

# **1** Back to the future of education: Four OECD scenarios for schooling

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Our world is in a perpetual state of change. There are always multiple versions of the future – some are assumptions, others hopes and fears. To prepare, we have to consider not only the changes that appear most probable, but also the ones that we are not expecting. Inspired by the ground-breaking 2001 *Schooling for Tomorrow* scenarios, this report provides four scenarios for the future of education to 2040, showing not a single path into the future, but many. Using these scenarios can help identify the opportunities and challenges that could be in store for education. We can then use those ideas to help us better prepare and act now.

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## Education for a changing world

Our world is changing. More people are being born and many of us are living longer. The unprecedented digital transformation of the global economy and society has increased connectivity of economic markets and the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of our societies. These changes are not cosmetic, but rather a fundamental transformation in the balance of economic power and ways in which we live.

Education has been tasked with providing the skills and competencies needed to operate in this modern world. It is a powerful tool to reduce inequity. However, while virtually all children and adolescents in OECD countries participate in primary and lower secondary education, inequality – between countries and between individuals – is increasing, and the gap between rich and poor is at its highest level in 30 years.

Education must evolve to continue to deliver on its mission of supporting individuals to develop as persons, citizens and professionals. It must remain relevant to continue to shape our children's identity and integration into society. In a complex and quickly changing world, this might require the reorganisation of formal and informal learning environments, and reimagining education content and delivery. In an ageing world, these changes are likely to apply not just to basic education, but to lifelong learning as well.

By providing the competencies needed to operate in the modern world, education has the potential to influence the life outcomes of the most disadvantaged. It can help combat the increasing fragmentation and polarisation of our societies, and empower people and communities to take charge of their own civic processes and democratic institutions. Access to learning and knowledge not only opens doors to individual and collective opportunities, it has the potential to reshape the future of our global world.

But... the future is inherently unpredictable, because it is always in the making. Close your eyes and think of something that happened over the last 20 years that you would never have expected. Be it the coronavirus pandemic, the invention and ubiquity of smart phones or something else, the truth is that the future likes to surprise us. This convoluted year 2020 is a reminder of how our comfortable assumptions about the future may change in an instant. Although challenging, this is a call to action, a reminder that we can better prepare for both seen and unforeseen futures if we so choose.

## Multiple futures

Traditionally, the year 2020 has held great allure for future thinkers. At the turn of the 20th century, imagining life in the distant time of 2020 generated rich predictions, from everyone living in houses that fly to not needing transport at all, because we can all teleport. Even half-way through that century, predictions for 2020 were something of a fad, and it was not the case that being closer in time made them more accurate:

**“By 2020 we could have well-trained animal employees, including ape chauffeurs.” (RAND Corporation Long-Range Forecasting Study, 1968)**

Much of our thinking of the future is linear, and based on extending currently existing trends. But trends slow, accelerate, bend and break. Unforeseen events can disrupt even long-standing trends. Opinions differ on historical developments and, even when there is agreement, the future is rarely just a smooth continuation of past patterns. Moreover, we do not know in advance which trends will continue and which will change course, or in what context. Sometimes, we can just be plain wrong.

“The horse is here to stay but the automobile is only a novelty – a fad.”  
(President of Michigan Savings Bank, warning Henry Ford’s [inventor  
of the automobile] lawyer not to invest in the Ford Motor Company,  
1903)

In the absence of concrete facts or evidence about the future, the only way to meaningfully understand the future is through dialogue. The future cannot be passively observed. It must be actively discussed in order to learn from it and identify and agree upon actions for today. Imagining multiple scenarios for the future thus recognises that there is not only one pathway into the future, but many (OECD, 2001<sup>[1]</sup>).

Scenarios are more than just an extrapolation of a given trend, but they can take trends into account by describing how the future might look if one or more trends were to continue (or change course). Scenarios themselves have no intrinsic value; it is the process of creating or using them in the context of strategic dialogue that makes them worthwhile.

## The original OECD Schooling for Tomorrow scenarios

In 2001 the OECD/CERI programme “Schooling for Tomorrow” published a set of six futures thinking scenarios. Aimed at sharpening understanding of how schooling might develop in the years to come and the potential role of policy to help shape these futures, the scenarios brought together the “big picture” of strategic goals for education intertwined with the complex and the long-term processes of change. Intentionally fictional, the scenarios did not contain predictions or recommendations. Rather, as with all scenarios, they were constructed for the purpose of learning and taking action in the present. This was achieved by generating, testing, and reframing ideas about what might happen.

At the time, the authors noted that “Perhaps surprisingly, forward thinking... has been relatively little developed in education compared with other policy sectors, despite education’s fundamental characteristic of yielding benefits over very long time spans” (OECD, 2001, p. 77<sup>[1]</sup>). In the almost two decades since, future thinking in education has become more popular but it has tended to coalesce around aspirational visions and roadmaps of desirable futures. These aspirational visions have been used to set agendas and spark dialogue among diverse groups of stakeholders about the curriculum, pedagogy and system delivery that would be needed to make these visions a reality.

Although powerful, by focusing on the delivery of a desired future, those approaches do not prepare systems for unexpected shocks. They do not take into account that the future likes to surprise us. Being future-fit in a challenging and uncertain context requires identifying a number of different plausible future scenarios, exploring what impacts they could have and identifying potential implications for policies. This volume aims to do this, using as its starting point the 2001 Schooling for Tomorrow Scenarios. Connecting to broader futures thinking across policy domains and revisiting and updating the scenarios from almost 20 years ago, this report provides four scenarios for the future(s) of education.

## This volume: Four OECD Scenarios for the Future of Schooling

After this introduction, **Chapter Two** provides a brief sketch of strategic foresight methods. It looks at elements of a foresight system and how one might begin to think about using foresight and future thinking methodologies as a way to plan and prepare future-fit systems. Strategic foresight is required whenever there is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding changes to the relevant future context. This applies as much to broad national decisions as to decisions in particular sectors or policy domains such as education.

Two examples from very diverse education systems – Finland and Singapore – are provided to illustrate concretely some of the ways strategic foresight plays out in education.

**Chapter Three** offers an overview of some of the main trends in education policy and practice in the last decades. It begins with a look at how education has become massified and expanded, reaching more people and increasingly extending throughout the lifespan. It outlines the rising expectations for education and their impacts on multiple areas of schooling and instruction, from evaluation, assessment and certification processes to teaching and teacher policies. The chapter also looks at how education governance has changed and what impacts that has had on our design, delivery and expectations for the future of the sector.

**Chapter Four** provides a set of four scenarios for the future of schooling to 2040. They have been constructed in a time frame of approximately 20 years – long enough for significant change to occur beyond immediate political cycles, but not so far off as to be too remote for anyone except futurists and visionaries. The alternative futures are a) schooling extended; b) an outsourcing of education and resulting surge of learning markets; c) schools as learning hubs and d) the end of school-based learning and demise of schooling more generally.

The volume ends with **Chapter Five**, which looks at the key implications and tensions that emerge from the scenarios. It explores the policy questions that become visible when imaging these multiple futures. Just as the goals that schools work towards are various and complex, so too are the potential futures that unfold as they are intertwined with the daily reality of the school and its defining processes. The chapter does not provide direct answers; as those emerge in the use and consideration of the scenarios within a specific context. Rather, it highlights those areas that deserve closer attention and where further discussion can be most valuable.

## Finally

As the methodologies for educational forward-thinking remain under-developed, there is much to be done in building a “toolbox” of such approaches to inform the policy-making process. Scenarios are one vehicle for doing this. By stimulating dialogue at multiple levels and among key stakeholders, the scenarios come alive with the realities of a particular country or setting. The scenarios are not meant to be understood as polished final statements about the future but the starting point for a process of genuine engagement. This book is meant to challenge, to inspire, to stimulate critical and creative thinking on the multiple futures of education.

A large body of CERI work has been founded on the need for educational decision-making to be better informed by evidence, by awareness of what is taking place in other places and at other times, and by the need to consider the bigger, long-term picture. This volume follows proudly in that tradition.

## References

- OECD (2001), *What Schools for the Future?*, Schooling for Tomorrow, OECD Publishing, Paris, [1]  
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