A R T I C L E

# Co-Futuring Narratives for Toowoomba – A Regional Australian Community

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## Abstract

*The futures of regional communities are a matter of worldwide concern. In Australia, given the rapidly changing nature of rural and regional communities, a futuring program was proposed to explore 'community development' scenarios guided by local stakeholder participation. The venue for our futuring research was the regional city of Toowoomba, in Queensland, Australia. Over the past decade, Toowoomba has reacted to significant change in response to local and global effects, such as the resource boom and shifts in agricultural production. As a consequence*

*there are a number of social, economic and environmental impacts whose cumulative effect could threaten the city's future vitality. An inter-disciplinary research team co-developed a Futuring Tool-Box (FTB) incorporating a comprehensive range of acknowledged tools and methods. A futuring workshop was held to identify the futures issues specific to Toowoomba. Participants were professionals, CEOs and NGOs living in the Toowoomba region, identified as actively futures-aware. This paper focuses on their voices and the future scenarios they co-created, and concludes with a suite of follow-up strategies.*

## Background

### Purpose

This paper reports on the first phase of an envisaged three-phase futuring workshop process held in 2013 at the University of Southern Queensland campus in collaboration with the Queensland University of Technology and Smart Services 2020 CRC. As such this is a work-in-progress for which the first workshop was intended as a scoping exercise for participants to explore futures issues which would subsequently create the stage for a longer term approach to regional futuring. The focus of this paper is to tell the stories of Toowoomba residents, communicating their thoughts and ideas about the futures of their community.

Regional Australia, as exemplified by Toowoomba, is undergoing significant social transformation which can be disruptive on one hand and replete with opportunity on the other. Toowoomba is a growing regional activity centre which serves as a gateway to the resource-rich region known as the Surat Basin and is affected in complex ways by the mining boom.

Research goals included using this opportunity to scope futures issues for this regional community as well as teasing out innovative possibilities for on-going futuring workshops. Some of these creative applications of futuring are included in this paper and will serve as a platform for developing an extended, coherent research design. It is hoped the experiences to garnered from this workshop will provide a framework for other regional communities actively engaged in the complex task of re-futuring within the context of rapidly changing social landscapes.

### Australia's Regional Futures: Doom or Boom?

Given the changing nature of rural and regional communities in Australia, the futuring program reported here explored 'community development' scenarios guided by a strong industry participation with the aim of fostering strategic planning for future community needs.

Traditionally, rural and regional communities have played a significant role in the economic and social development of Australia. Up until the late 1950's, more than 80% of the value of Australia's exports was attributable to agricultural products (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2000). Currently, although the agricultural industry still utilizes more than half of Australia's land area, multiple local, national and global challenges are changing the nature of this and other traditional industries. Mining and tourism are two key land-use industries in regional Australia. The diversification of rural communities has been encouraged by the force of a globalized market, which is explicitly evident in regional areas that exhibit resource potential for commodity markets.

In addition, the nature of rural communities is directly shaped by the changing demographics due to the comparatively older workforce, the in-migration of retirees and the outmigration of younger people due to limited tertiary educational prospects and employment opportunities. Needs of resource companies and impacts of so-called fly-in-fly-out workers also put pressures on communities to support and deliver services in an unstable environment.

## Garden City Toowoomba

Toowoomba is a picturesque mid-tier city with sprawling public gardens and private lawns, retro-architecture, walkable streets, friendly people, a vibrant educational sector, and a multi-cultural ethnic composition. Toowoomba is a spacious and livable community that presents as a prospering regional hub. The signs of social decay are disguised behind a well-kept cityscape. But like many Australian rural and regional communities, beneath the surface lies a matrix of issues threatening Toowoomba's future livability.

The Toowoomba region is situated 90 minutes drive west of Queensland State's most populous city of Brisbane, population 2 million, at the crest of the Darling Downs. Toowoomba has a subtropical highland climate affording the region a pleasant climate, with summers cooler and less humid than Brisbane. Toowoomba was settled by Europeans in the 1840s and currently is home to 160,000 residents, 100,000 in Toowoomba City.

Toowoomba has an impressive array of futures-oriented programs such as the Sustainable Transport Strategy and the Future by Design initiative. Local information pamphlets reveal a keen interest in matters pertaining to the 'future' of the region. The Toowoomba Regional Council newsletter *MOVING ON* features an article referring to "events and plan for greater readiness in the future," "sharing of local knowledge and ideas for the future," and on the same page, "ideas you may have for your community to build resilience, move forward, and be prepared." (Toowoomba Regional Council, 2013). The concept of 'future' is no stranger to the Toowoomba community, exemplified by a previous Futures project headed by Steve Ames (Ames, 2007), 'our Toowoomba towards 2050 – a vision for the future – a plan to guide us all.' This ambitious and comprehensive project covered a range of futures issues for the region titled as *trends of tomorrow* and *key questions for the future* around the themes of demographics, future development, community, and environment.

### Innovative Aspects: Toward a Futures 2.0

As the research team designed the Co-Futuring Toowoomba Project, we were conscious of the need to achieve a balance between tried and tested *and* innovative approaches. We conceived this workshop to be novel for the following features:
1. The scale of the futuring as a micro-workshop – with only 3-4 hours for busy participants to cover a full futuring process;
2. Within the micro-workshop we introduced participants to key state-of-the-art Futures Studies tools and concepts in the form of a Futuring Tool-Box (FTB), which they would 'take home' and ideally seek to apply independently
3. The futuring workspace at the USQ campus played an important role in how the workshop was conducted and the human-technology interface ergonomics associated with creative futuring;
4. The multi-national workshop team consisted of seven academics from seven nationalities, allowing for diverse cultural perspectives;
5. Based on the Futures research of the workshop facilitator, we strategically used multiple media and visualization formats to make the workshop tactile and engaging;
6. A final innovative aspect involved the visualization of co-futured scenarios. Based on previous research of the chief facilitator across Japanese universities, a strongly visualized approach to futuring was employed. Experience suggested an emphasis on visualizing futures, as opposed to predominantly text-based scenarios, would generate a range of benefits. Futuring teams were encouraged to visualize their ideas using mind-maps, and other visual assets, which could later be re-purposed to more creative and comprehensive modes of expression for telling their stories.

## Futuring Tool-Box & Program Design

**Micro-Course in Contemporary Futures Studies**

 Futuring participants and indeed most of the university academic team were unfamiliar with the discipline of Futures Studies. To make the workshop meaningful, we commenced with a micro-course in contemporary FS including core tools, concepts and methods, summarized below.

1. City Futures DVD (Brisbane City Council, 2006): Used as an ice-breaker, this short explanatory film produced was with the cooperation of the Brisbane City Council provides a useful overview of key FS concepts and how these can be applied to themes around City Futures.
2. Evolution of Contemporary Futures: As the Toowoomba participants were relative novices to the futuring workshop method, we introduced the context of FS in four broad evolutionary waves from the post-Cold War scenario work by Herman Kahn and the RAND Corporation through to the current FS trends exemplified by foresight communication, community futuring, and complexity in FS, amongst other emerging trends.
3. Definitions: Many existing definitions for Futures currently compete but for first time futuring workshoppers Wendell Bell's is an appropriate one to start with. According to Bell (1996) acknowledged definition: Futures Studies is a "*new field of social inquiry whose purpose is the systematic study of the future and whose aims are to discover or invent, propose, examine and evaluate possible, probable and preferable futures.*"
4. Inayatullah's Six Pillars of Futures Studies[1]: From experience with futuring workshops, attempting to frame an entire discipline for newcomers is a conceptual challenge. Inayatullah's Six Pillars of FS is neatly structured and provides a readily accessible framework with which the would-be futures analyst is able to form a comprehensive mental image of the field (Inayatullah, 2003, p.35). In brief, the pillars we used were: 1. Mapping Futures, 2. Macrohistory, 3. Foresight, 4. The image of the future and alternative futures, 5. Epistemologies, and 6. Futures as praxis.
5. Futures Triangle Analysis: FTA is as a useful and easy-to-apply macro-analytical framework. FTA maps out the *pushes* of the present (trends), with the *pulls* of the future (the varying and competing images of the future) along with the *weights* - factors that resist change. The FTA is an applied futures tool useful in mapping out the principal dynamics that collectively constitute a futures issue. Using this triangular mapping arrangement, the task for the futures researcher is to first engage in the deconstruction of the overall dynamics of a futures issue in order to *re*construct preferable futures. As Inayatullah said: "Taken together the triangle of the future presents a way to map the competing dimensions of the future" (Inayatullah, 2003, p.37).
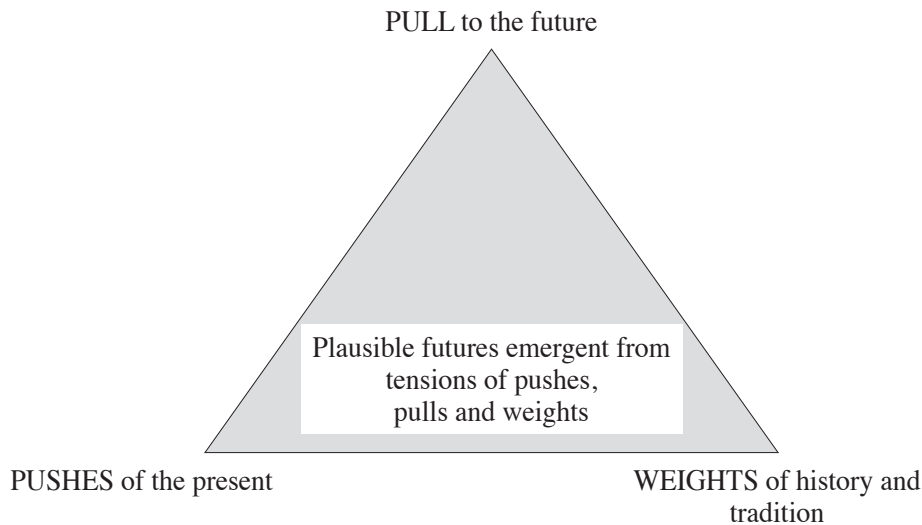
PULL to the future

Plausible futures emergent from
tensions of pushes,
pulls and weights

PUSHES of the present

WEIGHTS of history and
tradition

*Figure 1*. Inayatullah's Futures Triangle Analysis.

6. Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)[2]: CLA is a relatively new futures methodology which emerged and developed from poststructuralist thinking, especially from the work of Michel Foucault (Inayatullah, 2004).

7. Scenarios: In contemporary futures, a key tool from the futurist tool-box is scenario creation. As a framework for structuring scenarios of the future, Inayatullah (1993) cites the particular usefulness of Dator's four archetypal images of the future - (1) continued growth, (2) collapse or catastrophe, (3) nostalgia/reversion to the past, and (4) transformation (Dator, 1983).

8. CoVE: CoVE is construed as a Complex Futures-Oriented Communication Model whose development owes its origins to H. D. Lasswell's 'Communication Formula': *Who* says *what* in *which channel* to *whom* with *what effect*? (Lasswell, 1948). While this is a useful start to understanding communication/s phenomena, the linear nature of this formula does not reflect the complexity of 21st century communication/s environments. Instead, we suggest a complex systems approach with eight components whose ordering have no particular beginning or end, rather, all components are inter-linked and produce feedback loops upon each other in an infinitely complex system. The three components we added to Lasswell include: *In what contexts?* – an essentially Foucauldian concept which asks: What are the historicities and social contexts from which the communication event and its messages arise?; *How?* – enquires into the mechanisms and processes by which the message is constructed and how messages continue to function once sent out into the global message-sphere; and *What is the value ecology?* A Creative Industries term which asks: What kinds of value ecologies emerge and develop around the system in question, and what are the values produced commercial, ethical, socially negative or positive?

9. Emerging Issues Analysis: EIA focuses on issues yet to become trends, pre-trends, whose probability are low but potential impact high. Emerging Issues are used to explore the social impacts of the unpredicted, unthinkable events. They keep the futures analyst alert to the possibility of the unexpected that lie outside neatly packaged scenarios.

10. STEEPV: To keep participants' perceptions of 'future' manageable we suggested framing their scenarios within an accessible framework, for which we advocated a typical STEEPV clustering structure - science, technology, environment, education, politics, and values. Participants were however invited to suggest their own framework if STEEPV did not fit their analytical tasks.

11. Backcasting: An important aspect to the futuring task involved backcasting, whose aim is to map out the chain of events and milestones that need to be achieved *from the present* in order to

realize the transformative scenario at the designated point in the future.

12. Foresensing Community/Organization: Foresensing is a macro concept considered central to the effective functioning of FS and futuring across all organizations. Foresensing, as its name implies, builds upon foresight, a cornerstone concept of FS. Foresensing as practice involves applying the human senses and non-human senses, in coordination with an array of available sensoring technologies, organized into a coherent whole for the purposes of identifying danger signals and/or opportunities on an on-going basis so that the organization is continuously scanning the futures environment and making sense of it strategically.

## The Micro-Workshop Methodology

Given the time constraints of the preliminary futuring workshop, we designed a micro-workshop which would cover a complete futuring process to produce useful outcomes. We launched with 'Shared Histories' positioning ourselves and our expectations for the workshop. This was followed by an icebreaker & micro course in state-of-the-art Futures Studies (FS) facilitated by the lead author with the audio-visual support of the above-mentioned City Futures film and PowerPoint introducing key Futures concepts and the Futuring Tool-Box (FTB). At this point, the first breakout team task was to identify a futures issue and to describe and frame it using a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) framework. At the end of this task teams were allotted five minutes to micro-pitch the futures issue they felt impacted upon Toowoomba futures.

The second breakout proceeded to build upon the sketch of the futures issue by mind-mapping it with the Futures Triangle Analysis framework. Initially, archetypal pushes of the present and the pulls of the future - business as usual, nostalgic, and collapse were explored, leaving the transformative future scenario until the last phase. The third breakout was designed to sketch a transformative image of the future, whilst giving attention to backcasting the dynamics required to realize that future, and the weights anticipated to resist change.

For the facilitators, the sketching a *transformative future scenario* is a critical step in the overall futuring process. Questions posited here include: Who is going to make this happen, how, with what resources, what resistant factors will be encountered? What effects and impacts would this transformative scenario have on Toowoomba, on Queensland, Australia, the world? In 2023, what is it like to live in Toowoomba? We also backcasted by asking what are the steps that must be taken to realize the transformative future scenario? Each team had 5 minutes to tell their compelling[3] scenario-story using a preferred media be that oral, mind-map poster, computer, or other.

## Workshop Specifications

An inter-disciplinary *academic research team* of seven members from Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Smart Services 2020 CRC and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) formed the academic component of the futuring workshop. The *futuring workshop partici-pants* were professionals: CEO's, community-based NGO's, university lecturers, and so on, living in Toowoomba and surrounding regions, with a strong interest in the futures of this region. All had been involved in community-based workshops previously as organized by QUT and USQ academic staff. They were known to be actively engaged in activities relevant to our workshop and as such were highly motivated, connected and the holders of rich insights into the Toowoomba region.

Often overlooked as a key factor in effective futuring, we were also sensitive to the ergonomic attributes of the *space*. In this sense, the room used at USQ - appropriately located in the then new Australian Digital Futures Institute (ADFI) - is a significant factor in the overall futuring dynamics. An appropriate space and environment can significantly add or subtract to the effectiveness of a futuring workshop.

*Figure 2*. Australian Digital Futures Institute, 'Futuring Workshop Space'

To help participants actively visualize their futures scenarios and to assist the post-workshop analyses, each team was assigned a Self-Stick Wall Pad in the form of a large Post-It onto which their mind-maps with varying degrees of creative design and style were hand-drawn. A QUT Masters student video-recorded the entire session resulting in a two-hour DVD recording, allowing for transcription and re-viewing by facilitators.

## Findings: Co-Created Scenarios

This section re-creates the futures scenarios sketched by each of the three Toowoomba futuring teams. The first team breakout in the futuring process aimed to identify a futures issue (FI), then frame and describe it using the Causal Layered Analysis framework. The three FI identified as significant to that region were:
1. Toowoomba After the Resources Boom
2. Homelessness
3. Community Mental Health.

The second breakout involved mind-mapping the futures issue with Futures Triangle Analysis (FTA) shaped by the *pushes* of the present, and *pulls* of the future, whilst leaving the most important *transformative* scenario, and the *weights* of history, for the third and final breakout. In breakout 3, the tasks were to sketch the contours of a transformative future, followed by a brief backcasting exercise which would take into account the *weights* resisting change. As the most important phase of the futuring process, workshoppers were encourage to think outside the box, stretch the boundaries of possibility or mind shift into science fiction mode in order to create a compelling transformative image.

The workshop teams were enthused by the futuring tasks making it difficult to stay on task. The patchiness of the team presentations, are as the reader will notice below, incomplete, and require fleshing out. Team micro-pitches at the end of each breakout highlighted this and we tried to reinforce the importance of keeping on-task. By the third breakout, teams tended to follow the frameworks provided with greater accuracy suggesting that subsequent futuring workshops would

proceed in a much more methodical manner. Below, the stories co-created by the three teams are condensed for readability.

## Futures Issue 1: Toowoomba After the Resources Boom

### Identifying/Framing/Describing

For the first issue - *Toowoomba after the resources boom* – the question was: What would be the legacy for Toowoomba after the current resources boom? The *community litany* was the daily conversation which centered around this issue of what's next for Toowoomba. Yet, despite the topicality of the issue, few if any ideas about the future were forthcoming. As for the official *litany* - it was proclaimed that agriculture and mining would harmoniously co-exist in the future revitalizing the region's agricultural industries to enjoy on-going growth eventually superseding the mining bonanza. A healthy portfolio of new industry projects would seamlessly replace the vacuum left by the resources industry. Participation would be equitable, communities would be sustainable, a new airport built, a Regional Plan would show the way, as "all our problems would be solved and everybody taken care of."

Following from the litanies, the next phase of this CLA framework should have been the *social causes*, but the team veered off-task somewhat and instead looked at the *social impacts*, which we summarize nonetheless below. Here, team members envisaged a post-resource Toowoomba in which communities would undergo rapid shrinkage. The construction aspect of the resource boom had taken place over only 3-5 years and once this started to decelerate, decay would set in rapidly leading to a vacuum in social infrastructure. Family farms would come under increasing pressure, smart operators would emerge pushing up productivity, and climate change would start to impact upon the prospects for post-boom Toowoomba. Water would assume new meanings for Toowoomba's post-resources future – its availability, cost, and quality and the value community places on the roles of water.

Several questions arose such as: what will happen to the highly qualified and ambitious people once the boom is over and what will happen to the retail mix? It was noted how businesses at the end of the food chain such as fast-food outlets, cafes, and pubs, were already firing–the proverbial canary in the coalmine forewarning the beginning of the end of the resources boom. Another feared outcome was that the social infrastructure developed with the support of the resources boom would be under-utilized and fall into disrepair as maintenance costs became untenable. The team questioned what would Toowoomba's youth choose to do once the resources boom wound down and how would the population demographics be affected with an unstoppable out-migration of the region's young along with other transient community cohorts. The underlying fear was that Toowoomba would rapidly transform into a retirement community.

But upsides were also noted. Those left behind would be the most resilient community members able to seize the opportunity by strategically creating cross-sector collaborations, overcoming the impacts of the post-resources boom, and usher in a new innovative and creative model for the region – the Resilient and Creative Minorities inheriting the task of giving birth to a new regional identity and economic base.

At the deeper *worldviews* level, examples were cited from nearby communities who had suffered similar post-resources fates along with the United States and Canada having undergone similar boom and bust cycles. The point made was that the over-exploitation of natural resources had subsumed all other worldviews of the entire community shutting out the possibility of alternatives.

We were able to extract two key *myths* - the first of which could be expressed in terms of *resources as infinite*; and the second, that local government played into, and community played along with, of local government playing nanny, assuming default responsibility for identifying

and providing once the resources boom peaks and recedes. In sum, this is the enduring myth of government as ultimate provider.

This team did not get to the level of *metaphor,* but based on the reading we interject with our own interpretation. From the final words of the team pitch, the *metaphor* about to emerge was that of the parasite, a negatively imaged role represented by the massive resource companies, taking from the earth, with Toowoomba as host, and moving on after exhausting deposits in search of the next host.

## FTA Mind-mapping: Pushes of the Present + Pulls of the Future

Pushes of the present: Pushes that impacted upon Toowoomba's resource boom included global commodities prices and demand, multinational boardroom decision-making, the employment of skilled and semi-skilled people, training and raising workplace capacity in specific sectors, the influx of migrant workers, the pushes of the emerging Digital Economy and new ways of retailing. Other pushes from the Creative Minorities (CM) in particular alluded to the trend for collaboration, a trend that emerged from the futuring workshops across all three teams. The next point pointed to a much stronger focus on "community visioning, community development and empowerment." Local governments are feeling much more involved with their communities rather than simply creating structures and leading top-down."[4] A separate push observed was the sense of inevitability that the resource boom was finite and would come to an end, forcing people to find coping strategies for this eventuality, "learning to live with the unavoidable fact." Another identified push suggested that there were increasing numbers of people working within the Toowoomba community who didn't actually live there, representing a significant break with past living-working arrangements. The final push indicated a trend across agriculture and the mining sectors was for greater productivity and efficiency calling for the optimization of resources.

Pulls of the future: The key aspect of a *business as usual* scenario for Toowoomba's future was exemplified under the negative pull of "financial entrapment" as experienced across multiple levels. For the individual purchasing a home for $400,000 and maintaining a substantial home mortgage, who in the aftermath of the resources boom finds the once valuable home devalued to $150,000. One outcome of this kind of financial entrapment would lead to the contradictory "need to be transient but also the need to be based somewhere." Currently, the fly-in fly-out population may be coming from far-off locations but systemic financial entrapment would see people moving in from much closer proximities. Local and state governments would also fall victim to financial entrapment as they are left with the legacies of the resources boom but left incapable of responding flexibly. With a rapid contraction of the local economy the rates base alone would shrink immediately igniting a cascade of negative impacts as housing prices fell with mortgages staying the same. Local small business would struggle to stay solvent, people would opt to leave, infrastructure would decay, skilled workers would relocate, whilst the lesser-skilled would be stuck. Toowoombans would have to "learn to live with it" or else *collapse* would set in, sealing Toowoomba's fate as a ghost town as the skilled mobile work force "chase the dollars." Asset values would decline, adversely affecting the entire web of inter-related financial and economic assets, export revenues dwindle, and the prospects for a near-future recovery remote. To complete the pulls, the *nostalgic* future was connected with "feeling" – feelings associated with "tennis clubs, rodeos, football teams, walking down the street and knowing everyone" and "small town areas and Mayors that everyone really connected with."

## Transformative Scenario/Backcasting & Weights

In 2023 "we envision a transformative future for Toowoomba as a region we nurture, that is a

great place to belong to with a strong family focus." The catchphrase that caught the essence of this transformed Toowoomba was: "We live here because we love it, not because we have to make a dollar." This notion becomes the primary driver for creating the identity of our region. The region offers quality of life, freedom, lifestyle, opportunities to engage in community life; networks that support employment opportunities and make people feel safe and socially included and connected. So rather than aiming "to become something specific, we want to keep our transformed future open that doesn't leave us vulnerable and reliant on a specific sector."

The backcasting process to achieve this transformative future would involve scenario planning processes, conversations between community organizations, economic development organizations, government bodies, outcomes-focused business people, and the resources sector – actually facilitating trans-sectoral conversations and build bridges of communication between organizations who often don't understand the motivations of others. The transformation would start to happen when people recognize the value all the members bring to the conversation. The common thread was the trans-sectoral partnership paradigm which results in collective buy-in, sharing visions, and building a distributed rather than hierarchical leadership.

As for the question: who would make this happen? It was perceived that local government organizations, NPO's and business owners, aligned by a strong incentive by highlighting their roles within community as "asset holders" – would push this future. It would be their common desire to leave a positive legacy to their grandchildren that would be the motivating force. Each sector would learn and master a "different language to converse and collaborate effectively across organizational cultures." A final key catalyst in achieving the transformative process was to fortify governance, management and visionary leadership capacity. Finally, the *weights* that would resist the transformative image was the gravitational pull of the current resources boom whose intensity meant that those inside it remained obsessed with how to intensify the boom, while those on the outside were fixated with how to get in. In summing up, another team observer suggested re-branding Toowoomba the *City of Livability*.

## Futures Issue 2: Homelessness

### Identifying/Framing/Describing

The second issue - *homelessness* – contravenes popular understandings of Australia as a wealthy, bountiful nation with low population density - a home-owner's paradise with sprawling lawns, back yards, wooden decks and barbeque areas. This was a futures issue that was unexpected by the research team. The official *litany* of this issue was denial, that there was no issue. According to this workshop team, the issue of homelessness was under-reported with little information officially available. But evidence from one organization's records suggests that more than a thousand extra meals were being prepared daily for the hidden homeless. Homelessness was perceived as an issue experienced by individuals and families, an entirely new species of social problem for this region that could not be overlooked. The collective intuition of this team indicated this issue was not about to go away of its own accord any time soon.

The *social causes* driving this future issue are manifold but include the general lack of opportunity in the Toowoomba region to find meaningful employment, causing greater numbers of people to migrate from the surrounding regions in to the city, often ending in homelessness. Insufficient and uneven access to health resources were perceived as exacerbating the problem.

At the level of *worldview*, a Not In My Back Yard mentality manifests as community indifference and lack of understanding about the causes of homelessness in a negative spiral, sustaining the problem whilst failing to produce creative solutions. This indifference may in part stem from the common perception, the *myth*, that people end up homeless because they are lazy or are substance abusers who get what they deserve. But, there is an irony in relation to the

indifference. This team observed that during times of disaster, communities and governmental organizations *do* mobilize to ensure safe accommodation for the homeless and displaced.

In terms of *metaphors*, this team posited two visually-rich metaphors about homelessness - a giant blind eye of community indifference that literally turns a blind eye, with the second metaphor depicting a road that leads nowhere.
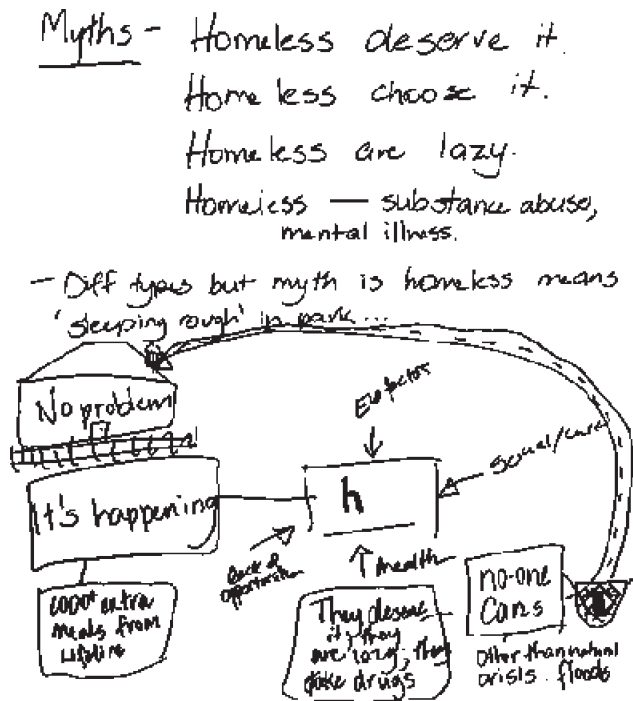


*Figure3*. Homelessness CLA 'Myth' mind-mapping – 'blind eye' & 'road to nowhere'

## FTA Mind-Mapping

Pushes of the Present: The push that most informs the *emerging technologies* aspect is the issue of access to such new technologies – especially digital communications. Digital communications are perceived as a basic requirement for a fully participating and functional member of contemporary regional Australian society. For those without digital technology skills, the transition back into society post-homelessness can present as an almost insurmountable obstacle. With *globalization*, new forms of governance and the mass media focus on new forms of social equity offering fresh perspectives and raising awareness vis-à-vis the issue of living arrangements, thereby exerting influence on the issues associated with homelessness in the regions. *Demographic* pushes include in-migration and out-migration, aging populations and the growing economic divide between Haves and Have-Nots, with the extreme end denied the opportunity to share in the Australian Dream of owning one's own home. In terms of *values*, the shift was noted towards an increasing awareness of safe and secure shelter as a basic human right long positioned within the global human rights discourses. The terms appropriate shelter and appropriate housing as foundational prerequisites are recognized as providing opportunities for personal growth via those networks – an underlying value that embodies the spirit of social inclusiveness. Pushes from the *creative minority* were not fully fleshed out, nor was there sufficient time to identify actual instances and/or organizations and individuals involved in the alleviation of rural homelessness. There was however a sense that

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individual actions were starting to make tangible differences, and that creative organizational collaborations were "taking us somewhere," although the "somewhere" remained undefined. At another level, creative organizations cognizant of "global advocacy" discourses were engaged in the issue of homelessness and appropriate housing provision.

Pulls of the Future: A *business-as-usual* approach to homelessness and continued systemic indifference were perceived as leading to an unstoppable crisis for Toowoomba - the early onset symptoms of which include increasing numbers of dislocated peoples, increasing crime rates and mounting pressure on social services. The outcome would culminate in unpredictable and unsafe communities, and within time evolve into the second future scenario – *collapse*. As the collapse scenario manifests, exacerbated by decreased funding, the resultant effects suggest a dystopian Toowoomba typified by a vigilante mindset as groups take the law into their own hands. In a *nostalgic* image of Toowoomba's future what was imagined was a caring community ready to help the needy. But despite this positive nostalgic image, as it persists into the unfolding present, homelessness does exist and continues to worsen. Nostalgia has a negative side in that Toowoombans tend to not acknowledge the existence and the needs of the city's new migrants. Toowoombans are also nostalgic about their image as a Garden City, with its artfully laid-out streetscapes fostering a community of familiar faces. In sum, it is the nostalgic image that signifies who Toowoombans most truly perceive themselves to be and sustains the politics of identity that holds the community together. As people reflect upon the nostalgic, there is a sense that Toowoombans felt affection for the community as it formerly was. The Toowoomba of today is no longer the 'real' Toowoomba, with not only too many people, but too many *different* kinds of people.

## Transformative Scenario/Backcasting & Weights

The transformative scenario for Toowoomba's burgeoning homelessness issue had a simplistic goal: *a roof over everyone's head by 2023* - a vision which implies a major shift in community values and perceptions aligned with social justice and equity models. Similar to the other transformative scenarios crafted in this workshop, this future would be driven by a strongly pro-active community-based approach relying on partnerships between community groups, governmental bodies, service providers, and supported by 'champions' who would provide the vision, the leadership, and creating funding strategies. While backcasting to identify the mechanisms needed to facilitate the transformation, the team suggested it would be the champions who create projects and programs with the aims of forging alternative and creative options for supplying affordable housing. Another mechanism resided in creating new training opportunities, such as life-long learning programs open to all regardless of background, age and gender. Social networks would also play a role in ensuring a place for all within the community. In the effort to break away from the reliance on conventional funding strategies it was suggested that alternative community funds could be designed and implemented: a customized regional version of crowdfunding. Local businesses and the remaining resource industries could also play more pro-active roles in alternative financing schemes to provide employment opportunities for at-risk groups with limited financial resources.

## Futures Issue 3: Community Mental Health Futures

### Identifying/Framing/Describing

The third futures issue – community mental health – may equally surprise non-Australian readers. Less so for our local team as the nation-wide issue of mental health is an acknowledged phenomenon. This team preceded the *litany* for this issue with a definition of their own making for mental health expressed as: "the ability to lead a life you have reason to value" - a broader and

gentler framework for understanding the issue than as something "narrowly defined by people with identifiable conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar depression."

When mental health is understood within its wider social context, the *social causes* that promote poor mental health outcomes, or, conversely, protect against the rise of such issues, are seen inextricably linked in with the prospects for meaningful employment, economic prosperity and financial dependence.

In terms of the prevailing *worldview* that informs mental health discourses, is the perception that responsibility lies with the social services and clinical support, not with the community itself. Matters of the mind are externalized 'out there' problems. The position of this team however was that the individual *does* have, indeed *should* have, a role to play in mental wellness. Underlying worldviews identified furthermore point to an ensemble of problems around perceptions of success – community members without a car, without a house, the average 2.5 children, eligibility to be considered a 'normal' member of society - come into question in a place such as Toowoomba. Accordingly, the challenges for the future in the contexts of rapidly evolving family structures and composition, changing social perceptions of what it means to be 'normal', are construed as the need to create novel community conversations which re-constitute the meanings of *normal* and criteria for being a valued member of society. Another future challenge as expressed by this team alludes to the fact that mental health issues are overlooked by city planners when it comes to designing social infrastructure and public spaces such as parks, all of which impact upon the mental lives of community members.

Social connection, in terms of family, workplace colleagues, and neighbours, was also offered as a vital issue inherently connected to community infrastructure, the social web from which positive mental health environments emerge and be sustained. Social isolation correlates as a major risk factor. Spirituality was also suggested as a pivotal factor in the way community members manage contemporary life stresses and integrate life events into a coherent and meaningful whole.

In terms of social *myth*, "mad, bad and dangerous" was the catchphrase that encompassed common perceptions of local mental un-wellness. The task for the future was to expand the communities who participate in community conversations around mental health transforming its taboo-like nature into a matter of common concern with a common language of reference with which all people were able to engage in and co-create new meanings for.

The *metaphor* that eventually emerged once the team presentation had completed the futuring workshop exercise, was the idea that mental health was an intangible entity, a societal *will 'o the wisp*. Unlike the other teams' futures issues of homelessness and resources, which belonged more to the graspable world, mental health issues remained virtually invisible.

## FTA Mind-Mapping

Pushes of the Present: The market presence of new pharmaceuticals constitutes a major *new technologies* push. One team speaker referred to an article about the "Americanization of mental health, whose message was that regardless of the nature of your problem, we have a pill for you." Further observations pointed to recent product catalogues which medicalize even the habit of hoarding as a mental health issue, curable with the right pharmaceutical. Even personal idiosyncrasies and quirks were identified as undergoing a similar US-driven medicalization push. Another push was the emerging counseling practices typified by social media and other on-line modes making Net-based consultations with psychologists and other mental health care professionals a reality. There was also the powerful push of Toowoomba's rapidly changing demographic landscape as migrants from outside Australia relocate to the community bringing with them their own cultural perceptions about issues of mental health. In terms of *new values*, the team pointed to a rapidly emerging interest in holistic, recovery-oriented approaches. Rather than being

assigned to the social "scrapheap", revived understandings would promote the message that it is possible to continue with one's lifestyles, maintain a family and keep one's job, while successfully managing a given mental health condition.

Pulls of the Future: The *business-as-usual* image of the future mind-mapped a continuation of a "sectoralized and managed" approach to mental health care. To stop this negative image of the future in its tracks, Toowoomba would have to transcend it by developing community-based approaches. If Toowoomba were to experience a total *collapse* scenario, rates of incarceration would escalate and homelessness would become an unstoppable community-wide problem. As in the United States, prisons effectively assume the role of de-facto mental health institutions. For 21st century regional Australia, this Americanization of mental health was perceived as a to-be-avoided-at-all-costs collapse scenario. Furthermore, the above problem complex would lead to an increase in suicides and hospitals would run out of available beds. Their preferred *nostalgic* image of the future expressed in a single slogan reads: "Send 'em (the mentally ill) back to the asylum" – in a reference to Toowoomba's history as an asylum city, home to a monolithic mental institution. The *metaphor* for the asylum would read: "out of sight out of mind," depicting the asylum as the safest place for both patient and community. A secondary nostalgic scenario was expressed in the following words: "It wasn't so bad. They got their three meals a day. There were nurses. They were safe; we were safe. They were the good old days."

## Transformative Scenario/Backcasting & Weights

The transformative image for Toowoomba's mental health was described in terms of a transition from "passive sector-dominated partnerships to active integrated collaboration, a feature missing from the current state of affairs. This is our Utopian view of how the future of mental health in Toowoomba should be." Achieving this vision would necessarily involve strong pro-active community engagement with community members designing mental health care models. Resistance, however, would be met while attempting to transition away from government led structures and policies. The transformation process would have to be informed by consumers and carers, whose roles would be central in changing the current stigmas associated with mental health as expressed earlier in the workshop with the phrase: "mad, the bad and the dangerous." It was felt that community based approaches would introduce in softer and gentler social attitudes towards mental illnesses, valuing diversity and resilience oriented approaches.

The agents of change would first emerge at the community level who would facilitate collaborative efforts between and across various health related organizations and bodies. For this initiative, a new kind of language would be needed to coalesce the multi-perspectival stakeholders and drive futures-positive change. Alternative sources of funding such as social enterprise would fuel the transformation away from commonwealth and state government over-dependence, a trend they noted, that was already set in motion.

The barriers to change (weights of the FTA) would be peoples' attitudes and values vis-à-vis mental health, requiring better education in which people were viewed as people, not as mental patients. For one team member, the first step in bringing about the transformative future would need to involve a shift in the will 'o the wisp intangible quality of mental wellness by first making it tangible and discussable across the community. Systems in the form of government policy were seen as major obstacles to change – where institutionalized mindsets left little scope for creative policy-making. Changing modes of behavior or practice within hospital environments was similarly perceived as a major challenge for achieving a transformative future.

Evidence based practice, the focus of some of the team members, would play a vital role in transforming their Utopian ideal into a social reality, a *Eutopia*, a *possible* better future. Evidence would demonstrate via actual case studies featuring people who had recovered from mental illnesses

had recovered, and successfully integrated back into society. In 2023, if such a transformative scenario became reality, Toowoomba's mental health culture would become a leader and best-practice benchmark to which other communities aspire.

## Discussion

### Post-Workshop Participant Comments, Observations and Concerns

With a view to assessing the value and usability of the futuring workshop and designing subsequent workshop rounds, we took note of the participants' comments, observations and concerns, which we clustered around the following three thematic strands:

1. *Ownership*: One concern was around who would 'own' the futuring process and results. Many of the participants admitted that they had taken part in workshops before with limited results. One response to this valid concern was that the academic team was conducting research of an exploratory nature whose outcomes would emerge as the project proceeded. It was hoped that this futuring workshop would evolve into something bigger and develop the capacity to involve more stakeholders and generate intra-community interest, around which concrete projects would coalesce.

2. *Community Visioning Tool*: There was a consensus among participants that the Futuring Tool-Box (FTB) held significant promise as a community visioning tool, hence the concern as to whether this futuring workshop would continue and bring real-world outcomes for the people of Toowoomba. Participants noted that this style of futuring could be applied across the community and introduced into regional governments as part of the community DNA.

3. *The Magic Wand*: A question was posed to the participants: If you could cast a magic wand what would you want to get out of this project? The response was that the futuring workshop process should aim for a broader community participation and engage the entire region of Toowoomba, especially the resource industries looking for creative post-boom social solutions. An addition to this was that the scenario-forming work started at this workshop could be taken out into the general community and developed through a range of organizations, with a view to influencing community engagement and filtering through to policy-making decisions. By extension, Toowoomba could become a benchmark in applied futuring attracting the attention of other regional communities domestically and internationally. The futuring design used, "gave us (the participants) the permission to think outside the box and transcend the boundaries of convention."

## Facilitator Observations, Comments and Concerns

As the futuring workshop designers and facilitators, we had our own concerns as to the usefulness of the futuring process. Initially, the novelty of the tools and concepts from the FTB caused some confusion, making it difficult at times for the teams to stay on task. But as the workshop proceeded participants progressively focused their responses and within a half-day workshop displayed a distinct familiarity and fluency with the tools and the goals of the project, suggesting that subsequent rounds would be conducted greater economy, producing sharper results.

Furthermore, piecing together and making sense of a futuring workshop, especially a micro-workshop conducted over just 3.5 hours, presents a communication challenge in that effective communication of the intended messages involves making assumptions around incomplete messages in order to build a coherent picture that can be channeled into on-going futuring work. Finally, the most important aspect of the futuring workshop – that of crafting the transformative scenarios of the future and backcasting the pathways to make them achievable – finished at a point less developed than was hoped for, serving as a reminder that for any futuring workshop design, time needs to be allocated proportionately to ensure desired goals are met.

## Post-Workshop Follow-up Strategies

Analyses of the workshops and reflections upon their value helped us to forge four main sets of follow-up strategies: a subsequent round of progressively focused futuring workshops; an on-going co-futuring platform; a futures scenarios visualization strategy; and a strategy for enabling the results and FS tools used throughout the process to be systematically rolled into an innovative anticipatory tool for Toowoomba to self-transform into what we tentatively call a Foresensing Community.

1. *Subsequent rounds of futuring workshops*: Once workshop outcomes are analysed, participants will be approached to offer their suggestions for how to build upon the scenario sketches and how to co-design the next rounds of workshops. The second workshop focus will be on expanding the skeletal scenarios of the three identified futures issues, especially designing the transition strategies for the transformative future.

2. *On-going co-futuring platform/s*: Our approach is that effective futuring must be an on-going process that facilitates an engaging communication and collaboration platform for an on-line community such as Ning, a social media presence such as Facebook, a Toowoomba Futuring newsletter, a Net-based virtual world[5] onto which Toowoombans can upload their own preferred images of the future, receive feedback, and co-design suggestions, as part of an iterative collaborative futuring process.

3. *Futures scenarios visualization strategy*: Most scenario work, though well-intentioned, most often starts and finishes in text-based forms. In a media-saturated world, greater communication effectiveness can be expected from richer media formats. Accordingly, we hope to steer subsequent research to incorporate compelling audio-visual story-telling design features in order to generate active interest from futuring participants and encourage broad community engagement in futures issues. If transformative scenarios are to inspire and compel stakeholders into active engagement, scenarios could be represented as simple pictorial poster-like images, or in more sophisticated and dynamic media, such as Design Fictions,[6] short films, Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Mixed Reality (MR) worlds, or more ambitiously large-scale wall-based touch panel gamification-based simulations.[7]

4. *Enabling Tools for a Foresensing Community*: A defining position for our research team within the FS field involves advancing the concept of the Foresensing Community or Organization. The futuring process we set in motion is one step in a longer-term project to enable communities and organizations, in this case Toowoomba, with the basic assets to incorporate and integrate the inventory of anticipatory knowledge into its community DNA – a community that collectively possesses the know-how to and routinely practice the arts and sciences of futuring. Included in this inventory would be the Futuring Tool-Box used in the workshop, the results of the workshops in the form of scenarios, and the items 1-3 listed in this section, an array of sensoring and monitoring technologies, all functioning in a strategically coordinated system so as to be able to continuously interpret and make sense of future dangers, possibilities and opportunities.

## Conclusions

We emphasize that this futuring workshop was intended as a scoping initiative with the objective of harvesting key futures issues for an academic-stakeholder focused futuring workshop. This paper has aimed to report on the first of a series of futuring workshops for the regional city of Toowoomba in the Australian state of Queensland, focusing on the voices of the people who participated in the futuring workshop, and the scenario-stories they crafted. As such, the paper presented here is not intended as a finished product providing fully-shaped conclusions.

The university research team strategically designed-in a suite of futuring workshop features we

believe to be innovative to inspire the participants into the ongoing creation of a futures-oriented culture in Toowoomba region that can serve as a replicable model for other social organizational units.

The Futuring Tool-Box proved effective with both the facilitating and participating teams by making the act of understanding, engaging in and literally shaping the future, a much more tangible and real experience.

Aspirations for subsequent futuring workshops with a view to fleshing out these sketch-like transformative scenarios into communication-rich actionable visualizations, were welcomed amongst participants. This preliminary futuring workshop demonstrates how non-expert community members equipped with simple futuring tools can be empowered into organizing their thoughts about their futures into creative, coherent and highly practical forms. This futuring workshop has produced vicariously a new organization of like-minded people into what we have come to call for the purposes of this paper, a *Spontaneously Occurring Distributed Foresensing Network*.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. For a full explanation of Inayatullah's FTA see: Inayatullah, S. (2003). Teaching Futures Studies: From Strategy to Transformative Change. Journal of Futures Studies. Taipei: Tamkang University, 35-40.
2. CLA is now a well-documented Futures Studies methodology and theoretical framework. For a comprehensive explanation, see Inayatullah, S. (2004). The Causal Layered Analysis Reader: Theory and Case Studies of an Integrative and Transformative Methodology. Taipei: Tamkang University Press.
3. The term 'compelling' is a central feature in image of the future discourses and typified by Duane Elgin who stated: "We cannot build a future we cannot imagine. A first requirement, then, is to create for ourselves a realistic, compelling, and engaging vision of the future that can be simply told. If our collective visualization of the future is weak and fragmented, then our capacity to create a future together will be commensurately diminished. Without a strong sense of the future and meaningful orientation for our lives, we can lose confidence in ourselves, our leaders, and our institutions" (Elgin, 1991, in Hicks and Holden, 1995, p.138).
4. The example given was of a collection of local councils in South West Queensland who had transformed from within to effectively work as one and create countless new projects and opportunities for social development, collectively tackled regional issues by engaging with people, actively trying to show the way, and people actively wanting to have a sense of direction.
5. While Associate Professor at Future University Hakodate in Japan, the chief facilitator designed and created such a virtual world - FUTURE-ZINE for co-creating community futures. A student-produced promotion video outlining the FUTURE-ZINE Minimal Viable Product (MVP) can be viewed at: www.text-tubefutures.com.
6. Design Fictions are a genre of corporate media that communicate the possibilities of new technologies by incorporating prototype devices into fiction-based narrative stories.
7. Specifically, we wish to guide the reader to investigate the futuring possibilities embodied in a new media complex – The Cube – situated at Queensland University of Technology's Science and Engineering Centre. For an online guided tour of The Cube's state-of-the-art interactive media environments see www.thecube.qut.edu.au.

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