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Learning ahead of time: how evaluation of foresight may add to increased trust, organizational learning and future oriented policy and strategy

Martijn Van der Steen^{a,1}, Patrick Van der Duin^{b,*}

^a The Netherlands School of Public Administration, Lange Voorhout 17, 2514 EB The Hague, The Netherlands

^b Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, Jaffalaan 5, 2628 BX Delft, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of futures research (foresight) consists of three elements: *quality*, *success*, and *impact* of a study. Futures research ought to be methodologically and professionally sound, should to a certain extent be accurate, and should have a degree of impact on strategic decision making and policy-making. However, in the case of futures studies, the one does not automatically lead to the other. Quality of method does not ensure success, just as quality and success do not guarantee impact. This article explores the new paths for understanding evaluating of futures studies that are provided by the various articles in this special issue and sets out an agenda for next steps with regard to evaluation of futures research. The more structural and systematic evaluation can result in an increased level of trust in futures research, which may in turn lead to more future oriented strategy, policy and decision making. Therefore, evaluation should be seen as more than a burden of accountability – albeit important as accountability is – but as an investment in the credibility and impact of the profession. It may set in motion a cycle of mutual learning that will not only improve the capacity of futures-researchers but will also enhance the capacity and likeliness of decision-makers to apply insight from futures research.

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1. Introduction

Many people know two stories about foresight. Most people know about the *Shell*-scenarios that ‘predicted’ the oil-crisis, at least that is what people recall. And most people know about *IBM* that saw only a market for a handful of mainframe computers; or stories alike. In this special issue we have attempted to increase our understanding of evaluation of futures studies that goes beyond blunt accuracy, rigid methodology, or plain use. Not because we do not like accurate foresight or rigorous methods, but because practical experience and theoretical insights learn that there is more to it than that. The papers in this special issue set out to explore that issue and come up with empirical and conceptual findings that give us new insights into how the evaluation of futures-study *works* and what that means for the profession.

In this concluding article, we attempt to explore these arguments further and formulate some common denominators that can lead to next steps that may take the complicated issue of evaluation of futures-studies further. We will begin with a discussion of the various papers. After that, we will deduct some of the recurring themes and dilemmas of the papers and discuss the consequences of them. We will conclude our special issue with an attempt to set out two basic strategies for the further development of the field with regard to the evaluation of futures-studies.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 15 2781146.

E-mail addresses: steen@nsob.nl (M. Van der Steen), p.a.vanderduin@tudelft.nl (P. Van der Duin).

¹ Tel.: +31 70 3024910.

2. Looking back at the contributions to this special issue

This special issue consists of six articles that each focus on a different dimension of evaluating foresight. Together they add to our understanding of how foresight can be evaluated. Some of the papers are empirical and evaluate themselves, while the conceptual papers provide us with several models that can be applied in practice. We will not summarize the individual papers here, but we will discuss some of the key-insights that each paper provides. After that, we will draw some overall conclusions with regard to the evaluation of futures studies.

Bouwman, Haaker and De Reuver evaluate a set of futures research studies from the early days of the 'Internet Bubble', when new technologies were emerging and economic and social consequences were still rather fundamentally unknown. They carefully study the expectations that are formulated in their set of studies about the development of the ICT-industry and the economic growth and value of that sector. They then evaluate the *accuracy* of the prediction, but also reflect on the methods that were used in the studies. This analysis shows that the overall accuracy was limited, because expectations structurally overstate the effect of technology-push and only limitedly take into account business-models and consumer behavior. The various futures studies (FS) had a limited eye for the social and economic dynamics that followed from technological innovations and that will ultimately define the consequences of that technology. It seems as if the researchers of that time were first and foremost interested in understanding and predicting the new technology instead of the dynamics that could result from that. This is an important finding because we have learned that social and economic dynamics are not only a consequence of new technologies but to a large extent define the second and third order phases of technological developments. Therefore, the studies did not simply 'miss' certain consequences but were unable to discern important constituents of future technological development. This may be related to the study's other finding, that points at the limited methodological rigor and transparency of most of the studies in the dataset; Bouwman et al. doubt the adequacy of the methods that were used in the studies; the limited accuracy and impact may be related to the limited attention for quality of methods in the study. However, they also conclude that an analysis of more recent comparable studies suggests that the methods of technological foresight-studies have dramatically improved since. Not only are recent studies more transparent about methodology, they are also more thorough and reflexive about the choices that are made within the study. Furthermore, Bouwman et al. point at an especially promising development, namely the integration of scenario analysis with a business model approach. This integration allows for a much more thorough analysis of possible dynamics that could help companies (the analysis is focused on the private sector) formulate long-term strategies. That may lead to more dynamic analyses of the long-term and second-order effects of emerging technologies. That innovation of the quality of foresight studies should have positive outcomes in terms of success and also the impact of studies.

Rijkens-Klomp conducts a study of futures studies in local governments and the focus of her study is therefore on the public sector. The motive for conducting this evaluation of FS in local government is the observation that the impact of such studies remains limited. The paper therefore takes a demand-driven perspective; Rijkens-Klomp is primarily interested in how 'users' experience the process of foresight and how the end-results and the process itself match their particular context. What is interesting about this study is that a deep analysis of four cases provides a rich insight in the actual experience and perception of policy-makers that find themselves a part of a foresight-project. The analysis provides us with some important and surprising new insights that cast doubt over the current practices of futures researchers. Especially striking is the claim by policy-makers that they did not know what to expect from the futures-study and that if they had known better they would have done things differently so that the impact of the study would be bigger. Some of the findings seem mundane, for instance the notion that a foresight study almost always takes more time than policy-makers thought it would. However, such practical matters have large consequences. It leads to time-pressure at the end of a project, which reduces the impact of the study. Not because policy-makers cannot use the findings, but because they lack the time to properly weave them into running processes of policy and planning. Studies tend to come out too late to be of influence. The evaluation of the set of studies also suggests that more time and energy should be invested in relating to the persons that will have to use the studies – who are they? That will lead to some refreshing insight, as Rijkens-Klomp shows. More than the futures-researchers themselves, the 'demand-side' is primarily triggered by the processual and organizational dimensions of a study. To a certain extent, they value the discussions and the 'room for fundamental debate' and reflection on present-day repertoires as much more important 'products' of a study than the eventual report. The report has value, but it is the process that leads to it that really matters—at least, that is what 'users' say. Another value of the process, more related to content, is that futures research invites policy-makers to think more structured and strategically about their own policies. The structured approach of a FS leads to a more structured and rigorous process of policy-making. Had they known this in advance, Rijkens-Klomp argues, they would have done things differently and would have commissioned another type of question to the researchers. Related to this finding is the level at which the 'learning' takes place. Users value the shared learning experience of a futures study; they develop a shared sense of the ambiguity and turbulence in their environment and collectively extend their time-horizon. However, in most cases this experience is limited to those directly involved in the process. Therefore, one of the questions that arises from the study of Rijkens-Klomp is how the learning process can be extended to a larger group and how the learning process of a group can be 'scaled' into organizational repertoires. To conclude, the paper by Rijkens-Klomp assesses the value of futures studies in local governments; while the evaluation is generally positive about the quality and impact of the study, the introduction of the 'demand-side'-perspective presents us with some important questions for which answers are not readily available.

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