

# **Futures literacy as a special soft skill – concept of a new research**

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## **Abstract**

There is an increasing demand for a better understanding and use of soft skills and futures literacy in terms of business performance. This paper sets up a research concept that links these areas and provides new insights into the futures field in five specific streams. These are futures literacy as a special soft skill; futures skills in the labour market; international comparison with Asia; futures literacy and anticipation development; and case studies of entrepreneurial successes. The rationale for, the objectives and the scope of the research are followed by specific research questions and methods adapted.. The research results cover theoretical and methodological contribution to the field as well as development and training programmes for futures literacy enhancement.

**Keywords:** futures literacy, anticipation, foresight, labour market

## **Introduction**

Recent decades in the increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world calls for new foundations in social research. One among them is the determining role of soft skills of human agents. These are inter- and intrapersonal abilities that help deal with others and manage oneself including emotions in the way the workplace requires (Hurrell et al., 2013). Soft skills in this perspective are built by personality and habits but cannot neglect performativity (Almonte, 2022).

The emerging consciousness of the importance of the future and its possible management is another hot issue (Sombala, 2019). Since probabilities, classical forecasts and even classical scenario building fail to incorporate the changing environment into strategic management, the development of futures studies and foresight are increasingly appreciated and adapted in various social fields with business management among (Crawford, 2019). In recent years anticipation, the human capability to use the future is coming to the forefront in order to improve the understanding what futures individuals, social groups and organisations create and what mechanisms they use to do so. Futures literacy, the conscious ability to use the future seems to be a crucial element of soft skills, and hence an outstanding concept for the business world to measure and develop (Miller, 2018; Mangus et al., 2021).

This paper aims to draft a recently emerging research concept on how futures literacy appears as a soft skill, how it varies by cultures and labour market participants, how it can be measured and developed as a management tool.

## **Objective and scope**

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The objective of the research is unfolding and developing futures literacy and foresight activities as entrepreneurial soft skills. By doing so, the project is to collect academic foundations and findings, educational and training materials as well as practical experiences on futures literacy (FL) among past (successful cases), present (start-ups and small-medium enterprises - SMEs) and future (Budapest Business University - BBU students) entrepreneurs.

The research of futures literacy, soft skills and entrepreneurship is quite complex, and needs to be shrunk into specific sub-topics or streams. Considering the time frame – one year –, the background as well as the ongoing research programmes, this project grasps the topic in five streams as follows.

- a) *Futures literacy as a special soft skill*: This stream discusses the conceptual foundations of futures literacy, soft skills and foresight. A review on how foresight can be adapted unfolds different anticipatory systems and the way futures literacy can be measured.
- b) *Futures skills in the labour market*: The new technological era and the highly complex, networked world challenge enterprises what soft skills, among them futures literacy, future success demands. The problem addresses both employers and employees. Since the focus of the research is the adaptation of futures literacy in management and education, the analysis compares the soft/futures skill expectations of companies and the employees who just enter the market and who are potential future entrepreneurs, i.e., university students.
- c) *International comparison – foresight and FL in Asia*: Since human thinking and behaviour are culturally also framed, futures literacy and foresight activity differ by different regions of the world. This stream wishes to have an insight in the Asian mindset of foresight and to make a comparison in terms of the futures skills by companies and university students of a selected region.
- d) *Futures literacy and anticipation development*: Futures literacy is a capacity that may change by learning and can be developed. This stream deals with the methods and practice of improving futures literacy of students and entrepreneurs. During the research period three main areas are discovered and experienced: interactive academic courses, futures gaming and action research workshops
- e) *Entrepreneurial successes in a FL perspective – case studies*: This is a “best-practice” approach. Enterprises were successful in the past as well. Lessons on the success of start-up or crisis facing companies and businessmen from a futures perspective is a fruitful source of identifying futures literacy, anticipation and foresight elements and practices.

## **Background building blocks**

The research has several pillars in the past. Partly regarding the personal and academic experiences, which provide reliable capabilities and active international links to run the research. In addition, the programme is built on some past results and ongoing projects.

### *Personal capabilities and links*

I have been involved in futures studies for 25 years in terms of education and research, partly at the Corvinus University (the only futures studies department in Hungary), at Ecostat Research Institute (strategic macroeconomic research) and at BBS. I have also been involved

in the international community of futures studies, mainly by the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), also as a member of the Executive Board for five years. I directed the organisation of three world conferences in 2005, 2008 and 2009. I managed to gain direct and good personal and academic relationship with experts of the field all over the world. This research is based on some of the relevant experts/centres as follows:

- Riel Miller – former Head of Foresight at the United Nations Economic and Social Committee (UNESCO), leading expert on futures literacy theory, practice and workshop
- René Rohrbeck – chair on Foresight, Innovation and Transformation at the École des Hautes Etudes Commerciales du Nord (EDHEC) Business School, France. The leading expert of corporate foresight
- Peter Hayward – former professor of Swinburne’s Master of Strategic Foresight (MSF) program, Australia. A leading expert on futures gaming.
- Fabienne Gaux-Baudiment – former president of WFSF, professor and consultant. One of the creators of The Game of the Great Transition, a foresight and futures literacy experiencing and developing tool
- Roberto Poli – full professor of the University of Trento, teaching social foresight, and a main expert of anticipation theory
- Finland Futures Research Centre – one of the main professional research centres on foresight with much relation to business and economics, as a part of the Turku School of Economics
- Department of Education and Futures Design, Tamkang University, Taiwan – the main centre of Asian foresight studies and practice, it runs the doctoral program in Foresight for Educational Leadership and Technology Management, and a centre of Asian-Pacific Futures Network.

### *Academic background*

I am currently running courses both directly on futures studies – Strategic foresight – in the doctoral school of BBS and other masters courses in a foresight perspective, but I also used to run classes on Futures studies. I managed to participate in a BBS research team working on the future of business higher education, comparing the visions and systemic strategies of teachers and students (Csillag et al., 2015). Recently I edited a book by the PhD students of BBS on the different applications of foresight practice and hence types of futures and methods (Gáspár, 2023). In addition, I have experience in basic skills development and future orientation too, while teaching small children at primary school for several years.

As an economist by profession, I have had a constant view on the relationship of the economic field and foresight. Improving futures literacy from the education side is based on these curricula and the book I published at Akadémiai Kiadó on foresight entitled *Strategia Sapiens* (Gáspár, 2012) and some journal papers on foresight issues and pedagogy (Gáspár, 2015a, 2015b).

As for the futures and labour market, since 2021 a research team by Tímea Juhász, Gabriella Horváth-Csikós and myself have been working on exploring the soft skills of employers and future employees (Horváth-Csikós, Juhász and Gáspár, 2023; Juhász, Horváth-Csikós and Gáspár, 2023, Horváth-Csikós, Juhász and Gáspár, 2022). On futures and labour market I also made comparative research with primary school students, age 10 and 14 (Gáspár, 2019, 2021).

These experiences we are extending to international comparison, and the present research is moving towards the exploration of futures skills.

### *Sofia Summer School: Foundations of Futures Literacy*

In July 2023 the Centre of Strategic Foresight in Bulgaria organised a summer school in Sofia. The participants represented more than ten countries of the world, mainly active practitioners and educators of the futures field. The school programme was set up and directed by Kwamou Eva Feukeu, the Decolonial Lead at Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law, Hamburg-DE; Riel Miller, former Head of Foresight and Futures Literacy, UNESCO, Paris; and Roumiana Gotseva, Founder and Managing Director of the Center for Strategic Foresight, Sofia-BG. The five days intensive course provided deep insight in futures literacy and anticipation both by practice and its conceptual and methodological framework. The interactive workshops and discussions were designed to develop futures literacy labs in several countries. The participants could also contribute with their own experience. Regarding the present research draft, I managed to share a fifteen-year experience in developing futures literacy skills with small children. Preparing the presentation as well as the comments and questions to it helped a lot to design the present research concept.

### **Literature review**

The umbrella concept of the research is soft skills – such as resilience, responsibility, persuasion, teamwork, analysis, empathy, and not at last anticipation, etc. As Gascóna and Gallifab (2022) define, they psychologically describe the learning, thinking and acting characteristics of people. Among many effects, these features help people anticipate professional futures and career orientation; however, they are not easy to acquire, measure and develop, and the education system is short of deploying these tasks. Rasli et al (2020) add that this way they mainly develop over time as people gain knowledge and experience, to a great extent on workplaces. In addition, all industries demand specific skills, where hard and soft skills are both fundamental, in many cases linked together.

Anticipation means the capacity to make decisions in the present according to forecasts about something that may eventually happen. The form future takes in the present is anticipation. This is not necessarily a human feature, since many biological, economic or social system realities possess this capacity (Poli, 2010; Miller and Poli, 2010). Futures literacy (FL) is the conscious knowledge and skill of anticipation. That is, a clear distinction of what type of futures one uses, how it is used and how the tools and methods suit (Miller, Poli and Rossel, 2018). Regarding foresight, we refer to the variety of applications of future intelligence in order to detect emerging issues and to reveal the scope of futures so that inform the present-day decision making and mobilise joint actions (Miles and Keenan cited by Saritas et al., 2022). Sardar, (2010) argues that though there is no clear or definite distinction, foresight is more widely used in terms of the corporate field activities, while futures studies is more societally and culturally framed and uses a longer interpretation of futures.

Corporate foresight is mainly the business field of futures activities. Rohrbeck and Kum (2018) find that it is applied with the expectation that it will help firms to break away from path dependency, help decision makers to define superior courses of action, and ultimately enable superior firm performance. In terms of corporate foresight practice Kononiuk, Szacio-

Szymanska and Gáspár (2017) highlight that the openness to foresight managerial competence is indispensable for foresight capacity building within organization.

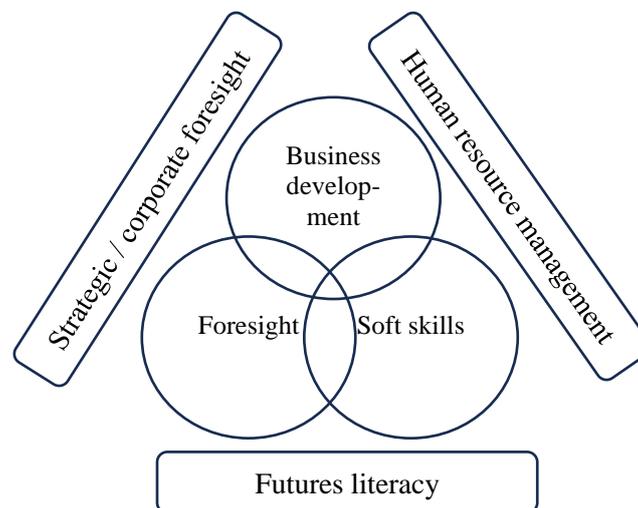
All in all the relevance of improving foresight skills is undeniable.

When paying attention to success, Hines (2016) found four specific challenges or barriers to integrating foresight in organisations: (1) foresight competes for attention (2) foresight is perceived as threatening (3) foresight is viewed as intangible and (4) foresight capacity is lacking. As Rohrbeck and Kum (2018) experienced, although we are witnessing the rising adoption of corporate foresight within firms, its application seems to, on average, still lack comprehensiveness, continuity, and institutionalization.

Rohrbeck and Kum (2018) also prepared a measurement for future preparedness and concluded that future prepared firms (vigilant) had a significantly higher likelihood of making it to the group of industry outperformers. The analysis they made has revealed that vigilant firms had a 33% higher profitability and a 200% higher market capitalization growth when compared with the sample average. Recently the researchers of the Futures Research Centre in Turku developed a scale of measurement for futures consciousness on a psychological basis (Ahvenharju-Minkkinen-Lalot, 2018; Lalot et al., 2019, 2021; Ahvenharju et al., 2021).

By a wider scope of literature review I find that there is a research gap in business development, foresight and soft skills. Though each of the two are linked together and discussed, futures literacy as a special soft skill for present and future entrepreneurs is not yet analysed properly (Figure 1.)

**Figure 1:** Research topics by combinations of foresight, soft skills and business development



**Source:** own editing

### Research questions

In order to filling in the research gap, the following research questions emerge in terms of the five research streams discusses above.

- a) In terms of a soft skill, what traits do futures literacy and the different forms of foresight have?  
b) How can futures literacy be measured?

What expectations do employers and employees have in terms of future soft skills? Is there any gap between the expectations?

What differences can be detected in futures skills among Asian and Hungarian entrepreneurs and students?

How can futures literacy and foresight practice can be developed?

What futures literacy elements can be revealed in the successful entrepreneurial cases?

### **Research methods**

In terms of strategy, the research is an applied by type, both inductive and deductive as well as idiographic and nomothetic by approach, mixed research by methodological perspective and cross-sectional by time. Regarding the data collection, the research questions demand both quantitative and qualitative methods like documentary investigation such as documentary analysis and content analysis, multivariable statistical analysis such as regression and factor analysis, inquiry such as survey, observations in terms of futures gaming, action research and case studies.

### **Expected results**

The research is going to result in the following contributions to the field of futures literacy:

theoretical contribution to the discussion and debate on futures literacy by revealing features of futures literacy as a special soft skill;

methodologically it is still an emerging field how to measure and develop futures literacy. By course experience and action research workshops present project is to unfold new ways to do so;

in terms of practice the research will collect a set of case studies on successful and failing enterprises regarding how they used the future for business development;

from educational point of view the result is to improve the Doctoral School programme, and set up new curricula and materials for the planned Organisation and management masters programme as well as entrepreneurial trainings.

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