

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Australian tertiary education in 2040: Mapping scenarios for an unknowable future

Jason Lodge

University of Queensland

Edward Palmer

University of Adelaide

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of generative AI has created significant upheaval for Australian tertiary education. This uncertainty has been exacerbated by policy uncertainty both globally and within the Australian context. In alignment with the conference theme, this workshop will explore what it means to educate in an era of continuous change. The workshop will adopt a format built on Klein's (1998) decision-making methodologies. There will be two phases: the first will focus on mapping future scenarios for Australian tertiary education, and the second will focus on what needs to occur now, particularly in terms of changes to practice. Participants will gain collective insight into future trajectories for tertiary education and develop practical approaches for adapting teaching and learning accordingly.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; Universities Accord; future; teaching; policy

Context

Globally, education systems are experiencing significant disruption. Beyond COVID-19 and generative AI, many institutions struggle under increased political and societal pressure. Australia is no exception, with ongoing discussion about the 'social licence' under which tertiary institutions operate and their accountability to government and communities.

Within these uncertain environments, it is difficult to plan beyond immediate crises. Global education NGOs have shifted to longer time horizons to emphasise longer-term planning. The OECD's 2030 Project has recently been reframed as the '2040 Project' (OECD, 2024), aligning with timelines set for implementing the Australian Universities Accord recommendations (Australian Government, 2024).

The workshop adopts a scenario planning methodology that focuses on persistent issues and what is fundamentally important for organisational resilience. This approach, grounded in Klein's research on naturalistic decision-making, is used in high-stakes environments such as intelligence and national security, where organisations must prepare for multiple possible futures rather than attempting to predict single outcomes. By engaging with this methodology, participants will move beyond reactive responses to consider foundational principles that should guide tertiary education regardless of which future emerges.

Facilitators

Professor Jason Lodge, PFHEA, is the Director of the Learning, Instruction, and Technology Lab and Professor of Educational Psychology in the School of Education at The University of Queensland. Jason explores the cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional aspects of learning, particularly in higher education and digital environments. He also serves as an expert advisor to the Australian Government and the OECD on the use of technology in education. He has successfully facilitated numerous workshops with similar themes and formats, including a series of fora for senior institutional leaders in partnership with Microsoft in 2025.

Professor Edward Palmer is the Director of the Unit of Digital Education and Training in the School of

ASCILITE 2025

Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Education at the University of Adelaide. Edward's research is concerned with technology in education, training and the assessment of learning. His work traverses a range of themes, currently focusing on the use of virtual and extended realities for situational awareness and training and the impact of Artificial Intelligence on assessment. Edward engages in research with colleagues in industry and has been funded with over three million dollars from partners, including the federal government, training organisations, and defense. His work has been used in commercial ventures for pharmaceutical companies and online assessment businesses.

Workshop format

Following Klein's (1998) naturalistic decision-making approach, this workshop will run in two phases. The methodology draws from strategic foresight practices and Klein's research on how expert decision-makers operate effectively in uncertain environments.

Phase 1: Participants will develop scenarios of what tertiary education in Australia should look like and what it is likely to look like in 2040. Small groups will consider multiple variables, including technological advancement, policy directions, societal expectations, economic conditions, and demographic changes. Groups will construct scenarios ranging from optimistic to challenging, ensuring the full spectrum of possible futures is considered.

Phase 2: Working from the scenarios developed in phase one, participants will collectively develop key trajectories needed to work towards productive scenarios and away from less productive ones. This phase will be situated within the Australian tertiary education context, using the Australian Universities Accord and current policy settings as stimulus materials. Participants will identify specific actions, policy changes, and strategic priorities that can be implemented in the near term to influence longer-term outcomes.

Outcomes

Participants will develop an understanding of the complex forces shaping the future of Australian tertiary education and gain practical tools for strategic planning in uncertain environments. They will leave with a framework for long-term institutional planning that moves beyond crisis management to consider fundamental questions about the purpose and structure of tertiary education. The workshop will provide concrete strategies for adapting teaching and learning practices to remain effective across multiple possible futures. Participants will develop networks with colleagues facing similar challenges and take away practical scenarios and trajectories as resources to inform institutional strategic discussions and planning processes.

References

Australian Government. (2024). *Australian Universities Accord: Final report*. Department of Education.

<https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord>

Klein, G. (1998). *Sources of power: How people make decisions*. MIT Press.

OECD. (2024). *The Future of Education and Skills 2040*. OECD Publishing.

<https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/>

Lodge, J. M. & Palmer, E. (2025, Nov 30 – Dec 3). Australian tertiary education in 2040: Mapping scenarios for an unknowable future [Workshop Presentation]. Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education Conference, Adelaide, Australia. <https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2025.2780>

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.

The author(s) assign a Creative Commons by attribution licence enabling others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon their work, even commercially, as long as credit is given to the author(s) for the original creation.