



From foresight to impact? The 2030 Future of Work scenarios



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ABSTRACT

Several factors have been identified as important in generating policy-related impact from foresight work, including an effective communications strategy, engagement with relevant stakeholders, creating partnerships, and alignment with the policy-making agenda. The aim of this paper is to explore the use and impact of a scenarios project on the future of work in the UK, undertaken by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (*Future of Work: Jobs and Skills in 2030*). The paper presents the results of a post-project study, where data from UKCES has been collected in two rounds in the first two years after the conclusion of the project. The evidence indicates that it has been an impactful project on many levels. Eight factors linked to foresight impact have been identified. The two most critical of these factors are the role of the 'foresight frontman', a high-profile and esteemed individual who is able to engage audiences widely and effectively; and a multi-channel communications strategy that encompasses diverse aspects such as professional design, visualisation and social media. Foresight impact is considered as a key design issue for projects ab initio; dynamic and iterative engagement processes support co-production and facilitate impact prospects.

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1. Introduction

The topic of foresight impact has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Various studies have identified success factors for government foresight (Calof and Smith, 2010), offered insights on longitudinal case studies (Rhisiart and Jones-Evans, 2016) and evaluated national foresight programmes (Daim et al., 2009; Georghiou and Keenan, 2006). However, there is still a comparative lack of evaluation of foresight exercises (Poteralska and Sacio-Szymańska, 2013) even though it can support learning and improved policy-making (van der Steen and Van der Duin, 2012). The aim of this paper is to explore the use and impact of a foresight scenarios project undertaken on the future of work and skills by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES): *Future of Work: Jobs and Skills in 2030*. The study was delivered for UKCES by a team that included the authors of this paper. The paper is guided by the following questions. What makes a scenarios exercise impactful? How are the results of a scenarios project used? How do organisations track the use and impact of foresight work?

As a topic, 'the future of work', has generated volumes of literature over many decades, and has prompted broader societal discussions. The emergence of the information age and computerisation stimulated

much debate in previous decades on the nature, organisation and meaning of work.

It was during the 1970s...that the familiar scenery of our working lives began to show visible changes. The large employment organizations which had been daytime houses for so many people all their lives began to decline...Jobs began to be a scarce commodity, and work started to mean other things besides the conventional full-time job. Second and third careers, moonlighting and the (informal) economy became part of our language as did the chip and the video – all new words to herald new ways. The old patterns were breaking down; new patterns were forming.

(Handy, 1984: ix)

Handy's references to the breaking down of old patterns and the formation of new patterns are redolent of the Schumpeterian process of creative destruction, in which entrepreneurs seize on the opportunities afforded by technological and other changes to disrupt the status quo. Zuboff's (1988) reference to the 'smart machine' appears prophetic to contemporary society in the 21st century where 'smart' is an epithet for ubiquitous and technologically advanced digital devices. The interest in the future of work remains very strong today. From a technology perspective, there is a fascinating and important contemporary debate on the potential role of artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics in transforming work, economies and societies (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Frey and Osborne, 2013; Ross, 2016); automation or

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computerisation has taken on a new meaning. Even though technology has a major impact in generating change, the future of work is broader than technology. A wider socio-economic and systemic perspective is needed.

The paper will briefly set the context and outline the main steps and processes of the Future of Work 2030 project. Most of the paper is dedicated to exploring how the foresight results have been used following the launch of the main outputs. Post-project interviews have been conducted with UKCES to track the use and impact of the scenarios produced. Two rounds of post-project interviews have been conducted over 18 months since the end of the project. The paper assesses the types of impact that the Future of Work 2030 has had to date – and the factors that are perceived as critical to impact. The assessment indicates that it has been a highly impactful project. Section 2 reviews the literature around impact of scenarios and foresight in a policy-making setting. The main context of the study and its activities are presented in Section 3, followed by the methodology used in Section 4. The results are presented in Section 5, and discussed in Section 6. Concluding thoughts are presented in Section 7.

2. The use and impact of scenarios in policy making: a review of the literature

Conceptions of the future structure the decision-making processes of the present. The way in which we use the future has a major influence on the possibilities and options that are revealed to us, both inside and outside government. Path dependencies have material effects for decision-making but also – and perhaps more importantly – set the cognitive frames for actors in these environments. Assumptions and norms generated from past events and conditions can have a powerful influence over the type of future that is 'available'. There has been a trenchant critique of 'static' models in the Strategy field (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Schoemaker, 1990; Stacey, 1995, 2007), particularly where organisations have a 'precommitment' to a course of action and the main task is optimization (Lane and Maxfield, 1996).

Futures activity within policy-making habitually encounters the constraints that are imposed when there is a premature closing of thinking and choices. Policy-makers need assistance in how they use the future: to emancipate them from probabilistic thinking, and to re-think decision-making in the present (Miller, 2016). In the absence of this creativity, and advanced knowledge, policy-making (unwittingly) reproduces and projects the present into the future, thereby colonising it. It neglects the creativity and potential that is emergent in the present. Policy-making is both situated in and seeks to consciously influence complex socio-economic systems. After all, if it were simple and linear, 'wicked problems' wouldn't be wicked. In many ways, the goal for policy-makers – and those that seek to support policy-makers – is to reflect more faithfully complexity in decision-making, and to forge ways of adapting knowledge from complexity science – including notions of emergence and adaptive capability – into the practice of policy-making. The study of complexity and complex adaptive systems has been an important dimension within futures studies for several decades (Linstone, 2011). The development of the futures field is said to be undergoing changes from 'forecasting to anticipatory action learning' and from 'reductionist to complex' (Inayatullah, 2002: 295). It is well acknowledged that decision-makers ultimately have to simplify and narrow down to certain choices. However, these choices can be revealed and enriched by adopting an open, anticipatory systems approach (Miller and Poli, 2010) that embraces the creativity and potential of a non-deterministic Universe (Miller, 2007; Miller, 2016).

Scenario exercises may have a range of tangible and intangible benefits, for example in supporting strategic decision-making, setting priorities, challenging assumptions and promoting learning. The most common reason cited for conducting scenarios exercises is to support strategic decision-making (Varum and Melo, 2010). Within policy-making, the decision-making process is informed by the multiple

streams of agenda-setting: of ideas, politics and perceived problems (Kingdon, 2002). Assessing the impact of scenarios on decision-making and policy-making is not a simple task considering the multiplicity of factors, layers and processes involved. These include – but are not limited to – individual and collective learning processes, intra-organisational and inter-organisational aspects, and the influence of ideas, politics and perceived problems in agenda-setting. Impact has been cited as one of the three main areas to be assessed in evaluating foresight activities; the other two are quality and success (Van der Steen and van der Duin, 2012).

Scenarios and other foresight methods form part of the strategic palette of tools that governments use in designing and implementing policies and programmes. In some cases, foresight units within Government may coordinate cross-cutting initiatives that involve multiple Departments and partners in the process. As with other areas of policy-related research and analysis, there have been various initiatives to share good practices and case studies, and develop guides for foresight implementation such as the European Foresight Platform.¹ Some of these initiatives focus on the application of scenario and related techniques (e.g. FOR-LEARN Online foresight guide²). Recently, attention has been increasingly focused on the key ingredients for governments in maximizing the value of foresight work. With sustained interest and cumulative experiences of using foresight in policy-related work, the quest to learn what works in the design and implementation of foresight is a sign both of its maturity and the expectation that applied (futures) research and analysis should be able to demonstrate its value. Concern with delivering impactful foresight work has also started to move upstream in the design and deliberations over foresight projects. Commissioners of scenarios and foresight studies are thinking ex-ante of impact issues. Contractors and researchers are increasingly sensitized to the impact agenda – beyond the technical accomplishment of the project. A recent example of this trend can be found in the decision of one European Union agency (EU OSHA) to commission a (pre-) study to understand success factors for foresight work. This was planned as a precursor to undertaking a major foresight project (Cox et al., 2015).

There are several possible interpretations of what constitutes 'success' in policy-foresight work. These include, for example, achieving stated objectives; stimulating collaboration to address a tricky problem; engaging with target groups, and so on. Whilst some are concerned with achieving tangible goals (e.g. development of a new, formal strategy through scenarios), others can be concerned with intangibles (e.g. forming new networks, changing culture etc.). At a prosaic level, much of the theoretical and practical literature in this area is directed towards understanding what works, how and why. Policy makers are increasingly looking beyond merely the technical competence and quality of foresight work taken. There are growing expectations that investments in foresight will deliver greater dividends. One national example of this change can be found in the UK. Over the years, the foresight programme has received positive evaluations (e.g. Georghiou et al., 2006). More recently, however, one parliamentary enquiry into horizon scanning activity found that the high quality of foresight programmes did not necessarily translate into a commensurate level of impact (Science and Technology Select Committee, 2014).

Discussions on impact lead us back to the question of the purpose and value of foresight. Haegeman et al. (2010) identify six functions of foresight (or future-oriented technology analysis (FTA)) for policy making: informing policy; facilitating policy implementation; embedding participation in policy-making; supporting policy definition; reconfiguring the policy system; and having a symbolic function. Other authors have similarly focused on the key functions of: generating information and aggregate knowledge to inform policy; advising policy through a process of shaping and interpretation; and facilitation of

¹ <http://www.foresight-platform.eu>.

² http://forlearn.jrc.ec.europa.eu/guide/0_home/index.htm.

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