

## **Futures Thinking: Why We Should Stop Teaching Students Theories and Practices Applicable to a World That Soon Will No Longer Exist.**

Produced for Durham University Learning & Teaching Conference, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2022, by John Hirst, Associate Professor, Dept of Management & Marketing, Durham University.

### **Why Educate for the Future?**

Business leaders such as John Elkington, who launched the “triple-bottom-line” in 1993 and then withdrew it in 2018, implore universities to stop preparing students for a world that will soon no longer exist, and emphasise that all the work being done on how to transform the socio-economic system to make it more regenerative, inclusive and sustainable will count for nothing if mainstream education, and business schools in particular, don’t “wake up” to the scale of change that the world is now facing.

After decades of being ignored, scientists are now having to resort to more radical action such as supporting Extinction Rebellion campaigns to communicate the dire urgency of the climate and ecological emergency, working with green politicians striving to enact legislation such as the Climate & Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill. Climate and soil scientist Rose Abramof confessed in April 2022 that “the fear of damaging our professional reputation and losing our jobs is a very real fear. Those are fears that I have. But they’re no longer as large as my fear of the future that we’re creating.” Academics, Noam Chomsky and John Beddington to name but two, have been warning about the “perfect storm” developing from a convergence of interrelated crises for at least ten years, and the former has recently declared that humanity is rapidly approaching the most dangerous moment in human history. As Mariana Mazzucato says, “there’s plenty of talk, but how is it that when it comes to walking the talk, there’s suddenly no one in the room?” Chomsky & Pollin (2020:136) conclude that “we are truly courting ecological disaster if policies and practices continue to follow their present course” and contend that we need “guidelines about the kind of future society that we would like to see come into being” (p.145).

There’s increasingly a connection at government, senior policy and education leader level on “the need for future-oriented skills to become a core element of learning” (Salcito, 2019:10). However, including future skills in policy is not enough to ensure a genuine shift. “Education systems need to get to the next level, to integrate Future Skills into curriculum and into assessment frameworks” according to the Worldwide Education for the Future Index (2019) which concludes that:

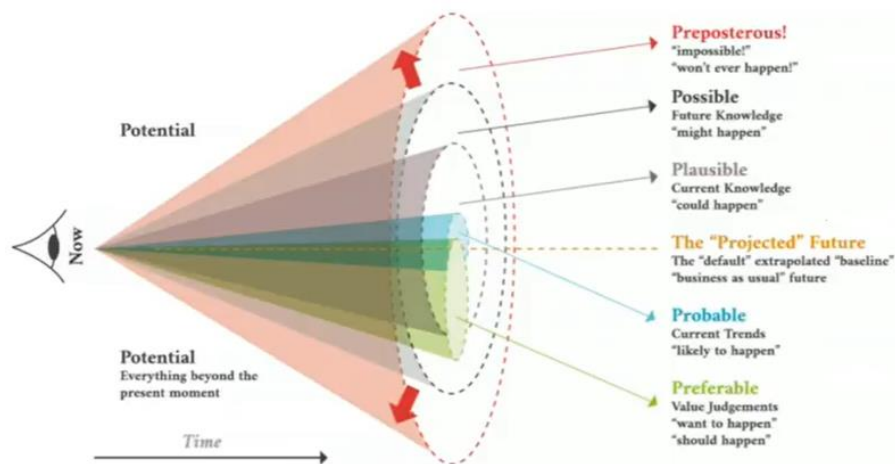
- In the future, universities will need to provide a learning experience for students that is fundamentally different from what exists today.
- Few educational systems, in Europe or elsewhere, are taking action to translate policy on future-oriented skills into action (Wagenaar, 2019:10).
- Almost all countries have a quality assurance framework for universities, but far from all have frameworks that specifically address future-oriented skills (Salmi, 2019: 10).
- University-level staff are “driving without a licence”, lacking the tools and methodologies to teach Future Skills.
- Cultural resistance to new teaching methods puts a brake on the progress of Future Skills development.
- Equally constraining, in many education systems, is a lack of guidance and support.

## How Can We Educate for the Future?

Most experts agree on the specific skills or competencies that need to be developed: critical thinking, creativity, communication, problem-solving, entrepreneurship and other future-oriented skills, including digital capabilities. Ethical dilemmas are among the challenges, so universities must integrate ethical values firmly into all their academic programmes. There's a misunderstanding that what we need to do is provide students with technology skills. Whereas, what we need are students who understand how to unleash their human skills in a world of technology increasingly dominated by powerful organizations dedicated to instrumental control and exploitation (Zuboff, 2019).

The National Union of Students Responsible Future Framework aims to equip graduates with the knowledge and understanding, skills, and attributes to actively contribute to a socially just responsible future. "We need an education system which equips graduates with the necessary competencies to face and address the climate and ecological emergency and deliver on climate justice, to avoid repeating mistakes of our past." Teachers need to inculcate:

- "Third places" (Oldenburg, 1991) where we exchange ideas and build relationship that are safe spaces in which to engage with alternative worldviews, mindsets, and assumptions and manage anxiety
- Frameworks to stimulate rethinking and imagining potential future pathways and possibilities (as shown in Fig.1)
- Approaches that challenge prevailing dominant cultural, social, economic and political logic that resists change and transformation, e.g. Raworth's (2017) "Doughnut Economics".



**Fig. 1** The Futures Thinking Funnel

Students themselves agree that "we need an education system that will equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attributes, and values to create a more just and sustainable future for all" (Students Organizing for Sustainability International).

Futures Thinking inspires students to contemplate multiple possibilities, explore potential scenarios, and consider the impact of complex interconnected outcomes that different courses of action might have, and how they can contribute to creating a more equitable, inclusive, innovative and sustainable future. The future does not exist in the present, but anticipation does. The form the future takes in the present is anticipation, so some equate teaching Futures Thinking to teaching "anticipatory competence" (QAA/AdvanceHE, 2021).

Anticipatory competence involves developing the frames, narratives and variables that shape what we imagine and calls for “emotional intelligence” because imagining the future involves hopes and fears that can lead to over-optimism bias or anxiety. This is critical because the futures we create depend on what we can imagine - our imagination is the most powerful tool we have as individuals and as a society. So, the key question is: how to become better at using our imaginations?

### What Methods Can We Use to Promote Futures Thinking?

There are a wide range of methods that can be applied to Futures Thinking (Fig.2)



Fig. 2 Futures Thinking Tools

Learning from scenarios is one of the most effective ways of teaching Futures Thinking. There are numerous approaches, some of which are set out below:

#### 1) The Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies

CIFS is a global leader in applying futures thinking and foresight methodologies to societal and business challenges. It developed the Copenhagen Method (Fig.3) and initiated the IMAGINE Futures Festival to stimulate critical discussion and debate and develop “futures literacy”. Futures literacy is the capacity to know why and how you are imagining futures. The term was developed and defined by UNESCO as an essential capability of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - a capability that people need to be trained in.

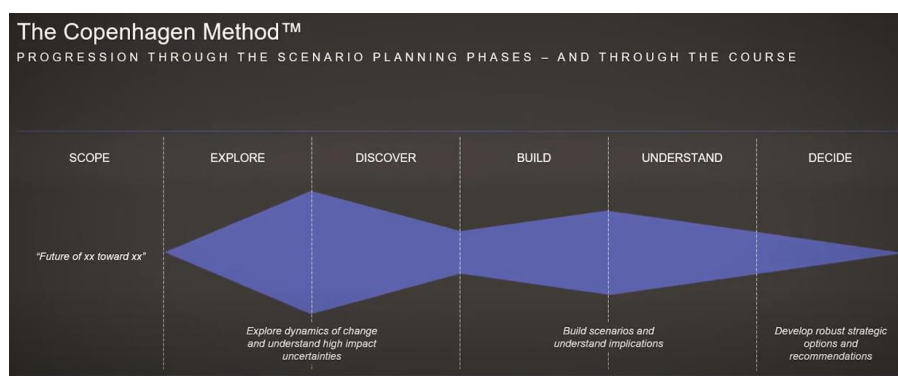
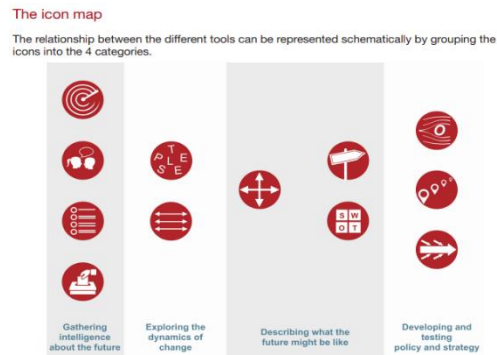


Fig.3 The Copenhagen Method

## 2) **The Futures Toolkit** created by Waverley Consulting and the Government Office for Science

The Futures Toolkit was designed primarily as a resource for those who are new to Futures Thinking but has also proved useful to more experienced practitioners. It provides an introduction to Futures Thinking. The tools are organised according to their primary purpose – gathering intelligence about the future, exploring the dynamics of change, describing what the future might be like and developing and testing policy and strategy – and each procedure is set out in detail. The Toolkit is practical rather than theoretical and each tool and pathway describes the design and facilitation steps required to deliver the technique.



**Fig. 4** The Futures Toolkit Icon Map

## 3) **The Academy of Business in Society (ABIS).**

The ABIS Scenario Exploration System (SES) is particularly suitable for use in the classroom and is currently being rolled-out to universities and colleges. The SES is a serious gaming platform. It was designed to help participants engage in systemic thinking with a long-term perspective and to explore alternative futures. It creates conditions favourable to mutual learning and networking and is sufficiently challenging to push people into thinking out of their comfort zone. It can generate very concrete conversations about the future that demonstrate the simulation value of scenarios beyond modelling or forecasting. The purpose of the Scenario Exploration System is to enable participants to experience and act through plausible sustainable alternative futures, by thinking and conversing outside of their usual frame of reference. The aim is not to play a game and win, but rather to promote a constructive conversation amongst key actors, and to promote integrated Futures Thinking in a spirit of collaboration. Ultimately, we need to develop forward thinking leaders with a specific portfolio of future-oriented skills to help society take action towards a more sustainable future. In this regard, gamified curricula hold the potential to develop such skills in a more engaging, impactful and effective way.



**Fig.5** The ABIS Scenario Exploration System

#### 4) The School of International Futures.

SOIF has a social purpose to create a fairer world for future generations and uses foresight to unlock insights about the future. It works with organisations and individuals and groups within them through mentoring, learning and dialogue to build the capability to apply future-facing perspectives to the questions they face, and to implement applied and participatory futures in their own settings, e.g by using futures and foresight tools in projects and workshops to help them get to innovative and imaginative solutions for the wider good.

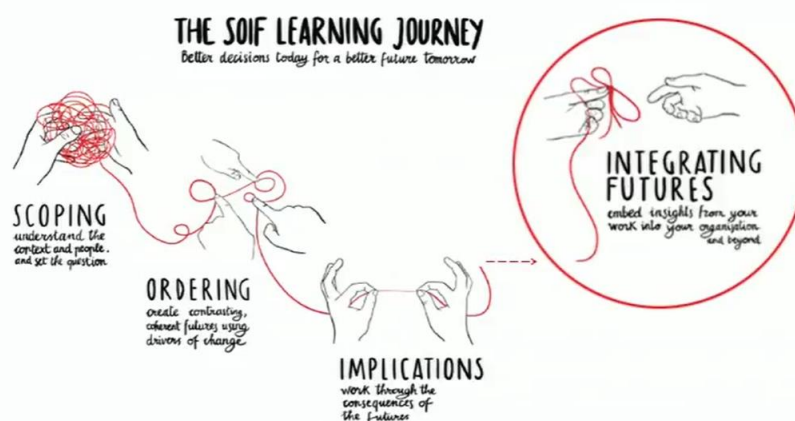


Fig 6. The SOIF Learning Journey

#### 5) Superflux

Superflux, founded by Anab Jain and Jon Ardern, takes scenario exploration a step further by converting future scenarios into futuristic experiential installations. They believe that through understanding, foresight, and creativity they can create tools that not only allow insight into forces at play but also help shape democratic, positive, rewarding futures. Put simply, they create memories of the future that feel real and relatable, and give a sense of ‘everydayness’ and intimacy alongside the ‘extraordinary’ and uncertain. “We are enabling people to pre-experience the future and those pre-experiences become part of people’s memories” (Anab Jain, Superflux).

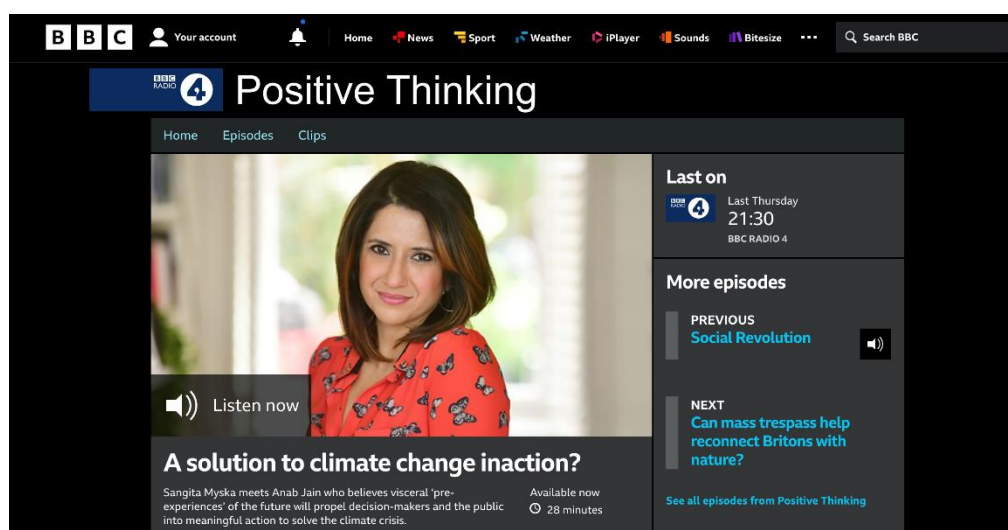
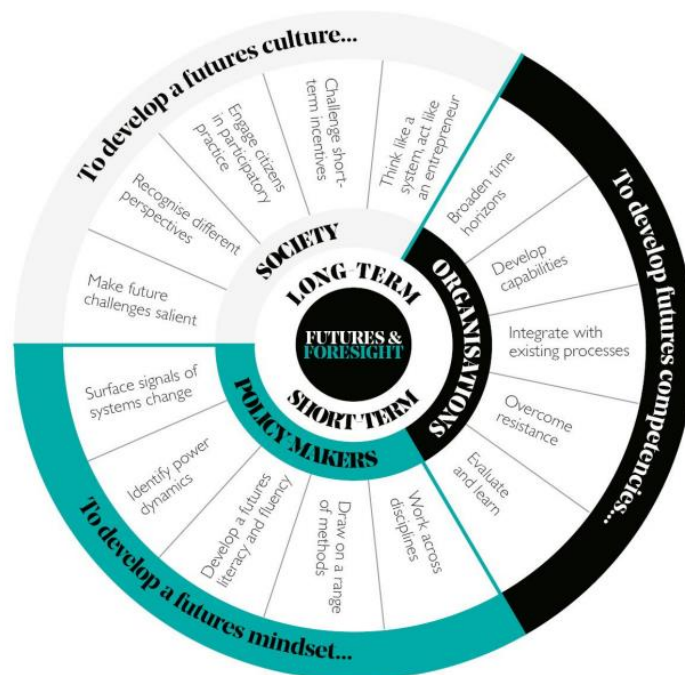


Fig. 7 BBC Radio4 Positive Thinking Interview with Anab Jain

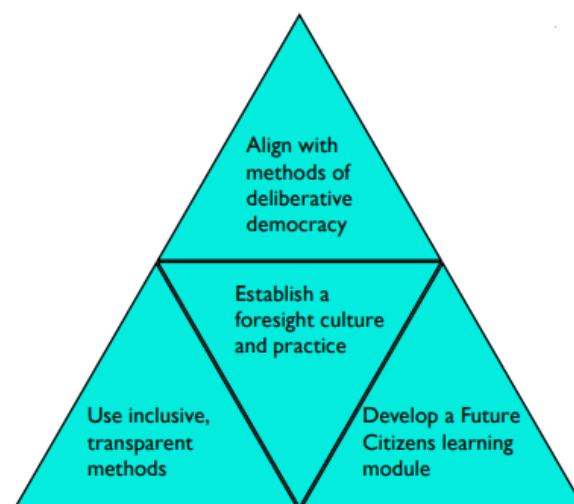
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0019rbw>

## 6) The Royal Society of Arts

The RSA is a natural home for those interested in the art of change. Inherent in change are notions of the future and how that impacts us today, especially as uncertainty and disruption characterise our futures going forward. The RSA has initiated a programme around the idea of regenerative futures with a vision for humans to thrive as part of the earth's ecosystems in perpetuity. Its "A Stitch in Time?" report (RSA, 2020) addresses the value, practice, and opportunity of futures and foresight methodologies in different contexts, with a focus on their potential for improving public policy and discourse. It emphasises that "futures as a discipline and foresight as a competency are inherently multidisciplinary and support longerterm, holistic, and systemic thinking. Systems thinking is the backbone of futures thinking - it is why futures thinking must be multidisciplinary" (*ibid* p.5). The RSA has developed a framework for designing a Futures Thinking society (Fig.8) and made various recommendations about how to implement this, as summarised in Fig.9.



**Fig.8** Framework for designing a Futures Thinking society (RSA, 2020:17)



**Fig. 9** Summary of mutually reinforcing recommendations (RSA, 2020:16)

## Conclusion

To think about the future and to plan ahead is to be human; our evolution depended on it. *Homo prospectus* has always embraced aspects of a futures and foresight mindset, albeit more intuitively than systematically. How we think about change and view the future is vitally important to how we think about and act in the present. In most cases we rely on the past as a guide to the future, often feeling powerless to influence change and seeking certainty and incremental change. The volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) state of the world now, facing multiple crises and threats, means that the future is even more difficult to imagine, still less to predict. The role of future-oriented techniques is not to anticipate the future as it exactly will be, but to set the stage for a learning process which fosters adaptation and prepares for future challenge. "Foresight approaches and techniques can facilitate and support the kind of multidisciplinary working, critical thinking and radical action that are necessary to effect change" (RSA, 2020: 73).

The RSA's recommendation most relevant to universities is to "design and test a new Futures Citizen module, ultimately to form a new further-education qualification, as well be a foundation part of every degree course. It could cover the basics of foresight alongside insights from a range of multi-disciplinary subjects such as systems thinking, complexity, design and innovation, strategy, decision-making, economics, choice and bias, and so on. Make available as a MOOC once developed and tested. This will start to seed and mainstream efforts at making foresight more accessible and culturally acceptable" (*ibid* p.15).

The RSA (2020) report concludes that "We recognise the value of these approaches for those trying to make the world a better place, to effect systems change, to open up our imaginations to the possibilities of what could be. Yet there remains a shadow side to foresight. It can be easy to dismiss as irrelevant to the present and just another distraction. There is a danger it is seen as 'just another tool' to be added to all the other models that strategists, management consultants and CEOs advocate." This shadow looms even greater if Futures Thinking is co-opted by powerful organisations whose self-serving objective is instrumentarian control and exploitation (Zuboff, 2019), e.g. by colonisation of imaginations. So, Universities need to ensure that any programmes they produce pays due regard to that risk and emphasises the need for "ethically-aligned design" (IEEE, 2019) of autonomous and intelligent systems (A/IS) and digital platforms and ecosystems.

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