

1 THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE - AND HOW IT CAN HELP YOU

**Framing Curiosity and Strategic
Readiness**

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1. THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE - LEADERS

The future isn't a fixed destination—it's a landscape of possibilities shaped by today's choices. In times of accelerating change, uncertainty, and complexity, the most resilient and effective organizations are those that actively engage with the future rather than passively wait for it to unfold.

Futures thinking is not about predicting what will happen. It is about exploring what could happen—and preparing to lead with intention, creativity, and courage in a world of shifting realities. For research libraries and the universities they serve, the stakes are especially high. Technologies like AI are reshaping knowledge production, research infrastructure, pedagogy, and public trust in expertise. Demographic, economic, and geopolitical shifts add further complexity.

Working with the future helps leaders:

- Challenge assumptions that no longer serve their mission.
- Surface emerging risks and opportunities before they become urgent.
- Design adaptive strategies that remain relevant across multiple futures.
- Strengthen institutional vision and cultural agility.
- Lead with purpose in a world where long-range thinking is in short supply.

In short: Futures work isn't a luxury. It's a leadership imperative.

1. THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE - FACILITATORS

The activities in Section 1 are designed to be brief, low-tech, and engaging. They don't require complex materials or deep content expertise—but they do play an important strategic role.

This opening phase of the workshop is about:

- Helping the group come together
- Building comfort with uncertainty and diverse perspectives
- Creating early emotional and intellectual engagement
- Surfacing leadership-relevant questions
- Beginning to orient toward the world of AI—not just technologically, but socially, ethically, and personally

Encourage honesty, curiosity, and reflection. There are no right answers in this section—just an invitation to show up as leaders who are ready to explore, learn, and think long-term.

1.1 CHECKING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE

Surfacing Beliefs and Biases About Change

Before engaging with scenarios or strategy, it's helpful to explore how participants feel about the future—consciously or not. Leadership decisions are often shaped by personal beliefs, assumptions, and past experiences with uncertainty, technology, or institutional change.

This section invites participants to reflect on their default stance toward the future: Are they hopeful? Cautious? Skeptical? Energized?

Understanding these mindsets helps:

- Surface hidden biases and assumptions
- Acknowledge emotional responses to disruption
- Create space for curiosity and constructive dissent
- Build psychological safety before exploring uncertainty

This activity isn't about reaching consensus. It's about recognizing that how we feel about the future influences how we think about it—and how we lead others into it.

1.1 CHECKING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE - FACILITATORS

Purpose:

- To help participants reflect on their underlying beliefs and emotional posture toward the future. This creates awareness, opens up diverse perspectives, and prepares the group for futures exploration with empathy and humility.
- To reveal the diversity of thought in the room and establish a baseline for group reflection. If the group appears broadly pessimistic or opposed, you will need to address this directly before moving forward.

Group Format:

Part 1 (Optional)

Individuals respond to some prompts and then share reflections with small groups

Part 2

Individuals consider some prompts and indicate their position in a whole group exercise

TIME: 15-25 minutes

USE: To orient the group to future possibilities

OUTPUT: A shared sense of the group's attitudes and assumptions about the future

1.1 CHECKING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE - FACILITATORS

1. Introduce the Activity (3–5 min)

Before we talk about future possibilities, let's take a moment to think about how we each relate to the idea of the future. Some of us are energized by change. Others feel wary—or skeptical. And all of that is valid. Our leadership instincts, priorities, and even our resistance to change are often rooted in how we see the future.

2. Individual Reflection - Optional (5–10 min)

Offer 2–3 of the following prompts and invite quiet journaling or thinking:

- When you think about the future, what comes to mind first?
- What excites you about the next 10 years in libraries, higher education or research?
- What worries or frustrates you about the future?
- Which phrase best describes your attitude:
- Hopeful, Skeptical, Urgent, Detached, Empowered, Overwhelmed?
- What's one past experience that shaped how you think about the future?

3. Group Sharing (5–10 min)

Ask participants to turn to a partner or form small groups (3–4 people) to share one reflection or keyword.

Encourage listening, not debating.

1.1 CHECKING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE - FACILITATORS

4. Attitudes on a Continuum

Identify 2–3 provocative, relevant statements or future-facing dilemmas related to AI and libraries.

Ask participants to stand in a line, placing themselves on a continuum according to their sentiment - for example “AI will create jobs/AI will destroy jobs”

Use this at both the start and end of your workshop to capture how views evolve.

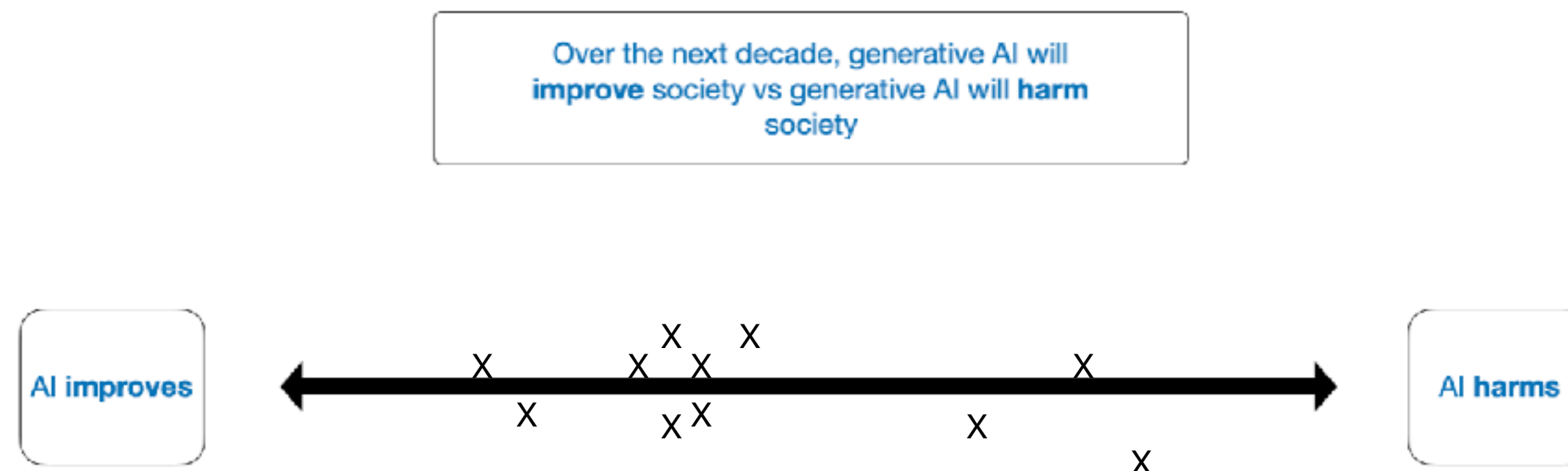
If the group contains people who don't know each other you can use this as an icebreaker exercise, having everyone introduce themselves and explain why they have chosen that particular location.

Debrief: Ask a selection of participants: “What shaped your stance?” “Did anything surprise you?” “What might change your view?”

1.1 CHECKING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE - FACILITATORS

Tips and facilitation ideas

You could print and display a poster and ask participants to mark their position on the line (see illustration below). This will provide a useful record for comparison between the start and end of the workshop. This could be replicated online using a platform like Miro.



Sample Prompts:

← Strongly Disagree | Neutral | Strongly Agree →

“AI will create more jobs in academia than it eliminates.”

“Universities will lose their monopoly on research and learning in the age of AI.”

“We can—and must—govern AI through intentional design.”

1.2 TWO GUIDING QUESTIONS

Clarifying What Matters Most

Strategic foresight isn't just about imagining the future—it's about connecting that imagination to today's decisions and tomorrow's responsibilities.

Before diving into scenarios, it's useful to surface the real-world pressures and uncertainties participants are navigating. These two questions are deceptively simple but surprisingly powerful:

- What questions would you like to be able to answer using the scenarios?
- What decisions do you have to make in the near future that would benefit from a long-term view?

These prompts anchor the workshop in the specific priorities and accountabilities of your leadership context. They also help identify where foresight can offer the greatest value—whether in shaping strategy, supporting advocacy, or strengthening risk awareness.

Use these questions as personal reflection, group discussion, or pre-workshop input. They will create through-lines that connect foresight exploration to action and alignment.

1.2 TWO GUIDING QUESTIONS

Clarifying What Matters Most

Before engaging fully with scenarios, it's helpful to anchor the work in the real challenges, uncertainties, and decisions you already face. Scenario planning is not abstract or theoretical—its power lies in helping leaders ask better questions, see new options, and act more wisely in a changing world. As you begin, consider these two questions:

1. What Questions Would You Like to Be Able to Answer?

Scenarios are not predictive—they won't give you answers. But they will help you generate insight around the issues that matter most.

Think about:

- What keeps you up at night?
- What trends or shifts feel unclear, overwhelming, or full of potential?
- What assumptions about research, learning, or community need re-examination?

2. What Decisions Are You Facing That Would Benefit from a Long-Term Perspective?

Scenarios are especially valuable for decisions with lasting impact—where investments, partnerships, staffing, or infrastructure might be difficult to amend.

Think about:

- Strategic plan revisions
- Budget or space commitments
- Service expansions or retirements
- Hiring, training, and workforce development

1.2 TWO GUIDING QUESTIONS - FACILITATORS

This activity helps participants connect scenario exploration to their own responsibilities and challenges. It sharpens the relevance of the futures work and surfaces key issues already on the minds of the group.

Option 1: Pre-Session Reflection and Submission

Best for: Workshops where you want to tailor the discussion to the group's interests or give participants more time to reflect.

Instructions for Facilitators:

1. Send out the two reflection prompts 5–10 days in advance.
2. Ask participants to submit brief written responses (~100 words each).
3. Compile and theme the responses (e.g., recurring concerns, strategic priorities).
4. Use these insights in the workshop:
 - To open discussion
 - To shape breakout group topics
 - As a warm-up for scenario immersion

TIME: 20-30 minutes

USE: To enable the group to connect futures to their current and emerging responsibilities

OUTPUT: A shared agenda for the group's work

1.2 TWO GUIDING QUESTIONS - FACILITATORS

Option 2: Live Workshop Exercise

Best for: Active, in-the-moment engagement at the start of a scenario session.

Timing: 20–30 minutes

Materials: Pens, sticky notes or worksheets, large flip charts or digital boards

Instructions:

1. Introduce the two guiding questions (verbally or on screen):
2. What questions would you like to be able to answer using these scenarios?
3. What decisions are you facing that would benefit from a long-term perspective?
4. Ask participants to reflect individually for 5–7 minutes and jot down their responses.
5. Form small groups (3–5 people) to share and discuss for 10–15 minutes.
6. Have each group post or report back on 1–2 key questions and 1–2 key decisions.

Facilitator Prompts for Debrief:

- What themes are emerging?
- Are there shared uncertainties or areas of concern?
- Which decisions seem most urgent—or most strategic?

1.3 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH AI

Connecting Strategic Thinking to Lived Experience

AI is central to the scenarios in this toolkit—but it's not just a distant trend. It's already part of our daily lives.

Before we examine institutional strategies, we start by asking participants to reflect on their personal experiences with AI. Whether joyful, unsettling, empowering, or strange, these moments help ground the conversation in reality—and remind us that strategic decisions about AI are not abstract. They're human.

This section offers a short warm-up conversation to:

- Share stories of surprise, delight, or unease
- Reflect on how AI is already reshaping research, learning, creativity, or leadership
- Build empathy and connection before moving into more analytical work

This is a simple but meaningful way to humanize the future, activate curiosity, and surface diverse perspectives within the room.

1.3 PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH AI - FACILITATORS

Purpose: To warm up the room by connecting abstract futures to lived experiences.

Group Format: Pairs or small groups (3–5 people each)

Discussion prompt:

What are one or two surprising or unexpected experiences you've personally had with an AI tool—whether for text, images, video, code, or something else?

Encourage discussion of:

- Emotions: surprise, delight, unease?
- Perceived impact: what changed because of the experience?
- Implications: what did this make you wonder about the future?

Debrief: Invite 3–4 groups to share a brief reflection.

TIME: 10-15 minutes

USE: To serve as an ice-breaker and allow participants to exchange practical experiences

OUTPUT: A sense of the group's levels of experience with AI applications

1.4 WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE THE SCENARIOS WERE PUBLISHED?

Situating the Toolkit in Today's Context

This toolkit is built around four scenarios for the year 2035, originally published in mid-2024. But time doesn't stand still—and neither does change.

In this section, participants are invited to take stock of what's happened since the scenarios were created. Have there been new developments in AI? Higher education policy? Research funding? Social trust? Cultural adoption? Political regulation?

The goal is not to update the scenarios in real time, but to reconnect foresight work with current reality. This activity helps participants:

- Reassess the perceived plausibility of each scenario
- Identify trends or events that signal movement toward one or more futures
- Surface new drivers, tensions, or unknowns that deserve attention

This also reinforces a core foresight principle: strategic thinking must be dynamic and iterative, informed by real-world signals—not frozen in a single moment of insight.

1.4 WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE THE SCENARIOS WERE PUBLISHED? - FACILITATORS

Goal: Reconnect participants to the present moment and build anticipation for scenario immersion.

Group format: small groups or full-room brainstorm

Prompt :

Since the ARL/CNI scenarios were published in June 2024, what developments have you noticed in AI, research, education, or society more broadly? Do any of these changes suggest we are moving toward—or away from—any particular scenario?

Materials:

Provide a summary handout or visuals of the four scenarios to help prompt alignment. Participants can:

- Use sticky notes or cards to mark trends
- Cluster developments under scenario headings
- Surface signs of convergence or divergence

Debrief: Highlight which scenarios feel more “present,” and introduce the idea that no scenario is “true” yet—but signals are always evolving.

TIME: 20-30 minutes

USE: To build connections between the present moment and the scenarios

OUTPUT: An understanding of how current events might be seen in any of the scenarios