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The impact of foresight on entrepreneurship: The *Wales 2010* case study



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the link between foresight and entrepreneurship over the long term. As such, it addresses two distinct gaps in foresight knowledge and literature namely the link between foresight and entrepreneurship; and longitudinal assessments of foresight activities in specific policy areas. The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of foresight on entrepreneurship over a long term perspective. In 1993, the results of an eighteen month foresight visioning exercise, *Wales 2010*, were published. It set out an enterprise vision built on engaging the ideas and views of a range of economic and social actors, and recommended a programme of interventions to help develop an entrepreneurship culture. Seven years after the setting of this vision, the Entrepreneurship Action Plan was developed, the first of its kind in Europe. Over the following years to 2005, entrepreneurial activity in Wales grew significantly outpacing the UK as a whole. However, a loss of focus on entrepreneurship in the years between 2005 and 2011, due to institutional factors and a lack of foresight renewal, was accompanied by a decline in entrepreneurial activity, which has only recently recovered. *Wales 2010* created a foresight legacy: the foresight exercise was an antecedent to the development of entrepreneurship policy and to notable growth in entrepreneurial activity.

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1. Introduction

Technology foresight has been a relatively common approach of governments around the world to assess how their economies, infrastructures and people can prosper in anticipated future conditions. These programmes have bundled related objectives and functions: to conduct technical assessments, to stimulate important discussions, to network different actors and stakeholders, to build consensus, and to set policy priorities. Most of the literature (understandably) focuses on the link between technology foresight and innovation and research. Relatively little attention has been paid to foresight and entrepreneurship although there are notable exceptions (see Fuller and Warren, 2006; Colwell and Narayanan, 2010).

In 1993, the result of a fifteen month national foresight and visioning exercise was published in a report, *Wales 2010*:

Creating our future (IWA, 1993).¹ Its goal was to respond to the following question: ‘What should we, the people of Wales, do to enable Wales to be one of the most prosperous regions of Europe by the year 2010?’ Coordinated by the Institute of Welsh Affairs (a think-tank), a ‘2010’ Project Group of twenty people drawn from different backgrounds oversaw the work of six taskforces, one of which focused on enterprise and entrepreneurship. The report offered a ‘platform’ rather than a ‘plan’. However, alongside the normative future there was a set of recommendations and action areas for realising the vision. *Wales 2010* set out a preferred outcome scenario for enterprise, central to which was the development of an entrepreneurship culture. In 2000, seven years after the publication of the *Wales*

¹ Wales is one of the historical nations of the United Kingdom. It is customary to use the term, ‘national’, in relation to Wales. At the same time, in political and institutional terms, Wales is considered a European region — and part of a broader framework of European regional policy. We discuss the context and implications of the situation of Wales later in the paper, and what this means for this longitudinal case study.

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2010 foresight vision, the *Entrepreneurship Action Plan for Wales* was launched. This was the first entrepreneurship strategic regional framework of its type in Europe.

Foresight exercises may have a range of intended and unintended consequences. Evaluation of foresight programmes is acknowledged as an important activity and attention has been focused on constructing appropriate evaluation frameworks (Georghiou and Keenan, 2006). Identifying critical success factors for government foresight programmes (Calof and Smith, 2010) is also an important topic, particularly for understanding how impact can be generated. Within the public policy field, it has been suggested that significant policy change can take ten or more years (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Although challenging, there is a strong case for taking a long term view of evaluating the impact of technology foresight activities, particularly to allow a more meaningful assessment of how it can influence policy and practice. The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of foresight on entrepreneurship over a long term perspective. A longitudinal approach is adopted to assess how foresight has influenced entrepreneurship policy and performance over a period of twenty years. There is little literature that takes a long-term perspective on reviewing foresight work undertaken (see Chrystall and Cleland (2014) for a rare example) and hardly any work has been published that assesses the impact of foresight work on a longitudinal basis. This paper aims to address this research gap.

Even though this is a valuable area for further research, assessing the impact of a foresight exercise undertaken over two decades previously is a significant challenge. Participants' recollections of the activity may be distant or hazy at best. The same applies to the timeframe for the development of new entrepreneurship policy and programmes discussed in the paper – even if those events are slightly more recent. As a result, our approach is based mainly on an analysis of primary documents associated with the foresight exercise and with the subsequent entrepreneurship policy initiatives in Wales. It also draws on the direct knowledge and insight of one of the authors, who was actively engaged in the entrepreneurship policy agenda during the period in question.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we review literature that addresses the main interests of this paper: foresight, entrepreneurship and impact. Section 3 provides an outline of the *Wales 2010* foresight exercise, situating it within its institutional, economic and governance context. In Section 4, we trace the impact of the initial foresight exercise on entrepreneurship policy – and subsequent entrepreneurship performance in the Welsh economy; this covers the period from 1993 to 2014. A discussion of key themes and concluding thoughts are presented in Section 5.

2. Foresight, entrepreneurship and impact: emerging themes and gaps

Over recent years, evaluation and assessment of impact have become increasingly important strands of foresight activities. Much of this literature has focused on national exercises oriented towards science, technology and innovation policy (see Cuhls and Georghiou, 2004; Havas et al, 2010; Chan and Daim, 2012; Meissner, 2012; van der Meulen, 1999; Georghiou and Cassingena Harper, 2011; van der Steen and van der Duin, 2012; Rijkens-Klomp and Van Der Duin, 2014). In

surveying the activities of different foresight programmes at a national level, Georghiou and Keenan (2006: 762) state that, 'Despite the spread of foresight experience across Europe and beyond, there has not so far been a systematic attempt to understand its effects in aggregate'.

Van der Steen and van der Duin (2012) summarise some of the main contributions around these questions when they state that evaluation of foresight or futures studies can be done through three elements: quality, success and impact. Public sector foresight exercises should be mindful of the behaviours of key actors and other processes in the policy cycle in their endeavours to create impact (Georghiou and Keenan, 2006). Amanatidou and Guy (2008) outline an impact assessment framework for foresight exercises in 'participatory knowledge societies', focusing particularly on factors such as knowledge creation, absorption and diffusion, and social capital and networking. This reflects an overall trend in policy-oriented foresight work towards both participatory approaches and broader canvases, where complex social challenges are addressed (Könnölä et al., 2011).

Eight critical success factors for government-led foresight work have been proposed, including the creation of strong public-private partnerships and the integration of stakeholders into foresight programmes (Calof and Smith, 2010). Furthermore, they suggest three foresight impact dimensions – scientific and technological aspects, societal aspects, and policy and implementation aspects – which are set against three impact issues in their analysis: raising knowledge, forming attitudes and opinions, and initiating action. Knowledge and lessons relating to foresight evaluation have been shared internationally and there is an emerging body of literature, particularly focusing on thematic, methodological and process issues (see, for example, Chan and Daim (2012) on assessing technology foresight studies and innovation in the BRIC countries). However, there appear to be gaps in knowledge and literature.

There are a few contributions that take a longer term perspective on assessing the results of foresight exercises, but these have tended to reflect on the perceptions of participants (Chrystall and Cleland, 2014; Yoda, 2011), the forecast estimates made by participating scientists (Brandes, 2009) and on process or thematic issues. One study finds a positive correlation between foresight studies and the innovation performance of countries in the OECD, and suggests that this may be through the design and re-shaping of the innovation system structure (Meissner, 2012). Colson and Cusset (2005) revisit a French national futures project conducted in the mid-1960s with a twenty year horizon. They relate general reflections on the exercise but do not assess impact on policy. One retrospective study on the New Zealand Foresight Project develops a narrative from the recollections of key participants (Chrystall and Cleland, 2014). At the corporate level, another retrospective paper has drawn on the accounts of key participants in Shell's scenario work, providing an alternative narrative to the one generally found in the literature (Jefferson, 2012).

Colwell and Narayanan (2010) discuss the importance of foresight activities in shaping an institutional environment that enables entrepreneurial activity. However, relatively little attention has been paid to foresight and entrepreneurship – certainly compared to the dominant focus on science, technology and innovation studies.

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