

Conference report

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How do we see the future, using futures literacy? A webinar review

Date of Webinar – 13th May 2024 at 11.00ECT (hosted by Hotel Management School and European Tourism Futures Institute, NHLStenden)

URL: <https://weblectures.nhlstenden.com/P2G/Player/Player.aspx?id=bw5ROO>

This webinar (one of a series), set up by Professor Ian Yeoman (Professor of Disruption, Innovation and New Phenomena at NHL Stenden) on behalf of NHL Stenden Hotel Management School and the European Tourism Futures Institute, invited experts on futures thinking to deal with the question of how being “futures literate” can enable longer term strategic thinking and planning for organizations. In a preliminary round of discussion responding to questions raised by the Chair of the webinar, Dr Stefan Hartman (Head of the European Futures Institute), the speakers clarified the differences between futures thinking and more traditional ways of trying to forecast the future based on the past. Futures literacy, however, as was explained, provides tools (strategic foresight and scenario planning to name but two) to get insights into multiple potential futures and approach unknown or unforeseeable challenges by using the future to innovate the present. By developing skills or competencies in futures thinking (futures literacy), we can integrate complexity, novelty and resilience into choices, plans and organizations.

The speakers in this webinar brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise to this subject gained typically from decades engaged in developing programmes to teach futures literacy or in facing off to industry teams who are stimulated to gain futures literacy methods and skills. One of the many interesting aspects/points of discussion revolved around what the drivers or triggers for introducing futures literacy are and the question of how big crises need to be to institute thinking which demands better preparation and anticipation of game-changing events in strategic planning. Examples showing negative consequences of a lack of futures thinking are numerous, from different types of natural disasters to business or economic failures and crises, to political or geopolitical crises. Such serious crises force radical assessments around lack of preparedness or lack of resilience in strategic planning. If the crisis is not big enough, do we fail to overcome the barriers or resistance to futures literacy? How can we gain skills that could open up futures based on more resilient strategic plans? Christina Reisen (Ambassador, European Innovation Council) explained more about this, referring to challenges in organizations which, for example, may have some measure of rigidity in their organizational structure or in their leadership. In some cases, the new thinking futures literacy demands can lead to emotional outbursts in discussions where an ability to examine different viewpoints with equanimity is missing and blocks discourse. The stages or prerequisites of gaining futures literacy are resisted, and the benefits cannot flow. A common thread (from all speakers) was the notion that the future belongs to all of us, everyone, and if we are armed with futures awareness, consciousness and skills, this can lead to more cohesion in developing and implementing resilient longer term strategic plans and decisions. An important question, rhetorically put by Christina Reisen, and emphasized by Professor Jan Mosedale (Futures Coach, Professor and Head of Research FHGR Institute for Tourism and Leisure ITF, University of Applied Sciences), asks this: Can we really afford not to be engaging in

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gaining futures literacy? The track record is littered with crises or disasters that may have been avoided or at least mitigated by futures thinking. In order to stimulate this, we need to build methods and skills; the skill to look at different aspects of a situation or decision and the skills (in for example scenario planning or strategic foresight) to carry out an in-depth futures process resulting in value for organizations. In addition, the issue of mindset is crucial, how can imagination be unleashed if we aren't able to open up attitudes? These are delicate and sometimes debatable areas but nevertheless vital in futures thinking.

Another interesting area was the relationship of futures thinking to economic modelling. Here again, we are dealing with the contraflows of established forecasting thinking and competencies contrasted with the more open and inclusive approach demanded by futures thinking. How many of the decisions affecting all our lives in an economic sense are arrived at and carried out based on pure forecasting with our societies geared mostly to fulfilling economic growth plans. This tends to produce waves (alluded to by Kristina Paju Project Coordinator/Futures Coordinator Forssa, Tavastia Proper, Finland) of economic activity, and Kristina strongly advised future thinking skills for students to be aware of these waves to succeed in being entrepreneurial and grasping opportunities as they arise.

In terms of developing the futures competency, the accuracy of the main question being investigated is crucial, and this was emphasized by Dr. Albert Postma (Professor of Strategic Foresight and Scenario Planning at European Tourism Futures Institute, NHL Stenden) who has wide experience of such processes, as it defines for everybody the scope of investigation and the start and end points. So, there is a sense that we need this type of thinking but that we all need to be onboard, and we should make sure it is well targeted to ensure we get value, in other words the right questions are vital as a basis.

Professor Ted Fuller (UNESCO Chair on Responsible Foresight for Sustainable Development) probed deeper into what this means in terms of our ways of thinking and if we accept the present can influence the future then we also must accept that futures literacy can itself affect the present. In a sense this involves breaking with the notion of extending the past to predict the future and simply embracing the thought that what we refer to as the future contains a multitude of futures and that in order to have access or any element of choice, preference or preparedness we should develop futures literacy and probably more than that, there is need of futures competencies.

Lastly a final and quite alarming thought was mentioned by one of our speakers concerning the possibility of the "colonialization" of our futures, highlighting the undermining of truth, a facts-based order and even democracy itself, should we fail to embrace futures competencies. Futures literacy is the first step to gaining awareness and skills that can enable creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship and also protect us from the dangers of colonialization of our futures.

Speakers:

Chair: Dr Stefan Hartman (Head of the European Futures Institute).

Christina Reisen (Ambassador, European Innovation Council).

Dr Albert Postma (Professor of Strategic Foresight and Scenario Planning at European Tourism Futures Institute, NHL Stenden).

Professor Ted Fuller (UNESCO Chair on Responsible Foresight for Sustainable Development).
Kristina Paju (Project Coordinator/Futures Coordinator, Forssa, Tavastia Proper, Finland).

Professor Jan Mosedale (Futures Coach, Professor and Head of Research FHGR, Institute for Tourism and Leisure [ITF], University of Applied Sciences).

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