society today (globalization, competitiveness, multiculturalism, creativity...) (Newman, 2001). This is a real opportunity to open the doors of the educational system to futures studies. Will the futurists be ready to come around to that turning point?

Surrounding the mammoth

What do futures studies need to make a real step further in the educational system? First of all, what is needed is a strategy, i.e., an analysis of the current situation, an accurate design of the goal to reach and the evaluation of the means to get and use in order to reach it. Then, we need a leader to coordinate means and assume the open responsibility to achieve results.

Mapping the present situation

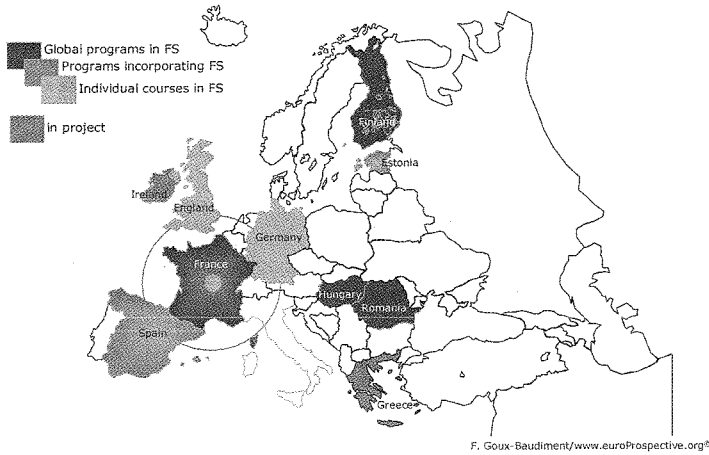
In spite of the difficulties mentioned above, some courses in futures studies are delivered in Europe. As could be logically expected, the countries of the periphery of Europe are more developed in this field than the countries of the core, which have the most traditional and rigid educational systems.

The following map shows both the countries with university futures courses and the kind of futures courses, following the International Survey of University Futures Courses achieved by the Australian Foresight Institute (<http://www.swin.edu.au/afi/international%20survey%20of%20futures%20courses.pdf>). Three categories are distinguished: global programs in futures studies, programs incorporating futures studies, and individual courses in futures studies. I added both the other countries where I

know futures courses are provided (with no pretension to exhaustiveness) and another category for the countries where futures courses are on the drawing board. Two other European surveys are being carried out, one by the

PREST (University of Manchester) and the other one by euroProspective. Their results should merge and contribute to complete the AFI Survey.

University Futures Courses in Europe



Three points surface from these surveys

University futures courses are not well known in Europe and the poor use of Internet and the lack of a European Futures Society or any other kind of professional organization able to gather all this information make them difficult to identify.

Beside the university courses for students, several kinds of regular courses are delivered to practitioners. They are easier to develop: no academic restraints, no

certification constraints. They evolve as a business: if the demand exists, the supply will meet it sooner or later. France seems to be the European country where this training is the most developed, with regular seminars of futures studies (proGective, Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussees, Futuribles, OIPR, Stratys...). Michael Keenan, at the PREST (University of Manchester; Michael.Keenan@man.ac.uk) has undertaken a survey to identify them. The results will complete the map below:

Futures Professional Training in Europe



Several attempts are in progress to federate these overly dispersed resources (courses and training):

The Finland Futures Academy (FFA) is, "a national network of the universities aimed at the academic educational and research programmes in the futures studies. FFA was established on the 2nd of February 1998, and the members are: University of Helsinki, Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration, University of Joensuu, University of Jyväskylä, University of Kuopio, University of Lapland, University of Oulu, University of Art and Design Helsinki, Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration, Tampere University of Technology, Lappeenranta University of Technology, University of Tampere, Helsinki University of Technology, Turku School of Economics and Business Administration, University of Turku, University of Vaasa and Åbo Akademi University. Finland Futures Research Centre is the coordinating unit of FFA. The vision behind the establishment of FFA is that there will be no direct competition between nation states or individual universities in the future but merely between European and global research networks. Therefore, the aim of FFA is to grow to an international network (World Futures Academy, WFA), the activities of which will be coordinated in Finland. In the near future, some of the FFA courses will be implemented together with international partners. Prominent futurists from different scientific disciplines have been invited to the Advisory Board of the Finland Futures Academy." (http://www.tukkk.fi/tutu/va/main_uk.htm)

The European Foresight Academy: "In recent years, the case for a European Foresight Academy has become increasingly persuasive—for example, in events and conferences organised by the European Commission, a recurring request from participants has concerned the need for better diffusion of Foresight know-how and experiences on a stable and continuous basis. One way to meet this demand is to establish a European Foresight Academy whose aim will be to provide training in the management and organisation of Foresight, as well as to supply knowledge on state-of-the-art tools and methods. Moreover, the Academy will constitute a useful forum for exchange of Foresight experiences across Europe and beyond. The Academy's founding members include some of Europe's leading institutions in the practice and teaching of Foresight and Strategic Prospective. In order to succeed, they realise that curricula should be fine-tuned to the training demands of the potential customer base. Moreover, they want to 'position' the Academy so that it provides value-added and avoids replicating existing courses or forums that already operate effectively." (http://es1.man.ac.uk/PREST/Foresight_Academy)

The euroProspective project, "World Futures University", in partnership with the World Futures Studies

Federation, aims to provide e-futures courses and to develop an international certification about Futures Studies. The goal of the project is to develop and promote the teaching of Futures Studies both in the university and in the secondary schools. This Open University could mix real classrooms and open learning, in order to bring together the main courses of Futures Studies existing in the world and give them a special value according to the different training paths that could be offered to the students or practitioners. It would also be a resource centre to help teachers and adults to improve their knowledge of Futures Studies, providing materials, examples of best practices, clearinghouses, lists of teachers around the world and forum. (http://www.euroProspective.org/20-en_euroProspective_projects.htm)

So the time seems to have come for a real change in this field. That is the situation. Obviously the strategy retained as the most successful by these three still independent actions is the gathering of different courses and lectures in order to build a syllabus for the teaching of futures studies. I would say the Finland project seems more university-oriented than the U.K. rather business-oriented one; yet the goal appears to be the same, in common with euroProspective.

Means can be different according to the challenger: the Finland project is firmly supported by the Finnish government; the U.K. one intends to be supported by the European Union funding; while the euroProspective project is supported by its own means in order to secure its independence. Indeed, the partners' good will and motivation appears to be the most important means. But they have to be coordinated.

euroProspective beyond Europe

In fact the euroProspective project is a little bit different from the others, as it is encapsulated within the whole vision of the EEIG euroProspective.

The futures studies research centre "proGective" (France) and the Jules-Destree Institute (Belgium) have formed a European Economic Interest Group (EEIG) in order to develop and promote Futures Studies and Research (esp. French Prospective) in Europe. This EEIG (a sustainable but non-profit organization) namely euroProspective, was formally established on August 13th 2001 and its status published in the Official Journal of the European Communities on October 2nd 2001. Its members are either in the public sector or in the private one: the Futures Studies Centre of the Budapest University of Economic Sciences (Hungary/ Erzsebet Novaky), the Faculty of the Built Environment of the Dublin Institute of Technology (Ireland/ John Ratcliffe), Z_punkt GmbH (Germany/ Cornelia Daheim and Karlheinz Steinmuller), Periscopi (Spain/ Jordi Serra), SCENARIOS + VISION (France/ Ute von Reibnitz). A brief look over these names

shows the proximity between euroProspective and the World Futures Studies Federation.

The EEG euroProspective dedicates a part of its resources to the implementation of long term projects in order to develop futures studies and research in the world. Its current projects are focused on one central aim: how to help and prepare new generations to think and implement the future better than we have done. To face this challenge, three experimental projects have been launched. The first one, "Budding Futurists," tries to raise a futures awareness in the children's mind, by working with them and their teachers at school [Page, 2000]. The second one, "Growing-up Futures," provides several tools to young futurists (less than 40) to help them to improve themselves and become competitive within the international community. The third one, "World Futures University," aims to provide e-futures courses and to develop, in partnership with the World Futures Studies Federation, an international certification about Futures Studies.

Let us turn to the content of this last project (Richard Slaughter being more competent than I to explain the various difficulties of the certification question). Ideally, we could share the world in different main educational systems based on the same kind of organization both of the institution and of the teaching:

- the English/American one, spread all over the world;
- the French one, widely used also in Africa, and, by extension, the national systems which are close to it and linked by mutual recognition;
- an Asian one perhaps, linking several countries of this area?

So, the idea is to organize the introduction and development of futures studies in these different blocks according to an endogenous mode. This means that each leader of each block should be a native of this area, in order to know the system not only as a teacher but also as a former pupil/student and a pupil/student's parent. He should be supported by a well-recognized institution, e.g. Tamkang University for the Asian area, in order to practice an efficient lobbying.

Let us now focus within one block, wherever it might be.

The euroProspective action in this field is framed by two interlinked dimensions. The first is the whole line of education: from early childhood until late adulthood. This implies a strong interconnection between courses and training, a constant back-and-forth between them, including work-based learning. The second dimension is the twin nature of futures studies: they can be taught directly, like any other academic field, but they can also be taught without even mentioning them, through any kind of field,

e.g. history, economics, law, geography, design, sociology, political sciences... According to the level (and sometimes the culture) you want to introduce them, you can play on this twofold nature and choose the most appropriate one for the best result.

If we look now at supply and demand (of teaching), we already know how supply is disseminated and diversified in Europe. So, the rational best way to organize a European curriculum in futures studies seems to be the open learning. ICT gives all the tools to do that efficiently. From your PC, you could access all courses with CD-Rom and online databases, and ask for explanation through email.

Demand, such as expressed by employers and parents, has two main characteristics: cultural openness and mobility, and application-oriented knowledge. The first characteristic plays in favour of developing a mix between virtual and material classes. For example, history and concepts and methodology of futures studies could be studied through open learning while tools and practice would be undergone during a stay abroad, alternating University courses and work experience. The second characteristic suggests to organize the curriculum by academic fields, in order to help the student to articulate his/her main speciality (e.g. sociology or economics) with futures studies and to find easily a job (since it is clear that the European market will not absorb some hundreds of fresh futurists!). For example, England and Germany have a special competence in futures studies applied to science and technology; Finland and Hungary are well-known for futures studies applied to economics; France, Spain and Italy are leading in the field of futures studies applied to territorial development. With ICT and some state-of-the-art tools of knowledge management, it could be easy enough to tailor specific curricula that could answer the needs of demand.

Thus, supply could meet demand and the different actors find their right place within the whole operation to the advantage of all the stakeholders.

In conclusion, I would like point out that there can be no high hopes without serious risks. The hope here is the increasing awareness about the need for futures-oriented society, decision-makers, and new generations. The risk is to see the field of futures studies unable to structure and organize itself quickly and seriously enough to size this opportunity, the result being the failure to negotiate the turning point. The risk is also to adopt a defensive attitude in the face of the invasion of newcomers to the field, and to become rigid about teaching futures studies. Several criteria should help futurists to follow the right track: a highly demanding professional competence to be qualified as futurist; a balance between rigour and flexibility to teach it; a high degree of coopera-

tion among futurists; and the ability to give constantly one's full attention to the demand (from the society as well as from the decision-maker) in order to elaborate the most suitable supply.

The possibility of creating this kind of Open University for futures studies lies within our grasp. There is nothing else we need but awareness of the need and the goodwill to face it.

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Notes

¹The word "Europe" refers here to the main traditional powers of the continent rather than to the political organization, that is France, Italy, Spain, Germany and the United Kingdom, the educational system of the other countries being less known (and often less rigid as we will see).

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