

It's a brave new world and we must feed the imagination of the young with new ideas

The world in which our children and grandchildren are growing up is changing at a remarkable pace. No wonder many older people feel like dinosaurs. They sigh, before handing their grandchild the remote control for the DVD player so that they can all watch a film.

The technological revolution is one of the main drivers of this change. Oldies may complain and talk about the "good old days" - which weren't always so good - but the world works differently now.

Sons rarely follow their fathers into work these days. Not so many people work for the same organisation all their lives. Most young people leave school fairly uncertain about their future work or prospects.

Once-stable institutions like the Churches find themselves living in a whirlwind. Statistically, the average Church member was born BC (before computers), reared on books and libraries and used to linear thinking.

No wonder Mr and Mrs Kirk, bewildered by their children's rejection of what they hold dear, feel themselves to be aliens in their own land and time.

They could easily echo the words of Marx - Groucho, not Karl: "God is dead, man is dead, and I'm not feeling too well myself."

Those leaving college often go into their first decade of work with thousands of pounds of debt, and into a job market which is fluid and un-

structured. Many of them will want to set themselves up in business, doing something which appeals to them.

For many people, "getting a life" is certainly not about marrying, bringing up children, taking out 25-year mortgages and making pension plans.

It is about life now, living to the max, knowing where to chill out, and being able to access the money to enjoy oneself.

Given these cultural, technological and economic shifts, the question of what kind of education can prepare people for the modern - or postmodern - world has moved centre stage. It is perhaps the most difficult issue of our age.

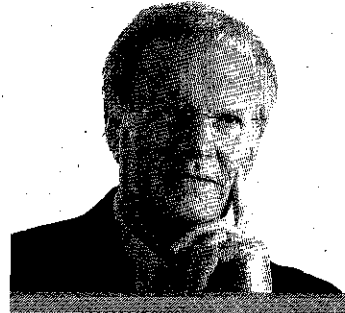
Education is no longer about training people for particular careers; it's about equipping people to live in this whirling, fast-changing universe.

I think that cultivating imagination and out-of-the-box thinking should be one of the most important marks of our educational system.

One sadness is how children, who have a natural curiosity about the world and a sense of wonder about the universe, seem to lose these things as they move through our educational system.

Socialisation seems to knock the sense of wonder out of them.

We need alternative visions. The new Curriculum of Excellence seeks to address some of these issues. We must train passionate teachers who



Ron Ferguson

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can communicate their love for subjects to children and teenagers.

One of the most interesting ventures I have come across recently is the development of what are called Children's Universities. What are they about?

CUs seek to provide children aged between seven and 14 (and aged five and six with parental backing) with the opportunity to take part in voluntary, out-of-school-hours learning, leading to children's graduations at grown-up universities.

The idea is that each participating child receives a Passport to Learning (just like a normal passport), with places to stamp when any learning destination is visited. There are no exams.

Read a book, tweet a review and the child gets a stamp. Learning Destinations have to be accredited - after-school clubs initially, extending to museums, libraries, art galleries, dance, drama and sports clubs.

Above all, CUs seek to cultivate the imagination of pupils, as well as motivating them and building their self confidence.

Activities must take place outside the normal school day and are always voluntary. Activities can include clubs which run before school, during lunchtime, after school or at weekends and during holidays. The learning is linked to higher-education course provision.

School membership fees and costs for children are decided by the local

Children's University, but are based on a contribution according to the size of the school, and include a small charge for the Passport to Learning per pupil taking part in the scheme.

They are open to all children, but especially to those who need it most. Funds are being raised to enable children from more-challenging backgrounds to participate.

The first CU began in a poor, black area of Birmingham in 2007. Since then, they have spread to various areas in England.

Now they have come to Scotland. The charity CU Trust Scotland has been established, with lawyer and sports commentator Jock Brown as chairman. Mary Brittain, who ran a CU for Nottingham Trent University, has been appointed chief executive.

It is hoped to have a presence in the Scottish Highlands and islands.

Independent evaluation by Professor John MacBeath, of Cambridge University, has established that children who join CU perform better at school - and attend better.

We live in interesting times. We need educational projects like this that work closely with existing educational establishments, yet push boundaries and feed the imagination with new ideas.

And oldies need new challenges as well - other than simply wrestling with a grandchild for the DVD remote control - in these problematic but also exhilarating times.