The state of play in the futures field:
a metascanning overview

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Abstract

Purpose – *The paper aims to introduce the first iteration of an international research project into the ''state of play'' in the futures field (SoPiFF) using methodology developed at the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI).*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper outlines the overall approach and the methods it employed, along with some implications and emerging themes from this first iteration.*

Findings – *The paper casts new light on patterns of activity in the futures/foresight arena that, in turn, lead to policy questions, including those of purpose and effectiveness.*

Originality/value – *The SoPiFF project is of interest not only for its early results, but also for the use of the metascanning methodology outlined here. At one level it draws attention to the nature of the foresight practitioner's toolkit. At another it may also help to guide decisions about future resourcing options and the nature of training that is offered within the domain.*

Keywords *Research, Forward planning, Forecasting, International cooperation*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

The State of Play in the Futures Field (SoPiFF). is a research project commissioned by the Futures Foundation, Seattle. Its purpose was to begin to build a clearer picture of the current ''state of play'' of the futures field, to understand it more fully, and to establish a basis from which it may be reinvigorated. The first iteration of the project took place in 2007-2008. The outputs are in the form of written documents and a purpose-built website.

Futures studies and, more lately, applied foresight, have been established for several decades. They have generated a rich and wide-ranging literature, a variety of methodologies and a spectrum of organizations engaged in many kinds of forward-looking work. Yet futures work still lacks broad acceptance, general recognition or wide application of proposed social innovations such as institutions of foresight. As will be seen below, the take-up of futures in education at any level has been very limited. Given that the field itself is a response to new levels of uncertainty and hazard, this performance gives cause for concern. It suggests that humanity is neither responding nor adapting to new conditions and is therefore currently at greater risk than is commonly understood.

The SoPiFF project was developed to allow a better understanding of the Futures field to be developed, and more importantly, to identify how the field can better serve the long-term needs of humankind, particularly in terms of contributing to global sustainability.

Walter Kistler has stated that ''humanity is like a vehicle going down a steep slope without a steering wheel, without brakes, and without a driver'' (Kistler, 2006). If the field that developed specifically to address this situation is under-performing, the human prospect darkens accordingly. The broad public awareness required to motivate decision makers is reduced. Progressive policy solutions take longer to frame and implement. Social foresight

remains an idealistic dream and humanity is condemned to learning from experience, which we now know is both dangerous and unwise[1].

If, on the other hand, weaknesses in the field can be identified and corrected, it should be possible to develop a more positive dynamic. To the extent that well-grounded innovations are thoughtfully taken up and applied, the prospects for humanity's long-term future improve. Advanced work in the futures domain offers integrating frameworks, metaperspectives, tools, methods and perhaps ''futures literacy'' – all of which bring clarity and focus to complex, contested multi-domain questions. Where this occurs, the capacity is created for disciplined, high quality and useful work. At its best, this work emerges in more effective choices, policies and informed decision making across the board.

Overview and key questions

The first iteration of the SOPIFF project sought to investigate a number of key questions relating to the futures field. An initial scan focused on identifying a broad sample of futures work across the world, where they were located and the type of work undertaken. It was impossible to quantify the number of futurists in the world, mainly because of the lack of an agreed definition. Each scanning ''hit'' identified was categorized using metascanning categories that are described below (under research method and results). The aim was to identify:

- whose social interests were involved;
- what methodologies were in use;
- what domains are covered; and
- what results were observed, especially in relation to social capacity building.

It is important to note that thee results of this first iteration are indicative only. Further work will need to be carried out subsequently to check and extend the early findings set out here. The next stage of the project involved producing a number of overviews of regional futures activity and case studies focused around identifying the impact of futures work in the following areas:

- social and organizational capacity building, and social and economic development;
- social innovation;
- educational systems;
- local, regional or government policy-making, and placing new issues on the social and political agenda;
- media and web presence;
- literature and journals; and
- understanding the global problematique.

Finally, the following questions sought to provide more focused overviews of the current state of futures work:

- what contribution has the field made to understanding and resolving aspects of the global problematique; and
- on balance is FS/Foresight work progressive . . . or has it been captured by existing social interests?

These questions are addressed in an accompanying paper (Slaughter and Riedy, 2009).

Definitions

The following definitions were used in the project.

Futures studies reflects on how today's changes and continuities become tomorrow's reality. It includes attempts to analyze the sources, patterns, and causes of change and stability in order to develop foresight and to map alternative futures. The subjects and methods of futures studies include possible, probable, and desirable variations or alternative

transformations of the present, both social and ''natural'', that is, independent of human impact. A broad field of inquiry, futures studies explores and represents what the present could become from multiple interdisciplinary perspectives[2].

Two factors usually distinguish futures studies from the research conducted by other disciplines, although all disciplines overlap to differing degrees. Futures studies examine not only possible, but also probable, preferable, and wildcard futures, and, typically attempt to gain a holistic or systemic view based on insights from a range of different disciplines.

Foresight is defined as systematic activities embracing:

■ critical thinking concerning long-term developments;

■ debate and effort to create wider participation in decisions; and

■ shaping the future, especially by influencing public policy and strategic decisions[3].

Strategic foresight is the ability to create and maintain a continuous high-quality, coherent and functional forward view, and to use the insights arising in useful organizational ways. For example to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy, and to explore new markets, products and services. It represents a fusion of futures methods with those of strategic management[4].

In this paper, the term ''FS/foresight'' is used to describe futures and foresight work.

Research method

The SoPiFF project was carried out in four stages. During Phases 1 and 2, the researchers collected futures material from around the world and ran a structured scanning process on this material. Each researcher concentrated on a specified geographic region. The bulk of the research was conducted using the internet and other published sources of information. These were supplemented by email and other personal contacts as needed[5]. Sources included:

■ books, papers and other published work;

■ course outlines and teaching materials;

■ web sites;

■ email communications;

■ futures associations, organizations and networks; and

■ personal contacts.

Over 200 separate scanning ''hits'' were identified during the first phase.

The metascanning framework used in the project provided an analytical approach to classifying futures activity through the use of a set of incisive breadth and depth criteria as shown in Table I.

This scanning method was first developed at the then Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) during 2001-2004 (Australian Foresight Institute, 2006) and documented by Ramos (2004). The method has since been used in a number of contexts including an in-depth assessment of a US National Intelligence Council Report[6]. In these and other cases, it has been shown to reveal hitherto ''hidden'' aspects of futures work, thus bringing new analytic clarity to them.

The researchers provided a brief summary of each item scanned and assigned it a metascanning code. Some items were reviewed in greater detail, particularly those that showed initial evidence of using some of the newer (i.e. critical and/or integral) methods. The full database of scanned material is available online (SoPiFF, 2008). A possible weakness of this approach was that of how to ensure consistency between the researchers. This was addressed through checking, feedback and correction of early scans. Thus, while profiles can and will be questioned in specific cases, the broad overall patterns shown in the data are largely unaffected.

Table I	Metascanning framework				
Metascanning category 1: organizational type	*Metascanning category 2: social interests*	*Metascanning category 3: methods*	*Metascanning category 4: domains*	*Metascanning category 5: capacity building*	*Metascanning category 6: country/location*
(a) Government (b) Professional firm (c) Private practice (d) Private firm (e) Not-for-profit (f) Research Institute (g) University/School (h) Network	(a) Pragmatic (b) Progressive (c) Civilization	(a) Linear (b) Systemic (c) Critical (d) Integral	(a) Structural (b) Inter-subjective (c) Behavioral (d) Psychological	(a) Conceptual (b) Foundations (c) Methods and tools (d) Enabling structures and processes (e) Social legitimation	(a) Country/location

The third phase of the project consisted of analysis of results to produce a series of overviews of futures work, at both regional level and in response to the key questions posed above. The final phase involved the preparation and submission of a final report to the project sponsors.

Results

This section provides an analysis of results according to the metascanning categories. The original – and much more extensive – regional overviews can be found on the SOPIFF website along with details of each of the following metascanning categories[7]. Further details of the impact of futures work in specific areas can also be found there. Emerging themes and patterns are identified there and discussed in other papers in this issue.

Organizational type

Figure 1 shows that three interlinked types of organizations dominate the world of FS/foresight work:

1. governments (51);

2. research institutes (46); and

3. universities (34).

Figure 1	Metascanning category 1: organizational type
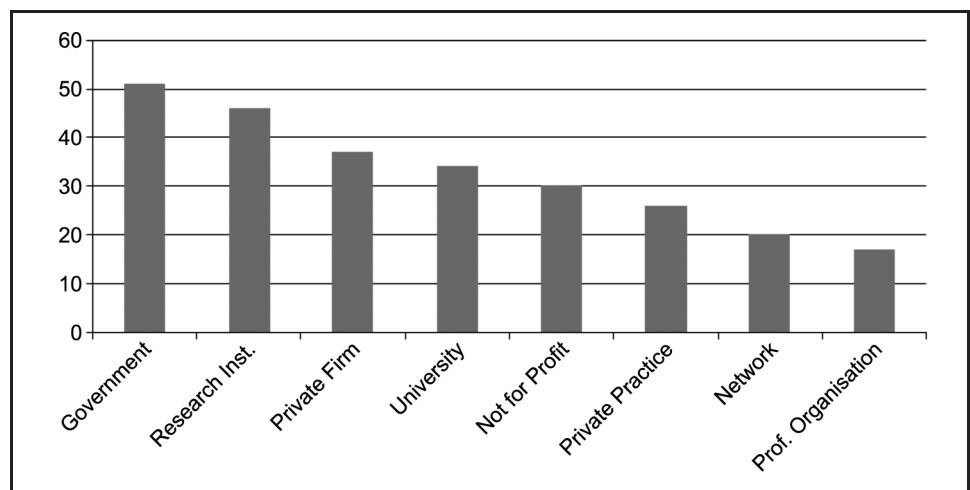
Clearly, there is a good deal of overlap between the last two. They are followed by:

- private firms (37);
- not-for-profits (30);
- private practices (26);
- networks, (20); and
- professional organizations (17).

In considering these figures, we should bear in mind that this is indeed a sample, not an attempt to count the actual number of active entities in the field. Such an attempt is problematic due to irreducible ambiguities and the impossibility of drawing sharp distinctions between related sub-fields such as strategy and planning, organizational development and so on.

The dominance of large organizations is not surprising. It is most likely a reflection of the fact that to carry out serious futures work takes time, money and trained personnel. This said, however, there are certainly many more private firms and individual practices than were included in this survey. This sub-area of activity is one that bears further investigation in later survey rounds. A related issue is the extent to which emerging internet applications have a bearing on the field and the contributions that they may make[8].

Social interests

Social interests are unavoidable and central in any field of enquiry and especially in those that deal with complex and value laden questions[9]. It is surprising, therefore, that relatively little attention has been paid to their influence in FS/foresight work thus far. By contrast, the present work regarded these as a structural factor that required explicit treatment. Three fundamental types of social interests were identified here. They are ''pragmatic'' (carrying out today's business, but perhaps doing it better), ''progressive'' (going beyond today's practices to invent and encourage new ways of doing things), and ''civilisational'' (looking beyond what currently exists and consciously working to create the foundations of the next level of world civilization and culture). The results of this part of the scan are fairly dramatic but not unexpected:

- pragmatic (172);
- progressive (128); and
- civilization (39).

As shown in Figure 2, about half of the activity scanned appears to be conventional, routine and basically concerned either with maintaining the status quo or at least not significantly challenging it. This provides clear evidence of the way that FS/foresight work has become closely linked with existing social and economic interests and agendas – a fact that may reduce its capacity to facilitate adaptive change. While some may well argue that the broad up-take of such work in largely conservative environments (planning, social administration, government departments and corporations) represents a real advance, it remains an ambiguous one for reasons that become clearer below. Essentially such work fails to engage with the central problematics of cultures and worldviews that remain in denial of the ''overshoot and collapse'' trajectory within which they are embedded (Randers, 2008; Turner, 2008).

Set against this, however, is the fact that progressive work is slowly becoming more widespread. This can be interpreted as evidence of an alternative tradition, that is, one that ''takes issue with the way things are'' and seeks innovative ways forward. Riedy (2007a), for example, notes a surprising amount of progressive work, often focusing on issues of sustainability. He accounts for this by suggesting that the worsening sustainability crisis, and the issue of climate change in particular, are acting as drivers for more progressive futures work. On the other hand civilization work, that is, work that looks further ahead and seeks to create quite new options, remains rare. One policy implication could be that if support were

Figure 2 Metascanning category 2: social interests
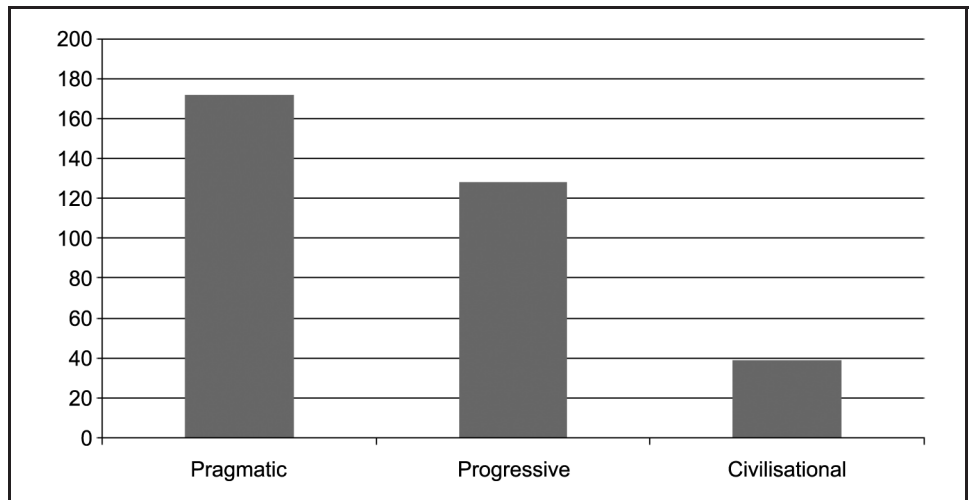
to be given preferentially, it might be best provided here. Yet where such support would come from remains unclear.

Methods

Four broad approaches to methods are distinguished in the research as follows:

1. systemic methods (167);

2. linear methods (158);

3. critical methods (66); and

4. integral methods (20).

Again this pattern, also shown in Figure 3, aligns closely with what one might expect. Systemic methods include systems analysis (both hard and soft), scenario building and the newer manifestations of, for example, Earth Science which considers the Earth as a complexly interconnected whole. Systemic methods have been widely applied in this and many other fields and is, perhaps, one of the most significant success stories for futures work over recent decades. It has arguably helped the field to mature, to improve its capacity

Figure 3 Metascanning category 3: methods
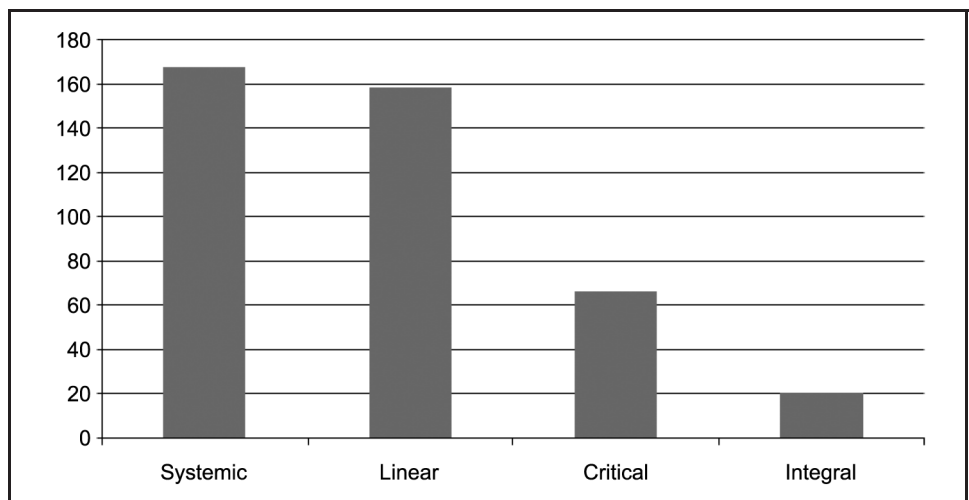
to deal with complex phenomena and is a definite step towards enhanced capacity and broader capability. Its drawbacks, however, at least in mainstream applications, include a tendency to reductionism and a failure to incorporate intangible drivers such as social assumptions, values and worldviews[10].

Scenario building has become very popular as a default method in wide use. Certainly, when done well scenarios are a valuable source of understanding and insight. The problem is that they are not always done well. As mentioned below, the sheer number of partly trained practitioners may obscure the fact that the quality of work carried out is very varied indeed. For example, most standard approaches to scenario building minimize or omit altogether any real consideration of the ''interior worlds'' of people and cultures, where many of the most significant drivers of change are found (Slaughter, 2008).

Linear methods include various kinds of trend analysis, forecasting and extrapolations. These are among the earliest methods to have developed and they remain well established, if not dominant in some areas. Their drawbacks are by now well known. They include a tendency to over-simplify, to fall into the trap of ''false precision'' and, broadly speaking, reify social phenomena to the point of caricature. Notwithstanding this, they have many practical uses in empirical contexts.

Critical futures methods – those dealing with cultural construction and understanding – reflect more recent developments, especially the tools of critical enquiry that have emerged from the humanities. They require expert knowledge of domains such as cultural studies, literary theory, post-modernism, hermeneutics and so on. Whereas in fact work grounded in these ways profoundly complements that deriving from systems work and the hard sciences, those working from the latter bases sometimes find critical methods too challenging, and hence reject them. This creates an artificial barrier that has arguably done much to impede the further progress and development of the field. This structural impediment does, however, have a viable solution and it is found within the following category.

The integral perspective is arguably both the most powerful and deeply applicable one to have emerged in recent years[11]. It is also the one that is least well accepted by those whose training and development occurred out of earlier paradigms and using earlier and mainly empirical models and methods. Thus, even more than the barriers facing critical futures work, resistance to, and misunderstanding of, the integral approach exists among some practitioners and may constitute another block on the path to greater disciplinary capability. A further reason for this is that the approach does require some time and effort to be understood and mastered. Equally, it is significant that younger entrants to the field find it easier to pick up than well-established people who understandably perhaps prefer the older methods. This suggests that development within the field may, to some extent, be viewed as a generational issue. If so, then it would be wise not to expect rapid change but rather slower change as a new generation of integrally informed practitioners takes over. A good example of the ''new'' literature that incorporates integral methods without giving them undue prominence is Hines and Bishop (2006).

Focal domains

Looking at futures-related activity focal domains provides yet another ''cut'' or partial diagnosis regarding what is actually happening within the field. These four domains correlate closely with Wilber's four-quadrant model[12] which provides four ''lenses'' on the world, as follows:

1. structural (lower right, or external collective domain);

2. behavioral (upper right, or external individual domain);

3. psychological (upper left, or interior individual domain); and

4. intersubjective (lower left, or interior collective domain).

The underlying point about using these four domains is that they appear to be the smallest number of ''windows'' on the world that are each represented by distinctive ''ways of

knowing.'' Let us also note in passing that the very notion of ''ways of knowing'' itself indicates a more elaborate and sophisticated understanding of how ''interior'' factors such as self-understanding, values, paradigms, traditions, language etc, all moderate and condition our thinking, understanding and behavior. These factors, long in the background, have now emerged and can be understood and factored in, along with more familiar ones[13].

At a simplistic level these distinctions provide a ''check list'' to ensure that all the main ''bases'' been covered. At a more advanced level they make it easier to apply the right methods to corresponding phenomena in the world. Conscious use of these domains means that practitioners are able to think and operate with a much higher level of clarity, and that methodological development in the field is significantly enhanced.

Figure 4 summarizes the following results:

- structural (183);
- intersubjective (112);
- behavioral (69); and
- psychological (42).

The overwhelming focus on the structural (lower right or external collective) domain again reflects the history and early development of the field which was dominated, and still is to a considerable extent, by a preoccupation with ''hard'', ''external'' and ''scientific'' ways of knowing. That is, the bulk of futures work appears to be concerned with problems that relate to external physical phenomena: new technologies, cities, infrastructures, the human genome and the physical universe. This view is moderated to some extent, however, by the fact that the second highest score is that of the intersubjective (lower left or cultural) domain. This result is promising, because it suggests that significant numbers of practitioners are also open to, and therefore influenced by, cultural factors and realities[14]. Since the latter are always deeply implicated in all external phenomena it is appropriate to see greater balance emerging here.

A good deal less balance, however, can be observed in the attention paid to people as individuals. Behavioral phenomena – issues related to human agency – appear to be of less interest and psychological ones receive the least attention of all. What this means is that knowledge about ''how people act'' and also ''how they construct their inner worlds'' – their internal development and ultimately their consciousness – are seen as of little importance.

Figure 4 Metascanning category 4: focal domains
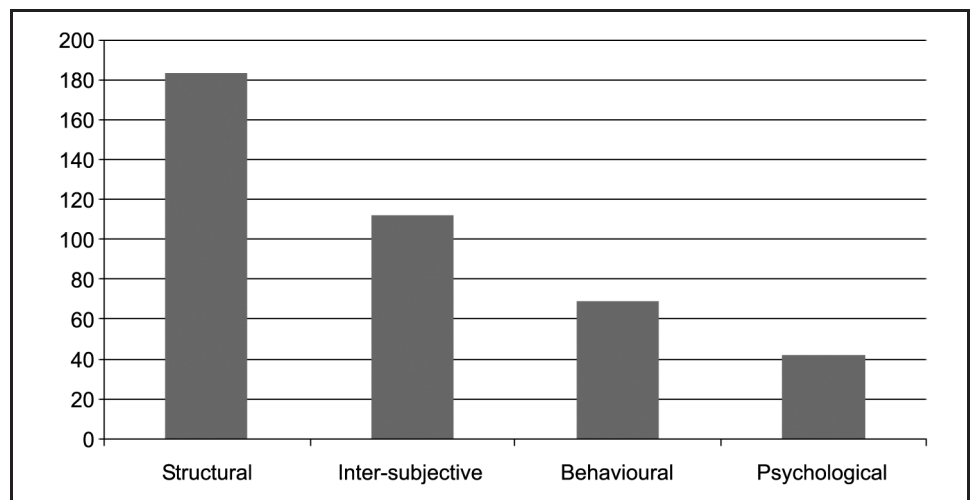
This represents an inversion of a view that is arguably becoming more widespread, i.e. that ''consciousness determines perception'' (Sahtouris, 2009).

These results confirm what was suggested above, i.e. that the field has been rather one-sidedly preoccupied with external phenomena and has tended to overlook the sources of understanding, perception and behavior within all human beings. Such a diagnosis allows us to understand some of the limitations of past practice. Equally, it can also inform suggestions for productive ways forward, which is the main point of the SoPiFF project. Maree Conway has pointed out how much FS/foresight work depends on ''thought leaders'' and ''individual good will.'' Moreover, she writes that ''don't see much effort going towards tailoring messages for the 'person in the street' so that the imperative to think about the future every day become clear and inescapable'' (Conway, 2007). In other words, whether we take the viewpoint of disciplinary development or whether we consider the needs of individuals and society, in both cases there is a clear need to embrace and balance both interior and exterior domains of existence.

Results and capacity building

It is notoriously difficult to assess the results of ''good FS/foresight work'' considered in isolation. One reason for this is that, within organizations, these activities are only a part of a much broader and more complex set of processes and disentangling them is no easy matter. That said, the research attempts to reveal more about the intent behind the work through the following categories. These are drawn from a research paper published in 1996 that informed the research program later developed at the AFI in Melbourne (Slaughter, 1996). Briefly, it was hypothesized that social foresight could be developed through the four broad stages used here:

1. conceptual underpinnings that facilitate the emergence of a futures discourse;

2. methods and tools of FS that assist in the resolution of practical, real-world issues and problems;

3. institutional structures/processes within purpose-built niches that protected FS/foresight work and raised it above mere project-based episodic use; and

4. a process of social legitimation that lent value and validity to the whole.

As in all the above, deeper insight into ''what's actually going on'' requires more detailed case studies. The results identified thus far are shown below and in Figure 5:

Figure 5 Metascanning category 5: capacity building
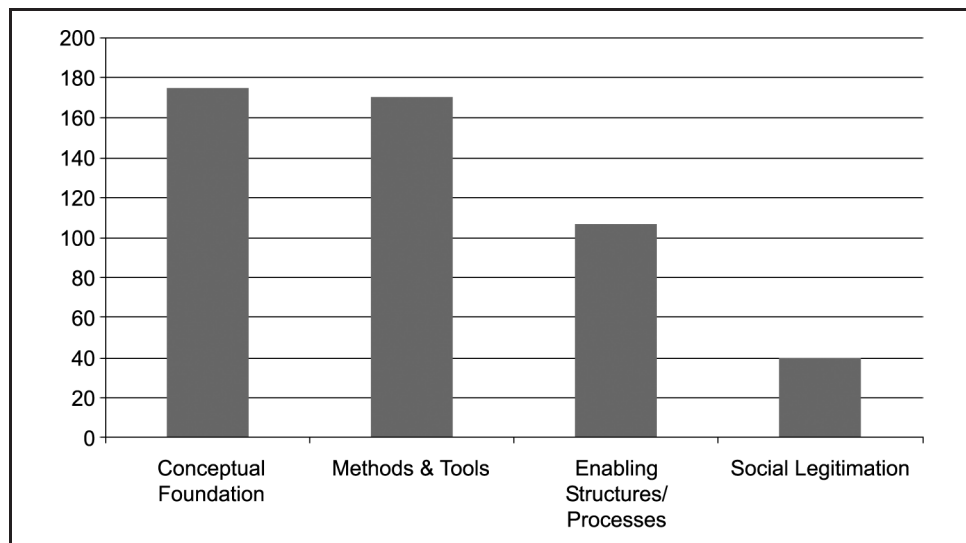
- conceptual foundation (175);
- methods and tools (170);
- enabling structures and processes (106); and
- social legitimation (40).

The overall picture here is clear. Most manifestations of FS/foresight work appear to strike a fairly consistent balance between the use of informing concepts and futures methods and tools. Considerably fewer, however, appear to take seriously the need to build on these capabilities and to devote time and attention to enabling structures and processes that would provide this work with continuity and security. The argument that foresight work be carried out in the public interest and therefore funded from the public purse has apparently fallen on deaf ears, there still being no effective constituency to pursue this case fairly and forcefully with governments. Instead what we appear to have is a fragmentation of what might be called ''futures efforts'' into many different specializations and institutional arrangements. Many, as noted, are commercial and administrative. Beyond the commonly ''strategic and commercial'' uses of FS/foresight work there is, however, a distinct increase in applications related to ''national security.'' In some cases such deliberations are made public but in many others the products of this work are available to high-level government officials only (Flitton, 2009).

It follows from the above that even less attention is paid to social legitimation. Indeed, it is difficult to find evidence that practitioners regard it as an issue. Certainly no readily detectable evidence of widespread work in this critical area was picked up in the survey. It appears, therefore, that the goal-oriented and instrumental focus of most futures work tends to dominate and also limit the effectiveness of such work. Only about a third of the examples sampled put as much effort into embedding it into specific contexts and most overlooked social legitimation completely.

Here we have another possible explanation for the slow and uncertain progress of the field as such. If it is to be more widely accepted it will have look beyond the immediate performance of specific tasks and engage much more fully in wider social processes. This has been a collective blind spot, perhaps, and it appears to have cost the field dearly.

Location

As noted above the regional futures scans are given in more detail elsewhere, so only brief comments are given here. The ''top five'' countries in terms of the number of scans completed (Figure 6) are as follows:

Figure 6 Metascanning category 6: location
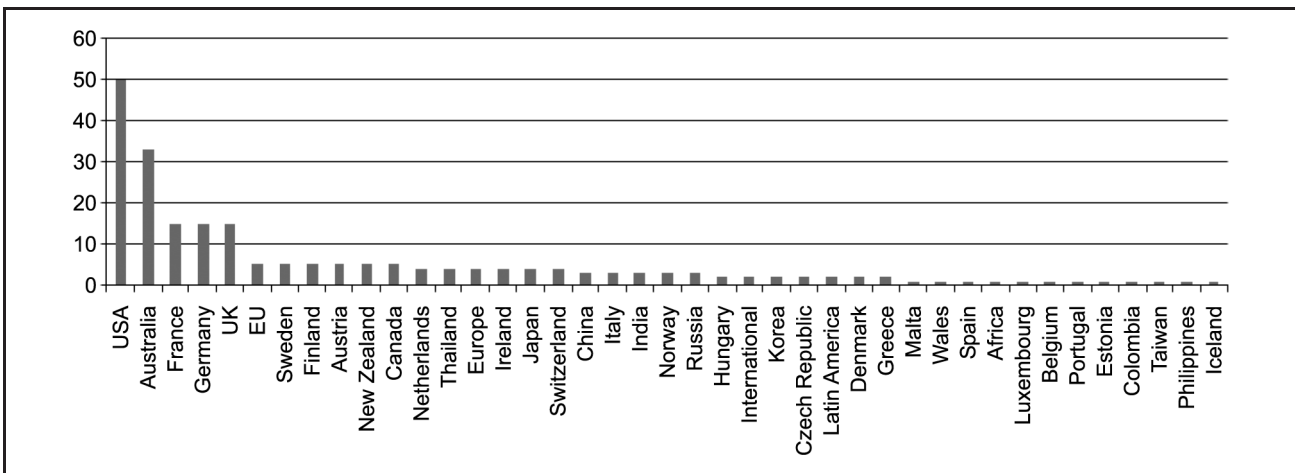
- USA (50);
- Australia (33);
- Germany (15);
- France (15); and
- UK (15).

What is obvious about this list is the dominance of the US, a result to be expected given that nation's dominance in world affairs and its significant investments in futures work for a wide range of purposes. Germany, France and the UK are three, if not the three, most highly developed and affluent nations in Europe. Australia's relatively high score may be accounted for by the fact that several of the researchers were based there. It might also reflect the fact that it is a ''young'' nation that is necessarily outward-, and forward-looking. The figure given for the EU is almost certainly an under count that should be checked and likely corrected in a subsequent iteration. Indeed, the figures given here should be considered as rough approximations only, given the sample nature of the survey. This suggests that a subsequent phase of work would do well to take a new look at the locations of FS/foresight work and also review the methods used here.

Emerging patterns and themes

While there is a lot happening in the futures field, and there are obviously some strong thought leaders in the field, futures work remains patchy and dependent to a large extent on individual goodwill. Ramos identified the need to do more work at the individual level to promote and communicate the foresight message, and the scanning for the SoPiFF project reinforced this finding (Ramos, 2004). If there is an individual who knows how to ''work the system,'' then futures work gets done, and often gets done well. Otherwise, implementation tends to be hit and miss, so that building a foresight capacity is not embedded in organizational processes.

There is much government work undertaken in the futures field, but it has primarily focused around science and technology foresight. There are signs that it is starting to integrate a human perspective, but not yet in the integral sense. Europe is leading the way in this area, for example through the European Foresight Monitoring Network and the Finnish Parliament Committee for the Future, among others. Europe also appears to be leading the way in embedding a futures perspective into policy processes, going beyond reliance on individual champions.

While European work seems to have achieved greater policy influence, American work seems more diverse, with a lot of work happening outside government and more examples of work not focused solely on science and technology foresight. Meanwhile, Asian futures work is developing rapidly and beginning to grapple with questions of sustainable development.

There much work being done with strategy in various forms, which means that organizations are exposed to, and using, futures approaches as long as there is someone in the organization who thinks it is a good idea. However, there is little effort to tailor messages for the ''person in the street'' so that the imperative to think about the future everyday becomes clear and inescapable. In other words, futurists appear to be failing to think about their audience or are not seeing the mainstream public as a key audience. Social foresight is unlikely to develop unless the average person accepts and helps to validate and ''mainstream'' the futures imperative. The negative comments futurists often make about their own media portrayal are related to this – how can the media be expected to understand something that futurists are unable to communicate in plain language?

Finally, there is a sense of inconsistency of quality and output in the field, which is generated from the vast array of people who call themselves futurists, and who do or do not have any formal training in the field. The Association of Professional Futurists, while US based, is a step in one direction towards trying to build credibility for the field. If futures work is ever to become mainstream, higher levels of credibility are required. Currently, there seems to be an element of variability in the field that does not help in establishing futures work as a critical part of human civilization processes.

Several themes that have arisen from a preliminary analysis of results are as follows:

1. There is a strong and dominant focus on conventional, pragmatic, government-funded research into science, technology and economic questions. Such work is often of a very high quality but it also appears to be quite narrowly focused and based largely on the earlier and somewhat outdated methods. In the light of the deteriorating global outlook there is a need to move beyond this focus to incorporate a civilizational focus, and greater attention to longer-term global sustainability.

2. There appears to be a significant amount of duplication, redundancy and overlap in the field. In many places the same, or similar, kinds of expertise and disciplinary paradigms, appear to operate ''in parallel'' with more or less (and usually less) interconnection and coordination. Overall, FS/foresight work appears to be poorly coordinated internationally, and collaboration among futurists is limited.

3. Quality control in the field remains problematic. There appear to be remarkably few attempts at oversight and evaluation of futures work worldwide. Those that are available should certainly be included in any subsequent iteration of this project. Stronger evaluation processes will help to develop a clearer view of the impact of futures work, and ensure that outcomes are available to governments, organizations, futures practitioners and individuals.

4. Similarly, integration of this work appears to be rare at every level. If correct, this means that lessons learned in one place may take many years to diffuse into other locations. To some extent the journals and professional organizations may help overcome the resulting fragmentation and blockages, but it seems clear that practitioners are separated by many barriers of: space, language, culture, purpose, paradigm and preferred methods.

5. There are, however, also exemplars that do assist and integrate. They include the EFMN program run out of Manchester in the UK, the ''great transition'' initiative (Raskin *et al.*, 2002) and the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that has growing influence in the global climate change debate.

6. In terms of the metascanning categories, there appear to be remarkably few broad-based and solidly grounded organizations. Most seem to occupy a small or mid-range part of the territory, thus defined. Hence there is value in looking at the field through these particular lenses.

7. Reductionism appears to be common in the field, as is the adherence to older and less comprehensive methods. If it is indeed a generational issue then change will be slow.

8. While FS/foresight work is clearly widespread in business and government circles it appears to be extremely rare in educational contexts. Considerable work also needs to be done to balance work around the future of individual fields and technologies with work to embed the futures imperative in education, and in political and social processes and institutions. Yet few appear to have grasped the centrality of this shift from ''of'' to ''in''[15].

9. Some current achievements are, however, visible. They can be seen in the widespread up-take of government foresight programs, especially in Europe. They can also be seen, perhaps, in what Riedy (2007b) calls ''the many small initiatives that are bringing the future into the present through experiments with different ways of living;'' as well as through the ways that ''people are building prototype or experimental futures in the present and learning what works''.

10. The role of futurists and futures practitioners needs to be clarified. It is possible for anyone to call himself or herself a futurist, and the superficial view held by the media about futurists and futures work is not helped by this lack of definition around who futurists are, and what it is they do.

11. Related to this, the nature of the contribution of futures work to global sustainability needs to be made much clearer. The impact of futures work on political decision-making and on social innovation will continue to be minor until this occurs.

12. Finally, the need to build the foresight capacity of individuals is clear as individuals influence government and organizational decision making, Therefore existing work on

understanding how individuals begin to think consciously and overtly about the future needs to be more widely available. Equally, new work arising from integral and other sources should be given due critical regard by practitioners.

Conclusion

The State of Play in the Futures Field, or SoPiFF, research program is the first to employ a metascanning approach of this kind to the FS/foresight domain and the results clearly reflect both the assumptions built into the former as well as emerging patterns in the latter. It is therefore appropriate that the report be understood and critiqued in this light. As in all such work the conclusions reached are limited both by the nature of the sample and by the various ''filters'' employed by researchers. Quite clearly there are other ''hidden aspects'' of futures work that this particular scanning frame will have overlooked. Such matters will certainly need to be addressed in the design and implementation of subsequent iterations.

Several unique perspectives have emerged regarding the nature and results of futures work. Four are of particular significance. The operation of fundamental social interests seems to have been a collective ''blind spot'' that has seldom, if ever, been subject to formal enquiry, and yet it clearly exerts powerful effects upon what is considered worth doing, and why. This study explored FS/foresight work through distinctions between pragmatic, progressive and civilizational interests. These by no means exhaust the options but they have succeeded in shining new light on the field. Similarly, the range of methods brought into play in any one context is heavily influenced by past experience and prevailing paradigms and we have seen some of the results of these unconscious selections. Also revealed here for the first time are some of the consequences of working in a limited number off focal domains, most commonly the ''lower right,'' or ''external collective'' one. The overall lack of interest in, and capacity to address, the interior worlds of people, including practitioners themselves, is perhaps one of the clearest results of this study that calls for corrective action. Finally, this study has shown that the uneven approach to capacity building in futures enquiry and application warrants equal attention. What the above amounts to is clearly a matter of viewpoint and opinion. It is, however, no exaggeration to suggest that the above provides a basis not only for a new model of R&D for the field but also a new framework for the training and induction of new practitioners (Slaughter, 2004).

Biases of language, the location of the researchers and other limitations attending such a brief pioneering study have been acknowledged. Yet the results are more than sufficient to inspire further work and application. Perhaps the most useful consequence of this report is that the field has a new opportunity to consider itself, its means and purposes and how it can up-grade its collective capacities for the tasks ahead. Clearly it needs to move on, and to do so urgently. It cannot afford the divisions, confusions, conflicts and sheer lack of understanding that has arguably held it back thus far. So it makes a great deal of sense to carry out further survey iterations every few years and with a more widely distributed group of researchers. They will want to re-evaluate the present conclusions, refine hypotheses and also more systematically track the development of the field. Without such regular in-depth, international and critical reviews it would be genuinely difficult for practitioners, sponsors, course designers and others to make firm judgments about the success or failure of work in this vital domain.

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves why the field of FS/foresight exists at all. It came into being because people of good will and intelligence in many different cultures began to realize that the future was no longer something that would unproblematically unfold from the past and present. As humanity became more self-aware, more numerous and equipped with increasingly powerful technologies, the future became the result of human perception, responsibility and action. Its very success could bring it to the point of extinction. Today we know more about this multi-faceted dilemma, and can bring more collective intelligence to bear upon it, than ever before. But the fact remains that we still appear to be set on an ''overshoot and collapse'' path (Randers, 2008; Turner, 2008).

We owe it to future generations to bring thing this concern, this commitment to viable, just and sustainable futures to the very forefront of concern in all societies and to help humankind negotiate the now unavoidable transitions ahead.

Notes

1. Kunstler (2005), provides one of the most honest and uncompromising assessments of the difficulty of the transitions ahead specifically for the USA and, by extension, other developed societies. Since then the emergence of the climate change debate, and the approach of ''peak oil'' have only added to the cogency of this argument. Also see Turner (2008).

2. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futures_studies (accessed 8 October 2007).

3. European Commission Foresight website; FOREN project; FORERA. http://forera.jrc.ec.europa.eu/index.html

4. This definition first appeared in Slaughter (1997).

5. As this was a first broad scale use of a new methodology, with limited resources, the primary concern was to achieve conceptual clarity. This meant, for example, that the more technical aspects of sampling would be deferred to a later iteration.

6. For an example of the application of the metascanning method to a high-profile piece of government research, see Slaughter (2005a, pp. 1185-1192).

7. For full details see: www.thinkingfutures.net/sopiff

8. For example, one of three awards given by the Association of Professional Futurists for the ''Most Important Futures Works of 2008'' went to an on-line forecasting game called ''Superstruct'' created by the Institute for the Future.

9. Further details regarding the meaning of ''social interests'' and other terms used in the study are given on the website in note 7 above and in the AFI monograph series (Australian Foresight Institute, 2006).

10. See review of Loveridge (2009) elsewhere in this issue.

11. It may be useful to distinguish between the ''integral perspective'' which includes methods, extensive theory and a growing literature, and ''integral methods'' *per se* which can be used with or without the latter aspects.

12. For an overview of this and the rest of the Integral Operating System (IOS) see Wilber, K. in Slaughter (2005b) (CD-ROM). Further in-depth overviews are available at: www.kenwilber.com/home/landing/index.html

13. The early implications of the four quadrants for environmental scanning were set out in Slaughter (1999).

14. This was one of the conclusions to emerge from a recent study carried out by Satiras and Smith (2008).

15. Arthur Shostak's writings illustrate this point rather clearly. See Shostak (2008).

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