



'It's life Jim, but not as we know it'

by Dorothy Lucardie

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'It's life Jim, but not as we know it' - Spock to Captain Kirk

Just as industrialisation swept away the lifestyle and concepts of the agricultural society, technology is currently beckoning the advent of the knowledge economy. As our attention is caught by this current fascination a quiet revolution, indeed a powerful evolution, is taking place.

Current estimates indicate that developed nations will have from 40-50% of their population aged 50 and over by the years 2010 and 2020. In developing nations the percentages will be smaller but in absolute numbers China will pass Europe in 2015.

By 2020 there will be more people in the world aged 85 and above, than in any other 10 year age bracket. Recent research has indicated that those below the age of 85 will retain the physical and mental health of a 55 year old. In Wodonga where I live, the fastest growing regional city in Victoria, 30% of the population is forecast to be over 60 by 2005.

Forecasts on the 'aging' of the population have led to a scurry of activity associated with economics (how can we pay for this?), health (how can we care for these people?) and politics (who will they vote for?). What has not happened to date is a radical review and widespread discussion on the place of education and learning in the 21st Century for the growing majority of the population.

We are the first generation of human beings to face the likely prospect of living routinely to one hundred years of age. For 85 of these years we will have a reasonable physical and mental health, with the option of a further 15 years if we have looked after ourselves. How does our current education system and learning opportunities fit into this societal landscape?

From 5 years of age or younger we enter 12 years of formal education preparing for the world of adulthood. The years 18-22 are most likely undertaken in low skilled employment or tertiary study preparing for work. For the next 33 years, if we are lucky, we are in paid employment. Our society and government currently sanctions learning for work through funding, GST exemptions and tax deductibility. Learning for other reasons and applications has been labeled 'hobby and recreation'. Upon reaching 55 society no longer views us as contributors to the economic arena and learning becomes 'user pays'.

How do we view the remaining 45 years of our life, in particular the 30 plus years of peak physical and mental health currently predicted for the majority of the Australian population in 2020? What preparation has been made for individual and collective quality of life in our early formal education?

What paths have been supported to increase skills and knowledge during our employment phase to assist a positive contribution to the community in later life? Adult learning has never been more important and we must as organizations, professionals and policy makers take action to redevelop both systems and opportunities.

Where will you be when the revolution happens?