

The Master of Strategic Foresight at Swinburne University 2001-2016

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The Master of Strategic Foresight (MSF) was first taught at Swinburne University in 2001. Richard Slaughter was the designer and educator of that original program. This paper will attempt to provide an overview of the program in the intervening sixteen years.

1. Beginnings and Endings

Conway (2016) says that the Vice-Chancellor (VC) at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) in late 1998 first raised with her the intention to 'bring foresight' to SUT. Apparently the VC had been to a British Council seminar on Foresight in the United Kingdom. That intention included changes to the organisational structure of SUT and also changes to its planning processes. It also included bring Richard Slaughter to SUT to establish the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI). I refer you to her book, *Foresight Infused Strategy*, if you wish to know more about the foresight journey at SUT.

Slaughter (2004) reports that the AFI was established in mid-1999 with the twin purposes of carrying out original research and developing "brand-new postgraduate courses". The first of those brand new courses was the Master of Science (Strategic Foresight) which took its first intake of students in early 2001. I refer you to Richard Slaughter's journal article, *Road testing a new model at the Australian Foresight Institute*, if you wish to know more about the AFI and its operation.

Hayward, Voros & Morrow (2012) outlined the evolution of the pedagogy that emerged over the first decade of teaching this "brand-new postgraduate course". I refer you to that if you wish to know more about how the teaching of foresight.

In May 2016, as part of a complete review of all post-graduate programs, SUT announced that the end of 2016 Master of Strategic Foresight would close to student intake and be taught out through 2017 for all remaining students. If you want to know more about the background and reasons for this decision, well you just have to wait until someone publishes that.

Joe Voros and I have been present for the entirety of the Masters journey. As participants in the first class, through to lecturers in almost all units taught and each taking a turn as the administrative Director of the Masters from 2004 till the present we are well placed to tell a history of the Masters. Of course there are many histories that can be told and the one that we choose to tell here is the history of actual unit components of the four 'versions' of the Masters that have operated for 16 years.

2. The Big Picture

Table 1 tries to show how the original units that made up the first version of the “brand new postgraduate course” travelled through time and through the three re-accreditation processes that the program had to face up to. Some units endured, some disappeared, some popped up and popped out and others emerged. We will discuss Table 1 in more detail.

2001-2006	2007-2011	2012-2014	2015-2016
Master of Science	Master of Management	Master of Strategic Foresight	Master of Strategic Foresight
Knowledge Base of Future Studies	Knowledge Base of Future Studies	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 1*	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 1*
Methods 1	Methods 1	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 1*	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 1*
Foresight in Organisations	Foresight in Organisations	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 2*	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 2*
Methods 2	Methods 2	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 2*	Foresight Knowledge and Methods 2*
Outlook for 21 st Century	Worldviews and Strategy	21 st Century Challenges	21st Century Challenges
Integral Futures Frameworks	Integral Perspectives	Integral Thinking and Complexity	
Dimensions of Global Change	Dimensions of Global Change		
Triple Bottom Line, CSR & Sustainable Development		Sustainability, Risk and Social Responsibility	
Advanced Professional Practice	Enterprise Project 1		
Intervention Project (2 nd year)	Enterprise Project 2		
Research Proposal 1 (3 rd year)	Research Methods		
Research Proposal 2 (3 rd year)	Minor Thesis		
	Systems Thinking and Design		
		Foresight and Design	Designing Innovative Futures
		Foresight Leadership	Leadership in times of Uncertainty
			Powering 21 st C Innovation?

Table 1: The Units of Master of Strategic Foresight

So what does that tell us about the units across time? Well the fundamentals of this Masters did not change across the sixteen years. Those fundamentals were in the first 4 units – Critical Thinking, the

Methods and Foresight in Organisations. The advent of the Generic Foresight process (Voros) helped enormously because it allowed us to teach the methods progressively; starting with scanning, then analysis and interpretation and finally the prospective methods. That approach emerged and then continued to serve us well. The notion of a ‘global challenge’ was featured by Slaughter in the first iteration of the Masters and by the end that notion had morphed into the ‘capstone’ unit of the award. Other units came and went – some new ones emerged. Sustainability as a unit proved to be problematic because, I think the critical thinking emphasis, undermined the simplistic notions and assumptions that tend to underpin sustainability. Integral theory (Ken Wilber) was a dynamic and powerful source of ideas at the start but overtime it became less necessary to teach it as a unique knowledge domain. Design emerged as a potentially powerful transformational epistemology for foresight, and at present the jury is out on whether it ends up doing that.

3. What’s in a name?

Roughly every five years university programs have to go through a political process called ‘re-accreditation’. I describe it as a political process because unlike the initial design of course, which is based on an ideological view of what is the ‘best’ way to do something, the subsequent re-accreditation is about the context of the program at that point in time and its credibility at that time. It’s political because whoever has the power tends to get their way. And the loser takes what scraps they are left with. The MSF faced three of these over its lifespan. Let’s look at each of those to understand what happened at each of these occasions.

Re-Accreditation #1 - “Pulling a rabbit out of the hat”

2004 was a crisis moment for the MSF. The AFI had been dis-established due to change in University policy over what could be called an “institute”, and the MSF had found an unwelcome home in the newly-formed Faculty of Business and Enterprise. An initial foray into online education (ably supported by Jennifer Gidley) had come and gone. Total enrolments had been declining over time and, due to the initial course design that saw earlier units set as ‘pre-requisites’ to later class enrolments, class sizes shrank as you moved through the Masters. The old VC who supported foresight was gone (having left at the end of 2003) and a new VC with a different agenda was in charge. The Deputy Deans of the university, who had the final say on all re-accreditations, refused to re-accredit the existing MSF, instead suggesting that it be downgraded to a Graduate Certificate (12 subjects down to 4) only.

I remember meeting with Trish Buckley (Dep Dean), John Pidgeon (Director International) and Gerard Shanahan (Faculty Manager) in late 2004 after the Deputy Dean meeting and in 2 hours the four of us cobbled together an alternative proposal that Trish would take back to the Deputy Deans and try to ‘save’ the Masters. That design did a number of things to make it more appealing.

- We changed the discipline from Master of Science (SF) to Master of Management (SF) because that was an easier sell to a Business and Enterprise faculty – “science just confused people”.
- We got rid of ALL prerequisites – so class sizes would not shrink over time; and
- We removed all the research and practice units (4 in total) and piggy-backed off existing research and practice subjects in other postgraduate awards.

Somehow it worked. The Deputy Deans said yes. I really don't know how but I only imagine that Patricia and John must have spread the pixie-dust around pretty well.

In Hindsight

The priority was to survive and continue the Masters. So whatever survived was what worked. But we could look back and see the changes weren't necessarily 'foresightful'. The biggest problem we created for ourselves was that we completely lost the 'cohort effect'. The fact of students learning together and watching each other learn and transform was consistently reported back to us over the first few years. Because the units had now lost all sequencing, we lost all semblance of any kind of cohort learning. The biggest plus we achieved was adding a dedicated Systems Thinking unit. Rod Sarah ended up teaching into the MSF for the next decade, his Systems unit was a very popular one and at one point it became a core offering in another Masters course. We lost the Sustainability unit from the initial design; on experience that unit had been problematic which may seem odd given our discipline but this foreshadowed the real ambivalence that foresight has regarding what is called 'sustainability'. We would revisit this in the future. The practitioner (purple units + 2 electives from elsewhere in the Faculty) and research (blue units) pathways options for the final four subjects sounded excellent as a design, but actually created future problems because they still required teaching resources to run them and our capacity to sustain the teaching over time would be an continuing problem that we would face.

Re-accreditation #2 – “Juggling plates”

Five years on and the context was very different: a different Dean and a more supportive atmosphere to face the next re-accreditation. The issues facing the MSF were now not whether to keep it at all (as before), but rather the sustainability of the teaching – we were still trying to cover too much material with too few staff – and the need to recover the 'cohort experience' of the first design and refine the relevance of the curriculum.

Eddie Blass was a driving force in this redesign and the big idea she put forward was to reduce the number of units to eight and to remove the Graduate Certificate level completely. Effectively, the idea was to just teach the Masters as a post-grad diploma-equivalent award. Eddie drove this across a number of courses in the Faculty, but it was a pretty big change for the MSF. It offered a couple of exciting possibilities. We could offer the MSF as a 'double masters with the MBA'. It gave two pathways in – one for experienced students, who could bypass the Grad Cert completely, and one for inexperienced and international students, who could still do a Grad Cert to 'get ready' (as it were) for the not inconsiderable challenge of studying Foresight. We were now also finally able to call the award what it was – the “Master of Strategic Foresight”.

We also took the chance to get a mini-cohort effect by teaching the first 4 methods units as two double units – so creating a semi-cohort experience by re-creating an actual cohort for the first year. This meant we had 4 units left to cover EVERYTHING else we wanted to teach. We had been requested to reinstate a Sustainability unit again. We also felt that we needed to add a serious unit on Foresight Leadership and we fortunately had Nita Cherry on-hand to design and deliver this. We also wanted to introduce a Foresight & Design unit and again fortunately we had Bridgette Engeler, whose Masters minor thesis in the MSF had been on that very topic, on hand to design and deliver that. With 21st Century Challenges as our Capstone subject then we had to squeeze Integral,

Systems, and Sustainability into two 'new' units. As it panned out, we ended up with one unit too many so we called the final four units 'electives', whereby students could choose any 4 of the 5. This 'flexibility' (something we had been exhorted to introduce over many years) ended up causing problems later when the course as a whole was considered as having too many 'electives' – instead of counting these as the equivalent of four core units plus one elective (because you had to take four of them), they were treated as 5 electives. In a subsequent review, the spectre of 'too many electives for not enough students' was raised and the MSF was 'mentioned in despatches' (and not in a good way...).

And we also decided to plunge into Undergraduate teaching by creating 2 core and 2 elective undergraduate foresight units that were offered as part of the Bachelor of Business Entrepreneurship & Innovation tagged undergraduate degree.

In Hindsight

Getting rid of the Graduate Certificate was a success and grew student numbers (via the MBA double) and also gave us more open pathway options for both work-experienced and inexperienced students.

Bringing back the cohort-experience via the double methods units was also a success and students reported favourably on the extended classroom experience – 24 full classroom days over two semesters.

The new name was very helpful, too, as it made the communication process much cleaner.

We had reduced the workload to sustain the course somewhat but the mixed bits-and-pieces units did not really work out. Sustainability just did not work (again). Integral and Systems were lost by mixing together, in effect diluting each other. The new Design unit started slowly but showed promise, and the Leadership unit was a success.

Adding undergraduate teaching and then being unable to recruit any suitable permanent staff to manage it was a really poor decision. Peter Chappell, Stanika Djurdjevic and Barbara Bok did a great job staffing the undergraduate units over a number of years, but in the end it was still too much for Joe and I to sustain long-term.

Re-accreditation #3 – “Better late than never”

The final 'tweak' re-accreditation put right what we could from the previous one. The world had got harder for Universities in general as student numbers were falling and costs were rising. Foresight had remarkably gone from being a 'problem child' a decade earlier to a 'strategic differentiator', but it was still not looking like the sort of 'cash cow' that Universities were searching for.

We dropped the Sustainability experiment for the second time and we also gave up on a dedicated Integral unit. We added a new unit based on the coming Energy Transition (called Powering 21st Century Innovation? with the question-mark added as a provocation, just to see if we could get away with it; we did) as a context setter for the Capstone 21st Century Challenges unit, which had always been a very difficult unit. The lead-in to 21CC via P21CI worked a treat – much better than we had dared hope – and the two “21st Century” units represent another “sequence” at the second year

which partially re-captures somewhat the first-year double-unit cohort effect. We withdrew the undergraduate units, with two exceptions (see later), and just concentrated on the post-graduate offerings. Everything else from the earlier change was retained because it was working.

In Hindsight

We both think we got there at the end, but that ‘reckoning with reality’ (a term we use in P21C to focus on the energy issue) had finally caught up with the Ponzi scheme that is Higher Education around most of the world. By the time that we had hit upon a sustainable model the edifice of Higher Ed was coming down. And so the news that we had been expecting since 2004 (at the end of every year we would sit down and marvel that we had managed to get away with it for another year and again produce another crop of budding foresighters) would finally arrived in 2016. Our watchword had always been “this, too, shall pass”, so it was far from being a surprise when the decision was taken.

4. The Books that tell our story

It goes without saying that a lot of books have come and gone over the (so-far) sixteen years of the MSF (with one more to go as part of teach-out). What follows next is a list of those books that tell a story of how the MSF evolved. They may not be the best books but for us they are important because they helped us understand what the MSF should be trying to achieve. So in no particular order:

- a. **Jared Diamond, Collapse (2005).** This book landed in around 2006 and quickly became a core text in 21st Century Challenges. The chapter in the book about Montana became the context for the students to write a policy proposal to the Governor of Montana about what should be done to create a better future for Montana. I think this was the first book that really started us thinking about ‘descent futures’ although at the time we did not yet use that term.
- b. **Tim Flannery, The Weather Makers (2005).** This landed around the time of Collapse and quickly became our go-to text for teaching System Mapping. Over time other texts did a more thorough job of explaining Climate Change but this was one that helped us with teaching complex adaptive systems.
- c. **Ken Wilber, A Theory of Everything (2001).** This became our standard Wilber text even when we stopped teaching a dedicated Integral unit. Most people could tackle 141 pages of Wilber. The alternative to it was **the integral vision (2007)** which Joe called the ADHD-for-Gen-Y version of Wilber (the “Frappuccino book”).
- d. **Richard Slaughter, Knowledge Base of Future Studies and others.** Richard Slaughter edited our foundational text (the KBFS) and then continued to produce fresh ideas for us and the students all the way through the sixteen years – special mention to **Futures beyond Dystopia (2004)** and **The Biggest Wake Up Call in History (2010)**.
- e. **Otto Scharmer, Theory U (2007).** This book alone almost completely captured how we designed the classroom processes for learning embodied foresight and it also gave students a great approach to doing their own group processes. **Presence (2004)** was an early taste of what was to come.

- f. **John Greer, The Long Descent (2008).** This book particularly, and the rest of his body of work, served to frame up the notion of descent futures – both as concepts and narratives – and also highlighted why we found ‘sustainability’ such an anodyne idea to teach in the MSF. What began in 2009 has continued till the end, and this message, echoed by so many other writers since then, aided us tremendously in shaping how the MSF eventually emerged into its final and most relevant form.
- g. **Mats Lindgren & Hans Bandhold, Scenario Planning (2009).** Whatever reservations we held about scenarios as a foresight method this tool has remained an enduring part of what we have taught the next generation of practitioners. There are dozens of books on scenarios but this one remains one of the clearest and most useful ‘tool-books’ that we can give to students. A special mention also to **Scenario Thinking (2011)** by the Georges, Wright & Cairns. These two books together provide an excellent grounding in the practical use of scenarios.
- h. **Robert Kegan, Immunity to Change (2009).** Is still our foundational text for teaching Foresight Leadership. It gave us a ‘pragmatic’ approach that went to the core idea of ‘depth in the practitioner’.
- i. **Donella Meadows et al, Limits to Growth 30-year update (2004).** This book has never left us but we found ourselves teaching it more and more the further we went into notions of energy transition and descent futures. If anything this is an old book that became ever-more relevant as time went on.
- j. **Nafeez Ahmed, A User’s Guide to the Crisis of Civilisation (2010).** Replaced Collapse as our main text in 21st Century Challenges. A book that was guaranteed to stop BAU thinking in its tracks. Not an overly-easy read, but once read never forgotten. Actually makes something extremely complex quite understandable while also terrifying the daylight out of you.
- k. **Charles Hall & Kent Klitgaard, Energy and the Wealth of Nations (2012).** The only economic text book that deserves to be taught in a Foresight course. Nuff said. Go and buy it now.

5. The Students

As at the time of writing 160 students have graduated or will likely complete after 2016 with either

- Master of Science (Strategic Foresight);
- Master of Management (Strategic Foresight)
- Master of Strategic Foresight
- MBA/Master of Strategic Foresight

Another group of students completed the various Grad Certs and Grad Diplomas and some just took a couple of subjects as part of another award. It was not uncommon for a person completing an MBA or a MEI to take a single foresight unit as an elective, ‘for a bit of fun’ as the last unit of their degree, only to have them come back and complete the whole MSF. My guess is around 250 or so students went through the MSF in some shape or form.

After the first re-accreditation we started to see a small but continuing stream of international students coming to take the course. I continue to be amazed by people who would come to our little program in Hawthorn to learn something as abstract as futures thinking IN A SECOND LANGUAGE. I

had enough trouble doing it in my native tongue! My best guess at the nations that we had the pleasure of hosting in the MSF include, India, Pakistan, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Spain, Germany, Sierra Leone, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, and – no doubt – a few more.

6. The Extended Faculty (family)

While Joe and I have taught into almost every unit across the entire journey of the MSF many other people have played a significant part in teaching entire units or occasional gigs. At risk of missing someone I will try to identify who will always be part of our extended family

Marcus	Anthony
John	Batros
Eddie	Blass
Barbara	Bok
Alessio	Bresciani
Trish	Buckley
Julia	Canty-Waldron
Peter	Chappell
Nita	Cherry
Maree	Conway
Simon	Dehne
Bridgette	Engeler
Josh	Floyd
Jennifer	Gidley
Richard	Hames
Peter	Hayward
Paul	Higgins
Sohail	Inayatullah
Julian	Lippi
Rowena	Morrow
Susan	Oliver
Gareth	Priday
Jose	Ramos
Elizabeth	Rudd
Rod	Sarah
Joseph	Voros

7. And finally signs of Hope - Where does the future come from? The past. The Very Long Past!

More recently, we have introduced Big History into the curriculum – the science-based story of how our present-day technological civilisation came to be the way it is – at both post-graduate and at under-graduate level. Many futurists recognise the importance of understanding and setting the context leading up to the present, out of which the future emerges. Big History, however, out-

contextualises *everything*, because it is a history that starts *literally* at the beginning of time itself – at the Big Bang. There had always been a ‘big picture’ lecture (aka “the ‘scary aliens’ lecture”) given at the end of the first year of the MSF (in its various incarnations, whether that first time in DGC in 2003 when the Sarkar Game also first ran, or at the end of FKM2 in 2015), but this extends that idea in a novel way, which we have found has had huge traction with students.

P21 now begins with a quick Big History – how we got to here in a couple of hours of before-entering-the-classroom YouTube videos (i.e., Crash Course Big History) – and then examines and focuses on the flows of energy that have powered human societies, especially over the last few centuries. Big History takes as one of its organising principles the flow of energy through matter using a systems view. That long historical perspective then becomes a perfect launching pad for considering the next century or two, and the Energy Transition that lies ahead. And then that perspective is further extended into 21st Century Challenges, where energy is seen as just one aspect of the civilizational challenge/problematique...

At undergraduate level, a similar two-unit elective sequence was designed and part-introduced to replace the lost foresight units of the previous iteration – Big History: From the Big Bang to Global Civilisation, and World Futures: Where to Now for Globalisation? BH was introduced in 2015 following several years of planning. Joe is on the Board of the International Big History Association (www.ibhanet.org) and so he has access to the core people in this field, all of whom were amazingly generous with their help and time. However, the University decided to shut down BH as part of a broad review process of undergraduate programs in the second half of 2015; but the unit was saved by being picked up by the School of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities as a core unit in the new BA History major – a rare instance of actual cross-Faculty cooperation. World Futures, however, did not survive, even in principle, as it was never even allowed to run. Nonetheless, the door has been left open to possibly offer it in future should student numbers in Big History pick up and a demonstrated demand for it is shown.

The main observation we have, though, is that students simply *love* Big History – even students not taking a history major come to it on the strength of what it tries to do – it provides a way for them to understand the whole of the past, literally, and their place in the grand scheme of things. But we also observe that students really, and I mean *really*, “get” ‘civilisational futures’ as a result of being introduced to the Big History perspective. After a 14-billion-year run-up, their thinking does not, and cannot, stop in the present. In contrast to our experiences over the years, by introducing Big History it is not necessary to have to ‘bash’ the future into the thinking of present-moment focussed students, something that had always been a source of frustration to us. We have thus discovered that one of the best ways to teach an openness to *futures* thinking is to introduce students to *the whole of the past!* And, at a time when our Masters has a very limited future left. Still, the combination of Big History and World Futures at undergrad, with a similar 2-unit sequence at post-grad level being proposed for the post-MSF era, suggests that Futures Studies could continue to survive by joining with Big History in what Joe likes to call “a multidisciplinary marriage of timely moment – a Cosmic perfect match”.

Brief Bibliography

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