

Creating Futures: Using Fictive Scripting Methods for Institutional Strategic Planning

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Abstract : Many key university documents, such as vision and mission statements and strategic plans, are aspirational and future-oriented. There is a wide range of future-oriented methods that are used in planning applications, ranging from mathematical modelling to expert opinions. Many of these methods have limitations, and planners using these tools might, for example, make the technical-rational assumption that their plans will unfold in a logical and inevitable fashion, thus underestimating the many complex forces that are at play in planning for an unknown future. This is the issue that this study addresses. The overall project aim was to assist a new university of technology in developing appropriate responses to its social responsibility, graduate employability and research missions in its strategic plan. The specific research question guiding the research activities and approach was: how might the use of innovative future-oriented planning tools enable or constrain a strategic planning process? The research objective was to engage collaborating groups in the use of an innovative tool to develop and assess future scenarios, for the purpose of developing deeper understandings of possible futures and their challenges. The scenario planning tool chosen was 'fictive scripting', an analytical technique derived from Technology Forecasting and Innovation Studies. Fictive scripts are future projections that also take into account the present shape of the world and current developments. The process thus began with a critical diagnosis of the present, highlighting its tensions and frictions. The collaborative groups then developed fictive scripts, each group producing a future scenario that foregrounded different institutional missions, their implications and possible consequences. The scripts were analyzed with a view to identifying their potential contribution to the university's strategic planning exercise. The unfolding fictive scripts revealed a number of insights in terms of unexpected benefits, unexpected challenges, and unexpected consequences. These insights were not evident in previous strategic planning exercises. The contribution that this study offers is to show how better choices can be made and potential pitfalls avoided through a systematic foresight exercise. When universities develop strategic planning documents, they are looking into the future. In this paper it is argued that the use of appropriate tools for future-oriented exercises, can help planners to understand more fully what achieving desired outcomes might entail, what challenges might be encountered, and what unexpected consequences might ensue.

Keywords : fictive scripts, scenarios, strategic planning, technological forecasting

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