

How to recognize "good" futures research?

Foresight experts from Germany have drafted guidelines for practice and evaluation in futures studies. Their handbook on quality standards is now available in English.

What breakthrough technologies are about to emerge? What will be characteristic features of the workplace of tomorrow? How should one respond to a warming world? These are but a few of the questions currently occupying the attention of thought leaders in various fields. Given the rapid rate of change across all domains of human activity, actors in business, government, and civil society have become ever-more reliant on research into the nature of things to come — that is, on how the *future* may emerge from the complex interaction of current and anticipated trends and relationships. Driven by rapid advancements in communications technology, decision-making cycles for executives and policy-makers have become increasingly compressed. At the same time, the range of questions with relevance for strategic decision-making is dramatically expanding.

Futures research has experienced an increasing demand and widespread dissemination in recent years, and there have been considerable advances in terms of methods, procedures and approaches. Still, the epistemic and practical challenges of gaining knowledge about future developments and creating useful images of the future remain. All too often, research findings of questionable quality and provenance compete for the attention of decision-makers and the broader public. This raises the question: how can one recognize good futures research? That is, what are the hallmarks of a rigorous investigation of the future—one that fulfills scientific standards, does justice to its subject matter, and effectively supports decision-making?

A seven-member editorial team consisting of experienced academics and professionals has tried to find answers to these challenges. The result is a catalogue of 18 criteria that can be used to determine the quality of futures research projects and processes. The book, which was published in 2015 in German language, is now available in English under the title *Standards of Futures Research – Guidelines for Practice and Evaluation*.

In addressing the overarching question of quality in futures research, the authors identified three underlying core questions that lead to three groups of standards: (1) What specific standards result from the fact that futures research explicitly deals with the future as a subject of inquiry? (2) What standards result from the fact that futures research aims to address this subject matter scientifically? (3) What standards result from the purposes of futures research like informing decision making in politics, society and economy?

The standards presented under the first group – *The Future as a Subject of Inquiry* – pertain to research methods, validation techniques, and approaches for substantiating propositions about future matters. They also address various needs: to account for the fundamental indeterminacy of the future; to explicitly account for underlying assumptions; and to properly characterize descriptions of the future as possible, probable, or desirable. The standards in the second group – *Good Research Practice* – require, for example, a clear definition of the research question and careful consideration of the research context. Additional topics addressed under this group include transparency, data quality, theoretical foundations, and method selection. The standards of group 3 – *Practical Relevance and Effectiveness* – ensure a suitable orientation to real-world concerns and contexts. The group includes a large number of application-oriented quality criteria, in particular criteria with relevance for the management of successful future-oriented research and consulting projects.

Each standard is described by general rules. Common shortcomings and pitfalls are equally explained and numerous illustrative examples are given. In this respect, the book is not only aimed at the scientific community, but also offers added value for foresight practitioners and users in the most diverse areas of application in research, business and civil society and for all who want to assess the quality of futures studies.

Overview: List of standards of the handbook

1 Standards of Group 1: The Future as a Subject of Inquiry

- 1.1 Images of the Future
- 1.2 Modality
- 1.3 Validation by Argumentation
- 1.4 Aligning Research with Ambitions for Action
- 1.5 Interdisciplinarity
- 1.6 Transdisciplinarity

2 Standards of Group 2: Good Research Practice

- 2.1 Objectives and Framework Conditions
- 2.2 Transparency
- 2.3 Theoretical Foundations
- 2.4 Method Selection
- 2.5 Producing Quality Research
- 2.6 Scientific Relevance
- 2.7 Code of Conduct—Scientific Integrity

3 Standards of Group 3: Practical Relevance and Effectiveness

- 3.1 Practical Relevance, Usefulness, and Effectiveness
- 3.2 Consideration of Type, Role, and Specificity of the Research Audience
- 3.3 Transferability and Communication of Results
- 3.4 Identifying Decision-Making Spaces and Options
- 3.5 Project and Process Management

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