

2 Scenarios: A user guide

Attempting to predict or forecast the future is of limited benefit in a world of high uncertainty. What is highly valuable, however, is to identify a number of different plausible future scenarios, explore what impacts they could have and identify potential implications for policies. Scenarios are sets of alternative futures in the form of snapshots or stories giving an image of a future context. They are intentionally fictional, and never contain predictions or recommendations. Scenarios do not consider what will happen, or what should happen; only what might happen. Participation and dialogue are indispensable to the effective use of scenarios. Through purposing, exploring, identifying implications, and taking strategic action, scenarios help us learn from the future to reframe and re-perceive our understanding of the present.

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain how scenario planning can be used by a variety of audiences, those who want to use ideas about futures that haven't occurred to play their part in shaping the future that will. For those wishing to become practitioners of strategic foresight or to create their own scenarios, please refer to the many resources on this topic.¹

Why do you need to think about the future?

Education systems currently face multiple pressures, including economic disruption; international tensions; polarisation and declining trust; large-scale migration; and ageing populations. The immediacy of today's challenges often means that governments fail to take the time to step out of the here and now and engage with the future at all (Fuerth and Faber, 2012^[1]). At the same time, the future will be no less challenging: climate-related crises, further digitalisation of economies and societies, and new forms of political turbulence both at home and abroad could make for a future that is very different from what is commonly expected.

What does it mean to be future-fit in such a challenging context? Attempting to predict or forecast the future is of limited benefit in a world of high uncertainty. What is highly valuable, however, is to identify a number of different plausible future scenarios, explore what impacts they could have and identify potential implications for policies. It is also important to look beyond the scope of traditional policy silos and consider how multiple developments can intersect and interact in unexpected ways. Change may be happening further and faster than our deliberative (and sometimes lengthy) policy processes are designed to cope with, and when change grows exponentially, so too must an education system's ability to respond to it.

How do you think about the future?

Strategic foresight is a discipline which involves the structured consideration of ideas about the future to identify ways to make better decisions in the present. It is founded on the principle that our ability to predict the future is always limited, but that it is possible to make wise decisions anyway by imagining and using multiple futures. 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. Strategic foresight has three main benefits:

- *Anticipation*: identifying what's changing and how to prepare for it; avoiding blind spots; considering developments that do not seem intuitively relevant, likely, or impactful, but which could catch us by surprise.
- *Policy innovation*: revealing options for action that make sense in new circumstances, and which reframe or refresh our understanding of the present.
- *Future-proofing*: stress-testing existing plans, strategies, or policies by subjecting them to varying conditions.

The word 'user' occurs frequently in strategic foresight practice. This is because, unlike prediction and forecasting, which attempt to identify one correct future that is the same for everyone, strategic foresight explores multiple versions of the future that help someone in particular. The envisaged user in this publication is the reader's educational establishment or organisation – for example a school, a ministry of education, or a municipality.

Box 2.1. Futures thinking in education: Finland

Skills anticipation and views on the future of schooling

Finland is a fertile land for futures thinking. In both the public and private sectors, megatrends and drivers are identified and scenarios and visions built from national to local level. There is a standing Committee for the Future in the Parliament, each government publishes its Report on the Future and the ministries prepare their own futures reviews. Prime Minister's Office and Sitra, The Finnish Innovation Fund, coordinate a national foresight network that brings together a wide range of actors from different areas of society.

The education sector is no exception to this trend. The world around the school is complex and rapidly changing, and there is a long tradition of using futures thinking to anticipate the content of education and better understand the possibilities and challenges affecting the development of teaching and learning. An example of this is the National Forum for Skills Anticipation, a foresight expert body bringing together hundreds of representatives from working life, education, research and administration to anticipate changes in skills demand. The results of the Forum's work on quantitative and qualitative skills needs and proposals for developing education are currently being explored and debated by various parties.

Another example was the Future of Learning 2030 Barometer, launched in 2009 by the Finnish National Agency for Education (formerly Finnish National Board of Education). Aimed at supporting the reform of the core curricula, the Barometer was repeated several times over successive years.

The Barometer relied on techniques of futures studies, such as the Delphi method. The use of three panels helped to capture the diverse views among different groups and bring these in dialogue with each other. In its second edition, a set of five scenarios was created to further highlight the diverse potential discontinuities the future could hold. Eventually, key issues addressed in the curriculum process had close connections to those highlighted by the Barometer, such as changing roles of teachers and students, crossing boundaries between the society and the school and within the school itself and the importance of transversal competences in teaching and learning.

Sources: Airaksinen, Halinen, and Linturi (2017^[2]) and Ministry of Education and Culture (2019^[3])

Find out more:

Foresight activities and work on the future, Prime Minister's Office, Finland, <https://vnk.fi/en/foresight>.

Strategic foresight methods

Strategic foresight uses many different methods such as scanning the horizon for signals for future change²; building visions of desirable futures and working out what steps would be needed to realise them; and road mapping the development of technologies. For the purposes of this chapter, two sets of methods are particularly important: trends and scenarios.

Trends are a fundamental part of futures thinking. They show multiple ways in which the past and the present give rise to the future by forecasting what might happen if a trend were to continue. Trends help us to tell the difference between what is constant, what is changing, and what is constantly changing. They also often challenge our assumptions and biases about what is really happening. Publications such as *Trends Shaping Education* (OECD, 2019^[4]) have the additional value of demonstrating the importance of

broader developments outside a given domain because the biggest disruptions to a system may well originate outside that system.

Scenarios are intentionally fictional, and never contain predictions or recommendations. Participation and dialogue are indispensable to the effective use of scenarios.

Scenarios are sets of alternative futures (usually three or four to compare) in the form of snapshots or stories giving an image of a future context. They are intentionally fictional, and never contain predictions or recommendations. They are constructed for the purpose of learning and taking action in the present. This is achieved by generating, testing, and reframing ideas about what might happen.

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.

Why do you need scenarios?

Scenarios are particularly widespread in the practice of strategic foresight, and multiple schools of thought exist on how they should be developed and used. In general though, for readers of this publication, scenarios are a particularly beneficial foresight approach because of three aspects:

- *Exploration*: scenarios offer a safe space for experts to disagree and challenge each other's assumptions. Knowing that a scenario is not a future we expect to occur means we can be freer in our discussions. It is not possible or desirable to be 'right' about the future in a scenario discussion. This is partly why scenarios come in sets rather than just as one. Exploring the future allows us to let go of our deeply held assumptions which may be proven unfounded and harmful if left unchallenged.
- *Context*: scenarios encourage us to consider what the future will feel like; what it would be like if the paradigm that governs our way of thinking were to change. Whereas forecasting and predictions tend to focus on individual metrics or events, scenarios allow us to consider the future as a whole: 'the big picture'.
- *Narrative*: scenarios can become powerful tools for creating shared understanding within an organisation on how to act. By creating a set of experiences about the future with their own characters, events, and logic, good scenario narratives are memorable enough to become part of an organisation's way of thinking.

Box 2.2. Futures thinking in education: Singapore

Long-term thinking and planning

The Singapore government started developing foresight capabilities in the late 1980s, beginning with scenario planning at the Ministry of Defence. Scenario planning was subsequently adopted as a tool for long-term policy thinking and development across the public service.

As a foresight think tank in the Strategy Group of the Prime Minister's Office, the Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF) was established in 2009 to strengthen long-term thinking and planning capabilities across the public service by evaluating new methods of futures thinking, identifying black swan events and developing contingency plans, free of the demands of day-to-day operational responsibilities. CSF also builds and maintains a network of foresight practitioners and strategic planners, including various ministry and agency foresight units, futures alumni and international thought leaders.

A key outcome of foresight work is the development of a mind-set and culture of future-orientation across the public service. In the area of education, driving forces such as rapid technological advancements, threat of inequality, and changing youth aspirations have important impact on how we prepare our people for the future. As such, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched a reform movement in recent years, called "Learn for Life", which comprises six thrusts that have been progressively introduced in recent years:

- "Joy of Learning" that emphasises purposeful learning driven by interest and passion, rather than just academic achievements.
- "One Secondary Education, Many Subject Bands" that allows students to learn different subjects at a pace according to their abilities.
- "Education as an Uplifting Force" that strengthens education as a social leveller, with significant investment in pre-school education and bursary schemes to ensure that everyone can access and afford education.
- "Learning Languages for Life" that supports the learning of Mother Tongue Languages that reflect Singapore's multicultural society and heritage, as well as foreign languages to prepare students to engage with the region and the world.
- "Refreshing Our Curriculum" that enhances character and citizenship education, strengthens digital literacy for all, and helps students get to know Asia; and
- "Skills Future for Educators" that supports educators in nurturing future-ready learners.

As the world remains complex and uncertain, and as Singapore continues to face unique challenges, the disciplined practice of foresight will be ever more critical. CSF will continue to support the public service in deepening its long-term thinking and planning capabilities, so that we can make better decisions today and be better prepared for tomorrow.

Source: Ministry of Education (2020^[5])

Find out more:

Centre for Strategic Futures, Strategy group, Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, <https://www.csf.gov.sg/>.

How do you use scenarios?



1. PURPOSING

Establishing why scenarios are useful

- What is the organisation that is considering its future?
- Why does the organisation exist?
- Who are the actors with which the organisation interacts?
- What strategy or programme or policy is the organisation considering that would benefit from discussion of scenarios?



2. EXPLORING

Understanding the logic and characteristics of the scenario

- What signals are there in the present that they may already be coming true?
- How would someone living in each of these worlds of the future describe it to someone from today?



3. IDENTIFYING IMPLICATIONS

Considering how the user would fare in the scenarios

- What new threats and opportunities emerge for us in each scenario?
- What strengths and weaknesses would our organisation have in each scenario?
- Which of the scenarios are we most and least prepared to survive and thrive in, and why?
- What new strategic challenges and priorities are raised by these scenarios?



4. TAKING STRATEGIC ACTION

Returning to the present-day actions of the user organisation

- What is our strategic inventory?
- How do existing practices perform in each scenario?
- What new changes or signs of change do we need to watch out for?
- What new options are there to combine existing strengths with new opportunities?
- What new options are there to avoid existing weaknesses combining with new threats?
- What new questions do we need to address today?
- What new options for action make sense in light of the discussion?

Box 2.3. Stumbling blocks in scenario-based policy dialogue

Stumbling block #1: Attempting to gauge probability of the scenarios (either in isolation or in comparison to one another). This can also manifest itself in attempts to disregard a scenario because it seems unlikely to occur.

- *Why this occurs:* this often stems from the misconception that scenarios are intended to be forecasts or predictions. Many also assume that only probable future developments are worth discussing.
- *Why it is unhelpful:* attempting to judge probability draws attention to the validity of the scenarios themselves, rather than the strategy they are intended to serve. It is much easier to criticise someone else's work than our own strategy! It also undermines a premise of scenario planning, which is to accept that a good deal of future developments are unpredictable, and many things will occur that seem unlikely from today's perspective. Furthermore, it is possible to learn positive lessons today from fictional future events, even if they never really occur.
- *How to address it:* participants in a dialogue can be reminded of events that have recently occurred that would have seemed almost impossible a decade prior (there are many); it can also help to refer to fables that are known fictions, but which nonetheless contain valuable lessons. Scenarios are fictions about the future from which we can learn. Another useful technique is to ask leading questions about what developments in the present positively suggest that the given scenario is already coming true.

Stumbling block #2: Attempting to identify actions that would neutralise or 'solve' the characteristics of a scenario that seem problematic. This can also occur when participants describe a scenario as 'unstable' and look for ways to return their image of the future to one closer to the status quo or current expectations.

- *Why this occurs:* this happens when participants accept that a scenario could occur, but find it undesirable and believe that they have the capacity to prevent it coming true or reverse it after it does. It is very common in policy dialogues for participants to fail to make a distinction between (A) what policy as a whole is capable of achieving; and (B) what their own organisation can achieve alone and through its actual partnerships.
- *Why it is unhelpful:* a central principle of scenarios is that the user should be forced to consider how they would face alternative futures that they are not in a position to determine. Only through the discipline of understanding one's own limitations can one identify concrete actions that can be taken to succeed in the future. Scenarios may reveal very insightful options for public policy as a whole, but if the dialogue does not reveal actions for the user to take then no impact will come of the exercise.
- *How to address it:* participants should be asked to divorce themselves from the present by imagining what they would do if they fell asleep today and woke up in the world described by the scenario. It can also help to structure participants' thinking using verbal devices, such as insisting that every sentence used to explore a scenario begin with the words "this is a world in which..."

Find out more:

Strategic Foresight, OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/strategic-foresight/>

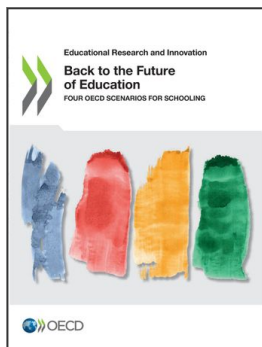
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- OECD (2019), *Trends Shaping Education 2019*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/trends_edu-2019-en. [4]

Notes

¹ For example, Ramírez, R., and A. Wilkinson (2016), *Strategic Reframing: The Oxford Scenario Planning Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.

² Horizon scanning itself can be done in an infinite number of ways, depending on what the user is looking for. This can include iterative reviews, automated text mining, expert surveys, and web scraping. The purpose is not to find the ‘right’ ideas about the future, but to identify instead the strong and weaker signals of change occurring in the present that could be surprising and significant in the future from the perspective of the user.



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