Foresight: Learning from the Future

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Abstract

Universities continue to undergo a process of' transformation as their purpose, their relevance and the way their work is carried out is challenged. The increasingly global marketplace for higher education requires a perspective very different to that provided by traditional strategic planning. What will be the impact of transformation and globalisation on the university as an organisation? How should universities respond to position themselves for the future, 10-20 years hence? And how should individual universities plan for the future?

Foresight is a process which allows people in an organisation to develop a coherent forward view and to imagine, explore and assess a range of possible futures. It is not about prediction, but it is about informing strategy. Foresight is used extensively by both business and governments across the world including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Japan, German;' and Australia. In education, foresight is manifested in academic programs in futures studies and in scenario planning. Thinking about the future is not new —foresight is an innate human capacity and we all do it to some degree already Foresight seeks to tap into these existing capacities to inform organisational planning and to use the outcomes in organisationally useful ways.

This paper discusses how foresight can inform strategy and reports on how foresight is being introduced into strategy processes at Swinburne University of Technology Initial implementation is through the use of scenarios within a framework of a broader educational process designed to introduce the organisation to foresight, its purpose, methodologies and benefits. The paper will provide information about the process, the results to date and, perhaps most importantly the challenges and surprises encountered in introducing an approach which sounds a bit too much like crystal ball gazing.

Introduction

It is difficult to imagine working in an Australian university which does not have a strategic plan. Yet, it is only since the then Federal Minister for Education, John Dawkins, began his program of reform of the higher education sector in Australia in 1989, that strategic planning really became part of the landscape. In the time since those reforms began, strategic planning in universities has become a critical function that also supports a new professional grouping of planners and institutional researchers.

In an Evaluations and Investigations Report published by the then Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the authors (Anderson *et al*, 1999) state their characteristics of good planning and of good strategic plans:

> "Good planning requires an understanding of the context in which the university operates, a good management information system within the university; the participation and support of as many of the university's staff as possible; and close links to the budget process within the university.

> "The plan should present a clear vision, the mission and goals of the university and the major steps by which its proposes to reach its goals. It should specify precise and usually quantified targets and timelines and nominate the officers or sections of the university responsible for reaching these. It should contain mechanisms for funding progress towards the targets, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating this progress."

The word "future", although it might be implied, is not explicit. \~t, if a university does not have a clear picture of the future it wishes to pursue in the long-term, its planning may well be ineffective, no matter how many of these 'good' characteristics it embodies. Why?

Trends like globalisation are changing not only the way the world does business, but the way we live. If globalisation is interpreted as:

- the internationalisation of production, trade and finance;
- increased international movements of people;
- the increasingly multi-cultural nature of societies;
- the rapid growth of international communication flows, delivered through telecommunications, information and media technologies;
- increased global circulation of ideas, ideologies and 'keywords'; and
- the development and greater prominence of international organisations.

and organisations in a global future will be characterised by, among other things:

- fuzzy boundaries, informal and flexible work units;
- the temporary nature of work in changing networks;
- no single dominant organisational form;
- more participative governance;
- more contradiction, paradox and ambiguity; and
- increasingly reliance by staff on personal authority

it is quickly apparent that *the future will be nothing like the past.* Understanding the past is important so that organisations can learn from experience and mistakes, but those lessons alone are insufficient to prepare for what might be in the future. Indeed, when one considers that "all our knowledge is about the past, while all our decisions are about the future" (Wilson, 2000), the need to learn from the future becomes indisputable.

Defining Foresight

Foresight is the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view and to use the insights in organisationally useful ways (Slaughter, 1999), for example, to:

- detect adverse conditions;
- guide policy;
- shape strategy; and
- explore new markets, products and services.

Phrased differently, foresight is a process of developing a range of views of possible ways in which the future could develop, and understanding these sufficiently well to be able to decide what decisions can be taken today to create the best possible tomorrow (Horton, 1999). It is simply a structured way of thinking about the future and planning for it (Office of Science and Technology, UK, 1998). It holds insights into what the future might hold, and helps identify opportunities and threats that might need to be addressed today,

Another way of viewing foresight is as a tool to allow an organisation to better understand the future external environment in which it will be operating. In this sense, foresight is a way to undertake a future environmental scan, and to tailor the information obtained for use in the organisation's strategy development processes.

Foresight is not new. As early as 1901, HG Wells was calling for universities to appoint "Professors of Foresight" to think seriously about the coming challenges of social change, particularly science and technology (Wells, 1932). Foresight programs in the United Kingdom and New Zealand have focused on science and technology foresight to assist with determining priorities for resource expenditure. Foresight projects have been undertaken by a range of organisations over the past 30 years, including:

- US Army Environmental Policy Institute

- Millennium Project
- National Institute of Science and Technology Policy, Japan
- Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research, Germany
- Royal Dutch/Shell, Netherlands
- Central Planning Bureau, Netherlands
- European Union Frameworks Programme
- European Planning Commission
- French Ministry for Higher Education and Research
- Scottish Enterprise Institute
- Interdepartmental Committee for Futures, Canada
- World Bank — Environmental Foresighting Project
- Japanese Futures Society

Foresight is an innate human capacity that everyone uses in their day-to-day activity. Foresight in organisations seeks to surface this capacity and to share individual insights about the future across the organisation. It has a long-term focus, is systematic and information rich, and is a process involving consultation with, and interaction between, people. It is a process that allows organisations to *learn from the future as well as the past.* The combination of both past and future perspectives enhances and strengthens strategy development by enriching an organisation's understanding of the environment in which it exists (ie its context *cf* Anderson *et al*), and the options available to it.

Foresight and Strategic Planning

There is often some confusion about the relationship between strategic thinking, strategy development and strategic planning. The confusion between these three activities lies in the belief that they are all essentially the same thing — which they are not. They are, in fact, three quite separate activities which have decidedly different foci of interest, and which require quite different styles of thinking for their proper execution.

Experts on strategy, such as Mintzberg (1994) have characterised the essential difference between strategic planning, strategy development, and strategic thinking. In essence, strategic planning is about analysis — the breaking down of a goal or objective into steps, designing how the steps may he implemented, estimating the anticipated consequences of each step, and measuring the manner by which progress is being made. This is a planned, programmed activity requiring thinking which is strongly analytical, logical and deductive, in order to ensure that things stay "on track." Strategic thinking, on the other hand, is about synthesis — using intuition, creativity and foresight to formulate an integrated perspective or vision of where an organisation should be heading. Because information about the future is always incomplete, the thinking required for success in this activity needs to be "synthetical" and inductive, not analytical and deductive.

Strategic thinking is concerned with *exploration* (based on limited and patchy information), not the steps needed for *implementation*, which is the realm of strategic planning. The junction between these two activities is the mysterious "black box" of strategy development or strategy-making itself, where a particular goal or objective is actually set or a decision made. The focus here is on making a decision, and/or with setting a *destination*. This arena remains as mysterious today as it has ever been; the "cognitive" school of strategy (Mintzberg *et al*, 1998) regards it as an unknown and unknowable function of cognition. Strategy "just happens". In practice, the way strategy happens is usually when it is set by a person or persons with the power to act; the Chief Executive Officer or Managing Director of corporations, or the Vice-Chancellor of a university. Foresight then, as an aspect of strategic thinking, is designed to open up an expanded range of perceptions of the strategic options available, so that strategy-making is potentially wiser. Highlighting these differences is not to suggest that one is preferred over the other. Strategic thinking and strategic planning are *interdependent*, one cannot exist without the other.

Liedtka (1998: 30-3 1) argues that organisations need to reframe their strategic planning processes to incorporate strategic thinking and surface the strategic conversations that occur on a daily basis. Decisions made by individuals every day have consequences for the organisation, with the quality of these choices dependent upon the quality of the strategic thinking process in which they are made. She cites five

characteristics of strategic thinking: a systems or holistic view; a focus on intent; thinking in time through the use of scenarios; hypothesis-driven (what if) methods; and intelligently opportunistic approaches. She also writes that:

> The need to create a capability for strategic thinking at multiple organisational levels has increasingly been recognised as central to creating and sustaining competitive advantage in the face of the rapid environmental change that characterises many business environments today. Traditional approaches to strategic planning have been argued by influential theorists like Henry Mintzberg and Gary Harnel to be inhospitable to the type of strategic thinking so urgently needed today, Strategic thinking, as these authors have described it, is creative, disruptive, future-focused, and experimental in nature. As such, its development and expression are rarely encouraged in the often bureaucratic, financially driven, incrementally focused approaches to planning evident in many organisations today,

The following table highlights some of the ways in which strategic thinking and strategic planning differ.

Strategic Thinking	Strategic Planning
assumes a future, only the shape of which can be predicted	Assumes a future that is predictable and specifiable in detail
local intelligence is essential to successful planning, so lower level managers need to have a voice in strategy development	information used by senior managers to create a plan which is then disseminated to lower level managers for implementation
reliance through self-reference — a sense of strategic intent that guides choices of managers on a day-to-day basis; often difficult to measure and monitor	control through management systems — measurement and monitoring variables
managers move beyond limited understanding of their own roles to understand the larger system, connections and interdependence between their roles and the system	managers know only their roles and can be expected to defend their 'turf'
strategy and change inescapably linked, so finding new strategic options and implementing them successfully is harder and more important than evaluating them	challenge of setting strategic directions is primarily analytic
planning process itself is value-adding	creation of the plan is the ultimate object
concerned with direction; qualitatively focused on the future; instinctive, subjective, inductive, idealistic emotional... it is creative	analytical, concerned with bringing a vision to reality; quantitatively focused on today, objective, deductive, and scientific, task oriented and pragmatic.
prepares to adapt	prepares to predict

Source: Liedtka, 1998; Owen, 1988

As an element of strategic thinking, foresight therefore informs strategy-making, which subsequently informs strategic planning. It does not replace strategic planning which is a proven methodology for implementing, monitoring and reporting on strategy. Rather, foresight enriches the context within which strategy is developed, planned and executed.

As a strategic thinking process, foresight aims to involve staff from all levels of the organisation in a dialogue about the future. It provides a process within which assumptions about the future can be questioned and issues critical to the future can be discussed. It allows new ideas to be introduced and information about the operating environment to be shared. When effectively managed, the process provides a shared context for understanding the future of an organisation and why particular strategy decisions are made.

Depending on an organisation's situation at any given time, different foresight capacities will be needed. In an environment with low levels of change and low levels of complexity, a fairly rudimentary foresight capacity is adequate for an organisation's continued survival and development. In more complex environments with a high degree of change, a deeper foresight capacity is needed to ensure that strategic processes are well informed. In the Old World of the mid-twentieth century, low rates of change and complexity meant that a "linear extrapolative" view of the future was adequate. The future, in this view, is

an essential!)' linear projected outgrowth of the past and the present. Such a view is manifest!)' no longer sufficient.

What confronts organisations at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries is a fundamental shift in both the level of complexity and the amount of change taking place in the wider world. The linear extrapolative approach to viewing the future, developed over times of relatively less change and complexity, is now being stretched beyond its breaking point. Organisations need to expand their capacities for foresight — as do individuals and society — if they are to survive and develop. If organisations continue to use older capacities without developing newer ones, the range of their strategic options may not be wide enough to ensure their continued development.

Most universities recognise the need to prepare for future challenges, hut action is generally embedded in their experience of the past. A lot of time is spent on environmental scans, identifying trends and integrating quantitative reporting to a sophisticated and impressive level. While these activities are all vita! to effective strategic planning, the data and information being generated is based on knowledge of what has gone before. Organisations understand the past well, but the experience of change to date indicates that the future will be so unlike the past that current knowledge held by organisations is incomplete and inadequate for strategy development today. The quantum leap in strategy and planning occurs when there is a recognition and acceptance that to prepare for future challenges, one has to understand the future as well as the past. Learning from the future then becomes as equally important as understanding the past.

Implementing Organisational Foresight

Implementing foresight in an established organisation is made more complex because there are existing planning processes that need to continue while a foresight approach is being implemented. There is little chance of starting with a blank sheet of paper in these circumstances, so foresight needs to be introduced in a way that is seen to add value to both the core business of the organisation and the existing planning processes.

Skumanich and Silbernagel (1997) from the Battelle Research Institute produced a report on "Foresighting Around the World" in which seven leading foresight programs (including the Australian Science and Technology Council, now disbanded) were investigated. The 'best practice' features of these programs were that they:

- began with a perceived need to prepare for future challenges;
- have champions during start up;
- prove responsive to client needs;
- involve relevant participants in the process; and
- experience a legitimising process.

These features are similar to those required of any initiative to he implemented in an organisation, although it might be useful to add "developed and implemented an effective communication strategy". Foresight is a new term as well as a new process and communicating its intent throughout the organisation from the beginning is critical to successful implementation.

A valuable starting point in understanding how to embed foresight in an organisation is to understand how it can be built up through several 'layers' of capability. Slaughter (1999) describes five such layers through which the development of a foresight capacity progresses:

Level 1: recognition of foresight as an innate human capacity: every individual has the capacity for foresight;

Level 2: immersion in foresight concepts: using foresight concepts and ideas to generate a futures discourse;

Level 3: using foresight methodologies: use of key methods to make foresight "real;

Level 4: creating organisational niches: permanent, purpose built areas to focus foresight; and

Level 5: foresight at the social level: where long-term thinking becomes the norm.

Slaughter's framework provided a useful blueprint to plan the implementation of Swinburne's foresight capacity over time.

The Swinburne Experience

Beginnings...

During 1998, the then Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President attended the Technology Transfer and Innovation Conference in the United Kingdom where they attended sessions on foresight. Recognising that foresight was critical if the change process the University was embarking on was to be successful, a decision was made to "do" foresight at Swinburne in two ways: first, to teach it, and second, to integrate it into planning. During 1999, the Australian Foresight Institute was established, headed by Professor Richard Slaughter, and the Foresight and Planning Unit (now Foresight, Planning and Review, FPR) was formed to coordinate foresight and planning at the University level. The establishment of these organisational niches of foresight equates to Level 4 of Slaughter's framework.

FPR was established after an internal re-organisation of planning and information management roles. As well as a brief to "do" foresight, the Unit was also charged with carrying out a review of planning processes to shift the focus from paper to people, and from compliance to action. In many ways, the University's development had outstripped its planning processes, particularly in terms of linking strategy and resource allocation to planning and the review coincided fortuitously with the decision to implement foresight.

An Integrated Framework

Initial work by the FPR Unit during 1999 therefore focused on reviewing planning processes at the University level. A new University Planning Framework was developed during 1999 and included the following "components":

- foresight and strategy development;
- planning;
- reporting;
- resource allocation; and
- quality

as depicted in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: Swinburne's Planning Framework
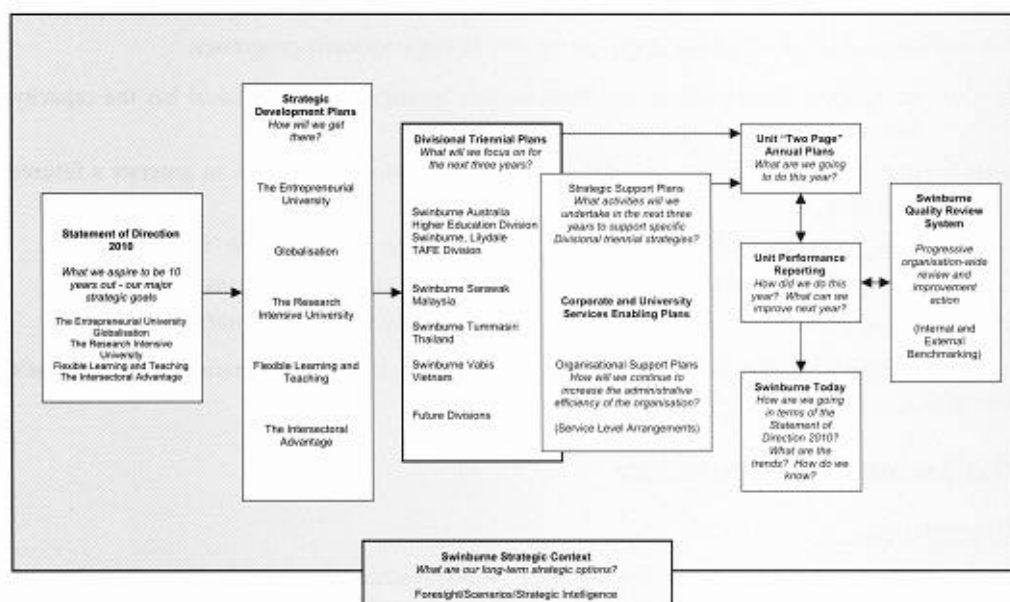
With the exception of foresight, the Framework is nothing new in terms of strategic planning. The Framework operates at the University level, since each Division already has existing planning processes that suit their needs, some more developed than others. The Planning Framework provides a way of linking those existing divisional planning processes and creating a 'one Swinburne' view of the world, while not interfering or imposing unnecessary processes on local planning.

The other benefit of the Framework is that it integrates annual planning with foresight work in terms of time frames and scope as shown in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2: Swinburne's Planning Framework: Time Frames and Scope
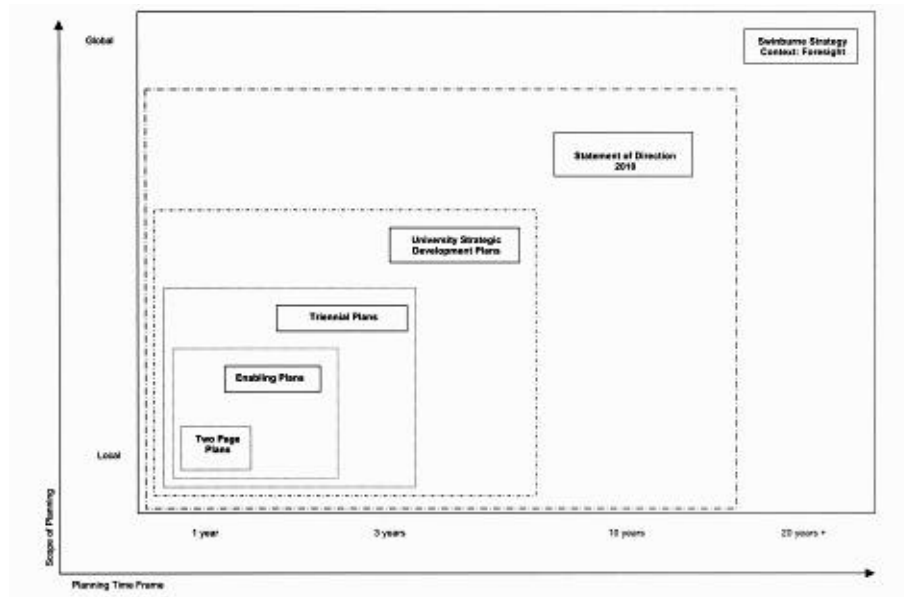
With the broad framework in place, work began on implementing or updating the various elements, starting with foresight. Some time in the second half of 1999 was spent researching foresight and how it might be used in organisations. Attempts to locate other universities using foresight were largely unsuccessful. A number of universities that have used scenario planning were identified, although this usage seemed to be episodic and not ongoing. The unique element of foresight at Swinburne is that it is formally integrated into continuing strategy development and planning processes. The existence of the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne, however, meant that there was an on-site source of expertise about foresight which proved to be invaluable in terms of developing the implementation plan. Productive collaboration with the Institute continues today.

It was also timely that the University's existing strategic plan 'expired' in 2000 which provided the opportunity to rewrite the top level strategy document in a more futures oriented way. Several drafts and consultation with the University community and major academic committees, together with the outcomes of the first ever University Planning Conference, resulted in the publication of the Statement of Direction 2010 in December 2000. The Statement is the first foresight publication for the University, although it has not been acknowledged as such and was not a result of any structured foresight exercise. It shifts the planning frame of reference out to 10 years, however, rather than the usual three to five years and describes the sort of organisation Swinburne wants to be, and its defining characteristics, in 2010.

Exploring Foresight

Foresight at Swinburne has three aims:

■ to inform strategy development and decision making by better understanding the external environment, particularly around potential futures and emerging areas of focus and priorities;
■ to build an organisational foresight capacity to encourage strategic thinking throughout the organisation; and

- to provide opportunities for staff to be involved more directly, if the)' wish, in University planning processes.

These aims require a long-term implementation program. Initially, the focus was on education and methodology. These two phases are not separated in time and are best thought of as overlapping waves; different parts of the organisation may be at different stages of the implementation process. The introduction of foresight concepts and ideas through an education phase assists the creation of a shared vocabulary for people to use in daily interactions. When this effect is widespread and natural, then a foresight 'literacy' is embedded. With this foundation, foresight processes and thinking may be meaningfully introduced into existing planning processes. These foresight processes are gradually adopted until they too become embedded in the strategic processes of the organisation. When this state is achieved, the organisation as a whole has a foresight capacity — through widespread shared understandings, concepts and processes.

Education

FPR began an education campaign in 2000 to introduce foresight to staff across the organisation, initially by publications and seminars. Monthly email *Foresight Snippets* were produced which contained items of interesting, challenging and sometimes weird information that may or may not have direct relevance to Swinburne. The *Snippets* focused on the broad social environment while a second quarterly publication, *prospect*, provided information about education related developments and futures work. *prospect* was focused more around the University's five strategic themes and developments in each of these broad areas. Both the *Snippets* and *prospect* were designed to be 'conversation starters' to support continuing strategic conversations about the future of Swinburne.

Introduction to Foresight seminars were also held to introduce staff to foresight, its intellectual base in futures studies, and how it links to strategy development. The seminar presentation and a Foresight Primer which discusses the concepts behind the seminar are published on the FPR website which is linked to the Human Resources on-line induction process. New staff also receive an information kit which includes information about foresight, the University Planning Framework and the Statement of Direction 2010. The focus on the education phase drew to a close towards the end of 2001 when the Swinburne Scenarios process began, although education activities continue with twice yearly seminars on foresight and planning for new staff, and presentation of Introduction to Foresight seminars upon request.

Voros (2003) provides more detail about the foresight framework developed and used at Swinburne, and its link to theory and methodology.

Methodology

While the education phase was underway, initial use of scenario planning also began. There are many foresight methodologies, but Swinburne chose scenario planning mainly because they have been in use for some time, and there is a well developed and structured process for creating and linking scenarios with strategy development. GBN Australia (Learning Scenario Planning, 2000) identifies the following reasons for pursuing scenarios:

- because the future is not predictable;
- to sensitise decision makers to unwelcome or subtle changes in the environment;
- because econometric models cannot accommodate sharp discontinuities;
- to provide a common vocabulary;
- because stories make for effective communication; and
- to encourage strategic conversation from scenario contexts.

Scenarios provide the "scaffolding" or framework within which a shared strategic conversation about the future of an organisation can occur. They create plausible alternative futures within which an organisation can consider where to position itself, and they also provide opportunities to experiment with how an

organisation might operate under different conditions identified in the scenarios. They help to "contour the unknown and help manage complexity" (Inayatullah, 2000: 371).

Scenarios emerged in World War Two as a method of military planning. It was the work of Herman Kahn, Pierre Wack and later Peter Schwartz at Shell that confirmed the value of scenarios to business planning, not only in terms of better understanding the future environment but also in terms of, as Schwartz (1991) put it: the ability of scenarios to 'change our managers' view of reality'. Scenario planning is an information rich exercise that attempts to identify the major drivers of change likely to affect an organisation in the future, and to assess the likely impact of these drivers on the organisation and its internal and external relationships. It is as much about involving staff in a strategic conversation about the futures described in the scenarios as it is about producing the scenarios themselves.

Perhaps most importantly, scenarios help organisations *learn* from the future. If all our knowledge is about the past and all our decisions about the future, then it makes sense to try and understand the future as far as it is possible. Strategy decisions made today will be wiser and the organisation in a better position to respond to future events and opportunities. As Sheldrake (2000) indicates:

> Developing scenarios is one of the most powerful ways we know to help us think about the future. It is true that we can't predict the future, but we can think about the future in a systematic way. Those who do have found many benefits; but in particular, scenarios present the possibility of seeing opportunities in the future. Entrepreneurial managers can anticipate how to make use of these insights to ensure their businesses prosper in the long term.

While scenarios are by no means universally accepted as a planning methodology, particularly in universities, the process was both different and structured enough to be of use in this first stage of implementation at Swinburne.

Scenario Planning Workshops

A range of internal projects in scenario development were also undertaken prior to a planned University wide Swinburne Scenarios project. An initial 'experiment' with scenario planning in 2000 provided evidence that staff within the University needed to be involved in scenario planning before using the methodology in formal planning processes. Unit-based workshops were therefore developed and refined during 2000 and 2001 as they were offered to individual units throughout the University.

These unit-based projects had different aims — for example, one was focused around future systems development, while another aimed to 'free up' the thinking of the staff prior to their regular planning day. Three workshops were developed: Learning Scenarios, an introduction to the method; Exploratory Scenarios, a tailored scenario planning exercise; and Strategic Implications; a follow-on to Exploratory Scenarios, to allow the unit to explore more fully how the scenario planning outcomes can inform their planning.

Responses to both the education activities and scenario planning workshops were overwhelmingly positive. It became clear that a key to successful implementation was to focus on involving staff in a process that provided a practical illustration of the value of foresight.

Swinburne Scenarios

A major scenario exercise for the University — Swinburne Scenarios — was undertaken during 2002. The Project had the following aims:

■ to generate a shared understanding about the University's future operating environment to increase understanding among staff of current and future strategies available to the University;

■ to assist in the process already underway of identifying key competencies, skills and knowledge that may be required in the future; and

- to provide an opportunity for all staff to have input into the process through a number of open consultation steps to be included at various stages of the process.

The Project involved the University's Executive Group and heads of academic units, and was undertaken from March to July 2002. Two Swinburne Scenarios were developed, which were launched at a University Council meeting in August 2002. The roll-out of the scenarios to other major groups and units indicated clearly that while staff found them interesting, it was not immediately clear how they could be used to inform planning. A workbook and supporting video have since been produced, with the aim of providing units with a resource to use to interpret the scenarios for their context. The scenarios and the environmental scanning in formation developed as part of the project will also trigger a review of the University's Statement of Direction 2010 during
2003.

Strategic Scanning

As foresight implementation continued at Swinburne, it became clear that the University needed a repository of futures oriented scanning information. In addition to the significant scanning activity that occurred as part of the Swinburne Scenarios Project, the devolved nature of the University meant that many units undertook effective scanning activities suited to their own planning needs. Individual staff also undertook scanning, particularly in terms of their own work. There was, however, no 'foresight' scanning information available to staff for use in their planning and decision making.

A new framework for environmental scanning was therefore developed within the Unit (Voros, 2001), and a new Strategic Scanning Database established, *prospect* was revised to be a publication focused on reporting scanning 'hits', and now incorporates the *Foresight Snippets.* Tailored scanning projects will be undertaken in the future, and regular updates of indicators identified during the Swinburne Scenarios Project will be provided to the major planning groups in the University.

Lessons Learned

1. A trigger to force the introduction of foresight is useful. The ability to see the value of learning from the future usually emerges from the brain of one person — in Swinburne's case, the Vice-Chancellor — with implementation then occurring in the organisation. The need for foresight is not likely to emerge from routine and embedded strategic planning processes.

2. Language, as always, is critical. There were two language issues at Swinburne — one with the language of foresight itself, and the second with presenting foresight in ways which are meaningful to the divisions at Swinburne, all of which have distinct missions, markets and cultures. The term 'foresight' entered the vocabulary at Swinburne surprisingly quickly, however, and has started to be used as a reference point for internal reviews, and as a source of information to inform new activities and initiatives.

3. Support from the Vice-Chancellor or CEO is critical. Foresight is not something that can be ignored at Swinburne because the Vice-Chancellor has indicated that there is no choice about it being used in our planning. Without the Vice-Chancellor's direct and indirect support in the current 'start-up' phase in particular, however, it is unlikely that the degree of acceptance — or tolerance — of foresight would be as high as it is today.

4. Personal goodwill helps, as does the perception of "political" neutrality and the ability to explain a concept that is different and unknown. The 'power of one' was a surprise in terms of people being willing to give foresight a go, or to treat the whole thing in a neutral manner until its outcomes were more obvious. Selecting the right staff to "do" foresight is therefore important.

5. Contexts are important. As with language, the federation structure at Swinburne meant that foresight has to be introduced in each area in a different way. Building close partnerships with key staff in each area has therefore become a critical part of our foresight implementation process. The influence of

contexts also means that presentations about foresight must to tailored to Swinburne and not be seen to be existing presentations from other organisations used at Swinburne without any consideration of language, structures or process.

6. This implementation will take time — it is a long term activity. Care must be taken at each step to ensure that there is a tangible outcome which shows the benefits of the new approach. Open communication of information and regularly seeking comment from the Swinburne community is critical in this respect.

7. Convincing people to take time out for foresight work is difficult. When people do work through a process, however, feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. This process itself is a key element of foresight work, and sufficient time must be spent to 'sell' foresight and its benefits.

Concluding Comments

Swinburne's vision is to become a pre-eminent entrepreneurial university from the Asia Pacific, thriving on new knowledge and ideas. The need to be innovative in all that we do underpins this goal. Foresight at Swinburne is a practical and very real example of the University's commitment to be innovative in its planning and in its desire to be in control of its destiny. Integrating foresight into planning at Swinburne is now about two years old, and continues to be a real challenge, but research on organisational foresight indicates that it has the potential to make a difference to an organisation's future — not so much in terms of its structure or its procedures, but in terms of its readiness to deal with the increasingly rapid and complex change resulting from globalisation and other external forces.

Writing about foresight as something new risks inferring that organisations and individual staff do not already think about the future, scan the environment or make decisions by taking into account what might happen. These processes, however, usually occur in individual brains and information gained from the processes is often not shared across the organisation. Foresight's benefits come from acknowledging that all staff have the capacity to imagine the future, surfacing that capacity and sharing it across the organisation to strengthen existing processes.

Foresight will become a routine part of strategy development and planning in universities in the future. For organisations like universities which face significant challenges to their role and function in society, the ability to develop a coherent and shared understanding of plausible futures and associated strategies will be critical to survival. The ability to learn from both the past and the future will be a characteristic of organisational longevity. Those organisations willing to explore what the future might hold will be better positioned to see and grasp opportunities and adapt more quickly to changing conditions and external forces:

> ...the imaginative 'visiting' of the future through constructive narratives can reduce the time for adjustment as the future unfolds, while those involved in the process are more ready to accept new strategies and ways of working. Rather than closure and stabilisation, Foresight provides a framework for openness and interpretative flexibility (Tann and Platts, 1997: 18).

Foresight as a process will become as common as SWOT analyses are today, and will be recognised as a best practice characteristic of strategy development and implementation. The lesson of Lot's Wife (Luke 17: 32) is salient here — she failed to keep looking forward and was ossified. Universities have always had a remarkable ability to adapt to external pressures and to not ossify. As an organisational type, universities will undoubtedly survive into the 21st century. The degree of ossification in individual institutions, however, could well depend, at least in part, on whether or not they adopted foresight to enhance their strategy development and strategic planning. The question to ask is not only "what value does foresight add to our strategic planning?" but also "can we afford not to do it?".

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