

## Prospective Process through Scenarios

'Prospective Process through Scenarios' is a futures procedure for strategic thinking. It provides the methods and techniques needed to explore the future and to approach complex issues of a long-term nature in a creative way. The process encourages unconventional thinking and influences the mindsets of people taking part to embrace the concepts of "pre-activity" (understanding) and "pro-activity" (influencing). The Prospective Process through Scenarios does not attempt to predict or forecast the actual future, but rather it allows people to "think, talk, plan and act" creatively about the future.

The process involves the creation of a single preferred future vision, the 'prospective', that is reached following the creation and examination of a number of 'scenarios'. Scenarios are well-worked, internally consistent and evocative stories or images of the future. They do not represent *the* future; instead they portray a range of *possible* futures. Evaluating present policy decisions against alternative scenarios is known as 'future proofing'. Formulating policy in this way ensures that it is more robust in the long-term and that it makes the achievement of the preferred future, the prospective, more likely. Policies or plans based on this type of approach can result in the closer alignment to the likely future circumstances.

If the Prospective Process through Scenarios is to be effective, it should adhere to a number of principles. The process must:

- look ahead to address long-term concerns;
- look breadthways to study interactions;
- look in-depth to identify significant trends and critical uncertainties;
- consider the consequences of present decision-making on the future.

### **Status**

The Prospective Process through Scenarios combines elements of a number of approaches used in 'futures studies' and it draws on both international and European experience. It is based on two main approaches: prospective and scenarios. The prospective method (or 'la prospective') has French origins and was initiated as a way of thinking about the future by Gaston Berger in the 1950's. The concept of prospective, based on Berger and de Jouvenel's work, has been developed by their successors (M. Godet, F. Goux de Baudiment and others) over recent decades. As a result, the prospective method has evolved into a range of varying strands to support the realisation of different tasks, and today, it is becoming more popularly applied across Europe in a variety of strategic settings. The modern scenario tradition is attributed to Herman Kahn and the RAND Corporation in the 1950's. Kahn adopted the word 'scenario' when Hollywood decreed the term outdated in preference of the label 'screenplay', and the scenarios he developed were used in military strategic planning for the US Government. Today, scenarios are renowned as being one of the most popular and widely used futures methods.

The [Futures Academy](#) has produced a large volume of literature on the Prospective Process through Scenarios demonstrating its application within a range of settings.

## ***Application***

The Prospective Process through Scenarios can be applied effectively to almost any subject matter or issue (owing in particular to its flexible nature), but it is especially useful when examining issues of a complex and/or uncertain nature. The process can be used to address a single issue or problem or more complex problems incorporating a number of interrelated issues that require the involvement of a variety of interests.

The process is suitable for application at many strategic levels and by a variety of stakeholders including:

- public sector,
- private sector,
- community and voluntary sectors,
- industry,
- academia,
- local and regional planning.

Furthermore, there is no strict limit to the scale at which the process can be applied. It can be used, for example, at each of the following spatial levels: global, European, national, urban region, city, district, neighbourhood, estate and building. The process can also be applied at the specific project level.

## ***Procedure***

The Prospective Process through Scenarios follows a number of logical stages that combine the use of several futures methods and techniques in a flexible but coherent way. The process adopts an iterative approach, and data collected at any stage can be continually recycled and integrated back into other stages as necessary. Producing the prospective is not the only product of the process; it is a learning process that represents an innovative way to prepare for the future. Figure 1 illustrates the Prospective Process through Scenarios.

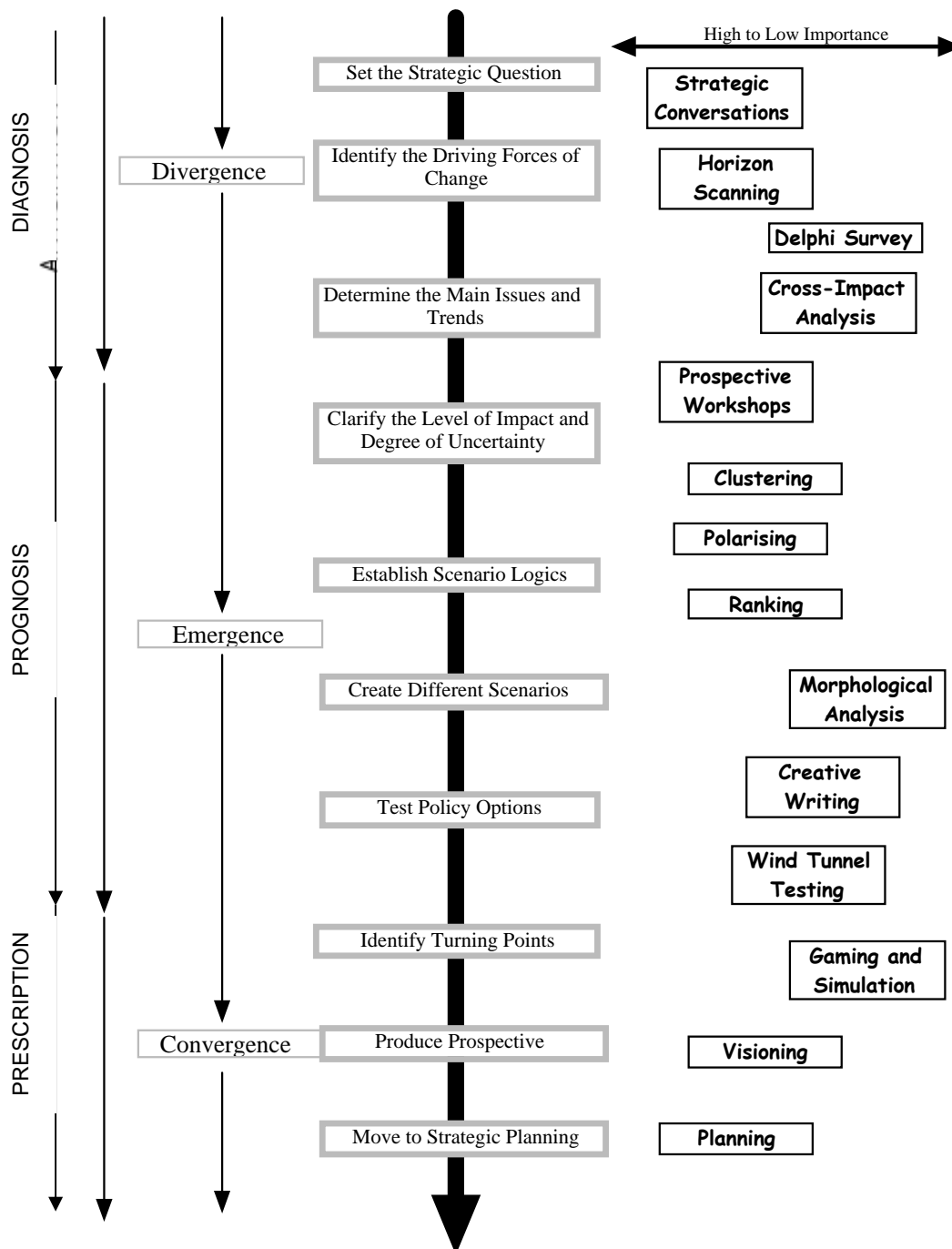
The process is discussed here in three parts: diagnosis, prognosis and prescription.

### **1. Diagnosis**

Diagnosis is the first part of the process and is concerned initially with identifying the underlying purpose (i.e. the problem in hand) for carrying out the process. This is called 'setting the strategic question' and must convey an exact statement of what is to be achieved as a result of the process. Following this, 'divergent thinking' can begin. This involves 'looking outwards' and exploring the future to gain a better understanding and fresh perspective of the present situation. This part of the process involves a number of tasks:

- formulation of the problem or 'strategic question' to help focus the process and act as a point of reference throughout;
- understanding of the present situation by identifying key issues, factors and actors (and the interactions between each);
- exploring the future by identifying the major driving forces shaping the future;
- determining the main issues, trends and critical uncertainties that might impact on the strategic question.

Figure 1: Prospective Process through Scenarios – the procedure



Source: Ratcliffe and Gannon (2005) [The Futures Academy](#)

## 2. Prognosis

Prognosis is the next part of the process during which ‘emergent thinking’ takes place. The issues previously discussed are developed more formally into ideas until patterns and inter-relationships begin to emerge: in this way, scenarios are created. Development of scenarios follows a specific and rigorous structure so that the results are coherent, robust, creative, and most importantly, thought-provoking. The scenarios allow for structured thinking about the future and represent tangible images

of possible future environments within which policy decisions can be tested - the 'wind tunnel test'.

### 3. Prescription

The third and final part of the process involves a number of important stages, the first of which is the creation of the preferred future vision (the prospective). It is perhaps the most important vision created throughout the overall process as it represents the goal towards which policy decisions should be directed and therefore requires focus.

For this, it is crucial to address the issues of implementation and monitoring. The overall process is futile if the lessons learned are not incorporated into strategic planning. The real value of the process can only be realised if the prospective and associated policies are integrated into decision-making and long-term planning. Implementation is therefore key to the success and effectiveness of the Prospective Process through Scenarios. Monitoring also plays a pivotal role in achieving the prospective. Progress must be monitored regularly by revisiting the scenarios and policies and evaluating the current state of play against them.

#### ***Methods and techniques***

The Prospective Process through Scenarios is qualitative in nature. The methods and techniques employed rely primarily on qualitative data and draw largely on people's opinions, experiences, knowledge and perceptions about the future. One of the main benefits of the process is that it adopts a qualitative approach often overlooked by traditional planning practices.

The methods and techniques most commonly used during the Prospective Process through Scenarios include: strategic conversations, horizon scanning, survey questionnaires, brainstorming, scenario creation, GIS, modelling, wind tunnel testing, visioning, futures workshops (see relevant descriptions in [Select method](#)).

#### ***Advantages and disadvantages***

The main advantages of the Prospective Process through Scenarios are that it is:

- an interactive process that encourages participation at a wide-range of levels to produce a common, shared vision for the future;
- a flexible procedure that offers a variety of methods and techniques to tackle complexity and uncertainty about the future in a variety of strategic settings;
- a creative process that stimulates people to think differently and 'outside the box' in an imaginative, innovative and intuitive manner.

The main disadvantages of the Prospective Process through Scenarios are that:

- stakeholders may be engaged in the process but not all will have the relevant decision-making power to implement the outcomes;
- there is a risk that the final vision will be ignored in favour of continuing work in a 'business as usual' manner;
- the lack of scientific evidence (owing to the nature of 'futures studies') often deters people from taking part in, or accepting the process.

To learn where to find more information about PPtS, go to [Further reading](#).