



# FUTURES-ORIENTED WRITING AND RESEARCH

## Editorial

**Tony Stevenson and Sohail Inayatullah**

In the many years of being engaged in futures research, attending futures studies conferences, workshops and courses, we remain surprised and dismayed at the lack of “futures” in futures research. Papers, while scholarly, often merely restate the present, with the last page or the final paragraph devoted to the future. Thinking about the future appears to be an unnatural, but not impossible, act, unlike thinking about the past.

In editing the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) *Futures Bulletin* and in planning the 1997 WFSF Brisbane World conference, we devised a list of what we believe are the criteria for futures-oriented research and writing. Writers, however, often commented that the list scared them off. This is partly the effect we desired. Writing about the future should be novel and rigorous. There are established methods and theories about the future. These need to be understood. Excellence in a particular field of knowledge does not necessarily mean one can say sensible things about the future or the study of the future.

At the same time, this list is written not to close the futures field/discourse or framework but to help evolve its knowledge base, to help create some semblance of shared views on what constitutes futures research, to distinguish it.

We invite readers of *Futures* to offer their own approaches as to what futures-oriented writing and research should ideally be about.

In our view, futures-oriented writing and research should constitute:

- visions/scenarios of the future, preferably more than a generation ahead, and preferably alternative visions/scenarios;
- methodologies of futures studies, that is: (a) how to engage in a study of the future or alternative futures; (b) ways to research how people and civilizations (as well as other

Associate Professor Tony Stevenson is Director of the Communication Centre and President of the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF). Sohail Inayatullah is a fellow and board member of the WFSF. They may be contacted at the Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology, PO Box 2434, Brisbane, Queensland 4001, Australia (Tel: + 61 7 3864 2192; fax: + 61 7 3864 1813).

units of analysis) study or otherwise think about the future; or (c) analyses of procedures for forecasting and anticipating;

- epistemological assumptions of studies of the future, for example, the layers of meaning hidden in various forecasts;
- means for attaining a vision of the future, for example, backcasting (certainly going beyond strategic planning and strategy in general);
- explicit consideration of the longer-term (from 25 to 1000 years, from one to seven to 30 generations) consequences of today's actions;
- implications for the present and past of particular visions and scenarios;
- theories of social, spiritual, economic and technological change that directly examine where and how society is moving and can move to, ie the shape of time, space and perception;
- analysis of events and moments in human history where a different future could have been followed and why it was not, that is, historical or genealogical alternative futures;
- deconstruction of texts explicitly on the future to show what is missing from a particular scenario, image of the future, that is, critical and value-oriented analyses of a particular future or alternative futures;
- novel social analysis or social innovation that can create different or unconventional futures different from today;
- differences and similarities in how civilizations, men and women imagine, create and know the future including historical changes in the idea and the practice of the future;
- what ought the future be like and who should make such decisions including discussions of the ethics of forecasting.

Thus, in our minds, to be futures-oriented does not involve a critique, analysis or other social commentary which dwells mainly on the past or present, merely making an oblique reference to the future. It should integrate into the very work itself an explicit consideration of the future (however defined), or how to get to the future, or a range of futures or visions. Traditional academic papers often conclude with a mention of the future; futures studies research should begin with the future.

Futures studies may examine such contexts and issues, preferably across civilizations, disciplines, fields and paradigms. It does not exclude history, but definitely includes foresight, preferably longer than the next financial year, the next election, or the next five-year plan. Indeed, a central dimension to futures research is contesting traditional perspectives on temporality and exploring alternative futures of time.

Thus while we believe it is important to have a wide-ranging debate on theories and methods of futures studies, futures research in itself must be quite specific about what it is and what it is not. Futures research can certainly use history, and other disciplines, and it can borrow from the research perspectives of different perspectives – including action-research, feminist, empiricist, interpretive or poststructural – but it cannot and should not be reduced to a particular research tradition. It is, and has become, if not its own research tradition, at least, a research perspective or framework.