

Book Review

Constructing Future Higher Education Scenarios: Insights from Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Few sustained efforts to develop scenarios for the future of higher education have been undertaken. The OECD has a futures programme that has produced scenarios for universities over time, but not many institutions take on the task in a sustained or systematic way. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is a bit of a trend-setter in this respect, and this book is to be welcomed by those interested in exploring the future of universities.

All universities grapple with the challenges in their external environments, but most develop strategies based on their understanding of the past and the present. Even though most universities write of changing paradigms in their plans, few actually engage with what this change might mean for their institution into the future. USM recognises the changing paradigm within which it operates and uses this recognition as the springboard for a scenario project that explored in some depth how it might create a preferred future for itself.

USM detailed their scenario project in great detail, including their rationale, the identification of drivers of change, their methods, the scenario outcomes, how these scenarios were used to generate options and indicators for the university, and how the process and outcomes were communicated to university stakeholders. They reviewed their project and have documented how they would do it differently. It is a remarkably comprehensive report of the project, which they have generously made available through the publication of this book. Photographs of workshops, the inevitable butcher's paper, and outcomes have been included, and this a particularly useful addition that makes the process 'real' and practical, rather than just a process described in words.

While the scenarios themselves are probably valuable only for USM, since they are created to understand the options for the future of USM, the process and drivers of change are relevant to all

universities. Within the context of the knowledge economy, USM identified four drivers of change:

- Globalism
- Multiculturalism
- The internet, and
- Politicisation

The interaction of these drivers will result in different university configurations, and how these configurations emerge will depend on each university's particular history and culture. Applying these drivers to their local context, the authors note that USM will not be immune from the transformational impact of these drivers:

Such a transformation implies that the future philosophical and functional framework of the university itself would have to undergo a metamorphosis to ensure its continued role as an incubator of innovation and a driver of social change (p.8).

They identified a number of issues to explore, including intellectual property, pedagogical approaches, curriculum design, accessibility, governance, relevance, acceptance of change and bureaucratic miasma. Their critical question to anchor their scenario work was around how to position USM for the future: "Will we forgo our social obligations as we pursue a more business-oriented approach?" This is a question with which all university administrators and managers would be familiar.

Five scenarios were developed using a wide range of futures methods. The scenarios were tested over a six month period with USM stakeholders to facilitate the process of communicating the outcomes to the university community, and to gain further input into the final stage of their project – creating a preferred future for USM. This final stage produced a vision for the University called "4S The Symbiotically Sustainable Study Space", as well as a set of indicators that will be monitored over time.

The value of the project has been summarised as follows.

"The Future of Higher Education Project has provided deep and 'original' insights into the current and future orientations of the stakeholders of a higher education institution such as USM...While one could never be certain of what the future holds, to desist from undertaking any such endeavour would imply a reluctance to change increasingly outmoded status quos and would contribute to future organisational inertia. One could surmise that the future is not to be beheld but to be grasped, moulded and shaped by our caressing thoughts and ideas, and constructing alternative future scenarios affords us the opportunity to do just that" (p.125).

Written in an accessible style, *Constructing Future Higher Education Scenarios* is an excellent resource for any university planner who wants to find out more about: using futures approaches, how futures methods can be used practically in strategy development, testing their university plans against a rigorously developed set of scenarios, or simply finding out how one university is approaching its future. Thanks are due to the authors and project team for documenting and then sharing their work. This book is well worth having on your bookshelves.

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