

Background, aims and design of Secondary Futures

The Secondary Futures Project *Hoenga Auaha Taiohi* was announced by the New Zealand Minister of Education in September 2003. The project aims to develop a broad-ranging discussion about what secondary schooling could be like in 20 years time.

Background

Secondary Futures was set up in 2003 to develop a discussion about how secondary schooling could make more school leavers more successful 20 years in the future. The project was given freedom to work differently. This has created considerable opportunity, as well as substantial challenges.

In 2004, the first year of operation, Secondary Futures' strategy was to establish itself as a credible part of the education and futures thinking landscape. Looking beyond short term objectives, Secondary Futures differentiated itself from other projects by focusing on education in 20 years time. The toolbox resources were developed through rigorous trialing throughout the country and with a multitude of groups.

Secondary Futures aims to act as a catalyst for a structured national conversation to build the capacity of a range of people to think about the future in a systemized way, and begin to explore possibilities and preferences for New Zealand's education system in the future.

The project was structured to facilitate the process as follows:

- A group of four “**Guardians**” leads the project. Their role is primarily to protect the integrity and autonomy of the process – creating the safe space for a dialogue to develop and to protect this from the impact of shorter term policy and industrial debates.
- A small **secretariat** leads the work on the project, accountable to the Guardians. It is accommodated as an independent team by the Ministry of Education. This arrangement provides access to research and information resources, administrative support and corporate infrastructure without compromising the autonomy of the process.
- A “**Touchstone Group**” functions as a reference group and conduit to key education sector organisations

Aims

Secondary Futures has identified three goals or phases for the project:

1. Building futures literacy
2. Building pathways for change
3. Building a mandate for change.

These phases are not discrete. Rather, the project maintains early phases at the same time as it moves forward, in order to feed new outcomes back to those involved at earlier levels.

The first phase saw Secondary Futures:

- Talked to a range of stakeholders around the country, and brought in voices not traditionally heard in the debate shaping education policy
- Researched and tested ideas and methodology to help people consider the future in a systemised way
- Set up systems to share information and help inform decision making at the level of practice and policy
- Develop a specialised methodology and set of resources to help participants consider the possibilities for the shape of New Zealand's secondary schooling sector in the future
- Facilitate over 200 engagements around the country within school communities, the education sector, and across a range of other sectors
- Develop data systems to support the information needs of the project and its audiences
- Develop a website which circulates this information.

The transition from the initial phase of the project, scoping a methodology and building futures literacy in the context of education, will see the secretariat move from direct involvement in local level workshops to more rigorous futures thinking with strategic education sector, cross sector and regional organisations, and devising the methodology to sustain futures thinking as an integral part of policy.

The third stage will be working with these possibility spaces to tell stories, or create scenarios, for specific institutions such as schools, using criteria such as funding, governance and organisation which are policy relevant.

By examining the relationship between current stories of innovation and practice, and the relationship to the possible scenarios, as well as the preferences around these, it should be possible to 'map backwards' what policy changes could occur to create this environment, and how. It is likely that this phase will initially involve participants from goal two work and build capacity for policy considerations at the higher level. There will be implications for change at many levels though, so people and groups involved at the earlier levels will need to be involved simultaneously in this process. The impact of this will be to build consensus and a broader mandate for change.

Approach

Since its establishment, the project has worked with schools and their communities, a wide range of sector organisations and agencies, and institutions including Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs), Colleges of Education, unions, education researchers, and other bodies. Meetings have also been held with business leaders, business-oriented organisations, iwi, local government, and private sector organisations.

Secondary Futures has also played an active part in the State Services Commission's Future Practitioners forum with policy representatives from a range of government agencies, helping to develop futures thinking capability across the state sector. It continues to work closely with a range of government agencies to share learning about futures methodology and alternative solutions to questions about how to make more learners more successful in the future. In this way, investment in Secondary Futures is building capacity, and a methodology, for futures thinking approaches to government policy.

Toolbox

The toolbox is an effective, rigorously tested set of resources which opens possibilities and creates the space for people to think differently about the future. To allow the secretariat to engage with level 2 (rigorous imagining – a deeper exploration of project themes) of the project.

A new tool; the storycard was developed in 2005 as a means to share information in workshops and conversations. Storycards offer flexibility as they can be created in office and display research, stories and information which can be tailored for an audience

Evaluation

An evaluation of Secondary Futures short term effectiveness was completed by The New Zealand Council for Educational Research. This report highlighted the project's success at building futures literacy (a copy of the executive summary is attached as Appendix 1 and a full copy can be downloaded at www.secondaryfutures.co.nz).

Engagements

Secondary Futures has had over 270 engagements since the project began.

Database

All Secondary Futures workshop information is now stored on a database allowing information to be scanned and extracted quickly and easily and over time, provide a richer, deeper foundation for policy. Phase 2 requires the creation of a knowledge base that moves away from abstract ideas and into potentially real time, real life change. The database gives Secondary Futures and potentially other education agencies, a systemised way of pulling out emerging themes from level 1 conversations and turning those themes into the springboard for level 2 and other policy activity.

Website

The website is a key tool in the project's work of collecting and spreading stories of innovation and excellence already occurring in schools – this helps illuminate pathways to the future, and provides concrete examples of how schooling could be different. During November, the website received 42,894 hits with an average session length of 18.48 minutes, exceeding the project's expectations and industry norms. This shows the project is achieving a key strategic outcome, "creating a space to consider the future of education" and suggests the site is being used as a frequently visited reference point for those in and beyond the education sector.

The website organises this information into a matrix, integrating the five themes identified through early work (Students First, Inspiring Teachers, Community Connectedness, Social Effects and The Place of Technology) and the three key questions at the heart of the project in twenty years' time; what will be the purpose of secondary education; how could learning happen; and how can secondary education best enable young people for their futures?) and presents material such as academic research, environmental scanning and stories created by Secondary Futures celebrating the innovation and excellence already occurring in New Zealand schools. It also offers an on-line version of the workshop. This tool allows Secondary Futures to share its information and celebrate innovation widely and keep stakeholders informed of new initiatives.

Projects

A number of projects are currently underway as Secondary Futures moves into level 2. These are designed to provide the project with an intensive forum to discuss ideas and provide deeper thinking for key issues.

- The teacher think tank held two meetings in 2005 with a group of innovative thinkers involved in teaching and teacher education link to purpose and stages. The Teacher Think Tank is a diverse group of innovative thinkers brought together to stimulate new thought and comment on potential missed areas
- New schools - the new schools group is a meeting of principals of brand new schools in New Zealand. The group offers support, professional development and a space to share ideas and issues faced by new schools.
- Blue Skies – The blue skies group brings together some of New Zealand's leading thinkers from a diverse range of disciplines in a broad conversation around education.

Touchstone Group

The Touchstone Group which helps the Guardians test ideas and consider issues met 3 times in 2005 and twice in 2004. Two further meetings are planned for 2006. Some members may also be involved in project groups; also have role in connecting their organisations to SF work.

Looking forward to 2006

The next stage of our work involves 'rigorous imagining', opening new horizons regarding the nature and determinants of change. This takes a key change variable, such as an institution (the school) and uses rigorously researched information to push the 'possibility space' of outcomes for the variable. Through the use of rigorously conducted research and catalytic discussions, it maps out a wider canvas for change than can be imagined through earlier thinking and creates strategic scenarios which will provide the basis for the next stage of our work. Projects already established to feed in to this process include 'Future Schools', 'Blue Skies' and 'Inspiring Teachers, 2025.'

At the same time, the project is committed to extending phase one activity, Building Futures Literacy, consistent with the project's mandate to have a 'wide-ranging' conversation bringing in 'voices not traditionally heard' in the debate shaping education policy. More than 100 people nominated by sector organisations such as NZSTA, school support services, education and corporate sector trainers and representatives from other state sector agencies, have participated in *Train the Facilitator* workshops, giving them access to the Secondary Futures tools and processes to incorporate into their own work, for example with Boards of Trustees. Secondary Futures now has a pool of facilitators around the country available to draw on when suitable and who can use the tools freely in their own area of work, with systems in place to continue to capture data from these sessions and provides a platform for making futures thinking in education sustainable.

2006 offers a new challenge to the project as it moves into level 2 and into deeper and more structured exploration of the five themes (Students First, Inspiring Teachers, Community Connectedness, Social Effects and The Place of Technology). Interrogating each of the themes separately means Secondary Futures will begin to target not only specific areas of society and stakeholder groups but also begin to work with those people responsible for change in governmental policy. By beginning to include policy makers in the process in this early stage Secondary Futures is creating ownership of futures thinking across the Ministry of Education and other agencies

It is planned to demarcate 2006 by theme as:

- February – May: Students First
- June – August: Inspiring Teachers
- September – November: Community Connectedness

It is recognised that the first theme may require some 'feeling out' time as the project adjusts to a new way of working in level 2.

Risks and Challenges

- Converting the futures thinking process into policy reforms and engaging people in the position to create or make change happen.

- Supporting current innovative practice in schools. Often innovative practice in schools can be put lost in the pressures of working inside today's systems. Secondary Futures aims to promote innovation and find ways around barriers.
- Managing the diverse range of expectations for the project. Exploring Possibilities: an evaluation of the short term effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process highlighted the tensions as some think Secondary Futures should remain out of the policy arena while others think the project should become more involved in influencing policy.

For more information on the project see www.secondaryfutures.co.nz

Appendix One: Evaluation of Short Term Effectiveness by New Zealand Council for Educational Research

Executive summary¹

This evaluation was commissioned to collect information about the effectiveness of Secondary Futures in promoting futures thinking and change in secondary education. It was intended that this information could feed into the ongoing development of Secondary Futures in Phase Two of its project.

The Labour Party's 2002 pre-election policy pledged its commitment to setting up an independent body to consider the future of New Zealand secondary schools. This promise was realised with the launch of Secondary Futures in September 2003. The project was tasked with stimulating futures thinking about the role and purpose of education and to create a guiding vision for secondary education. Through a range of engagements with educational stakeholders, including workshops, meetings, and presentations, Secondary Futures set out to achieve six objectives for Phase One of their project:

1. Creating space to contemplate the future;
2. Providing tools to resource thinking about the future of education;
3. Sharing trends for the future direction of New Zealand society
4. Sharing information about possibilities to make more students more successful;
5. Eliciting people's preferences in relation to the future of the New Zealand education system; and
6. Supporting change by taking information to others.

Four key theoretical areas appear to underpin the Secondary Futures project and provided a theoretical frame for the evaluation. The first is *futures studies*, which is a collection of theories and tools that allow people to imagine possible futures in order to begin to "create the future every day". The second is a *complex systems* approach, which assumes that sustainable educational change is unpredictable, networked, and transformative, but should be guided by vision and core values with careful attention to inputs. This contrasts with a managerialist paradigm operating in many schools and organisations, which focuses more on predictable outputs. Thirdly, knowledge and understanding about successful *school change*, which incorporates both complex systems and managerialist ideas, advocates for a whole-school approach to working towards goals in a flexible and ongoing manner. The fourth is *dialogue*, in which a range of methods facilitate a space for exploration, negotiation, and transformative change.

¹ Exploring possibilities: an evaluation of the short-term effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process.

Three research questions guided the evaluation:

1. How do participants perceive the effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process?
2. How do participants' expectations and perceptions of secondary education change as a result of their engagement with the Secondary Futures process?
3. What are the outcomes and actions that result from participants' engagement with the Secondary Futures process?

The research questions encapsulate and go beyond the scope of the project's Phase One objectives, which were focused on stimulating thinking and eliciting preferences, as opposed to actively directing change. Each research question provided a different theoretical lens through which to judge the effectiveness of the Secondary Futures process.

The evaluation incorporated two main methods: a document analysis was undertaken utilising people's responses to feedback forms from 59 workshops; and interviews were conducted with 42 engagement participants and eight members of the Touchstone Group. Interviewees came from schools, the wider education system, and non-education sectors. Most had experienced more than one engagement with Secondary Futures, including participating in at least one workshop.

The findings suggest that the processes used by Secondary Futures were very effective in relation to their first four Phase One objectives: creating space; providing tools; sharing trends; and sharing information about possibilities. Participants valued Secondary Futures for their thought-provoking tools and activities, allowing time out from daily pressures, and for the group-based learning environments that were well-established by the facilitators. Beyond the engagements interviewees appreciated Secondary Futures for retaining a good level of political independence, managing to bring together a range of stakeholders in a non-threatening manner, and raising the profile of futures thinking in New Zealand.

If change is framed as a linear process, thinking, talking, and taking action can be understood to be consecutive phases towards change. In most cases the Secondary Futures process was seen to extend participants' thinking, particularly in terms of helping people to adopt a futures lens on education. Although the whole engagement process was seen to encourage new thinking, of particular effect were the tools used, the focus on opening up possibilities beyond current constraints, and inclusive group discussion. Clarity on how secondary education could change for a better future was rated more negatively than other questions relating to the Phase One objectives. The tension between the aim of eliciting a shared vision and the aim of opening up possibilities is evident in futures thinking literature itself. Four-fifths of interviewees considered that Secondary Futures raises the level of discussion about futures thinking outside of the engagements themselves. Participants had spoken to a range of people. They generally directed their

attention to those at a similar or lower level on an educational decision-making hierarchy and mostly discussed what futures thinking could mean for their organisation.

Less than two-fifths of interviewees clearly suggested that actions followed on from engagements, while another fifth gave more qualified agreement. Considering that a greater proportion of feedback form comments stated an intention to act, it appears that good intentions were not always followed through. Still, interviewees who had taken action as a result of their experience were most likely to have: sought further involvement with Secondary Futures; used the Secondary Futures tools elsewhere; or fed futures thinking ideas into organisational planning or policy development. The desire for ongoing connection with the project indicates that people find the engagement stimulating but that, as is suggested by school-based professional development literature, a one-off experience is not always sufficient for them to be able to translate the ideas into actions within their own environment.

Interviewees believed that there were constraints to making changes. While some constraints were seen to reside within Secondary Futures, the rest were located within organisations, particularly schools, as well as the wider education system and policy environment. Interviewees offered a range of suggestions to address these constraints and improve Secondary Futures as a whole. Suggestions mainly recommended that Secondary Futures should work towards having a greater sphere of influence, particularly in the domains of policy and practice. The suggestions provided also highlighted that there are conflicting views and expectations of the project.

Overall, the findings suggest that Secondary Futures has developed tools and techniques to successfully work with a range of stakeholders and open up futures thinking. However, the project has now come to a point where many stakeholders are asking "What happens next?" On the basis of the evaluation we suggest that Secondary Futures develop processes to help manage challenges that are symptomatic of the project attempting to adopt a systems change approach with stakeholders who operate within more managerialist environments. We also pose a number of questions that could be considered to help shape the focus and implementation of Phase Two. In line with the Secondary Futures principle of collective ownership, we suggest that this discussion should involve a range of stakeholders, and any decisions be clearly and widely disseminated.