

## Chapter 12

# Reimagining African Futures Through Higher Education Policy: Evidence from South Africa

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### Introduction

In a recent opinion piece for *The Guardian*, two former African heads of state describe the importance of education for Africa to realise its potential and become a ‘colossal powerhouse’ on the global stage (Akufo-Addo & Kikwete, 2024). This fits into a powerful narrative that positions education as the key enabler of Africa’s ‘demographic dividend’ – a vision framed around global competition and economic productivity, where education serves as a means to transform Africa’s young population into skilled workers and entrepreneurs. Policy documents such as the African Union’s (AU) Agenda 2063 and South Africa’s Revised Strategic Plan 2020–2025 for higher education and training reflect this narrative, focusing on scaling up training, evaluation and certification of young Africans entering the labour market. While acknowledging that the desire to transform Africa into an economic powerhouse is driven by genuine goodwill, this chapter interrogates the origin and legitimacy of this specific vision for Africa’s future. It also considers how imagination of the future is interwoven into the continent’s education systems and where opportunities for new imaginaries may arise.

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The powerful productivist vision of Africa articulated in *The Guardian* article, is anchored in neoclassical economic theory about human capital and growth. Zein-Elabdin (2004) draws attention to the strength of the economic development narrative that frames much of the imagination of Africa's future. Development is taken as an unambiguous, scientific and inevitable process leading to 'the industrial prototype'. Any other form of social organisation is understood as lacking (Zein-Elabdin, 2004). The lack of exploration of alternative visions has been critiqued as 'paradigmatic lock-in', where the future is imagined as linear progression through a set of predefined and predictable stages leading to a modernist vision of industrial society (Karuri-Sebina, 2020). Policymaking then becomes a means of managing the path towards this vision rather than a space for exploration, imagination and innovation. It may be instructive to ask where the idea of this future comes from and whether there would be benefits in imagining alternatives. Research on African futures highlights the impact of colonisation not only on narratives of the past but on how the future is imagined (Bourgeois et al., 2022). Wider scholarship examining how human beings anticipate draws attention to the tendency to reproduce the past (even if it has failed) rather than face the uncertainty of an unknown future (Miller et al., 2018).

Much attention has been paid to the difficulty of reforming institutions of learning that emerged during and after the Industrial Revolution. These institutions are defined by standardisation, regimentation and control and have been criticised as no longer being fit for purpose in the 21st century (Bishop, 2012; Conway, 2020; Inayatullah, 2020). The slow pace of reform is contrasted with a rapidly changing educational landscape filled with new opportunities and challenges. Co-creation in learning, open-source education, big data and machine learning are some of the changes confronting conventional education. Currently, the African higher education sector is at risk of being locked into an industrial vision of a society that is enabled by industrial-era education institutions. Policy that is orientated around this outlook does not respond to the need to reimagine African futures and is at risk of being bypassed by the fluidity, flux and dynamism of the real world.

This chapter seeks to examine and enhance understanding of how anticipation shapes policy formulation in higher education, particularly in the South African context. The authors aim to demonstrate how different approaches to 'using the future' can influence education policies by making explicit the implicit narratives and assumptions that drive current policymaking. Rather than prescribing specific policy recommendations or solutions, we position this work as a contribution to existing voices calling for new ways to imagine higher education policy, with an emphasis on understanding uncertainty and complexity. The authors investigate how a 'futures literacy' approach might help look beyond dominant narratives of education and development in Africa and what this means for innovation and policy solutions. Through analysis of two futures literacy laboratories conducted with senior policymakers and university leadership in South Africa, we examine how certain dominant narratives about African education are underpinned by specific notions of economic development and progress. Rather than attempting to develop alternative 'indigenous' models of

learning, we focus on examining how our collective imagination around education is shaped—and potentially limited—by certain dominant narratives.

While acknowledging universal debates around higher education reform, we specifically examine these issues through an African lens, suggesting concrete actions including more research on how the future influences imagination and policymaking processes, increased training in futures literacy to deal with uncertainty, and moving away from ‘solutioneering’ approaches. This work situates itself within broader scholarship around decolonising African futures and the recent UNESCO Futures of Education<sup>1</sup> initiative to reimagine knowledge and learning.

## Literature Review

Current imaginaries of higher education and their role in Africa’s future may be better understood in the context of global trends. Conway (2020) gives a comprehensive overview of different epochs of the Western university, highlighting the tension between the ‘traditional’ university of the past and the contemporary ‘managerial’ university.<sup>2</sup> The sacrosanct autonomy and academic freedom traditionally afforded to universities has been subverted by demands to justify spending taxpayer funds and the growing emphasis on research impact to help address some of society’s most pressing challenges (Kokshagina et al., 2021). This represents a fundamental shift in the purpose of higher education institutions, moving from a role defined by the ‘search for truth’ to a new role defined by contribution to national economic priorities and needs (Conway, 2020).

As this tension between differing visions for the university plays out, there is a risk of losing sight of the need for adaptation in response to changing societal dynamics (Bishop, 2012; Conway, 2020). Bishop (2012) is especially acerbic in his analysis, arguing that it would take a meteor-like event (invoking the mass extinction of dinosaurs) to shift education systems away from all-too-familiar practices that were formed in the industrial era:

Students still sit in rows listening to professors lecture at them. They still purchase textbooks, take tests, get grades, and earn credits and degrees in the same way that previous generations did more than 100 years ago. School children still attend school from 7:45 am to 2:45 pm each day (or thereabouts), nine months of the year, separated into grades by age, and into subjects by the ringing of a bell.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.unesco.org/en/futures-education?hub=81942>

<sup>2</sup>The rise of managerialism was ushered into Western universities by a new cadre of administrative and managerial staff that began to emerge in the 1970s. The term ‘managerial university’ highlights a shift in the management and agenda-setting roles at universities away from academics (Conway, 2020).

In response to the internet, open-source educational resources, such as Wikipedia, and advances in machine learning and big data, education systems need to explore alternative modes of being rather than continuously trying to ‘optimise the present’ (Bishop, 2012; Inayatullah, 2020). A recent UNESCO (2020) report argues for urgency with regards to reimagining futures for education and posits three key questions: ‘What should we continue doing? What should we abandon? What needs to be creatively invented afresh?’

In the context of African higher education futures, documents such as Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015) and South Africa’s 2020–2025 higher education strategy suggest that policymakers are focused on improving existing systems of education and training. This includes working towards universal access, harmonising accreditation systems, investing in educational institutions and equipment, and ensuring there are enough good quality teachers. While these are all worthy and useful endeavours, especially in places where access to education is not guaranteed, they do not address the need to adapt to change and uncertainty. Furthermore, they do not speak to the importance of decolonising discourses around higher education and development in Africa (Bourgeois et al., 2022; Zein-Elabdin, 2004).

Bourgeois et al. (2022) draw attention to the impact of colonisation not only on narratives of the past but on how the future is imagined. The German philosopher Hegel famously asserted that Africa exists outside of history. This assertion ignores the rich and diverse histories across the continent and the central role that Africa and Africans played in the emergence of the modern world (French, 2021). Yet it is the narratives that cast Africa as pre-modern, underdeveloped and lacking that play a dominant role in imagining what the continent should become (Zein-Elabdin, 2004). The perspective that Africa’s development should culminate in ‘European-like industrial society’ (Terry et al., 2024) and that this process will be enabled by investment in education systems, advantageous demographics and technological advancement has become something of an ‘official future’. This narrative impacts all policymaking efforts, including those in the higher education sector. Policy documents such as South Africa’s 2020–2025 higher education strategy are filled with ratios, indices and indicators that allow for cross-country comparison, articulating the position of South Africa in relation to other countries along a spectrum (low, middle and high income), which implicitly reinforces the idea of linear progress along a set of predictable stages (Karuri-Sebina, 2020). Similarly, the language of Agenda 2063 is framed around the idea of an ‘African century’. This desirable image of the future is described in terms of global competition and an Africa that must aim to surpass the current centres of political and economic power – to beat them at their own game so to speak.

Overpowering narratives have the effect of ‘colonising the future’, dominating our imagination of what the future could and should look like (Bourgeois et al., 2022; Miller, 2018a). This ignores overwhelming evidence about the future that it is inherently complex, always in flux, unpredictable and full of unintended consequences (Fuerth, 2009; Miller et al., 2018; Poli, 2010). This is where it becomes crucial to diversify the ways in which the future is imagined (Bourgeois et al., 2022; Miller, 2018a). Addressing the legacy of colonialism and dealing with

the unpredictability of the future require a more open and exploratory approach to policymaking. Emerging approaches to the future that are centred on building human capabilities to deal with and embrace complexity may offer some useful strategies to address these challenges.

Futures literacy is broadly concerned with understanding anticipation. Anticipatory systems exist everywhere, from a tree that loses its leaves before the coming cold to the religious leader who believes they know when the world will end and to an individual who picks up their umbrella after seeing a cloudy sky (Miller et al., 2018). Human beings have the ability to consciously imagine the future. Images of the future are a powerful source of hope and fear and have a profound impact on how we perceive the world. This is why understanding anticipation and advancing human beings' ability to make use of their anticipatory systems is so important (Miller, 2018a,b).

The term 'futures literate' describes a person who has gained the skills to choose how to use their anticipatory abilities to bring images of the future into the present (Miller, 2018a). By sharpening these skills, futures literacy offers the chance to move beyond official futures and embrace novelty and change to open up human imagination in ways that more closely match the realities of an ever-changing world.

Fuerth (2009) focuses less on individual capabilities than on creating governance systems that are anticipatory rather than reactive. This requires decision-makers to have an awareness and understanding of past, present and future as well as the ability to see the complex interactions that occur between all parts of an interlinked system. Fuerth argues that current civilian government systems that are broken down into neatly divided bureaucratic portfolios with rigid planning mechanisms are bound to fail in the face of a future that is constantly changing in unpredictable ways. Alternatively, governance systems could be developed in a networked, fluid manner that integrates the use of foresight to enhance decision-making. While this is challenging, Fuerth argues that the alternative, to continue making decisions in a siloed, reactive manner, is not an option.

The tension between uncertainty and control in higher education policymaking is further explored in UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative (2021), which emphasises that while planning and preparation are necessary, an over-reliance on prediction and control can limit innovation and adaptability in education systems. The concept of anticipatory governance, as outlined by Fuerth (2009), becomes especially relevant when examining how higher education institutions can better navigate uncertainty. Traditional approaches to policymaking often assume a linear progression of development, with clear cause-and-effect relationships. However, as Miller et al. (2018) argue, this assumption fails to account for the complex, interconnected nature of social systems and the inherent unpredictability of the future. In the context of African higher education, this linear thinking is often manifested in policy documents that emphasise quantitative targets and benchmarks against Western institutions, potentially limiting the exploration of alternative paths.

The call for decolonial approaches to higher education futures, as discussed by [Bourgeois et al. \(2022\)](#), requires more than just acknowledging historical injustices. It necessitates developing new capabilities to imagine and work with uncertainty in ways that challenge dominant narratives about progress and development. This aligns with [Miller's \(2018a\)](#) argument that futures literacy can help individuals and institutions move beyond 'official futures' to embrace more diverse possibilities.

The emphasis on futures literacy and anticipatory capabilities offers a potential way forward. As [Miller et al. \(2018\)](#) suggest, developing these capabilities can help institutions and policymakers work more effectively with uncertainty and complexity. This approach acknowledges that while the future cannot be predicted or controlled, the way we imagine and anticipate it profoundly influences our present actions and decisions. For African higher education institutions, this could mean developing policy approaches that are more adaptive and responsive to changing circumstances while remaining grounded in local contexts and needs.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Design***

This study employed a participatory action research approach through the futures literacy laboratory (FLL) method. The research design was grounded in futures literacy principles, which examine how anticipation shapes present actions and perceptions. FLLs are structured workshops that engage participants in exploring how their imagined futures influence perception and decision-making. The laboratories were designed to make explicit the narratives, thinking patterns and hidden assumptions that participants use when thinking about the future.

### ***Study Site***

Both FLLs were conducted at the Future Africa Campus within the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The first laboratory was held over one and a half days in August 2022 while the second laboratory took place over one full day in February 2023. The Future Africa Campus was selected as the study site due to its role as a platform for transdisciplinary research and its connection to both academic and governmental stakeholders.

### ***Participant Recruitment and Profile***

Purposive sampling was used to select 31 participants across two laboratories, with an emphasis on recruiting individuals in senior leadership and decision-making roles. The first laboratory (2022) comprised 15 in-person participants representing senior university leadership from various academic departments within the University of Pretoria, including engineering, public health, law,

Table 12.1. Participant Summary.

Personal Information	Total Participants (N = 31)	
	Lab 1: Academia	Lab 2: Government
Gender		
Female	6 (40%)	7 (44%)
Male	9 (60%)	9 (56%)
Profession		
Government	2 (13%)	16 (100%)
Academia	13 (87%)	0 (0%)
Total	15	16

Source: Authors.

management and institutional planning. The second laboratory (2023) included 12 in-person and four online participants from various agencies within the Department of Science and Innovation in the South African Government. Participants were selected based on their positions as decision-makers in their respective organisations and their connection to the Future Africa platform (Table 12.1, source: author).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through multiple methods during each laboratory session. The laboratories were structured in three distinct phases, each with unique prompts for participants to imagine different types of futures: probable futures, desirable futures and unexpected futures (neither desirable nor probable). Data collection included:

- Written outputs from groupwork sessions;
- Facilitator observation notes and
- Post-it notes from participants that were digitally transcribed by the first author.

### *Data Analysis*

An inductive qualitative content analysis method was employed to identify principal themes from the data, intentionally avoiding predefined theoretical frameworks. This method was selected to permit the data to speak for itself and ensure that themes emerged organically from participant responses. The first author conducted open coding of the transcribed data using the QualCoder open-source software package. The coding process involved comparing and

consolidating codes to develop a unified codebook for both laboratories. This consolidated codebook was subsequently used to encode all data from the two labs, and relevant themes were extracted from the coded data.

### ***Theoretical Interpretation***

The final stage of analysis involved interpreting the data using the Futures Literacy Framework. This framework was used to:

- Deduce different types of anticipation observable in participant data;
- Detect changes in anticipatory systems and processes as participants progressed through different phases of the laboratory and
- Identify how participants' perceptions and assumptions about the future evolved throughout the laboratory sessions.

## **Results**

Five major themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: our turn to lead; play and creativity; the education-to-employment conveyor belt; control and uncertainty; and new ways of imagining (see [Table 12.2](#)). The themes illustrate how participants' imagination of the future shapes their perception of the higher education sector, and, ultimately, how these narratives influence policymaking processes. Each theme is described below, along with direct quotations from the laboratory.

### ***Our Turn to Lead***

'Our turn to lead' describes statements that emphasise the transfer of power and prestige from old to young, men to women and from existing centres of power (Europe, United States of America [USA] or China) to Africa. The following example was extracted from the 2022 lab with academic stakeholders, when participants were asked to describe their probable and preferred futures:

African Nkrumah prize surpasses Nobel prize in prestige.

At the beginning of a laboratory, participants are asked to envision the future, 30 years from today, in two ways: the first task is to describe what they think the world will look like in the future, and the second task is to describe the world as they would prefer to see it.

In this way, participants begin to reveal the often-invisible assumptions they rely on when thinking about the future ([Miller, 2018b](#)). Statements under this theme featured strongly at the beginning of the 2022 lab and indicate an assumption of continuity of existing systems and power dynamics in the future, albeit with new faces at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Another statement from

Table 12.2. Themes Identified From Two Futures Literacy Laboratories.

Themes	Definition	Example Quotes*
Our turn to lead	‘Our turn to lead’ describes statements that emphasised the transfer of power and prestige from old to young, men to women, and from existing centres of power (Europe, USA and China) to Africa	‘The scientific pipeline is healthy—competing strongly with the Global North.’ ‘Female—more women science leaders.’ ‘Youngest female VC appointed at UP (28 years old).’ ‘African [Union Kwame] Nkrumah prize surpasses the Nobel Prize in prestige.’
Play and creativity	The ‘play and creativity’ theme refers to discussions that explored the importance of play and creativity in finding policy solutions or reframing perceptions around the problem entirely	‘How to get people to be light/playful with the future?’ ‘Focus more about providing spaces for creativity, than about creating (controlling) solutions.’
Education to employment conveyor belt	The ‘education-to-employment conveyor belt’ theme contains statements that questioned the effectiveness of current links between the education system and the job market	‘Heavy scientific brain drain to Europe.’ ‘Why are we obsessed with creating qualifications?’ ‘We don’t need more jobs, we need livelihoods.’
Control and uncertainty	The ‘control and uncertainty’ theme contains statements that recognise and question the prevalent tendency to plan and predict the future despite its inherent unpredictability and uncontrollability	‘Surrendering to unknowing.’ ‘Resist the temptation to plan and control everything.’

(Continued)

Table 12.2. (Continued)

Themes	Definition	Example Quotes*
New ways of imagining	The 'new ways of imagining' theme contains statements from participants who, following a reframed future exercise, began to rethink their assumptions about the future and devised new ways of understanding the present	'Revaluation of thinking and doing.' 'Everyone is a maker.' 'How to manage the risk of needing to sell solutions?' 'Community-based knowledge transfer system (from generation to generation).'

Source: Authors.

the early part of the 2022 lab exemplifies this idea, anticipating more young female leaders in higher education:

Youngest female VC [vice-chancellor] appointed at UP [the University of Pretoria] (28 years old).

The familiar notions of universities, qualification systems and job markets were projected into the future, framed around ideas of competition between institutions, job seekers and nations. There is an assumption here that university hierarchies could or should remain unchanged. In essence, this is a replication of the present reshaped in a way that is seen as desirable.

Seeing the future this way is illustrative of *anticipation for the future*, a futures literacy concept that describes a particular type of thinking that seeks to control the future and make it subservient to our desires (Miller, 2018a). Many of the statements made in both labs, especially in the early stages, fell into this category. This type of anticipation often entails planning for a desired future without adequately taking into account the intrinsic unpredictability of what is yet to come. Dominant narratives, such as those associated with Africa's development, often drive this type of imagination. The laboratories revealed the prominence of this way of thinking in both academic and government contexts.

### ***The Education-to-Employment Conveyor Belt***

The 'education-to-employment conveyor belt' theme contains statements that questioned the effectiveness of current links between the education system and the job market. In the early parts of the lab, participants were largely positive about the future, with some notable exceptions. The possibility of worst-case scenarios becoming a reality counterbalanced some of the positivity. Worrying trends around unemployment, the brain drain, youth disenchantment and xenophobia were projected as fears in the future. The first example below was drawn from the 2023 lab with government stakeholders during the probable futures exercise while the second statement came from the early stages of the 2022 lab with academic stakeholders:

The level of unemployment is still high compared to 2025. We missed our 2030 target.

Heavy scientific brain drain to Europe.

In the later stages of the lab, participants began to realise the power of their imagination to think of new realities and re-perceive the present. This learning journey is embedded in the design of all futures literacy laboratories. After describing probable and preferred futures in the first part of the lab, participants were challenged to imagine a future that was neither probable nor preferred. This exercise heightens the imagination and begins to build the capability to perceive and appreciate novelty and uncertainty. This was reflected in the examples below

from the 2023 lab, which are drawn from the final sessions when participants were asked to revisit their original ideas and come up with new questions:

Why are we obsessed with creating qualifications?

We don't need more jobs, we need livelihoods.

These statements question the most common ways higher education is understood, suggesting the possibility of alternate visions for the education sector, beyond existing narratives that command the policymaking space.

### ***Control and Uncertainty***

Over the course of an FLL, the participants are confronted with two observations about the future: that it is unpredictable and that it is uncontrollable. Yet our imagination of the future is often shaped by our desire to plan, prepare, predict and control. The tendency to think in this way has become so prevalent that it obscures any other possibilities. In both labs, participants began to perceive and question this tendency. These reflections were captured in the 'control and uncertainty' theme, which contains statements on the desire for control and fear of uncertainty in planning and policymaking.

The examples below are both drawn from the latter stages of the labs, with the first quotation coming from 2022 lab and the second from the 2023 lab:

Surrendering to 'unknowing'.

Resist the temptation to plan and control everything.

While there is no escaping the need to plan and prepare, especially in policymaking spaces, participants rightly question the relationship between uncertainty and policy discourses. This leads to important questions for policymakers to address: Does a desire to control and plan everything limit the ability to make good policy decisions? How can uncertainty be taken into account in policymaking? How to create space for novelty and unpredictability?

### ***Play and Creativity***

The 'play and creativity' theme refers to discussions that explored the importance of play and creativity in finding policy solutions or reframing perceptions around the problem entirely. In the reframed future segment of an FLL, participants are tasked with imagining a strange (neither probable nor preferred) future. This is often the most difficult part of a lab as participants are not used to exercising their imagination in this manner. Games, sculpture, music and role play can be used to help participants with this task.

In both labs, but to a greater extent in the 2023 event with government participants, there was a noticeable reluctance at first to participate in a playful

activity. Participants were simply not prepared to express their ideas in unfamiliar ways. This highlights the absence of play that is emblematic of many workplace settings. However, the initial resistance was quickly followed by wholehearted enthusiasm and at times joy in the creative process. The greatest enthusiasm and the most creative ideas came up during the reframed future exercise in both labs. This shows the creative potential of collective play and how underutilised it is in many corporate environments. It also illustrates the power of the reframed future exercise to shift the mindset of participants and open the possibility of new ways of perceiving.

In reflecting on this, participants made observations on the need for more playfulness and creativity in their work. The first example below was drawn from the 2023 lab while the second statement came from the 2022 lab:

Focus more about providing spaces for creativity, than about creating (controlling) solutions.

How to get people to be light/playful with the future?

The initial reluctance to take part in play during the reframed future exercise may be linked to the expectation that thinking about the future should be a serious activity that is best left to experts. It is likely that this expectation stems from a desire to control what is yet to come and to minimise uncertainty. The weight of this desire is enormous while at the same time it is ultimately doomed to fail.

In imagining a reframed future and taking part in play, participants were relieved of this weight and began to access an alternate way to use their anticipatory capabilities. *Anticipation for emergence* is a futures literacy concept that describes imagining the future in a way that is not based on a desire to control but rather to perceive and appreciate novelty and complexity in the present (Miller, 2018a). This may seem peculiar at first but is important in two respects: firstly, in building the capability to deal with the unpredictability of the future and secondly to move past the assumptions and narratives that are usually part of envisioning the future. This type of anticipation, which is accessible through the collective intelligence in the room and often revealed through play, unlocks new and innovative ways of thinking. This is an important yet largely untapped resource in policymaking discourses.

### *New Ways of Imagining*

Following the reframed future exercise, participants began to rethink their assumptions about the future and come up with new ways of understanding the present. These statements make up the ‘new ways of imagining’ theme. The first two examples come from the 2023 lab with government participants:

Revaluation of thinking and doing.

Everyone is a maker.

The second statement refers to the idea that members of a society do not need to be divided into consumers and producers but could be imagined as ‘makers’ who possess enough self-sufficiency to learn new skills outside of the normal education channels and define their own systems of production and conception of value. While these ideas may be radically different from mainstream perceptions of the way the world is supposed to work, they reflect the intuition and intelligence that participants have about how their society may be changing. These insights can be tremendously powerful in creating innovative policy solutions that more appropriately address realities in the present.

The final example below comes from the 2022 lab and refers to the difficulty that universities and researchers face in constantly having to prove their value by providing solutions to the most complex and intractable social challenges.

How to manage the risk of needing to sell solutions?

In the latter parts of both labs, participants began to grapple with the idea of not being able to control or predict the future, especially when dealing with complex social dynamics. Often, it is precisely these challenges that research institutions and policymakers are tasked with solving. The desire to find solutions without appreciating novelty and emergence is likely to result in narratives that aim to dictate what the future should look like. Participants began to question the usefulness of these narratives in enabling effective and innovative policymaking.

## Discussion

Higher education policy in Africa, as exemplified in South Africa’s 2020–2025 higher education strategy and the AU’s Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015), does not address the need to adapt to change and uncertainty when envisioning the future. These documents paint a picture of the future as a static point that South Africa and Africa as a whole should move towards a stationary target. This has led to a technical focus on monitoring and evaluation indicators that give the impression of inevitable scientific process towards the stated policy goal of % unemployment and % educational coverage, etc. While it is necessary and useful to have these goals, these plans do not pay adequate attention to the unpredictable nature of the future or make an attempt to understand the novelty that exists in continuously changing social dynamics in the present.

Anticipating the future as a goal to achieve can result in narrative lock-in that hampers innovation and can result in policy solutions that do not meet the needs of the current moment. One of the most commonly used narratives in Africa’s policymaking spaces imagines Africa’s future as a ‘European-like industrial society’ (Terry et al., 2024) that will be enabled by investment in education systems, advantageous demographics and technological advancement. A simple question should be asked of this vision: who’s future is this? Could this narrative be perpetuating the hegemony of Western ways of knowing and being that have

consistently portrayed Africa's history, culture and knowledge as lacking? While investment in education, youth and technology should be applauded, there is a need to ensure this investment is reinforced through policies that speak to the present-day realities of Africans and address the constant flux and unpredictability of the future.

The evidence generated in the 2022 and 2023 futures literacy laboratories confirmed that there is a tendency among decision-makers to see the future as something to be controlled and managed. Statements extracted from the laboratories within the 'our turn to lead' theme envisioned the future as strikingly similar to the present, with hierarchical structures, education and economic systems intact, but with younger, more female and more African representation at the top of the pyramid. This fits the dominant narrative outlined above that emphasises Africa's need to accelerate its path towards an industrial society and claim its place in the modern world. The desire to find solutions without appreciating novelty and emergence is what drives dominant narratives that aim to dictate what the future should look like. Participants in both labs began to question the usefulness of these narratives in enabling effective policymaking. A more useful starting point may be to ask instead, in what ways is the world changing and how can we respond to this proactively?

## **Conclusion**

The future plays a decisive role in shaping higher education policy, particularly through dominant narratives about Africa's potential. As demonstrated through our analysis of two futures literacy laboratories conducted in South Africa, these narratives—which are centred on economic development, technological progress and the demographic dividend—while legitimate, risk becoming 'official futures' that limit policy innovation. Our findings reveal how such narratives can constrain collective imagination and reinforce existing power structures, leading to policy approaches that may be unresponsive to real-world complexity and change.

Rather than attempting to prescribe alternative models or specific visions of what future education systems should look like, our research suggests the need for new approaches to policy development that embrace uncertainty and complexity. The evidence generated through our laboratories, combined with current research in futures studies, points to several key considerations for policymakers in the higher education sector.

First, the integration of play and creativity in policy development processes can encourage innovative thinking beyond conventional frameworks. Our laboratories demonstrated how collective intelligence processes can effectively harness diverse perspectives and empower stakeholders to imagine beyond current paradigms. This approach aligns with our finding that policy innovation requires moving away from solutioneering approaches that attempt to bend the future to fit current visions.

Second, policymakers should focus less on predetermined destinations and more on understanding the dynamics of change within social systems. This would involve exploring and clearly articulating the anticipatory assumptions used when imagining how the future could or should look. The laboratories revealed how making these assumptions explicit can help policymakers recognise and move beyond the limitations of dominant narratives.

Third, using alternate visions of the future—those that are neither probable nor desired—can help discover novelty in the present and open up new ways of perceiving. Alternate futures, explored through the collective intelligence processes embedded in an FLL, help to unravel the dynamics of complex social systems and reveal insights that might otherwise be ignored. This process also builds capacity to deal with the unknown and unexpected.

Finally, questioning narratives of progress associated with policy development is crucial for decolonising the way African futures are imagined. By understanding that the future is not a fixed destination but a landscape of possibilities, we can begin to challenge and dismantle power structures that are entrenched in existing narratives. A futures literacy approach can facilitate a critical examination of collective envisioned futures and enable African societies to imagine futures that reflect their unique histories and aspirations.

Looking forward, this work suggests the need for increased training in futures literacy to deal with uncertainty, more research on how the future influences imagination and policymaking processes and continued exploration of approaches that challenge dominant narrative frames. By situating itself within broader debates around African futures and the future of learning and knowledge (see the UNESCO Futures of Education initiative), this chapter aims to contribute to emerging discussions about how we might reimagine higher education policy in ways that are both innovative and responsive to local contexts and needs. It demonstrates that powerful narratives about education and Africa's future must be balanced with approaches that allow for adaptation, innovation and a critical examination of underlying assumptions.

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