

Navigating uncertainty: using futures scenarios to inform education strategy and decision making

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using futures scenarios to inform education strategy and decision making**
AITSL

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Limited (AITSL)
PO Box 299
Collins Street West, VIC, 8007, AUSTRALIA
Phone: +61 3 9944 1200
ABN 17 117 362 740
www.aitsl.edu.au

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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.

Contents

Part 1: Introduction	4
The challenge	4
The initiative	4
Who is this publication for?	4
What can the scenarios help you do?	5
How to use this guide	5
Part 2: Exploring the future through scenarios	6
Why use scenarios in futures thinking?	6
How were the scenarios developed?	6
Introducing the scenarios	7
Scenario 1: Civic Learning Commons	9
Scenario 2: Negotiated Learning Ecosystem.....	11
Scenario 3: Platform-Defined Learning Market	13
Scenario 4: Crisis-Defined Learning Network	15
Part 3: Applying futures scenarios	17
How to use the scenarios	17
Practical application 1: Using scenarios to support strategic conversations	18
Practical application 2: Stress-testing using scenarios	19
Part 4: Looking ahead	22
Acknowledgements	23
References.....	24

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?

This guide has been developed primarily for:

- education policy makers
- education system and sector leaders
- regulatory authorities
- professional associations
- others involved in policy, strategy and long-term planning for Australian education.

The scenarios can be used by individuals, teams or organisations. No previous experience in futures thinking is required.

What can the scenarios help you do?

The scenarios provide a structured way to step outside current conditions and consider how education could operate differently in the future.

They can be used to:

- explore a range of plausible futures for Australian education
- support strategic conversations about uncertainty and change
- challenge assumptions that underpin current thinking
- test current (or proposed) decisions, policies, strategies and reforms against different future conditions
- identify emerging risks and opportunities
- strengthen long-term planning and decision-making.

The scenarios are tools to prompt discussion and exploration, rather than provide answers about what the future will look like.

How to use this guide



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.

Want to know more about how the scenarios were developed?

Read *Developing Australian education scenarios: exploring alternative futures* at aitsl.edu.au/futureteacherfutureleader for information about the methodology, horizon scanning, stakeholder engagement and scenario development process.

Introducing the scenarios

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.

Each scenario includes:

- a description of the future and how education operates
- a timeline outlining how that future could plausibly emerge to 2040
- early signs that can be observed today.

How to approach reading the scenarios

There is no single correct way to read a futures scenario. It can be tempting to judge each scenario by asking whether it is likely to happen or whether it reflects our future preference. Futures thinking encourages a different approach. Rather than trying to predict the future, consider what each scenario reveals about today's assumptions, choices and strategic decisions.

Each scenario should be read both as a complete future and as a collection of individual ideas. Some elements may feel more plausible, more challenging or more relevant than others, and aspects of different scenarios may emerge over time. The value lies not in deciding which scenario is "correct", but in exploring the different questions, opportunities, assumptions and risks that each one raises.

What most people think



“That would never happen.”



“Which one is most likely?”



“Which future will happen?”



“Is this the right answer?”

Futures thinking asks

What would need to change for this future to become plausible?



What assumptions does each future challenge?



Which decisions remain sound and effective across multiple futures?



What can we learn from this future?





Scenario 1:

Civic Learning Commons

Communities, learners, teachers, leaders and governments define learning together.

In this future, the purpose of education is collectively held. Government provides a strong public framework for equity, quality and accountability, but does not define learning alone. Learners across all years of schooling, teachers, families, communities, First Nations knowledge holders, employers, researchers and local organisations all contribute to shaping what learning is for.

Learning is designed around human flourishing, social cohesion, planetary responsibility and democratic participation. From the early years of school to senior secondary, learners are supported to build strong foundations, develop agency, deepen capability and connect their learning to themselves, their communities and the wider world. AI and digital systems are treated as civic infrastructure: publicly governed, transparent, accessible and used to expand learning opportunities rather than narrow them.

Teachers are highly trusted professionals. They use AI to personalise support, reduce administrative burden and connect learners with rich, level-appropriate and increasingly complex real-world problems. Their role becomes more relational, ethical and design-oriented. Learners have meaningful agency, expressed differently across childhood and adolescence, but always within a shared commitment to community, equity and public purpose.

Schools are community hubs. They connect learning with local place, global challenges, culture, work, wellbeing and ecological responsibility in ways that are developmentally appropriate for learners across all years of schooling. Success is measured through growth, contribution, capability, collaboration, wellbeing and foundational learning.

? How this future could emerge

2026–2030

Pressure for change builds

Learner engagement and wellbeing data raise questions about whether traditional schooling is evolving in line with changing learner needs.

Teachers and leaders report that the education system is not keeping pace with learner needs, advancements in AI, workforce pressures or community expectations. Public debate shifts from performance metrics to the purpose of education.

2031–2035

A shared reform agenda emerges

Governments, employers, teachers, leaders, learners and communities collectively explore the relevance and meaning of learning and develop a shared reform agenda. Learners have agency in helping shape decisions. First Nations knowledge, teacher expertise and community perspectives help guide reform.

Digital infrastructure is widely available and publicly controlled. AI guardrails are articulated and accepted as an essential requirement. Teachers actively integrate AI to enhance learner development. Learner assessments are redefined and community partnership models are implemented. Schools are funded and governed as public infrastructure, with funding models reflecting their role beyond instruction.

2036–2040

Education is a shared civic project

Schools remain central but operate with an integration and presence of families, communities and local organisations. Learning is whole-person focused around flourishing within a relational and community-connected framework.

Early signs

- Growing debate about how to govern AI use in education.
- Rising concern about learner wellbeing and belonging.
- Renewed attention to learners contributing as active and informed citizens.
- Demand for greater trust in teacher professional judgement.
- Increasing recognition of learning that connects learners with Country, culture and community.



Scenario 2:

Negotiated Learning Ecosystem

No single group defines learning; purpose is constantly negotiated between government, platforms, employers, families, schools and learners.

In this future, Australian education is a mixed ecosystem. Learning across the schooling years is increasingly shaped by technology platforms, employers, universities, community organisations, families and learner choice.

Learners from the early years of school to senior secondary move – in level-appropriate ways – between schools, online platforms, micro-credentials, AI tutors, workplace learning, community projects and hybrid programs. Some learners thrive because they can build personalised pathways aligned with their strengths, interests, developmental stage and emerging sense of future work and contribution. Others struggle because the system is harder to navigate and depends heavily on family capability, digital access and confidence.

Teachers are guides, curators and designers of learning. They help learners make sense of choices, evaluate information, build relationships, develop capabilities and connect learning to meaningful futures. For younger learners, this means providing strong foundations, structure, care and guided exploration. For older learners, it means supporting pathway decisions, independence, identity formation and transitions beyond school. AI is widely used for tutoring, feedback, planning and assessment, but quality varies.

The purpose of learning is not settled. For some families, it is future employment and opportunity. For some communities, it is belonging, wellbeing and contribution. For some platforms, it is engagement and data. For government, it is equity and national capability. For learners aged 5 to 18, it may shift over time: from curiosity, confidence and foundational learning in childhood, to identity, purpose, flexibility, capability and survival in adolescence.

? How this future could emerge

2026–2030

Personalisation pressure builds

Growing focus on the needs of the individual learner leads to calls for a more responsive education model with fewer administrative demands.

Families and learners expect greater choice, agency and relevance from their education. AI-enabled tools are used to supplement or replace learning with tutoring, feedback, planning and learning design.

Teachers increasingly take on mentoring, coaching and individual learning design roles. Governments, systems, schools and private providers prioritise and expand flexible pathways, digital learning, micro-credentials, complex real-world learning and new ways of demonstrating capabilities.

2031–2035

Choice expands while quality varies

Private providers, employers, tertiary education and community organisations offer learning directly to learners and families, promising individualised attention. For some learners, internet connectivity and platform access make schooling less dependent on physical sites and offer more choice.

Consistent standards and quality learning are difficult for governments to regulate as individuals choose their own learning pathways. Access to technology, resources and networks increasingly shape learner outcomes. Equity is challenged as those with greater means can choose higher quality learning options.

2036–2040

Negotiation becomes the system norm

The mix of learning pathways and providers becomes an established part of Australian education. No single group defines what learning looks like, how it should be delivered or how achievement is recognised. Governments, schools, platforms, employers, families and learners continually negotiate these questions.

Early signs

- Increasing use of AI tutors and online learning platforms.
- Growth of micro-credentials and alternative pathways for learners.
- Demand for flexible senior secondary and post-school transitions.
- Employer shift toward skills-based hiring.
- Increasing interest in learner choice and customisation.



Scenario 3:

Platform-Defined Learning Market

Markets and technology platforms define learning.

In this future, education has become a consumer product. Government has stepped back from direct responsibility. Private providers, AI platforms, employers and market demand increasingly determine what children and young people learn, how they learn and what counts as success.

The purpose of learning is optimisation: employability, productivity, efficiency, customer satisfaction and platform engagement. AI systems personalise learning pathways, recommend credentials, monitor progress and predict future opportunities. From the early years of school to senior secondary, learning is available anytime and anywhere, but it is shaped by commercial incentives and data ownership.

Teachers remain in some parts of the system, but their professional autonomy is reduced. Some become facilitators, platform managers, wellbeing monitors, salespeople or private learning consultants. For younger learners, adults are still needed to provide care, structure, social development and safety. For older learners, human support is increasingly positioned as a premium service for those who can afford it. Teachers and leaders are increasingly accountable to dashboards, customer metrics and provider performance.

Families with resources can buy rich, human, creative and socially connected education across childhood and adolescence. Others receive narrow, low-cost algorithmic education pathways from an early age. Learners appear to have more choice, but many choices are shaped by sponsorship, platform design, employer demand and predictive analytics, long before they are old enough to fully understand or challenge the pathways being created for them.

? How this future could emerge

2026–2030

Capacity strains as learning diversifies

Teacher shortages, workload pressures and demand for personalised learning increase. AI tools are used by schools widely for learning support. Reliance on teachers for some forms of academic learning declines. Families increasingly turn to AI products, tutoring, online learning, home schooling and self-directed learning options.

2031–2035

Private delivery expands and shapes the system

As reliance on human-led teaching declines, governments increasingly use private providers to deliver learning alongside schools. Credentials offered by private platforms are widely accepted as valid and demonstrated learning.

Private providers begin to control most of the learning content, learner data, digital tools and credential pathways. Consistent standards and quality learning are difficult for governments to regulate. Decisions made by algorithms increasingly influence what learners are taught, which pathways are recommended and how success is measured.

2036–2040

Education becomes a consumer market

Education is no longer organised primarily through governments and schools. Private platforms package, sell and recommend learning pathways based on user data, employer demand and commercial priorities. Human-led teaching and support become premium services, while lower-cost algorithmic pathways become the default for many learners.

Early signs

- Rapid growth of AI learning tools and education platforms.
- Private tutoring and edtech market growth.
- Increasing use of learner analytics and dashboards.
- Employer interest in platform-based credentials.
- Public and private sector dependency on digital infrastructure.



Scenario 4:

Crisis-Defined Learning Network

Crisis defines learning, and communities, governments, schools and families scramble to respond.

In this future, the purpose of learning is reshaped by disruption and constant chaos. Climate events, pandemics, economic shocks, misinformation, geopolitical instability, workforce shortages, mental health pressures and rapid AI acceleration make it increasingly difficult to sustain established expectations about the purpose of education, how learning is delivered and what schools should provide.

At first, education becomes reactive. Attendance is unstable across the schooling years. Families vary in their capacity to support learning, with children needing more direct supervision, care and structure. Adolescents need support to stay engaged, connected and oriented toward future pathways. Teachers and leaders are overloaded. Schools are expected to provide teaching, care, wellbeing, social support, technology navigation and community stability all at once.

The purpose of learning shifts from achievement and progression to continuity, safety, adaptability and survival. Learners need to build strong foundations, stay connected, solve real problems, discern truth, manage uncertainty and care for themselves and others. For younger learners, this means security, belonging, foundational learning and trusted relationships. For older learners, it means critical thinking, resilience, practical problem-solving, civic responsibility and preparation for uncertain futures.

In some places, crisis produces fragmentation and inequity. In others, it sparks renewal. Local learning networks form between schools, councils, health services, emergency services, First Nations communities, employers, families, AI systems and local organisations. AI could help coordinate learning, translate information, personalise support and maintain continuity during disruption. AI systems could also be unstable or unreliable where power, connectivity and infrastructure are threatened. Reliance on human relationships, community networks and non-technical forms of support is heightened.

? How this future could emerge

2026–2030

Repeated shocks expose fragility and ongoing instability

Schools face overlapping pressures from teacher shortages, learner wellbeing needs, climate disruptions, mis- and disinformation and cybersecurity risks, while still recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Learner attendance, staffing and access to school sites and technology are frequently interrupted. Families vary in their capacity to support learning when usual arrangements are disrupted. Among the volatility, schools endeavour to provide teaching, care, wellbeing support, technology assistance and community stability.

2031–2035

The system struggles to keep up

Arrangements designed to help schools manage temporary disruption are unable to withstand repeated crises. Immediate needs force short-term problem-solving, delaying longer-term action to address systemic issues.

Some families and communities can draw on resources and technology to keep learners supported and connected, while others face greater barriers. Teachers and leaders focus on building strong local networks with communities, health and emergency services, councils, employers and families. Some schools lack the required relationships and resources, and remain fragmented and reactive.

2036–2040

Crisis becomes the organising condition

The purpose of education shifts towards maintaining continuity, safety, adaptability, truth, care and connection during ongoing disruption. Some communities use local networks to renew and strengthen education, while others experience deeper inequity, fracturing and disengagement.

Early signs

- Increasing climate-related school disruptions.
- Greater awareness of post-pandemic impact on learner mental health and wellbeing.
- Increasing cybersecurity and misinformation risks.
- Global geopolitical uncertainty.
- Growing interest in strengthening community resilience.

Part 3: Applying futures scenarios

How to use the scenarios

There are many potential ways to use futures scenarios (e.g. see Chermack, 2022). They can be used to support strategic planning, decision-making, policy development, organisational strategy, risk management, investment decisions, and capability and capacity planning.

This guide focuses on two practical applications:

- using scenarios to support strategic conversations
- using scenarios to stress-test decisions, policies, strategies, reforms, and/or assumptions against different future conditions.

Practical application 1:

Using scenarios to support strategic conversations

Scenarios can provide a starting point for conversations about uncertainty, change and longer-term priorities. The structure below outlines a simple way to read, reflect on and discuss one or more scenarios as a pair/group, and can be adapted to suit the relevant context.



Discussion prompts / 'conversation starters'

After reading one or more scenarios, use the prompts below to help frame strategic conversations. Select the questions most relevant to your purpose and context and adapt/add as needed.

Questions may include:

- Which futures scenario would most challenge our current direction, and why?
- Which elements of our current approach would remain effective and what might need to be strengthened or reconsidered?
- If each of these futures emerged, how would our current/proposed policy, strategy, reform or initiative perform?
- If each of these futures emerged, who could benefit and who may be disadvantaged?
- What conditions would need to exist for our approach to succeed?
- What unintended consequences could emerge?
- What early signs could we monitor?
- What risks may require earlier attention?
- Which capabilities may become increasingly important?
- What conversations should we be having with learners, teachers and key stakeholders?
- How can young people be meaningfully involved in this work?
- What is one action or question we should take forward from this discussion?

Practical application 2:

Stress-testing using scenarios

Stress-testing is a structured process that can be used to explore whether a current or proposed decision, policy, strategy, reform or initiative would remain effective under different future conditions; and/or to test an assumption that underpins current thinking.

Assumptions are the beliefs we often take for granted when making decisions. They are rarely written down but can influence how policies are designed, priorities are set and success is measured.

The steps outlined below draw on techniques in the *Australian Government Futures Primer* (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024) and were used as part of the Future Teacher Future Leader initiative. These steps can be adapted to suit the relevant purpose and context.

Step 1: Select what you want to test (target)

Select a target for stress-testing. The target could be a current or proposed:

- decision (e.g. *investment in new infrastructure*)
- policy
- strategy
- reform
- initiative; or
- an assumption (e.g. *'Human relationships are fundamental to quality teaching and learning'*).

The target should be specific enough for participants to consider how it would operate under each scenario. If the target is broad or contains several different elements, consider breaking it into smaller parts and testing each separately.

Step 2: Select group participants

Identify who will participate in the stress-testing process and who will facilitate/lead the exercise. This will vary depending on your context and the target.

Consider including people with different roles, expertise and experience, including those responsible for implementing the target and those who may be affected by it.

In particular, think about how young people could be meaningfully involved in the process. Their perspectives can provide valuable insights and bring different assumptions, risks and opportunities into view.

Step 3: Rate the scenarios

Before coming together as a group, participants read the 4 scenarios (and accompanying timelines and early signs). They are asked to imagine that it is 2040 and the conditions described in each scenario have emerged.

Participants individually consider whether the target would remain sound and effective in each scenario (i.e. their initial judgement/instinct). They then rate the target's performance in each scenario as:

● **Still broadly holds in this future**

or

● **Breaks down in this future**

Note: Choosing between the two ratings may feel difficult for participants. A neutral option has deliberately not been included. These initial ratings are a prompt for discussion rather than a conclusion. Participants should select the option that most closely reflects their initial judgement for each scenario and note down any qualifications or concerns to discuss with the group.

Step 4: Discuss individual ratings

Participants come together as a group and share their ratings for each of the 4 scenarios, explaining their reasoning.

Discussion questions may include:

- What features of each future most influenced your ratings?
- What elements of the target remain strong or effective in each future?
- What elements of the target become vulnerable or less effective in each future?
- What elements of the target might need to be changed?
- What conditions would need to exist for the target to succeed?
- What tensions or challenges emerge?
- Has hearing other perspectives changed your thinking?

Note: The purpose is not to reach agreement immediately or to identify which scenario is most likely. It is to understand how different people have interpreted the future and what this reveals about the target being tested.

Step 5: Agree group ratings

The group determines an agreed overall rating for each scenario:

● **Still broadly holds in this future**

or

● **Breaks down in this future**

Discussions may include:

- where the target remained sound and effective
- where it depended on particular conditions
- where significant adaptation was required
- where it broke down or created unintended consequences.

If the group cannot agree on an overall rating for one or more scenarios, explore the different views and the reasoning behind them. The disagreement may reveal an important uncertainty, risk or difference in perspective.

Step 6: Make an overall assessment

The group uses the agreed ratings for the 4 scenarios to determine an overall assessment of the target.

The 3 options are outlined in the table below – is the target overall robust, contingent or ineffective?

Overall assessment	Meaning
Robust	Target is broadly effective across a range of potential futures
Contingent	Target is effective only under particular conditions
Ineffective	Target requires fundamental change to be effective across a range of potential futures

Note: The overall assessment requires an on-balance judgement rather than a numerical score. Consider the pattern across the 4 scenarios, the significance of any weaknesses identified and whether those weaknesses could realistically be addressed.

A target that performs well in most scenarios may still be contingent if its failure in one scenario would create a significant risk. Conversely, the need for minor adjustments in one or more scenarios does not necessarily mean that an otherwise robust approach should be classified as contingent.

The value lies not only in the overall assessment, but also in the discussion used to reach it. This step helps the group identify where the target holds up, the particular conditions it depends on, elements that may require further testing and where the target may need to be changed or reconsidered.

Discussions may include:

- What parts of the target are effective across multiple futures and should be kept?
- What may need to be adapted, strengthened or reconsidered?
- What risks or opportunities have become more visible?
- What early signs should be monitored?

Step 7: Determine next steps

The group uses the overall assessment and discussion to decide what should happen next (this will vary depending on context).

The group may agree on an action or question to be taken forward and/or share their reflections on the stress-testing process.

Part 4: 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 further information on how the scenarios were developed, and additional Future Teacher Future Leader publications and updates, visit aitsl.edu.au/futureteacherfutureleader

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