

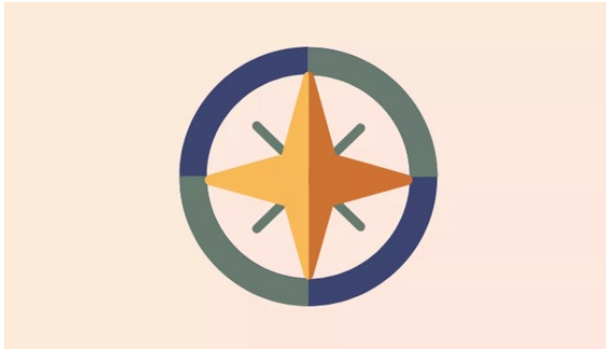
Learning Futures: a CenTCS exploration

June 2026

WORLD
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GLASGOW

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Introduction



The CenTCS project streams are derived from our Research Compass (see [website](#)). This brief set of annotated slides captures some of the underpinning thinking that is driving the activities of Project Stream 3.

The slides explain the focus of the stream and then introduce some key propositions from Futures Thinking that are driving both *what* we are researching and *how* we are researching.

Learning Futures: Justice, Sustainability, and the Digital Turn

This project stream investigates how educator learning can become a generative force for justice and sustainability amid rapid technological, geopolitical and planetary transformations. It explores pedagogies that open up learning beyond the classroom—across human and more-than-human relationships, digital and material worlds—to imagine new ways of being, learning, and teaching that serve to drive change for social good rather than simply react to external forces. Our research approaches aim to support the creation, rather than merely description, of educational conditions for a just and thriving future.

Learning futures' is the third of three CenTCS project streams, identified by members through a collaborative exercise that initially produced the Centre's Research Compass:

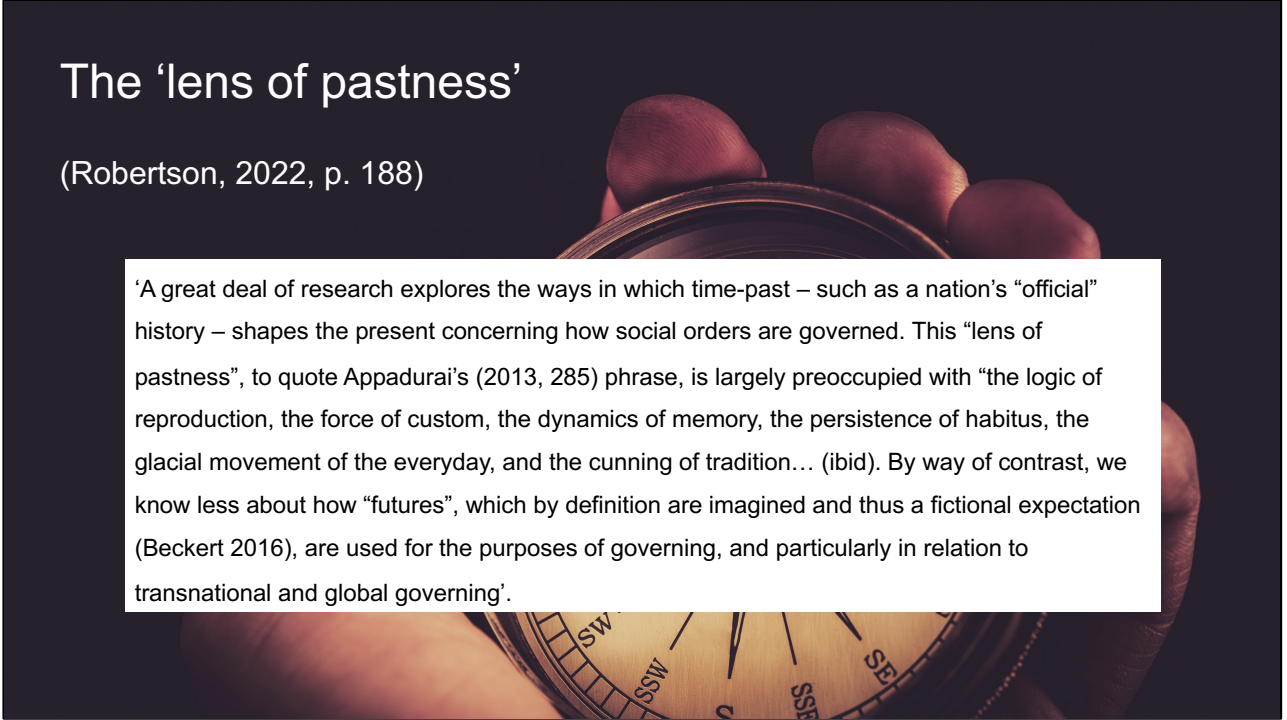
<https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/centcs/researchcompass/>

The text on the slide is the overview of this Stream, as agreed by the CenTCS community. It essentially makes three propositions that frame the work in this project stream:

1. Educator learning can help frame future possibilities
2. Futures are formed across human, digital and material worlds
3. Research can help to create educational conditions, not just describe them.

The 'lens of pastness'

(Robertson, 2022, p. 188)



'A great deal of research explores the ways in which time-past – such as a nation's "official" history – shapes the present concerning how social orders are governed. This "lens of pastness", to quote Appadurai's (2013, 285) phrase, is largely preoccupied with "the logic of reproduction, the force of custom, the dynamics of memory, the persistence of habitus, the glacial movement of the everyday, and the cunning of tradition... (ibid). By way of contrast, we know less about how "futures", which by definition are imagined and thus a fictional expectation (Beckert 2016), are used for the purposes of governing, and particularly in relation to transnational and global governing'.

We're interested in making explicit the forces that govern our educational decision making, acknowledging that the 'lens of pastness' is a powerful shaper of decisions in the present. The lens of pastness supports a narrative that positions innovation as 'dangerous experimentation', appealing to the status quo as a 'safer' way to do things. We're therefore keen to use Futures Thinking as a way of imagining alternatives, and of seeking greater equilibrium between appeals to status quo and conservatism and thinking differently and risk taking.



A Future Studies perspective?

Future Studies is not about 'predicting the future', but an approach to imagining and describing possible futures, based on past and present – “walking backwards into the future”

The phrase 'walking backwards into the future' comes from a Māori proverb and is often used in Future Thinking. It helps to orient ideas in their current context, without being blinded by fixed notions of the future as an extension of the status quo. We're drawing on Futures Thinking as a framework for considering how things might be done differently – not as an acontextual or ahistorical wish list, but as a structured, analytical approach to building scenarios based on careful consideration of past experiences and the present situation. We see this orientation as central to making 'good' decisions.

‘The future is plural’ (Bengston, 2018, p. 194)



‘A core principle for thinking about the future is that it is plural: Rather than a single future, there are countless possible alternative futures (Dator, 2002; de Jouvenel, 1967; Masini, 1993). Plural futures are foreign to our normal pattern of speaking and thinking (May, 2002). In everyday English usage, we refer to “the future” as if it is singular, futurists often talk about “the futures” (Dator, 2002).’

Considering possible futures as plural helps us to consciously reject the notion that ‘the future’ is somehow fixed and predictable., and that there is nothing we can do to shape what it might look like. Thinking in terms of ‘futures’ affords possibility and agency that is restricted by a singular conception of ‘the future’. This opens up exciting possibilities that help us to think creatively and expansively.

Futures thinking scenarios: The future is possible, plausible, probable and preferable (Bengston, 2018, p. 194)

Possible – largest category of scenarios. May seem “far out” but ‘[t]he world is . . . full of things that intelligent and well-educated people at one time believed to be impossible’ (Bell 1997, p. 78)

Plausible – believable and consistent with our current understanding of science, technology, society

Probable – most likely; the continuation of the status quo

Preferable – what we individually or collectively want to happen, based on value judgements.



Bengston's categorisation of possible, plausible, probable and preferable futures provides a useful and accessible framework for building scenarios. We have drawn on this framework in exploring with teachers and education managers how the educator workforce might be differently organised in order to facilitate more effective professional learning, improve support for inclusion and enhance conditions for both young people and their educators.



Anticipatory governance: when Futures Thinking meets policy

'In response to uncertain times, liberal democracies aspire to develop anticipatory practices that usher in changes in policies and governance. These practices include creating visions and implementing roadmaps, which seek to address, and ultimately preempt, future challenges' (Kallo & Välimaa, 2024, p. 367).

We've been toying with the discourse of futures thinking and thinking about how it can be perceived in different space. This has led us to consider the relationship between futures thinking and 'anticipatory governance'. They both share a future orientation, but anticipatory governance has a tighter focus on future thinking in order to prepare for future governance scenarios. In this sense futures thinking on its own – without associating it with anticipatory governance – may provide a more open and creative space. However, this has to be balanced with the chances of having a genuinely open futures thinking approach be taken up in policy and practice. These are questions we are wrestling with in our work with school and education managers.

Futures of Education

Vision. Foresight. Research. Dialogue

<https://www.unesco.org/en/futures-education>

While futures thinking is not widely used in academic research in education, it is widely used by UNESCO (and to a lesser extent by OECD). UNESCO's 'Futures of Education' programme – which uses the strapline – 'Vision. Foresight. Research, Dialogue' – “anticipates and imagines new possibilities for education. It looks beyond the immediacy of today and tomorrow and takes a longer-term view of the purposes, functions and processes of education. Because education shapes the future, it is vital to generate ideas and suggest orientation to construct the future of education.” (<https://www.unesco.org/en/futures-education>).

Taking 'a longer-term view' is perhaps a luxury of such transnational organisation – something that local and national governments find harder to do, especially if they are elected administrations within liberal democracies, where the election cycle demands quick results.

Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education (UNESCO, 2021, p. 80)

Chapter 5

The transformative work of teachers

'In a new social contract for education, teachers must be at the centre and their profession revalued and reimagined as a collaborative endeavour which sparks new knowledge to bring about educational and social transformation.'

This UNESCO report has lots to say about teacher education and professional learning. Although not much is radical or different to what is already known about professional learning challenges and effective conditions. The report acknowledges that

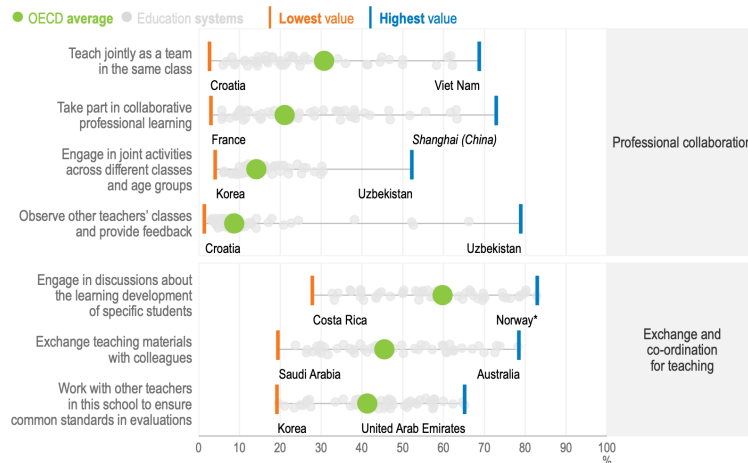
'Teachers need opportunities for professional development, education, and support to work with different population groups who are ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse, to include and adequately support students with special needs, and to personalize learning. They must ensure that learners from historically excluded and marginalized groups are adequately supported. This is becoming especially true for regions where the classroom makeup may be radically transformed by increased migration and internal displacement resulting from climate change, social and political violence, and armed conflict – conditions which are anticipated to grow in the coming years.' (p. 86).

These broad, global challenges are also felt keenly in the Scottish context, and

we are exploring with some local teachers what that might mean in terms of workforce organisation and development, focusing on increasing collaboration.

Figure 6.2. Teachers' collaborative practices

Percentage of lower secondary teachers who do the following activities at least once a month



Note: *Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to higher risk of non-response bias.
Source: OECD, TALIS 2024 Database, Table 6.3.

**Results from
TALIS 2024:
The state of
teaching
(OECD, 2025)**

'TALIS shows that successful teaching is the product of successful collaboration. Teachers deserve a work environment that encourages and values change, innovation and co-operation. We expect them to prepare our children for the future, not the past we have already lived.' (p. 3)

Collaboration is seen as a key way for teachers to both teach and learn well, and the most recent TALIS survey has some interesting data to report in this regard.

Where next?

This work contributes to the Centre's Research Compass by advancing generative, justice-oriented approaches that build collective capacity and create more sustainable, equitable futures for schools.

Drawing on a Futures Thinking approach supports the CenTCS mission of generating practice-transforming knowledge, by co-developing and exploring alternative ways of organising educator work around collaborative, practice-based professional learning.

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Central to the work on this project stream is the idea that research into learning futures should be generative, i.e. that it generates transformative professional learning as well as researching it. We believe that a Futures Thinking approach will allow us to fulfill that mission.

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