Assumptions Exercise – Facilitator's guide

OBJECTIVE: TO IDENTIFY THE POLICY ASSUMPTIONS IN A GIVEN DOMAIN.

This is a quick brainstorming exercise. In about 35 minutes of discussion, a group of 20 participants can generate roughly 40–50 assumptions.

People:
1 facilitator
15–25 participants
1–2 assistants/"runners" (optional)
1 note-taker (optional)

Materials:
Fine-tip marker for each participant
8" x 6" sticky notes—Large enough to fit 8 words (at least 3 per participant)
Projector/computer (optional)

Post on the wall:
- Poster with assumptions question (optional)
- A visual agenda (optional)
- Rules of engagement (optional)
- 2 headings on sticky notes (optional): What worked? What could be better?

Meeting Space: A large room with a blank wall to post assumptions (or several flipcharts).
Seating for all conducive to both hearing other participants and seeing.

Agenda at a Glance

TIME	ACTIVITY
5 minutes	1. General meeting introductions (if needed)
35 minutes	2. Give context for the assumptions exercise (4 minute) 3. Provide instructions for the exercise (6 minutes) 4. Discussion: round up assumptions (20 minutes) 5. Summarize points of assumptions exercise (5 minutes)
10 minutes	6. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise
EST. TOTAL TIME: 50 minutes	

BEFORE THE MEETING

Prepare the room

- Each participant will need a chair, writing surface and a clear sightline to the wall where assumptions will be posted using sticky notes. If assumptions will be voted on at the end (see option B at the end of this guide), consider using several movable flip charts to collect assumptions instead of a single wall.

- For a larger group (e.g. 25), seating participants facing each other around a single large table(s) can help to ensure all are seen and heard. With a large group and room, it is also a good idea to have 1–2 runners who can support the facilitator by collecting the sticky notes and arranging them on the wall. Alternatively, you may want to break out into smaller groups, in which case you would need a facilitator for each break-out group.

- Develop and post in the room any visual aids that will be referred to in the meeting.

- Ensure each participant has 3 large sticky notes, with extras close at hand. Sticky notes should be large enough to clearly fit about 8 words.

Alternative to sticky notes: If there is a projector in the room, a note-taker can type the assumptions that participants raise in the meeting. Allowing participants to review and reformulate assumptions as they are being recorded works well. This is a good choice if the assumptions activity is one of several facilitated activities in a day involving sticky notes. Sticky note activities are interactive and fun in small doses, but sticky note fatigue is real.

ANNOTATED AGENDA

TIME	ACTIVITY	NOTES

5 minutes	**1. General meeting introductions (if needed)**
	• Introduce facilitators
	• Provide context for the session (why are we here?)
	• Allow participant introductions if they are unacquainted
	
	• Consider adding a few minutes to the agenda to:
	  ° build rapport through an ice-breaker activity
	  ° review or develop a list of ground rules on the wall
		• If this is one of several activities, consider using a visual agenda to situate this activity within the day's events.
		• A list of rules of engagement posted in the room during the meeting is a visual reminder of the group's commitment to support a good discussion.

4 minutes	**2. Give context for the assumptions exercise** • "Policies and programs are developed based upon a set of assumptions. We want to be aware of assumptions embedded in policy so that we notice when they could be at risk of disruption." • Provide an example of an assumption that is relevant to the domain. To illustrate the relevance of the assumptions exercise, it may be helpful to also note some weak signals of changes that could challenge the assumption. ° For example: an assumption about research and development in Canada is that **Canada will continue to train and recruit world-leading research talent.**	• To ensure assumptions are relevant, it is important that participants are clear on the scope of the domain. Providing a domain definition to the group is a quick way to do this. • If participants have rather different ideas of what the domain includes, it may be worthwhile to add a domain map exercise to the agenda.

° This seems challenged by weak signals of rising competition from Asia:
- **Asian universities are quickly rising in the global quality rankings** (http://www.socialsciencespace. com/2014/10/asian-universities- continue-rise-in-the-rankings/)
- **East Asian universities are also leaders in attracting business funding** (especially South Korea and Singapore) (http://www. timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/ east-asia-leads-the-world-in-business- funding/2006387.article)

| 6 minutes | **3. Provide activity instructions**
• "In a moment we will ask you to note some assumptions about [the domain]."
• "We are interested in:
  ° <u>Assumptions that are embedded in policy</u>. Such assumptions may have originated as much as decades ago; if they haven't been revised, they continue to shape our future.
  ° <u>Assumptions that you believe to be currently influencing policy makers</u>. You might draw some of these prevailing notions from policy discussions and current policy papers."
• Ask participants to take a few minutes to write down 1 or more assumptions (1 per sticky), which will be collected and shared with the group. If the assumptions wall will later be reviewed by the group, demonstrate clear, large writing by providing an example on a sticky (e.g. by pointing to the example shared above as a reminder of size). | • This module includes a poster template for the assumptions question, so the facilitator can refer to it during the exercise.
• Note that we are interested in assumptions that are shaping policy, ***not necessarily those held by individuals.*** The reason is we want to later test the credibility of our policy assumptions against a range of plausible futures identified in the study. Weak assumptions are considered poor foundations for policy and should be re-examined. |

20 minutes	**4. Discussion: round up assumptions**	
	• Ask each participant to read out their assumption and hand it to the facilitator or a runner. Keep the time focussed on sharing assumptions, with little discussion of them unless the facilitator wants to seek clarification of an assumption. Minimize cross-talk in order to move quickly through the exercise, generating a breadth of assumptions in a short time.	• Consider having a note-taker record what is said as participants present their assumptions. Often participants will rephrase their assumptions or add additional detail that may be useful in understanding the findings later.
	Suggestions:	• If the assumptions wall content will be reviewed by the group later (e.g. for Option B: voting), consider asking the runners to group assumptions thematically as they collect them.
	• To collect assumptions, the facilitator could ask for 1 or 2 assumptions per person, going sequentially around the room, or invite participants to speak up with an assumption as they are ready ("popcorn style"). With either approach, the facilitator can create some continuity of themes by inviting related assumptions. E.g. "Does anyone else have an assumption about the role of universities?"	
	• Participants do not need to agree on the assumptions. A divide in the room could indicate an assumption is already uncertain, or perhaps it is true for some parts of the domain and not others. Keep the activity moving by asking if an alternative assumption can be added and then move on.	
	• Avoid personal assumptions. If a participant's assumption seems to reflect a personal opinion (e.g. "I think we need less border control"), politely remind them of the objective by simply asking if this assumption is reflected in current policy or policy thinking.	

	• If assumptions are weighted to some topics more than others, refer to the domain map or domain definition to prompt any missing assumptions. • If time runs short, make a last call for assumptions around the room.	
5 minutes	**5. Summarize points of assumptions exercise** • "These assumptions are a good reflection of the expected future; they give us a baseline we can use to scan for a range of possible, alternative futures." • "We want to consider these assumptions with an open mind—open to new events that could confirm or challenge these assumptions." • Ask participants if they have any questions about the exercise. • Sometimes a participant will ask for more information about how Horizons uses assumptions in our process. Here is a possible response: ° "In Horizons' larger studies, we use scenarios to test our assumptions. We build a range of different, plausible scenarios that draw upon the sources of change we identified in our study. We ask: does this assumption seem credible across each of these plausible futures? We want to note which assumptions do not seem credible across some or all scenarios—these are areas of potential future policy challenge. They suggest where our policy foundations are not well aligned with the plausible futures we are identifying. We then consider: what more robust alternative assumption could form a better foundation?"	

	• If appropriate, the facilitator could commit to posting the assumptions in a shared space (e.g. a shared network folder, a workplace wall) and invite participants to continue to add assumptions that come to mind over the course of the relevant project. As the scanning and foresight process continues, participants will become aware of hidden assumptions. These are assumptions that may run so deep that participants are unaware of them until new information challenges these beliefs.	

10 minutes	**6. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise**
	• Give participants an opportunity to provide feedback on the exercise.
	• This might take the form of:
	  ° A Q&A discussion
	  ° Participant completion of an evaluation form
	  ° Informal evaluation—On their way out the room, participants are asked to post one comment on a sticky note for each of two wall headings:
	  - What Worked?
	  - What Could Be Better?
		• Provide evaluation forms or sticky notes as appropriate

ADD-ONS TO THE ASSUMPTIONS EXERCISE

Below are two optional but very helpful steps that support the goal of collecting assumptions:
    a) prompting assumptions in advance of the meeting with a questionnaire; and
    b) after the brainstorming activity, asking participants to vote on the most important assumptions.

OPTION A: Ask for assumptions in advance of the meeting with a questionnaire
An assumptions questionnaire sent in advance of the meeting can be an easy way to build rapport with participants and create interest in the meeting to come. In this module, the document "Pre-workshop questionnaire for participants: Gathering assumptions" provides an example of how an assumptions email questionnaire could be framed.

Whether participants are expected to reply with their responses in advance or simply be ready to share them at the meeting, there are a few benefits of issuing a homework exercise in advance:

1. It helps participants prepare for the meeting by engaging with the content early.
2. Repetition of the assumptions concept (in advance, then at the meeting) improves understanding and retention.
3. If the results are collected in advance, this can help the facilitator to anticipate meeting topics, possible problems and strategic points to highlight.

Even if the facilitator collects responses in advance, they don't necessarily need to use them in the meeting; simply instruct participants to bring their best assumptions to the meeting (they'll also think of new ones, and that's fine). The point of the homework exercise in this case is simply to prepare participants and the facilitator. This works very well.

If the facilitator plans to use the list in the meeting, they will have an opportunity to review the list with the group and ask them to fill in gaps to arrive at a more comprehensive set of assumptions. Assumptions homework is not recommended as a substitute for an assumptions discussion at the meeting (it is not a time saver). Participants will want to review the results generated by others— and with fresh ideas, they will generate additional assumptions. This still takes time (nearly as long as the basic assumptions exercise), but it is worth the result. If you skip this step, participants may not buy in to follow-up activities.

OPTION B: After collecting assumptions, vote on the most important, "strategic" assumptions (5–10 minutes)

After 40 or so assumptions are generated, it is often helpful to evaluate which assumptions are the most critical to the system. This provides ideas of where participants can prioritize their attention, for example when scanning. It also allows the group to nominate the assumptions that should be tested against scenarios later in the process.

At the end of an assumptions activity, we will often ask the group to dot-vote for the most important assumptions using sticky dots. (The assistants have already clustered related assumptions; they should also consider whether any can be combined or removed in order to prevent unnecessary vote-splitting.) To place their votes, participants are asked to consider the following question:

- "Which assumptions are most central to policy makers, for the system we've described?"
- "That is, a lot rides on these assumptions for one or both of these reasons:
    ° the assumption underpins the policy context of a lot of issues
    ° if the assumption turned out to be wrong, it would necessitate a significant adjustment"

Each participant is given 5 dot stickers. They are invited to peruse the assumptions wall at their own pace and distribute their dots to the most important assumptions. (The choice of weighting the 5 is up to them: they can place one dot on each of their top 5 or 5 dots on a single important assumption, or anything in between.)

When time is up, the facilitator can briefly highlight a few of the assumptions that were prioritized with a greater number of dots and remind participants that these are good themes to monitor when looking for signs of disruptive change affecting the system.

Notes:

- For a large group of participants, it may be preferable to gather the assumptions on several movable flip charts rather than on a single wall. At the voting stage, the flip charts can then be spaced out around the room to improve the flow of participant movement. In this case, divide the room into groups to assign each to a flip chart to begin their review, then move on to others (e.g. if 3 flip charts, separate into 3 groups).
- To help participants manage reading the volume of results, it is helpful if assumptions are clustered somewhat thematically. This is best done by the runners as they collect assumptions, and can be further refined during a break if it is available. The themes can be divided among the flipcharts.
- If there isn't time for participants to circulate across all the assumptions, it is ok, as long as they are starting at different points: this voting exercise will still give an approximate indication of importance. Some assumptions won't have any dots, others will attract many.

BUILDING A FORESIGHT WORKSHOP: COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER

For facilitators with multiple objectives for a foresight workshop, below are a few suggestions for activities that would pair well with the assumptions exercise.

Before the exercise:
- Deliver the Assumptions presentation.
- Establish the domain using a Domain map exercise (see module 4).

After the exercise:
- Deliver the assumptions reversal exercise to assess the credibility of some of the common policy assumptions identified by the group.
- Deliver the cascade diagram exercise (with option A: weak signal activity) and then return to test whether any of the findings from these exercises would challenge any of the assumptions.