

# Lessons from 25 Years of Futures Teaching

Graham H. May  
Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

---

## Abstract

*This paper summarises the experience of the author in teaching Futures at one UK University. Student reaction has almost always been positive but Futures has not become embedded in the curriculum. A number of lessons are drawn from the experience of running the UK's only Masters degree in Foresight and Futures Studies that ran from 1996 to 2002 and suggestions made for the future of Futures education*

---

Futures Studies was part of the curriculum in Leeds Metropolitan University from 1977 to 2002. For most of the time it was part of the third year of an undergraduate degree in Town Planning, Urban Development or Human Geography. At various times it also contributed to degree courses in Home Economics, Building Surveying and Playwork. Between 1996 and 2002 the University also offered a course that was unique in the UK, the MA Foresight and Futures Studies. In 2001, some modules from the MA were made available to students on the University's MBA and MA in Town Planning and a number of part-time PhD students doing research in Futures were enrolled. Unfortunately, the MA is no longer available and it is probable that from the end of 2002 when the author leaves the University, Futures Studies will no longer be taught at LMU.

The MA Foresight and Futures Studies was offered part-time and based around a series of sessions held on Fridays and Saturdays to enable students working in different parts of the UK to enroll. This contrasted with the more usual day release pattern of most part-time courses in the University. A full-time route was approved but was never taken up probably because finance for full time Masters degrees is difficult to obtain in the UK. The course or programme in US terminology, consisted of 10, later 9, modules (courses), four core, two electives, a research methods module and a dissertation equivalent to 3, later 2 modules. The core modules were:

- Introduction to, later Principles of, Foresight and Futures

Studies, which focussed on the development and literature of Futures Studies

- Issues for the Future which examined the implications of, for example, globalisation, environmental change and technology
- Futures Methods, which were grouped into those concerned to foresee, manage or create the future (May 1996), and
- Futures Dilemmas, which focussed on the often conflicting values that surround decisions with significant consequences for the future.

Small student numbers meant that the intended electives could not be offered and they were operated as Group Learning Agreements in which students chose their own topic of study but both shared their findings with the rest of the group and benefited from the comments of others. These became very valued learning experiences.

## What lessons can be drawn from this experience?

Firstly it has been great fun. My colleagues and I have gained great enjoyment from teaching and being involved in the Futures field. For the opportunity to develop those courses, I am grateful to the University but disappointed that it has not been possible to establish the discipline more firmly into the curriculum. Ironically, as the MA closes there is some evidence that interest may be developing both within the University Business School and more widely in business and government in the UK.

A large part of the enjoyment has come from the positive

reaction from both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Final year undergraduate students found the module "interesting, enjoyable and informative" and asked why they had not been introduced to Futures earlier in their studies—a sad reflection, in my view, on the nature of education. The MA attracted students from across the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic who remained enthusiastic despite the difficulties of travelling and studying while working. This was reflected in the University's Annual Student Survey in which the proportion of students recommending the course exceeded the University average by a considerable margin every year. Students commented favourably on the opportunities for discussion and the spirit this developed in the group. Part of the Introduction/Principles module was devoted to a Futures Exchange in which students were encouraged to share "futures" ideas and issues they had come across since the last meeting. This was particularly valued and led to much lively discussion. The Dilemmas module, run by one of my colleagues, tended to stretch the imagination. One group noted that it, "opened up the ability to speculate and consider the breadth of consequences," to, "understand the complexity of dilemmas, particularly their knock-on effects," and "that preferable futures are very tricky to work out." No-one said that Futures was easy!

One Town Planning postgraduate, who took the Issues for the Future module in open learning mode on "Blackboard," wrote in her evaluation, "Planning (my profession) is all about tackling issues of the future but the discipline seems to be very reactive and only solve problems as they arise. This module has enabled me to look further afield enabling me to gain an understanding of issues which I hope to deliver in the future further on in my career." (From a personal perspective this reflects almost exactly the reason why I became interested in Futures many years ago. What continues to puzzle me is why more Planners cannot see the logic, for as Ingelstam (1974) pointed out, "It is safe to say that nowhere in the society are people's futures mortgaged so far ahead as when the municipalities plan housing projects, earmark uses of land and build highways." An MBA student remarked of the same module, "This module is by far the best module I have undertaken in any level of study. The method of delivery was great and the content extremely thought provoking, just why I wanted to do an MBA. It would sit well as core module of an MBA." Elsewhere he noted that he had been able to transfer these study experiences back to his work and social environments. Such comments make it all worth while, even the Saturdays!

The two External Examiners who were associated with the MA were also very positive. They emphasised the need for the development of understanding and skills in Futures and stressed the importance of the institution-

al support that was required to make it a success. As doubts about the continuation of the MA developed, the then External Examiner wrote in his report, "It would be extremely disappointing if the University did not continue to support this unique UK programme." It is tempting to conclude that such reports, that the bureaucracy is so keen to receive, are not actually read by those who make the decisions, or that in today's financially-driven climate academic matters take a poor second place.

One of the advantages on both sides in teaching Futures Studies is the difference the very nature of the subject brings to the relationship between academic staff and students. Gone is the "sage on the stage" pouring out the accepted wisdom to empty vessels in the audience. At the start of each course I like to point out that as I do not possess a time machine I have not been to the future so do not know what will happen. Given that the students engage with the course and put sufficient effort into their studies, their ideas about the future can be as good, and sometimes better, than mine. That is liberating on both sides. It has been most evident in the MA where mature students with experience in their own fields have contributed to discussions from which I have learned as much as them. Indeed, I am convinced that a visitor dropping in to one of our sessions would have found it hard to differentiate between the students and the academics. That to me is education as it should be, which in the English language goes back, I believe, to the Latin root of the word, *educare*, to bring out or develop.

It is therefore regrettable that Futures is still not an accepted academic discipline in the UK. This seems to be related to the empiricist tradition, and, as we know, there are few "empiricals" in Futures. Particularly in the Social Sciences, it is regarded as a badge of respectability to collect data and manipulate it using SPSS or some other software package before drawing conclusions from the evidence. So there is a great deal of Policy Analysis and history, some of it fairly recent, but relatively little attention to "what if?" or "what now?" Even such subjects as Town Planning and Business Management are largely concerned with what has happened, leaving concern with what may or should happen to practitioners rather than academics. To be fair, the Quality Assurance Agency, the national organisation responsible for ensuring standards in Higher Education, has recently published benchmarks for Business and Management education that indicate that, "There is likely to be an emphasis on understanding and responding to change and consideration of the future of organisations and the external context in which they operate." It is encouraging to see such developments and, for example, the establishment of the Centre of Scenario Planning and Future Studies at the University of Strathclyde Graduate School of Business and growing

interest in Futures work at PREST in the University of Manchester, but there is a long way to go before the UK can match Tamkang as a centre of Futures education.

Perhaps academe will eventually follow business and government, both of which have shown signs of interest in Futures and Foresight in recent years. Shell's scenario work is well known, as is that of the government, first with the Foresight Project and more recently the Strategic Futures work within the Cabinet Office (<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2001/futures/main.shtml>) the Prime Minister's private office, have been important influences. Several other government departments have also commissioned futures studies and a number of commercial ventures are under development.

There are positives, but the closure of the MA brings other lessons that are negative, yet probably as important. Anyone embarking on any new venture in an academic institution needs institutional support, preferably from near the top of the structure. Initially this was forthcoming in Leeds but the failure to attract sufficient student numbers in the ever tighter budgetary climate that developed in the UK in the last decade and promises of income that were not fulfilled undermined that support. From the perspective of the course team, the lack of active marketing of the MA was critical. The occasional media coverage we obtained, usually in the form of newspaper articles or radio and television programmes that mentioned the course brought a number of enquiries. Based on this evidence, it was our belief that a concerted marketing campaign with adverts in major periodicals or newspapers, e.g., *The Economist*, *New Scientist*, *Financial Times* or *The Guardian* would more than have paid for itself. Regrettably such funds were never made available.

Real estate professionals often remark that three things are important in selling property, "Location, Location and Location." This was also relevant to the failure of the MA. We were located in a "New University," one that until 1992 had been a Polytechnic, that quite reasonably saw itself as having a vocational and regional focus. Although through the national undergraduate applications system students come from across the UK and abroad there has been an increasing tendency towards regional recruitment, often for financial reasons, and part-time provision is essentially local.

The University is also located in Leeds, a city of some 750,000, in a conurbation of around 2 million, 200 miles north of London. The city is attractive to undergraduate students: it has a thriving night-life, beer is cheaper than London, and some 40,000 students in two Universities mean they are well catered for. Minimal marketing is therefore needed to ensure sufficient undergraduate recruitment. For post-graduates, things are different. There was no tradition of national marketing for such

courses, because most are part-time, day release with a local intake, and until recently little budgetary provision for it, nor did the University have a strong tradition of post-graduate provision.

The UK is totally dominated by London and its surrounding region. About one third of the population live within the South-East region and the vast majority of major companies have their main offices there. The transport infrastructure focuses on London. Other cities are at a disadvantage in comparison. On a number of occasions it was suggested that we should run the course in London, hiring accommodation and having staff travel to teaching sessions. Theoretically that would have been possible but again the course team felt the support they would need to undertake such a venture would not be forthcoming.

Within the University the MA was located in the School of the Built Environment, because that was where the idea originated, although the initial course team was drawn from across a range of Schools and Faculties. The University having adopted an internal market for inter-Faculty teaching, such cross disciplinary work became increasingly difficult as Schools were quite happy to gain income by "exporting" but not to incur expenditure by "importing." It also became difficult for staff in other Faculties to contribute to the MA in the face of mounting demands from their own management. In consequence, the team gradually shrank in size undermining one of its strengths, bringing colleagues from different disciplines together.

The location with Built Environment also had an impact on recruitment as potential applicants quite reasonably, but incorrectly, concluded that the focus of the MA must be in that area. Although it is not a perfect fit, location within the Business School would probably have brought more financial success and academically Applied Social Science would have been more suitable. It may also have been easier to share a few modules with other courses and so avoid what became the fatal flaw of the MA, its free standing nature, which made it easy to pick off.

**What lessons can be drawn from this experience that may be useful in the further development of Futures as an academic discipline?**

Ways need to be found to exploit the clear student interest. We have found that those who have taken Futures courses are one of the best advertisements, frequently recruiting others. In the UK, at least, education at all levels seems to be dominated by the middle-aged, mostly men, who design a curriculum that is often more appropriate to the world in which they have lived than the one in which the younger generation they inflict it on

will live. Futures, in attempting to address what may lie ahead, has an immediate relevance and appeal to a student audience. Unfortunately until now, at least, it has lacked the structure of established disciplines or a clear demand for the abilities it generates. This is partly a circular argument because with few graduates of Futures there is little appreciation among potential employers of the value that such recruits could have. Although I do believe the aim should be to establish Futures as a discipline in its own right with courses at secondary and tertiary levels, it may be more successful to build it up by contributing to other disciplines and gradually create the academic material and necessary credibility. In this way it may be possible to develop the critical mass of interest and resources, particularly employees with Futures experience and academic staff who regard it as their main priority that are needed to sustain Futures as a discipline. Launching into a stand-alone MA is a high-risk strategy that if it is not successful can easily be terminated. Embedding Futures in wider programmes, which share elements, may offer greater protection, particularly in the early years.

The potential of the Internet could offer the prospect of courses, including an MA, studied world-wide from one centre. The Open University in the UK worked nationally and internationally long before such electronic methods were available and several other institutions have also developed such programmes. There remains, however, a suspicion of qualifications gained outside national boundaries, and it would probably be easier if each contributing country had its own centre with local accreditation for such a programme. That, of course, creates its own difficulties as academic currencies need to establish exchange rates just as much as monetary ones; and as you are probably aware, the UK is still unsure whether to join the Euro! Building up through collaboration, exchanges, and joint working on elements of courses seems more in line with the grain of current development than attempting to launch a major international programme, unless the institutional ground has been carefully prepared first, or the necessary investment is available. Maybe there needs to be effort at both levels, the development of educational materials in order that we have a product that we can sell to the decision-makers, and the seeding of international collaboration between institutions to support the programme.

This points also to the development of a range of products from single sessions such as lectures, or information packs on particular topics, to modules and complete courses. Credit accumulation, which is relatively new in the UK, can then be exploited. The smaller elements can also be fitted into other disciplinary programmes or marketed as short courses or workshops

outside academic institutions. In the UK, at least, the pressure for income from such less traditional activities has increased markedly in recent years and is now almost a requirement to support any programme. Again this suggests a need to provide multi-mode and flexible delivery, including traditional face-to-face teaching and open learning, full-time and part-time provision and the ability to transfer between them. This, of course, only reflects the wider changes that universities will need to make as their customer base changes. In the UK again there is much talk but little real appreciation of the changes needed to adapt to lifelong learning and the ageing population. It seems increasingly likely that the traditional pattern of first degree at 21, followed by a Masters and/or PhD at 25, both studied full-time and leading to an academic career will have to change to meet the needs of a changing society.

The use of phrases such as customer base and marketing is intentional. Much though I still believe in the value of education for its own sake, it is necessary in the current environment to accept that business and the potential individual student/customer has to be convinced of the value of their investment in education. In this respect, it is encouraging to see a growing awareness in business and government of the need to be prepared for the uncertainty of the future. This may require some swallowing of academic pride and purity but it provides an opportunity of a kind that has not existed before to develop products tailored to meet these recognised needs. Once that has been achieved, the wider theoretical questions that are intrinsic to Futures work can be introduced. If we miss this opportunity for whatever reason I fear, as the demise of the Foresight Programme in the UK shows, that unrealistic expectations based on unreasonable assumptions about our relationship to the future will undermine these efforts.

As I leave one institution of Higher Education after more than thirty years there is one further question in my mind. Will universities play a role in the development of Futures education or are they too locked in to their existing practices to realise the opportunity? Are they the right place to develop Futures education? Many of us have tried, with relatively little success, to interest them in what we believe is a vital facet of education for the future. Perhaps my experience has made me unduly cynical, but why go to LMU if you can study at your own convenience with "Global Education Inc?"

Correspondence:  
28 Margerison Road, Ben Rhydding, Ilkley LS29 8QU,  
England  
graham@maylikley.freemove.co.uk

## References

Ingelstam L E (1974) *To Choose a Future*, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Secretariat for Future Studies, Stockholm

May G H (1996) *The Future is Ours: Foreseeing, Managing and Creating the Future*, Adamantine, London and Praeger, Westport

## Advertisement

### **Coming Soon! The Inaugural 'Australian Foresight Institute Monograph Series'**

*The Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) is situated in Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. AFI is a specialised research and postgraduate teaching unit, which was established in 1999 to develop an innovative set of postgraduate programs and research in the area of applied foresight. The Institute offers a Master and Doctorate award in Strategic Foresight.*

*The Institute has embarked on a publishing program for 2003, of which the monograph series is the first product. This inaugural series contains four works by different authors, which highlight the breadth of application and research into foresight undertaken within the Institute. Topics include the history and evolution of critical futures studies; foresight in everyday life; and innovative environmental scanning techniques.*

### **How To Order**

*The series will be available through the AFI website from April 2003. Please visit [http://www.swin.edu.au/afi/What's\\_New.htm](http://www.swin.edu.au/afi/What's_New.htm) to order your copy.*

*Further details about the series can be obtained by contacting:*

*Ms Rowena Morrow  
Research Publications Coordinator  
Australian Foresight Institute  
Swinburne University of Technology  
Melbourne, Australia.*

*Telephone: +61 3 9214 5815  
Email: [romorrow@swin.edu.au](mailto:romorrow@swin.edu.au)*