College of Graduate Studies Workshop on Global Shifts and Research Relevance

Workshop on foresight relevance, 10 November 2025

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Key discussion topics:

- ***What is foresight? How can we develop futures literacy?***
- ***How useful is this multi-disciplinary science as common basis for research in the catalytic niche areas of UNISA?***
- ***How can it stimulate cross-fertilization of research and multiple use of research outcomes?***

Introductory reading

The future of South-Africa, and by extension of the African civilisation in today globalised world, is not singular and linear, but plural and complex. Various futures are possible, some of them bringing positive developments, others bringing dramatic, if not catastrophic, changes. Much of what will happen in the decades to come will depend on the strategic agility to manage the various interdependent paradigms shifts and on efficient collaboration between key actors, not only national governments, but also other stakeholders, such as companies large and small, universities and think tanks, and civil society, will have all impact on the collective future.

For the second time, the prestigious Nobel Prize for Economics has gone this year to scholars focussing on innovation as the crucial engine for economic growth and welfare for the people. Technology and social innovation are the key drivers, and their continuous improvement is based on research, all kinds of research, even history is relevant for the future. Foresight or systemic future-oriented thinking is the indispensable policy instrument in the context of rapid socio-economic and technological changes and for evaluating relevance of research.

Professional foresight is a trans-disciplinary scientific approach that seeks to improve the ability to anticipate, create and manage change in a variety of domains (scientific, technological, environmental, economic, cultural and societal), on a variety of scales (personal, organizational, societal, local, national and global) and through a variety of methods. The overarching objective is to permanently and comprehensively establish anticipatory thinking and a reflective handling of uncertainty in government institutions. This requires changes in the culture of organisation and the processes of communication.[1]

Foresight studies focus on steering through uncertainty and complexity and preparing future policy making. They use different methodologies and disciplinary inputs (hard and soft) and rely on data and evidence, as well as on creativity to imagine different futures. Foresight can be said to have eight purposes [2].

The world is characterised by high levels of uncertainty, fragility, and unpredictability. In such times, decisions will have to be taken swiftly and often only on the basis of partial evidence. The consequences of wrong and delayed choices are potentially disastrous, but collective inactivity also carries a heavy price. Underlying this challenging environment is political volatility, with decision-makers confronted by shifting political support, impact of other countries policies, a permanent news cycle with a mix of fact and fantasy, but still high expectations to deliver solutions to the multiple crises. Foresight allows anticipatory and evidence-based scenario planning in practice for government and business.

Volatility, ambiguity, uncertainty needs to be dealt by factoring-in different time horizons. This puts a premium on universities which are less constrained by day-to-day issues but still need to reconcile the short and long-term benefits of their research investments. By segmenting time in three-time horizons, research organisations can build a robust system of anticipation with constant feedback to guide researchers, making the essential link between foresight and the needs of government and business.

[1] L. Schmertzing, B. Freuding, J. Fricke, F. Keisinger (2013) 'Government Foresight für Deutschland', *Stiftung Neue Verantwortung*, 20/13.

[2] Ricardo Borges de Castro, Foresight : scenarios, models, solutions, High Level Group on Governance Innovation, discussion paper 2021, www.highlevelgroup.eu

Horizon 1 12-24 months	Horizon 2 3 to 5 years	Horizon 3 > 10 Years
From Certainty	**<<< ------------ /------------ >>>**	**To Uncertainty**
Policy implementation (Policy-Makers)	Strategic planning (Planners/Foresighters)	Foresight / Futures studies (Foresighters)
Review of existing strategy and policies	Monitor developments in known trends and uncertainties	Identify emerging trends and weak signals

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Source: Ricardo Borges de Castro

Content of foresight studies

Essentially foresight studies aim to identify the various kinds of uncertainties, risks for any kind of planning and investment. Experts often distinguish various risk categories and subdivisions. [3]

1. Geopolitical risks

• Armed conflicts.

• State stability: risks of governmental collapse.

• International relations: tensions and alliances.

• Transnational movements: migration and refugee crises.

2. Security Risks

• Physical threats: terrorism and criminal violence.

• Cybersecurity: digital threats and data theft.

• Hybrid threats: physical and digital dangers.

• Disinformation: spread of false information.

3. Political Risks

• Government institutional instability.

• Policy risks: unpredictable policy changes.

• Democratic stability: erosion legitimacy and accountability

4. Societal Risks

• Social inequality : deepening societal divides.

• Well-being Impact: public health challenges.

[3] Lieve van Woensel, Egmont Institute meeting of the Foresight Group, 2025.

• Radicalization: growth of extremist ideologies.

5. Economic risks

• Financial stability: GDP stagnation, market volatility.

• Employment impact: job market fluctuations.

• Market disruption: supply chain breakdowns.

• Economic inequality: widening wealth gaps.

• Research decline : reversal of innovation and growth (impacting all other risks)

6. Environmental Risks

• Climate risks: impact and costs of climate change.

• Natural disasters.

• Resource security: scarcity of water, energy, and materials.

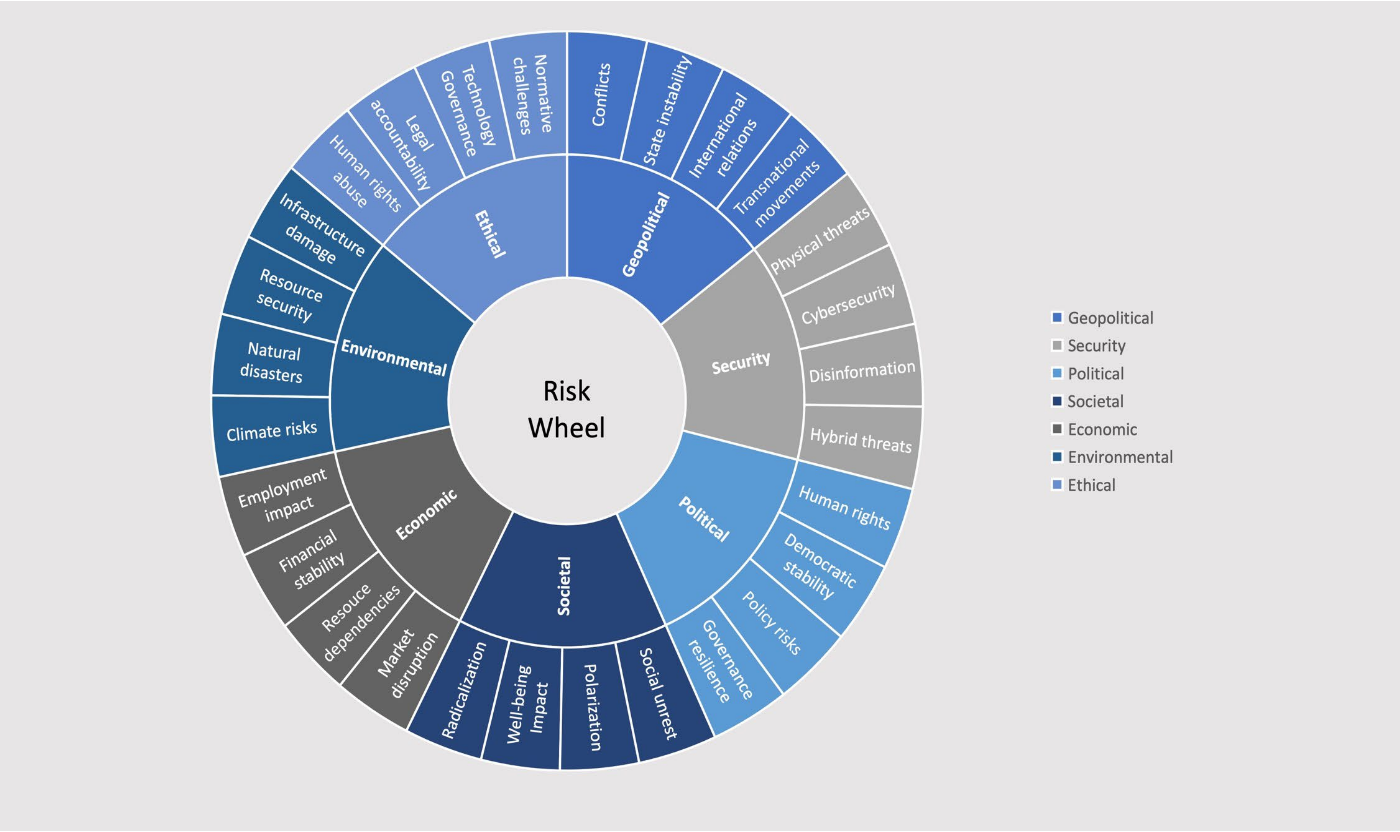
• Infrastructure damage: critical facilities out of use.

7. Ethical Risks

• Ethical thinking and acceptance : inequality, tech use.

Summary: The foresight risk wheel.

The is a basic foresight version, others are possible.



Foresight studies should bring futures literacy, the ability to imagine the future, which requires much creativity and serendipity. It is a capacity to know how one can imagine possible future(s). It is part of horizon scanning and scenario planning and it requires to learn to 'think outside-the-box'. [4]

[4] Riel Miller (head of futures literacy at UNESCO), Transforming the future, anticipation on the 21st century, 2018.