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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

From horizon scanning to action: The Contextualising Horizons initiative as a catalyst for collective sensemaking in higher education

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Higher education is operating in an environment characterised by accelerating technological change, shifting social expectations, economic uncertainty, environmental pressures and evolving political priorities. Since 2021, the ASCILITE Contextualising Horizons initiative has brought together educators, learning designers, educational developers, researchers and institutional leaders from across Australasia to identify and interpret emerging trends influencing technology-enhanced learning. This concise paper examines the evolution of the initiative through a qualitative document analysis of four reports published between 2021 and 2025. The analysis examines how priorities have evolved over time and considers these changes through the lens of collective sensemaking. Findings show that key themes have evolved, shifting from individual technologies towards broader institutional responses. The reports have also provided a shared reference point through which emerging issues can be interpreted and discussed across the sector. We argue that the value of horizon scanning lies in helping institutions interpret emerging change and translate trends into informed discussion and local action.

Keywords: horizon scanning, collective sensemaking, higher education, educational technology, qualitative document analysis

Introduction

Horizon scanning has become an established approach for identifying emerging issues, weak signals and longer-term trends that may influence higher education (Fűzi et al., 2022; Montero & Dal Borgo, 2019). International initiatives such as the EDUCAUSE Horizon Report have helped institutions anticipate change by identifying emerging technologies and educational practices that require strategic attention (Pelletier et al., 2021). Furthermore, universities are increasingly working collectively to consider the implications of emerging developments for curriculum, assessment, professional learning and institutional priorities. Since 2021, the ASCILITE Contextualising Horizons initiative has brought together educators, learning designers, educational developers, researchers and institutional leaders from across Australasia to identify and interpret emerging trends in technology-enhanced learning (Campbell et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2025; Porter et al., 2023; Porter et al., 2024). Using a Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political (STEEP) framework alongside educational technology and practice trends, the initiative has, to date, produced four annual reports designed to identify emerging developments and stimulate discussion about their implications for higher education.

While horizon reports have become increasingly common, less attention has been paid to how horizon-scanning priorities evolve across successive reporting cycles or to the contribution of collaborative horizon-scanning initiatives to shared interpretation. This leaves a gap in understanding how such initiatives evolve and how they may support the higher education sector in making sense of increasingly complex and interconnected challenges. This paper addresses that gap by examining the evolution of the Contextualising Horizons initiative through a qualitative document analysis of four reports published between 2021 and 2025. We consider how the reports have changed over time and what they suggest about collaborative horizon scanning as a support for collective sensemaking across the higher education community.

Collaborative horizon scanning and collective sensemaking

Horizon scanning, environmental scanning and strategic foresight are related approaches used to identify emerging trends, uncertainties and weak signals that may shape future decisions. In the literature, these approaches provide structured ways to explore uncertainty, test assumptions and consider how present choices may influence possible futures (Miller, 2018; Montero & Dal Borgo, 2019). In higher education, horizon reports have commonly been used to synthesise emerging technologies, pedagogical innovations and sector-wide challenges for institutional audiences. The EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, for example, has provided a recurring mechanism for identifying developments likely to affect teaching and learning practice (Pelletier et al., 2021). Such reports are useful because they translate signals into accessible summaries that can inform planning, professional learning and strategic discussion.

The literature also suggests that the value of foresight activity can depend on how trends are interpreted and used. Miller (2018) notes that futures work can enable groups to engage with uncertainty rather than treating the future as something to be forecast. This focus on interpretation connects closely with Weick's (1995) concept of collective sensemaking, which describes how people develop shared understandings of complex or ambiguous situations through noticing, interpretation and dialogue. Applied to horizon scanning, this suggests that the reports may function as summaries of emerging trends and also as artefacts that support shared interpretations of change. From this perspective, collaborative horizon scanning can be understood as both an evidence-gathering activity and a mechanism for sector-wide dialogue. This research therefore examines the Contextualising Horizons reports to understand how the collective interpretation of emerging educational technology and practice trends is reflected across successive reporting cycles..

Method

We employed a qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of the four ASCILITE Contextualising Horizons reports published between 2021 and 2025. Document analysis provides a systematic approach for examining published artefacts to identify patterns, meanings and the evolution of ideas over time, making it well suited to analysing initiatives that have developed iteratively through collaborative sector engagement. The dataset comprised the four annual Contextualising Horizons reports, each developed through a consistent horizon-scanning methodology involving multiple stakeholders from across Australasia. Together, the reports provide a longitudinal account of how the higher education community has interpreted emerging trends influencing technology-enhanced learning and teaching.

Analysis was conducted in three stages (Table 1). First, the lead author reviewed each of the four reports to identify dominant STEEP trends and educational technology and practice priorities. The resulting analysis was reviewed by all co-authors, with interpretations discussed and checked against the published reports. Second, an AI assisted thematic comparison informed by inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Naeem et al., 2023) was undertaken to identify recurring themes, emerging issues and changes in the framing of trends across successive reports. This stage was informed by the initial document review but remained open to themes that cut across the reports. NotebookLM was used as an analytical support tool to assist with comparison. It was prompted to undertake a thematic comparison of changes in higher education priorities across the reporting period, with attention to recurring priorities and changes in emphasis over time. The patterns identified by NotebookLM were checked against the source reports, and reviewed and refined by the authors with final thematic judgements remaining with the researchers.

Finally, themes were interpreted through the lens of collective sensemaking (Matos-Castaño et al., 2025; Weick, 1995) to examine how the reports supported shared interpretation and informed discussion across the sector. Credibility was supported through systematic comparison across the four reports, explicit attention to continuity and change over time, and reflexive checking of claims against the published evidence. We also acknowledge that some authors contributed to one or more Contextualising Horizons reports through roles in research, facilitation and report development. To support reflexivity and trustworthiness, interpretations were grounded in the published reports and framed cautiously as evidence of patterns within the initiative rather than claims about institutional use after publication.

Table 1.
Analytical framework

Stage	Analytical focus	Purpose
1. Document review	Lead author review of each report followed by author team review	Identify dominant STEEP trends and educational technology and practice priorities
2. Cross-report thematic analysis	AI-assisted thematic comparison across the four annual reports, followed by source checking and author team review	Identify recurring, emerging and reframed themes
3. Interpretive analysis	Interpret findings through the lens of collective sensemaking, with reflexive checking against the published reports	Explore how the reports supported shared interpretation and informed discussion

Findings

The analysis of the four Contextualising Horizons reports showed that the initiative changed in ways that went beyond shifts in educational technology trends. Although each report was developed through a collaborative horizon scanning approach, the focus moved from responding to the immediate disruption of COVID-19 to supporting broader conversations about long-term change in higher education. Three key findings emerged from the analysis (Table 2).

Table 2.
Evolution of the Contextualising Horizons initiative (2021–2025)

Theme	Early focus (2021–2022)	Later focus (2025)
Educational technology	Digital transformation and technology adoption	Responsible AI, educator capability and strategic impact
Assessment	Continuity, online assessment and academic integrity	Authentic assessment, graduate capability and assurance of learning
Student experience	Flexibility and access	Wellbeing, belonging and inclusive learning
Institutional focus	Responding to disruption	Building resilience, partnerships and sustainable innovation

Trends matured

The first finding was that major themes rarely disappeared across successive reports. Instead, they evolved as institutional understanding and responses matured. Artificial intelligence illustrates this progression: early reports positioned AI as an emerging educational technology requiring exploration and critical evaluation while later reports reframed AI as a catalyst for broader discussions about curriculum, assessment, educator capability, governance and institutional responsibility. Similar shifts were evident in assessment, student wellbeing, employability and sustainability, suggesting that horizon scanning captures how the meaning of issues changes over time, rather than just identifying new trends.

The focus shifted from technologies to institutional responses

A second finding was a clear shift from identifying emerging technologies towards institutional responses. Earlier reports concentrated on educational technologies and innovative practices, whereas later reports increasingly addressed organisational capability, curriculum renewal, professional learning, policy development and leadership. This reflects a broader move from asking *What is changing?* to asking *How should higher education respond?*

Collaborative horizon scanning provided a mechanism for collective sensemaking

The third finding concerned the potential of the collaborative process to support collective sensemaking. Across all four reports, multiple stakeholders contributed to identifying and interpreting emerging issues, connecting broader developments with Australasian higher education priorities. Viewed through the lens of collective sensemaking, the reports can be understood as shared artefacts through which different perspectives on emerging change are brought together and made visible. This suggests that collaborative horizon scanning can provide a structured mechanism for collective interpretation across a higher education community.

Discussion

The findings suggest that collaborative horizon scanning is valuable because it helps the sector interpret emerging technologies and future developments in context. Across four iterations, the Contextualising Horizons initiative evolved from documenting issues associated with pandemic-driven digital transformation to facilitating broader conversations about institutional resilience, responsible innovation and the future of higher education. The reports demonstrate how horizon scanning can create a structured process for interpreting complex and interconnected change. This perspective aligns with strategic foresight literature, which positions horizon scanning as a process for exploring uncertainty and informing present-day decision-making (Miller, 2018). The findings indicate that the value of the Contextualising Horizons initiative is the opportunity to bring together diverse perspectives and support reflection on the implications of emerging trends for policy, practice and leadership.

An important shift across the reports has been the movement from technology-centred discussions towards broader institutional questions. Early reports focused primarily on digital transformation and educational technologies, whereas later reports increasingly considered curriculum renewal, assessment, educator capability, wellbeing, sustainability and strategic impact. This progression reflects growing recognition that educational technologies need to be understood within wider organisational, social and political contexts. The findings also highlight that the collaborative approach provided a structured space for dialogue across professional and institutional boundaries, while recognising that local responses differ, and often for good reasons. For higher education leaders, horizon reports offer a practical mechanism for connecting emerging trends with local priorities and supporting more informed decisions in the present. Used in this way, collaborative horizon scanning can help institutions ask better questions about future priorities and build a shared understanding across diverse communities.

Implications and conclusion

This paper has identified that the value of the Contextualising Horizons initiative lies in its contribution to collective interpretation across the higher education sector. Analysis of the four reports shows a clear evolution from immediate responses to pandemic-driven digital transformation towards broader questions of institutional resilience, responsible innovation and strategic impact. For institutions, the implication is that horizon reports can be used as practical prompts for curriculum renewal, assessment, professional learning and strategic planning. Their value is strengthened when they are treated as starting points for local dialogue, rather than as standalone summaries of future trends.

Although this study focused on a single collaborative initiative, it also highlights the potential of horizon scanning to support informed decision-making in changing educational contexts. Future research could

examine how institutions engage with horizon reports after publication and how collaborative futures work influences educational leadership, policy and practice over time.

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