

Developing Australian education scenarios: exploring alternative futures

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, sea countries, and waterways from across Australia. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and living cultures, and to Elders past and present.

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Part 1: Introduction

The challenge

Australian education is operating in a period of rapid change. Schools and systems are navigating new technologies, evolving community expectations, workforce pressures, and shifting policy landscapes. At the same time, the core purpose of education remains constant: supporting every learner to thrive.

Too often, responses to change are reactive and issues are only identified and addressed once they escalate. How can we look ahead with more clarity? What if we planned more strategically, strengthened capability and maintained adaptability through constant change?

Futures thinking provides a way to explore uncertainty. Rather than trying to predict what will happen, it encourages us to consider a range of plausible futures, challenge assumptions about what may remain the same and consider how decisions made today might perform under different future conditions.

The initiative

Future Teacher Future Leader is AITSL's national foresight initiative, designed to support the profession to look ahead and prepare proactively. AITSL established this initiative in late 2025 to explore what the future may mean for education.

The first phase of Future Teacher Future Leader focused on building an evidence base, engaging diverse perspectives and working with key stakeholders to develop futures scenarios for Australian education to 2040.

The scenarios were developed through a structured futures thinking process, informed by evidence and perspectives from across the Australian education ecosystem and beyond, including young people.

The scenarios are not predictions or preferred futures. Instead, they provide different contexts through which decision-makers, systems and sectors can explore change, test existing thinking and consider how current decisions might need to adapt and change.

Who is this publication for?

The publication is designed for readers who want to understand the research and evidence underpinning the futures scenarios and how the scenarios were developed.

It outlines the futures thinking methodology used by AITSL, including horizon scanning, stakeholder engagement, scenario development, testing and refinement. It also highlights the contribution of partners and participants and the 4 scenarios that emerged.

For **practical guidance** on using the scenarios in policy, strategy and decision making, see *Navigating uncertainty: using futures scenarios to inform education strategy and decision making* at aitsl.edu.au/futureteacherfutureleader

Part 2: Exploring the future through scenarios

Why use scenarios in futures thinking?

The future is inherently uncertain. While trends and data can help us understand emerging patterns, they cannot tell us exactly what the future will look like.

Decision-makers often work under pressure on immediate priorities. This can make it difficult to predict sudden disruption or see slower, deeper or emerging changes until they become urgent. Looking for drivers, trends and weak signals can help decision-makers step back from the present and consider what may emerge.

This matters because today's decisions often have long-term consequences. Policies, workforce strategies, curriculum reforms, infrastructure investments and system settings can take years to design and implement. If they are based only on current conditions, they may not be fit for the future.

Scenario planning is one of the most widely used approaches in strategic foresight and long-term planning. A scenario is a plausible description of how the future might unfold. Scenarios are not forecasts and are not intended to predict what will happen. Instead, they are useful tools for incorporating uncertainty into strategic decision-making.

The value of scenarios lies not in determining which future is most likely, but in helping decision-makers prepare for a range of possibilities.

How were the scenarios developed?

The scenarios were developed through a structured futures thinking process informed by the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach (Ramírez & Wilkinson, 2016) and the Australian Government Futures Primer (Australian Government, 2024). The process drew on research, horizon scanning, insight interviews and engagement with stakeholders from across Australian education, including young people. The scenarios were then tested and refined to ensure they were plausible, distinct and useful for exploring the future of education.

The following sections describe how this approach was applied through Future Teacher Future Leader, from understanding emerging change and engaging stakeholders through to developing, testing and refining the 4 scenarios.

Part 3: Understanding change

Purpose statement

A well-defined policy focus helps to understand the parameters of any futures activity. AITSL developed a purpose statement to guide Future Teacher Future Leader activities.

Purpose Statement

To understand how primary and secondary education in Australia could evolve under different conditions to 2040, and what strategic choices today can maximise the learning of every child and young person.

Horizon scanning

The first stage of work focused on understanding the changes already shaping Australian education and those that may become more significant over time.

Horizon scanning is looking for evidence of change across different domains. The aim is not to identify every possible issue, rather to scan for key drivers, megatrends, weak signals and disruptions that could matter most for the purpose statement being explored.

Key drivers are forces that are likely to influence the future direction of a system. They are often categorised as STEEP (social, technological, economic, environmental, political) and can include legal or cultural change. For example, in education, key drivers might include artificial intelligence (AI), climate disruption, changing family expectations, mental health pressures, demographic shifts, public trust in institutions, or changes in employment pathways.

Megatrends are patterns of change already reshaping society. They unfold over at least a decade and affect many parts of life. They help decision-makers lift their view beyond immediate issues and consider the bigger shifts. For example, intensifying climate change and the worldwide transition toward environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient societies could affect infrastructure, health, employment and communities. In Australian education, it could disrupt learning, require climate-resilient school facilities and increase demand for climate literacy.

Weak signals are early signs that something new may be emerging. They are often small, uncertain, unusual or easy to dismiss. A weak signal is not proof that a major change will happen, but it may point to something that could become more important over time. Weak signals are valuable because they help decision-makers notice change early, before it becomes obvious. For example, early trials of institution-owned AI learning assistants suggest that personalised AI tutors may eventually become embedded in everyday teaching and learning.

A **disruption** is a change that could significantly impact existing systems, assumptions or ways of working. For example, a coordinated cyberattack could disable school and university digital systems across Australia, including learning platforms, enrolment databases, assessment systems and student records.

What the horizon scan involved

AITSL reviewed published research, data, expert commentary, social patterns, global issues, policy developments, student and workforce trends to identify the drivers, megatrends, weak signals and potential disruptions that could matter most to the future of Australian education.

Given education is critically shaped by society, it was important to seek insights beyond education to set a broader contextual horizon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with national and international experts from a range of fields, including education, health, policy, adolescent development, history, defence and strategic analysis. Interviews explored emerging trends, potential disruptions, weak signals, opportunities, risks and implications for education. Survey responses on megatrends, emerging trends, weak signals and future implications for education, were collected from general experts (5) and education experts (24). These insights helped test the initial evidence base and informed the design of the workshop series.

Learning Creates Australia gathered insights and lived experience reflections of young people from across Australia through surveys (80 participants) and focus group interviews (15 participants) (see Part 6 for further information on AITSL's partnership with Learning Creates Australia).

What the horizon scan revealed

The horizon scan identified a broad range of changes with potential implications for Australian education. While some were already well established, others were more uncertain or emerging.

Several recurring themes became particularly important in shaping the subsequent workshops and scenario development.

The horizon scan revealed an education system being shaped by several changes at once, rather than by any single trend. Technological acceleration, social fragmentation, economic and workforce pressures, environmental change and geopolitical uncertainty were interacting in ways that could amplify both risks and opportunities. Some of these changes were already clearly visible in schools; others were early indications of developments that could become much more significant by 2040. The evidence also suggested change in one area could not be considered in isolation. For example, technology could affect learning and work, but also wellbeing, equity, trust, resource use and human relationships.

Technology, AI and human connection. Technology was one of the strongest and most immediate themes from the horizon scan. Generative AI was already moving from an emerging development to an everyday reality, while education systems were still determining how to respond. The scan pointed beyond questions of efficiency or automation to changes in how students access knowledge, determine what to trust, interact with teachers and develop critical thinking. More uncertain signals included AI becoming a source of income generation, companionship, advice and emotional support, alongside a counter-trend towards technology-free learning intended to protect attention, creativity and human interaction. Young people similarly identified AI and technology as the most prominent megatrend, seeing opportunities for rural students to access specialised subjects while expressing concern about over-reliance on AI and the potential erosion of critical and relational skills. Young people also raised concerns about the role of social media in fuelling misogyny and polarisation, and the risks of increased overreach by AI and technology corporations.

Wellbeing, belonging and the changing role of schools. Student wellbeing, disengagement, attendance and school refusal were not viewed simply as future possibilities; contributors described them as established and worsening pressures. At the same time, schools were increasingly being expected to respond to needs extending beyond curriculum delivery, including mental health, family

crisis, disability support, food security and community connection. This raised a broader question about whether schools could increasingly become community hubs, and what this would mean for the roles, capabilities and sustainability of teachers and school leaders. Young people reinforced this connection between wellbeing and learning and envisaged schools playing a stronger role as places of community, human connection and student agency – where students' basic needs are met before learning can flourish.

Inequality, workforce and changing pathways. The scan highlighted persistent and, in some areas, widening differences in access, resources and opportunity. Young people spoke particularly about rural and metropolitan differences, disparities between schools and the stigma attached to some vocational pathways. Contributors also identified significant pressure on the teaching workforce, including increasing complexity of student need, workload, reduced professional autonomy and changing expectations of work and careers. Alongside these established pressures were emerging signs that traditional pathways may become less dominant, including greater interest in micro-credentials, skills passports, portfolio careers, vocational pathways and learning outside formal school settings.

Climate, resources, trust and wider system pressures. Climate change, resource scarcity and global instability formed part of a broader pattern of interconnected pressures. For young people, climate change and resource scarcity were viewed as existential threats, deeply impacting how they thought about their futures and the relevance of education. Young people also perceived global conflicts and power shifts as reshaping the world before their eyes. The scan also identified declining trust, social and political polarisation and increasing contest over institutions and authority. In education, as well as debates about curriculum, inclusion and the purpose of schooling itself. Young people expressed a strong desire to understand the interconnected factors shaping education and how education systems work.

Taken together, the findings raised a deeper question about whether structures designed for a more stable and predictable era will remain fit for a rapidly changing one. Insight contributors and young people questioned narrow definitions of educational success and highlighted tensions between human connection and technological reliance, equity and individualisation, academic outcomes and wellbeing, standardisation and flexibility, and individual responsibility and collective support. These tensions did not prescribe what the future would look like; they identified areas where the direction of change remained consequential and uncertain.

These findings provided the starting point for the Future Teacher Future Leader workshops.

Part 4: Developing the scenarios

National workshop series

AITSL convened a series of 3 national workshops to explore the evidence, test assumptions and progressively develop the scenarios with key stakeholders.

Participants were drawn from across the Australian education ecosystem to ensure the scenarios were informed by a broad range of perspectives. Education systems and sectors, regulatory authorities, professional associations and research organisations worked alongside school leaders, teachers, researchers and young people.

Across the workshop series, 58 participants took part, bringing perspectives from 45 organisations as well as individual professional and young people's perspectives (6 young participants). Participation included all states and territories and perspectives from the government, Catholic and independent education sectors. A youth-focused workshop was also conducted by Learning Creates Australia, engaging 10 more young people.

The workshops were designed as an iterative process, with each stage building on the previous.

Workshop 1: Exploring change

The first workshop was held online and introduced participants to futures thinking, including the pace of change and the concept of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA).

Participants explored how change is occurring across education and the broader environment. The horizon scan evidence and young people's perspectives were presented to participants as prompts rather than conclusions, with participants invited to challenge, extend and translate them into potential drivers of change across the social, technological, economic, environmental and political domains.

Participants were encouraged to look beyond current challenges and consider emerging changes that could shape Australian education over the longer term.

Workshop 2: Building possible futures

The second in-person workshop built on the drivers identified through the horizon scan and Workshop 1. Participants mapped drivers according to their potential impact on Australian education and the level of uncertainty about how they may develop.

The drivers expected to have a high impact on Australian education but whose future direction was highly uncertain were determined as critical. Participants explored how each driver could play out over a continuum and what might happen when they interacted. The interacting critical uncertainties became the building blocks for exploring possible futures.

Outputs from Workshop 2 were then consolidated and refined into a set of 4 scenarios by the AITSL team, in preparation for Workshop 3.

Workshop 3: Testing and applying the scenarios

The final workshop was held online and focused on testing and refining the 4 scenarios. Participants considered whether each scenario was plausible, internally coherent and sufficiently distinct from one

another. They used the scenarios to stress test nationally relevant education assumptions (that human relationships are fundamental to quality teaching and learning; and national governance arrangements effectively support learners), exploring whether they continued to hold under different future conditions. This provided a practical way to test the utility of the scenarios as a strategic tool and identify areas that required further refinement. Feedback from the workshop was used to strengthen and finalise the 4 scenarios.

Part 5: The scenarios at a glance

The Future Teacher Future Leader workshop series resulted in 4 distinct and plausible futures for Australian education in 2040. They are not predictions or preferred futures.

Each scenario explores how different social, technological, economic, environmental and political changes could reshape the purpose of education, the role of teachers and leaders, the experience of learners and the responsibilities of governments, systems and communities:



Civic learning commons

imagines schools as civic and community hubs, where learning purpose is defined by students, teachers, families and First Nations knowledge.



Negotiated learning ecosystem

imagines a flexible schooling system driven by the growing demand for personalisation.



Platform-defined learning market

imagines learning purpose defined by technology and becoming optimised for employability.



Crisis-defined learning network

imagines a future with repeated external shocks, pushing the education system into a crisis response with forced innovation and adaptability.

The full scenarios, including timelines and early signs visible today, are available in *Navigating uncertainty: using futures scenarios to inform education strategy and decision making*.

Part 6: Partnerships

AITSL partnered with Learning Creates Australia to embed young people's perspectives throughout the project, and with the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) to support engagement with education leaders – broadening the reach of the initiative.

Learning Creates Australia

Learning Creates Australia delivered a youth-led research cycle, supporting the meaningful inclusion of young people's perspectives.

Three Young Associates worked alongside the AITSL team, supporting engagement activities with young people and contributing to the workshop series. They facilitated dedicated discussions with young people, bringing their insights into the broader initiative and supporting direct participation by young people alongside education leaders and policy-makers. Their perspectives challenged and supported assumptions held by adult participants and introduced different views about the purpose of education, technology, belonging, agency and the future of learning.

This partnership helped ensure the scenarios reflected the experiences, aspirations and ideas of young Australians as well as the perspectives of those working within education systems.

Australian Council for Educational Leaders

ACEL partnered with AITSL to support engagement with education leaders and broaden participation in the workshops.

This partnership helped connect Future Teacher Future Leader with leaders from across the Australian education ecosystem and supported wider discussion of the role of futures thinking in education leadership and strategy.

Part 7: Looking ahead

The future of Australian education cannot be predicted with certainty, yet decisions made today will shape the experiences of learners, teachers and leaders for years to come.

The development of the 4 scenarios marks the completion of the first phase of Future Teacher Future Leader. Through research, stakeholder engagement and scenario development, the initiative has established a foundation for exploring how futures thinking can support longer-term decision-making for Australian education.

There is now an opportunity to understand how the scenarios work in practice. AITSL is exploring ways to test their application with education systems and sectors, build capability in futures thinking and identify where further resources or approaches could add value.

The scenarios themselves are not intended to remain static. As new evidence emerges and the Australian education landscape continues to evolve, stakeholders can revisit the scenarios to strengthen decision-making.

For practical guidance on applying the scenarios, and additional Future Teacher Future Leader publications and updates, visit aitsl.edu.au/futureteacherfutureleader

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