

Future Frictions

Designing the Future of Education

A three-hour workshop to interview, investigate, prototype, test and revise a concept, then plan a responsible pilot. The 90-minute sprint develops an initial concept and prototype.

Prepare

Teams of 3-5; paper, pens, sticky notes, a timer and accessible alternatives. Print one workbook (pages 3-7), signals sheet (17), canvas (18), poster (19) and reflection sheet (20) per team. Print one card deck (8-16) for the room.

Begin immediately

Choose one scenario and one learner. Spend three minutes describing a concrete difficult moment: where are they, what are they trying to do, and what gets in the way?

Work with uncertainty

Scenarios are provocations, not forecasts. Learner cards are fictional, not research findings. Mark assumptions and use real conversations and local evidence to challenge them.

Use the pack

Page 2: facilitator run sheet. Pages 3-7: participant workbook. Pages 8-13: twelve scenario cards. Pages 14-16: six learner cards. Page 17: signals. Page 18: canvas. Page 19: showcase. Page 20: reflection.

180 minutes | Introduction 15 | Engage 20 | Evaluate 20 | Explore 30 | Break 10 | Expand 30 | Execute 30 | Showcase 20 | Reflection 5

Short option: 90 minutes using the first six cards. Introduction 10; stages 10, 10, 15, 15, 15; showcase 10; reflection 5.

Keep the future concrete.

Use a visible timer. Invite drawing, speaking or writing; offer quiet thinking before group discussion.

00-15 | Open

Choose a scenario and learner. Imagine education ten years from today. Give teams three minutes to name a difficult moment. Ask for one sentence; park debates about whether the scenario will happen.

15-35 | Engage

Conduct a paired interview about a real experience; refine learner needs. Identify a goal, barrier and unmet need. Label invented details. Write: How might we help [person] to [goal] when [friction]?

35-55 | Evaluate

Use the signals sheet. Choose two signals and inspect a source. Add local evidence. Separate observation, interpretation and assumption. Select one uncertainty to investigate.

55-85 | Explore

Think silently for three minutes, then share contrasting ideas. Ask: what if no new technology were allowed? Develop three ideas; choose one by learner value, inclusion and testability.

85-95 | Break

Take ten minutes away from the task. Return ready to prototype and test.

95-125 | Expand

Sketch, storyboard or role-play the experience. Swap with another team. Ask them to attempt a task; capture confusion and feedback. Revise one feature.

125-155 | Execute

Complete the six-part canvas. Name a small pilot, accountable owner, safeguard, outcome measure and review date. Identify a condition that would make you pause.

155-175 | Showcase / 175-180 | Reflection

Five minutes: assemble the poster. Fifteen minutes: presentations; name one benefit, one concern and one next test. Final five minutes: write a headline from ten years in the future, reflect on what surprised you and agree a next action.

Understand the Future Learner

Team: _____ Scenario: _____ Learner: _____

Take turns interviewing a colleague about a real learning experience. Capture a concrete difficulty, then use it to refine your fictional learner's needs. Separate observations from assumptions.

Who is affected by this challenge?

What are they experiencing?

What frustrations, hopes or aspirations might they have?

What might success look like for them?

Output: A future learner profile and challenge statement.

Explore Signals and Evidence

Team: _____ Scenario: _____ Learner: _____

Inspect two relevant sources and one piece of local evidence. Record their dates and limitations. Identify an assumption the evidence challenges and an uncertainty you still need to investigate.

What trends influence this challenge?

Which trends appear most significant?

What evidence supports these trends?

What assumptions are we making?

Output: Three key future insights.

Generate Possibilities

Team: _____ Scenario: _____ Learner: _____

Develop three distinct responses to your challenge. Compare their learner value, inclusion and feasibility, then choose one to prototype. Explain why you selected it.

What possibilities emerge from our How might we question?

How can we build on each other's ideas and challenge traditional assumptions?

Which three promising concepts will we take forward?

Output: Three promising concepts.

Develop a Future Concept

Team: _____ Scenario: _____ Learner: _____

Build a sketch, storyboard or role-play. Ask another team to attempt a learner task. Observe where they struggle, record their feedback and revise at least one feature. If working alone, arrange a later test and mark the concept as untested.

What is the concept name and proposed solution?

How would learners interact with it?

What benefits and outcomes could it create?

What risks or challenges might emerge?

Output: One future-focused education concept.

Responsible Implementation Canvas

Team: _____ Scenario: _____ Learner: _____

Define a small pilot, its owner and the support required. Name an ethical or inclusion safeguard, a measure of success, a review date and a condition that would make you pause the pilot.

People: Who benefits? Who might be disadvantaged?

Inclusion: Who could be excluded? How can access be improved?

Ethics: What unintended consequences might emerge? How will risks be managed?

Sustainability: Can this be maintained over time? What resources would be required?

Governance: Who should oversee implementation? What policies or guidelines are needed?

Success: How would impact be measured? What evidence would demonstrate success?

Output: Implementation roadmap.

Use the separate six-part canvas on page 18 to stress-test your roadmap.

Possible futures

Pick one card. Focus on a concrete moment for your learner, not a prediction about the entire sector.

SCENARIO 01 / PROVOCATION

AI Everywhere

Imagine education ten years from today. Every student has access to a highly capable AI learning companion that provides tutoring, feedback, content generation, coaching and personalised support. Many educational tasks can now be completed with AI assistance.

- What becomes more valuable?
- What becomes less important?
- When should a human step in?

How might we design learning experiences that help students develop critical thinking, creativity and judgement in a world where AI is always available?

SCENARIO 02 / PROVOCATION

Assessment Reimagined

Imagine a future where traditional examinations no longer provide confidence that learning has occurred. Universities must develop new approaches to assessing knowledge, capability and human potential.

- What should a learner demonstrate?
- How could feedback become part of assessment?
- What evidence respects privacy?

How might we create meaningful forms of assessment that remain valuable in an AI-enabled world?

Possible futures

Pick one card. Focus on a concrete moment for your learner, not a prediction about the entire sector.

SCENARIO 03 / PROVOCATION

Lifelong Learning

Imagine a future where people expect to learn continuously throughout their careers and many workers retrain or reskill every five years.

- What can happen in twenty minutes?
- How can prior experience count?
- Who pays for time to learn?

How might we make lifelong learning engaging, accessible and sustainable?

SCENARIO 04 / PROVOCATION

The Flexible University

Students learn through universities, employers, industry providers, online platforms and professional communities. Traditional educational boundaries become increasingly blurred.

- Who defines a worthwhile outcome?
- How is local knowledge recognised?
- Who supports a learner when a partnership ends?

How might universities remain relevant and valuable within a distributed learning ecosystem?

Possible futures

Pick one card. Focus on a concrete moment for your learner, not a prediction about the entire sector.

SCENARIO 05 / PROVOCATION

Learner Wellbeing

Students face increasing uncertainty, information overload and competing personal, professional and academic commitments.

- What would make a learner return?
- Where does belonging happen?
- What could a team test next week?

How might education better support wellbeing, belonging and learner success?

SCENARIO 06 / PROVOCATION

Inclusive Futures

Student populations become increasingly diverse in culture, age, ability, background and learning preference.

- Who is missing from the room?
- What works with low bandwidth?
- How can learners choose how to participate?

How might educational experiences become more inclusive, equitable and accessible?

Possible futures

Pick one card. Focus on a concrete moment for your learner, not a prediction about the entire sector.

SCENARIO 07 / PROVOCATION

The Overwhelmed Educator

Imagine education ten years from today. Automation has reduced routine tasks but created new demands for checking outputs and supporting learners.

- What should stop?
- What must remain a human responsibility?
- How will workload actually improve?

How might we protect time for the human work of teaching?

SCENARIO 08 / PROVOCATION

The Degree Unbundled

Imagine education ten years from today. Learners assemble portfolios of short credentials from multiple providers instead of one three-year qualification.

- What role does a university play?
- How do learners demonstrate capability?
- How is quality maintained?

How might we make a fragmented learning journey coherent and trusted?

Possible futures

Pick one card. Focus on a concrete moment for your learner, not a prediction about the entire sector.

SCENARIO 09 / PROVOCATION

The Global Classroom

Imagine education ten years from today. Students work with international experts and peers across time zones, languages and local contexts.

- What opportunities emerge?
- What barriers remain?
- Whose knowledge shapes the curriculum?

How might we build belonging across a classroom without borders?

SCENARIO 10 / PROVOCATION

Human Skills First

Imagine education ten years from today. AI handles many technical and administrative tasks, while teams struggle with judgement, collaboration and difficult conversations.

- Which capabilities become more important?
- What experience helps people practise them?
- How would learners show growth?

How might we teach and recognise the human capabilities that matter?

Possible futures

Pick one card. Focus on a concrete moment for your learner, not a prediction about the entire sector.

SCENARIO 11 / PROVOCATION

The Climate-Ready Campus

Imagine education ten years from today. Extreme weather interrupts campus access and the institution must reduce the environmental impact of learning.

- What needs a physical place?
- What is the footprint of the digital alternative?
- Who is affected when a campus closes?

How might we maintain connection and learning with fewer resources?

SCENARIO 12 / PROVOCATION

The Data Mirror

Imagine education ten years from today. A learner dashboard predicts disengagement, but a student says its picture of them is wrong.

- Who can challenge a prediction?
- What data is genuinely necessary?
- What support is offered without a label?

How might we use learning data while protecting agency and trust?

People before predictions

Fictional starting points. Add detail, identify assumptions and seek real learner perspectives.

Zara

22; final-year undergraduate; uses AI daily, works part-time and learns through multiple platforms.

Hopes: Meaningful, personalised learning, career readiness and flexibility.

Friction: Generic learning experiences, administrative complexity and time constraints.

Design prompt: How can she build connection without compulsory attendance?

Assumption to check: _____

Michael

41; mid-career professional returning to study; family commitments and limited study time.

Hopes: Rapid reskilling, practical capability and a career transition through lifelong learning.

Friction: Lengthy qualifications, poor flexibility and outdated content.

Design prompt: How can he see a credible pathway before investing time?

Assumption to check: _____

People before predictions

Fictional starting points. Add detail, identify assumptions and seek real learner perspectives.

Anika

28; regional learner with strong digital skills; primarily online with limited campus access.

Hopes: Connection, community and high-quality learning.

Friction: Isolation, lack of belonging and limited networking.

Design prompt: What equivalent experience works with the tools she already has?

Assumption to check: _____

Sam

Learner with fluctuating energy and access needs.

Hopes: Wants demanding work with control over pace and participation.

Friction: Rigid live sessions and inaccessible interfaces create barriers.

Design prompt: How can flexibility preserve challenge and dignity?

Assumption to check: _____

People before predictions

Fictional starting points. Add detail, identify assumptions and seek real learner perspectives.

Leila

International learner collaborating across languages and time zones.

Hopes: Wants to contribute her expertise and build relationships.

Friction: Fast discussions can hide what she knows.

Design prompt: How can different ways of contributing carry equal weight?

Assumption to check: _____

Alex

Experienced worker returning after a long break from formal study.

Hopes: Wants existing capability recognised and a supported fresh start.

Friction: Unfamiliar platforms and assessment expectations reduce confidence.

Design prompt: How could the first week make capability visible?

Assumption to check: _____

Future signals

Choose two signals. Record source, date, relevance and uncertainty. Add current institutional evidence.

Technological | Artificial intelligence; learning analytics; extended reality (XR); immersive learning; virtual collaboration; digital twins.

UNESCO's AI guidance calls for human agency and capacity building. Its technology report examines equity and appropriate use. Sources: 1, 3.

Which use has evidence of better learning in our context? Treat XR and digital twins as possibilities to investigate, not established benefits.

Social | Lifelong learning; flexible employment; remote participation; mental health awareness; global collaboration.

OECD examines short credentials for lifelong learning. UNESCO considers inclusion and access in digital education. Sources: 2, 3.

Whose time, relationships or wellbeing might our proposal overlook? Add local learner evidence.

Economic | Skills shortages; rapid reskilling; micro-credentials; portfolio careers; industry integration.

OECD examines the uses and possibilities of micro-credentials for employability. This does not establish that degrees will disappear. Sources: 2.

Which capability is needed, who recognises it and who bears the cost? Check local workforce evidence.

Environmental | Sustainable campuses; reduced travel; hybrid participation; carbon awareness.

UNESCO's technology report includes sustainability as a lens for evaluating education technology. Sources: 3.

What is the whole-life impact of travel, devices, energy and replacement? Do not assume digital is automatically greener.

Foundational reading (2023); handout prepared September 2026. Watch items are prompts for inquiry, not claims that all are established trends.

1. UNESCO (2023): Guidance for generative AI in education and research
2. OECD (2023): Micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability
3. UNESCO (2023): Global Education Monitoring Report - Technology in education

Clickable sources above; full source links are also on the online workshop page.

Evidence / date: _____ Assumption to check: _____

Responsible Implementation

Concept: _____ Team: _____

People

Who benefits, who may be disadvantaged, and who should help shape the pilot?

Ethics

What unintended harms, privacy risks or conflicts could emerge? What safeguard is needed?

Inclusion

Who could be excluded? What accessible alternative and support will you provide?

Sustainability

Can this be maintained financially, environmentally and in staff workload? What resources will it consume?

Governance

Who owns the decision, who oversees it, and how can a learner question or appeal it?

Success

What baseline, outcome and equity measure will you use? When will you review, adapt or stop?

First pilot / owner / review date: _____

The future we would test

Write a headline about a concrete learner benefit. Imagine an announcement ten years from today.

Team name

Who developed this future education concept?

Future challenge

Which learner and challenge are you addressing?

Key insight

What evidence shaped your thinking?

Solution

Name and describe your concept and learner experience.

Benefits

What outcomes could it create?

Risks

What challenges or unintended consequences might emerge?

Implementation priorities

What is the first pilot, who owns it and when will you review?

Responsible implementation considerations

Summarise your people, inclusion, ethics, sustainability, governance and success decisions.

Future headline: _____

What changed your thinking?

Take five minutes individually, then agree one next action with your team.

What surprised you?

What tensions seem most significant?

What opportunities excite you most?

What should universities start doing today to prepare for tomorrow?

What role should design thinking play in shaping the future of education?
