

Series Introduction

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Why a ‘Knowledge Base’?

Few observers would deny that the world is facing a multidimensional challenge. The success of our species, the technical power at our disposal, economic contradictions, social and cultural polarisation, reduction in biodiversity and, above all, the mounting impacts upon the global environment have created quite new problems of understanding, control, policy-making and choice. While most organisations and public sector bodies tacitly assume a short-term, business-as-usual outlook, I believe that such anodyne views have been decisively refuted. If we are to have any future worth living in, one worth handing on to future generations, it is clear that humanity must successfully achieve a difficult transition from one state of civilisation to another. Insights into the nature of this transition vary greatly. Yet a ‘congruence of insight’ from many sources reflects a shift from an anthropocentric, materialistic, short-term, high-impact, rapid-growth outlook to one that embraces long-term thinking and involves stewardship. It is also post-materialist, low-impact and low-growth.¹ The central point is simply this: we face a civilisational challenge. The challenge is to grasp our destiny on this small planet and to work toward consciously chosen futures, rather than drift further into crisis and devastation.

Futures studies (FS) is grounded in human capacities and needs. The shaping of stone tools, the walls built with enormous effort around ancient cities, the storage of food against famine all attest to the ability of our species to think ahead and to apply foresight to the solving of practical problems. Through the ages this power to speculate on the strange, the unformed, the unseen and the possible has supported many creative endeavours including art, architecture, literature and religion. Utopian writers attempted to create pictures of ‘desirable’ societies and helped to rehearse many of the social innovations we now take for granted.

In the twentieth century, FS developed rapidly under the pressure of war and anticipated war, the need for military and commercial strategies, and the growing perception of what the Club of Rome aptly called ‘the global problematique.’ It was later refined and developed further by academics, consultants, critics, teachers and innovators of many backgrounds and cultures. At first the most dominant voices were North American and European. Indeed, these two arenas dominated the growing FS field for some years. More recently FS has shown signs of becoming more international and multicultural. The West no longer leads and preaches: it also adapts and listens. This is not merely a ‘knee-jerk’ response to the need for political correctness – it has a deeper significance.

In the context sketched in above, the discourse on global futures cannot be held in one or two privileged languages or locations. It has to be a multilayered, multicultural discourse because no culture contains more than a few of the possible resources needed for confronting adversity and plotting a sane path into the new millennium. No culture has a

monopoly on the kind of deep understanding, profound reconceptualisation, system-wide social, cultural and economic innovation and clear-eyed policy-making that is now required. Simply put, the global future can only be decided by drawing fully on all the voices and communities of discourse in the world – including those marginalised by industrialisation, colonisation and economic exploitation.

In essence, this is why FS needs to refine and develop its knowledge base - not simply to achieve academic goals, necessary though they may be, but to help facilitate the emergence of such a global discourse. Futures studies is liberating and empowering, but its rich symbolic and practical resources are still in the process of development. Therefore, with the wider context firmly in mind, it is vital that the process of discipline-building, implementation and nurturing of much needed futures work continues. In other words, the intellectual, practical and facilitative aspects of FS reinforce each other and can contribute significantly to dealing with the civilisational challenges we are facing.

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the third millennium gave a chance, as perhaps no other historical event could, to look back at the 20th Century and to take stock. We therefore had an opportunity to revise some of the cultural assumptions embedded in the standard Western industrial outlook, and to replace them with more forward-thinking, life-affirming alternatives. The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies contains many examples of this process. In summary, The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies was conceived to:

- help make FS clearer and more useful;
- contribute to an intercultural dialogue on the resolution of systemic problems and the framing of viable futures;
- provide a sound basis for new courses in FS, both within existing institutions and on the Internet;
- provide information and encouragement for innovations of many kinds;
- support the process of creating a society-wide foresight capacity; and
- constitute a gift to future generations.

How the project developed

At a 1991 World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) conference in Barcelona, Norwegian Futurist Kjell Dahle pointed out that the lack of a common knowledge base hindered the work of those preparing courses, planning research, teaching and developing futures projects. The suggestion took root in my mind. I was then teaching FS at the University of Melbourne and could appreciate the force of the point. Like most universities, it had a history department and some other innovative courses focusing on the present. But not only was there no department of FS, there was no research presence at all devoted to the area. In fact, I was the only individual on campus explicitly teaching FS. Later, when I left, these courses were discontinued. It's a familiar story: on the one hand clear evidence from students, colleagues and others that FS has 'come of age' and contributes in many ways to personal and educational goals and, on the other,

professional jealousy and bureaucratic indifference.

At one point the University had the chance of hosting a 're-invented' Australian Commission for the Future. This was a golden opportunity to apply the lessons of its institutional history, but the then vice-chancellor turned it down. On other occasions similar proposals have been made to similarly well-placed individuals, yet the same old excuses prevailed: 'We haven't the funds,' 'The time is not right,' 'The politics are too difficult,' and so on. However, I felt I knew differently. For one thing I had been engaged in FS since 1975 and had not only explored some of its broad intellectual potential; I'd also witnessed first hand year after year the impacts upon different groups of postgraduate students.

Throughout 1992 I worked with a group of colleagues to put together a special issue of *Futures* on the knowledge base of FS.² It appeared in April 1993 and was considered a success. I therefore took the idea to a small publisher in London which was starting a series of books on futures. Unfortunately, the problems of working with this particular outfit became insurmountable so I turned to a larger, more commercial publishing house. The latter showed genuine interest but an executive decision was finally made against a 'Knowledge Base' series and in favour of a single-volume anthology.³ In due course I delivered the anthology, but the notion of the knowledge base had stuck firmly in my mind. I saw it, and still see it, as one of the most powerful and durable futures concepts available to us. Thus, I either had to abandon it, or find another way forward.

Around this time I was invited to Japan by the Future Generations Alliance Foundation. Here I met Japanese entrepreneur-turned-benefactor, Mr Katsuhiko Yazaki.⁴ I saw how a well-grounded ethical view linked with financial competence and organisation could transcend old structures and create new ones. So it was partly with this in mind that I left the university in 1994 to work full-time in the Futures Study Centre.

By that time the Board of Senior Secondary Studies in Brisbane, Queensland, decided to proceed with a new Year 11 and 12 course on futures for a number of reasons. One of them was that FS had developed to a point where it could not be dismissed as an 'overseas invention,' a mere 'perspective' or still less as a spin-off of the then burgeoning futures market. The fact that a knowledge base had been defined and had received general assent from the futures community gave the Board confidence to proceed. I felt that this was a clear signal, and a forerunner of things to come. Where one authority had recognised the substance and quality of FS, others would follow.

What is the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies?

Those unfamiliar with the Futures field have often raised questions such as: Just what is FS? How can the future be studied before it has happened? Can the future be predicted? What practical applications does futures studies have? Who are Futurists and what do they do? Why should we care for future generations? What insights on the twenty-first century are available? Can we create reliable 'road maps' of the near-term future? The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies series answers these and many other questions.⁵

In the postmodern world all fields of enquiry must recognise how paradigms, worldviews and socially constructed ways of knowing affect their core understandings, methods and outlooks. Some futurists have argued that this brings other fields closer to FS, rather than vice versa. Thus, instead of seeking inclusion in a dated map of knowledge, FS reflects some of the wider shifts that have taken place in the sciences and humanities. Core elements of the field that are widely understood and applied can be defined and regarded as a knowledge base. At a minimum these core elements include the following:

- futures concepts and metaphors;
- futures literature;
- futures organisations;
- futures methods and tools;
- images and imaging processes; and,
- social innovations.

Futures studies is not static. It will continue to evolve as its assumptions and practices are explored, challenged and reformulated. This series provides an authoritative overview and a valuable starting point for those who are already active in the field, those who would like to be and those who simply wish to apply it in their own fields. Yet the series does more than provide an introduction to futures thinking: it also embraces a variety of viewpoints from different cultures and across various disciplines. This is the first truly global overview of the state of futures studies. As such, it is a gift from the late twentieth century to the twenty-first, and to all future generations.

The series

Great care has been taken to create a clear and accessible ‘house style.’ The use of Australian English is also deliberate. It has few of the overtones of British or American English and reflects the fact that Australia comes close to being a culturally ‘neutral’ site in the world. Its past is certainly Aboriginal and European but its future lies within the Asia–Pacific region. It is therefore well placed to be an international clearinghouse. We have also endeavoured to provide full and appropriate references. Where, despite our best efforts, references remain incomplete, we have provided as much information as possible.

For whom is the Knowledge Base intended?

The KBFS series is an accessible starting point for a wide range of uses, including Masters and PhD programs. The series is intended for both a general and professional audience and will be of particular interest to those teaching courses in futures, and futures related fields around the world. It will be an indispensable aid to students, academics, business people, researchers, policy-makers, planners – indeed, anyone seeking a readable but non-trivial travel guide to the near-term future.

Addendum to the 2005 CD-ROM Professional Edition

After the above was written the KBFS went through two printed editions and a Millennium Edition CD-ROM (2000). The latter was quickly taken up around the world and used in a variety of contexts. Its value as a resource in post-graduate FS courses was demonstrated at the Australian Foresight Institute. In fact the first course unit (Introduction to the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies) was based on it. As Prof Wendell Bell kindly observed of the hard copy edition, 'for many decades to come these volumes will remain the standard by which all other work in the field will be judged.'⁶ Others called the CD-ROM a 'one stop shop' and 'an ideal introduction to the field.'

One of my greatest pleasures in teaching FS in tertiary contexts has been the experience of the first day or two of a new course, when people have had some time to peruse the KBFS CD and to begin considering the implications. The first meetings of a new group of mid-career post-grad students are among the most stimulating ever. Everyone has taken a different path through the material. Everyone has questions, comments, ideas that need to be articulated and discussed. Energy levels are normally high. What the KBFS allows people to do is to *orient* themselves in what, to many, is a completely new area; to begin to create their own 'maps,' their own unique understandings regarding 'what FS is all about.' I was therefore delighted when in 2002 a group of University of Houston, Clear Lake, Futures Program students voted the KBFS CD as 'the best futures resource available.'⁷

The 2005 Professional Edition has come a long way from the three-volume hard copy editions. Some fifty five main papers were presented in the latter. Now there are over one hundred. Some of the material used in 1996 has dated and been dropped from the series. A great deal of new work has been included such that the work tracks the continuing evolution of FS over nearly a decade. The biggest shift over that time has been the rise of integral FS - a development that 'transcends and includes' so much of what went before. Far from dismissing earlier work (such as the 'empirical' tradition with its near-exclusive focus on 'exterior realities') integral FS honours it and, moreover, shows where, in a larger sense, it fits in a broadened and deepened perspective. With these developments FS can perhaps be said to have 'come of age.'

The main additions to the 2005 edition are as follows:

- a new section has been added to volume two - critical practice;
- a new section has been added to volume three - integral futures;
- a new volume five has been added - synergies, case studies and implementation;
- fifteen new biographical accounts have been added to volume four; and,
- many new papers have been added to existing sections.

Why is a 'professional edition'?

The main reason is this. FS began as a mid twentieth century multi-disciplinary response on the part of perceptive people to the emerging dilemmas of the modern world as they

perceived them. The early pioneers were predominantly Western and they employed the materials that were available to them at the time. As time went by, however, new developments – including practitioners, scholars and methods - progressively added coherence, depth and symbolic power to this emerging field. As well, the latter become increasingly international and multi-cultural.

The *starting points* for the field (i.e. simple futures concepts and tools) have never been simpler or more easily accessible.⁸ But what one might call the ‘R&D front’ has now reached a point where the field, and leading practitioners, are very well equipped indeed to tackle the multi-leveled, multi-dimensional challenges of the early twenty-first century. It’s for this reason that I believe that the field has, indeed, come of age. If this is correct, it follows that FS is poised for a new period of expansion and growth.

Many more organisations and individuals will be turning to FS and its sister field, applied (strategic -, integral -, social -) foresight. In so doing they will draw upon and adapt exactly the kinds of resources presented here. The term ‘professional’ is not intended to exclude post-graduate and other students who are beginning their own journeys of enquiry. Rather, it indicates that these resources also have much wider uses. Planners, strategists, business people, political advisers, consultants of all kinds and many, many others will find that the Professional Edition of the KBFS gives them, and many of their clients, a ‘fast-track’ route into the heartland of the field.

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More info on the KBFS and related work at: <http://www.foresightinternational.com.au>

Notes

¹ An alternative view, proposed by a minority, suggests that human ingenuity – mainly as expressed through science and technology – will save the day. But this view is scarcely credible in the late 1990s. See, for example, L Brown’s (ed.) books on *The State of the Planet*, Worldwatch Institute (series), Washington, These give clear evidence that crucial environmental limits are already being breached.

² R Slaughter (ed.) 1993, ‘The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies’, *Futures*, special issue, vol. 25, no. 3, April, Elsevier, Oxford.

³ R Slaughter (ed.) 1996, *New Thinking for a New Millennium*, Routledge, London.

⁴ See Yazaki’s chapter in R Slaughter (ed.) 1996, *Organisations, Practices, Products: Volume 2 of The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*, DDM, Melbourne.

⁵ Another primary source is M Marien's abstract, *Future Survey*, published monthly by the World Future Society, Washington DC. Also see G Molitor and T Kurian (eds) 1996, *The Encyclopedia of the Future*, Macmillan, New York.

⁶ Wendell Bell, personal communication, 1996.

⁷ Reported at the 18th World Conference of the World Futures Studies Federation, Kure, Japan, November 13-16, 2002.

⁸ J Gidley, D. Bateman & C. Smith, *Futures in Education: Principles, Practice and Potential*, AFI Monograph 5, 2004, Melbourne.