Strategic Planning in Uncertain Times: The Benefits of the Brexit Lens?
Lisa Boden, 4 March 2019

At the time of writing, there are 25 days until Brexit. We're a long way down the road from the referendum (983 days, 08 hours and 05 minutes to be precise; 704 days 17 hours, and 04 minutes since Article 50 was triggered - but who's counting…) Yet, at this moment, no one knows what will be our post-Brexit future. At the very least, the British public won't know until 12 March when Parliament is expected to have another meaningful vote on the current Brexit Deal- and maybe not then either. A "No-deal Brexit" is legally the default decision unless the deadlock in Parliament over the Withdrawal Agreement is broken, Brexit is delayed or Article 50 is revoked. The government's own economic report about the consequences of a no-deal Brexit makes for sobering reading.

Over the same duration that the government has been slowly connecting the dots in its Brexit strategy, EPIC, Scottish Government's Centre of Expertise on Animal Disease Outbreaks has also been considering the future - holding 2 dedicated strategy workshops in Perth (2017) and Dunkeld (2018) and a third meeting (EPIC's Innovation Summit in 2019) to explore organisational culture, creativity and innovation.

Art by Tony McKay for EPIC

Examining the role of strategic planning, through the "Brexit lens" might be a useful exercise at this intersection, for three reasons:

1. Brexit illustrates why it is important to have a shared vision and strategy for the future;
2. It offers the opportunity to reflect on previous work we've done in EPIC to explore how to best develop and future-proof strategies in anticipation of a post-Brexit Britain;
3. It illustrates how strategic planning in uncertain times, is critical to ensure long-term resilience of research organisations like EPIC, so that they remain trusted sources of expertise and evidence for decision-makers.

1. A shared vision for the future?

We can learn a lot about the dos and don'ts of strategy development by looking at the relatively short history of the Brexit decision. Highly complex decisions like this typically demand complex and nuanced evidence and solutions. However, the Leave Campaign proposed a compelling vision which offered an effective heuristic for decision-making. The simple, emotive message: "Take back control" appealed to the public's collective nostalgia for the *status quo*.

"You can sing a song to 85,000 people, and they will sing it back for 85,000 reasons".

David Grohl

Brexit architects never said how this vision would be achieved. The "devil is in the detail", so the saying goes, so leaving out strategic detail until after the vote turned out to be an effective tactical decision which won them the referendum. Voters simply *anchored* this vision to their own personal but divergent ideals, values and assumptions about what Brexit might look like. "Brexit means Brexit," Theresa May subsequently said, but no one knew what that meant either. In the absence of a clear EU exit strategy, May had to reinterpret others' views on how to "take back control" in her Lancaster House speech and underpin this, from scratch, with strategic detail in her White Paper. This was the starting point for subsequent fraught negotiations with the EU, the UK parliament and her own Cabinet on the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration on the future relationship between the UK and the EU. May is still trying to win a Parliamentary majority to progress her Brexit compromise and militate against the possibility of "crashing out of the EU" with a no-deal. It's proving difficult to do. The UK is on the brink of a constitutional crisis and the extent and significance of the long-term collateral damage to British society remains to be seen. A strategy (any strategy) from the outset might have helped.

Brexit Lessons Learned?

Do: Communicate a clear vision to help simplify complex decision-making.
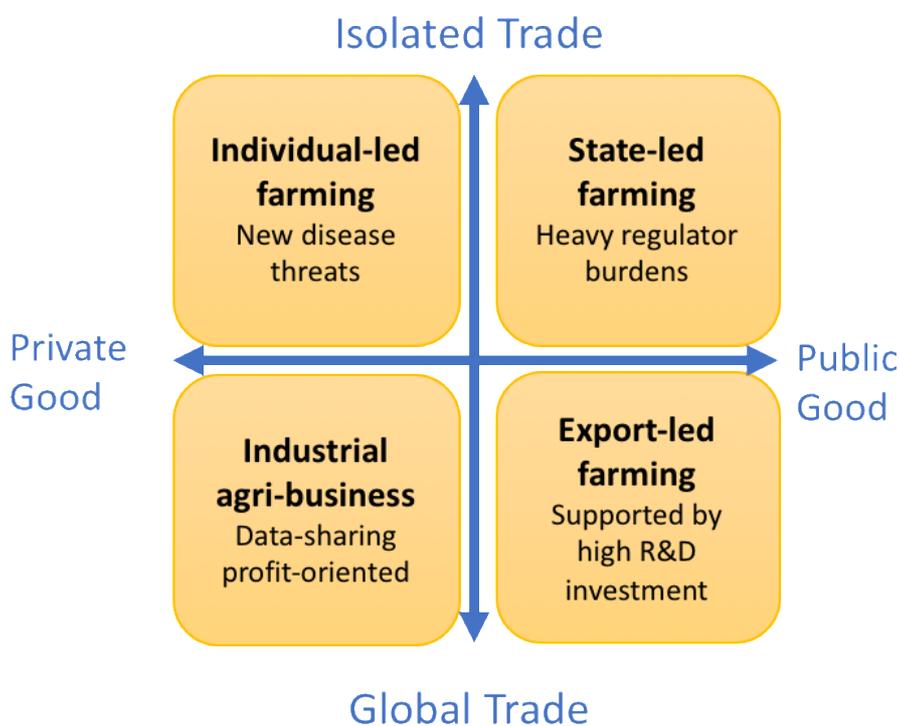
Don't: Assume that everyone interprets this vision the same way.

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2. An unlikely and undesirable future? Time will tell.

The UK's decision to leave the European Union (EU) is a contemporary example of a "shock" that wasn't anticipated because of our preconceived biases and assumptions about British politics and voting preferences. It wasn't our original intention, but the coincidental timing in October 2016, of an EPIC scenario planning workshop to explore the future of animal health surveillance, gave us an opportunity to explore post-Brexit scenarios and the impact of these on farming animal health services (for disease outbreak response) in Scotland. The findings may offer useful insights into the requirements, processes and intervention options available to develop a strategy to ensure organisational resilience (i.e. for EPIC

or any other organisation working to improve animal health and food security in the UK). You can read the peer-reviewed publication here and our report to stakeholders here.

Our participant stakeholders highlighted the importance of two **independent critical axes for the future:** a) global versus international trade b) public versus private resourcing of animal health services (and in particular, surveillance). A third dependent axis (integrated versus segregated data sharing) was considered but is not represented in the diagram as it is wholly contingent on resourcing (public versus private, respectively). These axes were used to explore a diversity of futures. The scenario considered one of the least likely and least desirable by participants, proposed a future in which the UK and Scotland, faced an isolationist trade policy, an integrated state-driven approach to data collection and sharing, and state-funded resourcing of animal health services. This now seems one of the most likely futures in the event of a no-deal (hard) Brexit. This perhaps serves to remind us of the anticipatory value of scenario planning and other types of participatory dialogues. Encouraging a diversity of opinions (different cultures, expertise, experience, values and viewpoints) in the room helps to improve creativity and challenge the status quo enabling transformational rather than incremental thinking about the future.

Isolated Trade

Individual-led farming
New disease threats

State-led farming
Heavy regulator burdens

Private Good

Public Good

Industrial agri-business
Data-sharing profit-oriented

Export-led farming
Supported by high R&D investment

Global Trade

Brexit Lessons Learned?

Do: Scenario plan to stress-test assumptions, consider unanticipated uncertainties and engage with stakeholders and end-users to co-construct a strategy.

Don't: Fail to challenge personal heuristics (familiarity, confirmational bias, status quo). Unlikely and undesirable futures are plausible and it's important to plan for them to militate against unintended negative consequences.

Hard Brexit: Is this the future?

(an excerpt from Year 2030, What is the future of Animal Health Surveillance in Scotland, published in 2016)

"In 2030, Scotland is focused on ensuring food security through self-sufficiency. A hard Brexit in 2019 resulted in loss of market access and increasingly isolationist policies designed to protect the UK economy. Scotland's agricultural trade policy is based on a precautionary risk-based approach, which results in fewer, highly selective and low-risk transactions with trusted partners to reduce the risk of notifiable disease incursion. Trade with BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries has declined substantially. This has downstream benefits for human health but has increased consumer costs. UK agricultural businesses have become more profitable: equilibrium prices are higher, as a result of fewer imports due to tariffs and non-tariff barriers. This situation is great for companies with a solely UK focus, but for all but niche producers, export costs are prohibitive. As a result, many multinational companies have decided to withdraw from Britain to focus on developing countries where costs of production are cheaper and where greater market access exists; the UK is no longer a good base for mass production for external markets. Some multinationals have remained in Scotland and have adapted to the new trade circumstances, buoyed by new trade access to different countries such as the USA. Production levels have become more similar to those of the 1960s, with less chicken and more lamb and beef being produced. Overall, acreage use for livestock is reduced due to competition for land use for carbon sinks, needed to meet the targets specified by the international agreements on climate change. Sheep and beef farms are increasing in size, but this does not necessarily mean greater intensification, just geographical redistribution (with more sheep and beef cattle moving to lowland areas, and marginal regions dropping out of production). Pig and poultry units have restructured into smaller units to supply national demand and many poultry units (those which are part of multinational companies) have simply moved overseas. Consumers are buying British, but as livestock numbers decline, farmers and consumers are increasingly choosing alternative protein sources. This has a knock-on impact on the veterinary and agricultural sectors, leading to reduced opportunities for employment and leading to a "brain drain" away from on-farm work. It is difficult to attract students to veterinary schools and agricultural colleges, resulting in a shift towards reliance on para-veterinary professionals and nurses. The one growth area is government service: the numbers of vets and epidemiologists directly employed by the state has increased. "

Opportunities	Challenges
New types of training initiatives focusing specifically on technology use for data collection, analysis and interpretation	"Brain drain" of veterinarians away from practice work and a reduced labour force working on farms; there is a smaller pool of veterinarians available
A lower tolerance for diseases means that there is the potential to "benchmark" animal population health and identify lower thresholds for intervention at pre-clinical stages, improving early disease detection and reducing disease impact	Agricultural sector is vulnerable to government resource de-prioritisation
	There is a science-policy-industry disconnect and little buy-in from stakeholders who are not happy due to their lack of control over their own data and industry
	There are challenges regarding data analysis including: volume and provision speed of data and absence of sufficient expertise in the UK to make full use of this resource. Those best resourced to use the data are not necessarily those best placed to do it
	Data are democratised and potentially available even to international competitors; There are new concerns about malevolent use of data

3. Strategy development in uncertain times.

Scottish Government's [strategy](#) includes a vision of "an agriculture industry that is dynamic, competitive and renowned for good quality, sustainable produce. It will strive to achieve that vision by promoting high welfare, healthy livestock produced by resilient systems with minimal environmental impact." EPIC's vision (i.e. its long-term view of its destination) and mission (why the consortium exists) should be aligned to this to ensure a complementary future trajectory. This doesn't prevent EPIC from adapting or refreshing its strategic objectives and tactical activities to respond to new uncertainties which might subsequently and unexpectedly emerge.

EPIC has been successfully commissioned 3 times. The status quo is thus a viable, familiar and attractive template on which to build a sustainable strategy ("if it ain't broke…"). However, depending on the Brexit we get, the past may no longer be a good indicator of the future. Even if EPIC's principles remain the same, we should be prepared to consider new and ambitious strategic directions to stay relevant and to remain a **trusted source of expertise and evidence for decision-makers.** UK Universities and Research Institutes are already facing real existential risks associated with retention of expertise and increasingly competitive demands for funding opportunities in a rapidly changing research landscape. EPIC, as an extension of these organisations also needs to consider these exigencies.

A creative and Innovative interdisciplinary research environment doesn't happen by accident. It takes resources, time and careful planning for an effective pathway to impact. These can become invisible barriers to strategy development. A [Forbes article](#) claims that people are often "too mired in today's challenges to envision a dramatically different future, let alone a path that gets them there". It goes on to reflect that, "People want certainty" and "those who seek it rarely cross the starting line… But that doesn't keep some people from demanding endless analysis and exhaustive plans. This is the end of many great strategies." If taken out of context, this quote might be misinterpreted as a salve for the conscience of the idea-rich, time-poor academic who is already juggling too much bureaucracy to engage voluntarily in resource-intensive strategy planning. But read further and it becomes clear that the article is not advocating that we abandon strategy altogether. It is recommending that a strong strategy is preferable to a weak one; that strong strategies accommodate uncertainty by being "clear about the ends and flexible about the means".

We can learn something from Brexit here too. Exhaustive planning is hardly the culprit for the current UK government paralysis – quite the opposite in fact. It's the lack of clarity around a shared vision of a Brexit outcome and the absence of a strong but flexible strategy to deliver it, which has created the current political deadlock and stagnation defining this process. This is a helpful lesson to learn and remember for any organisation which wants to ensure future sustainability and avoid unnecessary internal conflict and division.

Brexit Lessons Learned?

Do: Develop a strong outcome-driven strategy to inspire and implement transformational thinking.

Don't: Retrofit a strategy after the decisions about vision, mission and values have already been taken. This imposes constraints which entrench existing biases and individual differences, and limits strategic and innovative thinking making "lose-lose" scenarios more likely.