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Utopia; Future thinking; Global level;  
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#### Abbreviations

EFT: Episodic Future Thinking; FTP:  
Future Time Perspective; UNP: Utopia  
Now Program; UPW: Utopias Production  
Workshop; CLT: Construction Level  
Theory

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# Utopia Now Program-Future Thinking in an International Perspective

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#### Abstract

This research describes the contribution of the Utopia Now Program to the Future Time Perspective (FTP) and Episodic Future Thinking (EFT) of students from Israel and Austria. The research was carried out with triangulation of the research instruments in the qualitative approach. The research findings indicate that the program contributed to the development and depth of FTP and EFT on the personal level but was not expressed on the broader and global level.

#### Introduction

The objective of the research of the future is to improve decision making processes in diverse areas addressed by the human species in order to identify processes that will lead the individual or society to desired futures. In the Western world, young people in their early twenties are found in the stage of the transition from the high school to the world of adults and make decisions that influence their future development in various areas, such as employment, education, residence, and so on [1]. The Utopia Now Program (UNP) was developed in order to bring about personal, community, and global change among students of education from Israel and Austria in the framework of an international pioneering course. The program is held through the method of a Utopias Production Workshop (UPW), which exposed the participants in a process-based manner to discovery, clarification, and creation of personal and collective aspirations for a utopian future of space and society. Examination of the foresight relies on two main constructs: Future Time Perspective (FTP) and Episodic Future Thinking (EFT) in order to identify characteristics of the tendency for FTP and the ability to build personal future scenarios (EFT). The findings of this research were collected in the qualitative approach using interviews before and after the UNP. The findings indicate that the participation in the UNP contributed to the cultivation and development of FTP and EFT on the personal level, but an expression of the program contribution to the characteristics on the global level was not found.

#### Review of the Literature

##### On future thinking and meaning in life

In his book man's search for meaning, Frank [2] wrote "It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future-sub specie aeternitatis. And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task." It is possible to conclude that life with meaning and purpose may in still in us the strengths to overcome and face future challenges. This approach is commensurate with the existentialist approach, which maintains that future thinking has implications on a person's resilience. Indeed, purposive thinking and goals for the future constitute an infrastructure for life with meaning [3]. These statements lead to the following question. Can the cultivation and development of a utopian perspective influence rich, profound, and developed future thinking?

##### Future perspective and the future brain

This research study addresses the influence of the Utopia Now Program (UNP) on the way in which students from Israel and Austria think and imagine a distant future, foresight/prospection, in the aspiration to cultivate a utopian perspective in the coronavirus period. This characterization relies on two theoretical bases: Future Time Perspective (FTP), which engages in regular tendencies of future thinking, and Episodic Future Thinking (EFT), which addresses the ability to create episodic future scenarios [4].

##### Future Time Perspective (FTP)

FTP addresses the expectations and beliefs regarding the future [5,6], and it may change following social and cultural contexts [7,8]. There is a broad consensus regarding four key characteristics of the tendency to think about the future:

- i. Frequency, which refers to the tendency to engage in the long term range of future thinking expressed in thoughts and focus on the topic [9].
- ii. Importance, which refers to the tendency to attribute great importance to future goals and to prefer them over goals in the present.
- iii. Positive attitude towards the future, which refers to a general tendency to address things with a positive attitude.
- iv. Connectedness, which refers to the tendency to feel psychological closeness to the long-term future and to understand the connection between present actions and future goals [10].



## Episodic Future Thinking (EFT)

EFT addresses the ability to imagine a scenario [11]. A simulation of an episodic future event activates in the brain the core network in a way similar to processes in which memories of past events are processed. These processes are called “the future brain”, since they produce an episode that has not yet occurred [12,13]. These imaginary episodes indicate meta-cognitive ability of considerable value, since they enable optimal preparation for diverse events [14], such as improvement of the ability to deal with scenarios while phrasing multiple possible outcomes or analyzing the likelihood of their occurrence [14,15]. Accordingly, people do not prepare for reasonable and desired future results; rather, they build, in addition, contingency plans for unwanted future situations and thus extend strategies for solving problems that may occur in the future [16].

EFT has four main characteristics:

- i. Richness in the set of sensorial details that addresses the ability to imagine a scenario rich in sensory details, such as color, sound, tone, and smell, and for the presentation of a vivid picture.
- ii. Construction that addresses the ability to coherently, logically, and cohesively build a future scenario [17].
- iii. Coherence that addresses the ability to create a future story, scenario, or simulation organized logically, continuously, and clearly [18,19].
- iv. Involvement that addresses the closeness between the “present self” and the “future self” in the imaginary scenario [20], in contrast to an experience of distance from the scenario [21]. In this research study, the participants experience a unique international pioneering course, the Utopia Now Program (UNP), during which the contribution of the program to the development and cultivation of future thinking composed of the two main constructs, FTP and EFT, among the research participants was examined [4].

## Utopias Production Workshop (UPW)

The ‘Utopia Now Program’ based on the Utopias Production Workshop (UPW), aims to establish global collaborations between Israeli and Austrian students in order to develop future thinking through Utopia’s production workshop. The main vision of the program follows Mahatma Gandhi’s words: “Be the change you wish to see in the world”. As such, the program invites students to participate in a challenging learning journey that promotes intellectual independence, critical thinking, courage, and personal liberty. UNP invites pre-service teachers around the world to cross borders and cultures with the objective of participating in an educational initiative aimed at accomplishing the following goals: to develop professional relationships between students and faculty on an international level; to develop collaborative learning skills that focus on participants’ personal interests; and to initiate a project that creates positive, far-reaching sustainable change on an interpersonal and educational level.

The methodology that accompanies this learning journey is the “Utopia’s Production Workshop” established by Architect Oded Kutok from Shenkar College in Israel based and implemented through the “Israel100” project [22] and in other frameworks. UPW is aimed at developing future positive-oriented thinking through a unique approach that outshines traditional methods. This methodology calls for the creation of a utopian reality and contains several variations including one that was specially adjusted for children and youth. It consists of six stages of investigation of participants’ goals in the context of envisioning utopian worlds.

- a. “Boom”-Examples of stories from the past that have impacted the world. At this stage, students are exploring evidence of “turning points” that changed the world in an instant and understanding that not everything familiar is also permanent.
- b. “Future Detectives”-A search for clues in the local present environment that foreshadow the future. At this stage, students are trying to identify tangible evidence for the future in their local environment at present. After departing from the research of predicting the future, the students go back to the workshop to organize and decipher the evidence in the archeological exhibition of signs for the future.
- c. “Anxieties and hopes”-Searching for feelings and sensations about the future clues from a personal perspective-What scares me? What do I hope for? After discussing the feelings and sensations, adding anxieties and hopes to the archeological exhibition and connecting them to the clues.

- d. “A search for game changers”-How reality can change-for anxiety to be eliminated and for hope to come true? At this stage, students are creating stories of revolutions that bring an end to anxiety and create hope.
- e. “Our unfamiliar future worlds”-Manifesting desires for the future of upcoming daily life, and presenting them using description of spaces, objects, social interactions, etc., preferably as the future of their familiar environments.
- f. “Starting points”-What do we want to focus on in creating a better future? Students are determining the theme or focus for creating a better future. In this stage, students are looking at global goals for sustainable development as a possible starting point for further inquiry about the chosen topic in local and global contexts [23].

The program summary includes an accompanying site [24] and the following moves.

- i. The students worked together on stages A to D of the Utopia’s production workshop methodology. Each student will determine a theme of interest and choose a specific space that has the best potential to express a vision of a desired future world.
- ii. Groups of students are arranged based on common or related interests. Each group will investigate the chosen theme collaboratively. Students will observe unfamiliar sights and phenomena embedded in their foreign Centerport’s habitat with the objective of escaping from conventions and setbacks in exploring future possibilities of their habitats.
- iii. Each group will create a model of the utopic environment (stage E).
- iv. Each group will decide on possible additional steps aimed at creating a change in the world and will then add them to the utopic model (stage F).
- v. A joint online exhibition or conference of the program products will be held.

This research study seeks to examine the question of the influence of UNP on the development and cultivation of the Future Time Perspective (FTP) and Episodic Future Thinking (EFT) among students from Israel and Austria.

## Methodology

### Method

This research study makes use of the qualitative paradigm out of the assumption that reality is not an objective entity but is built by people, through the creation of a subjective interpretation of their experiences [25]. The research study was performed during an international semester course held by the Utopia Now Program (UNP) among twenty students, twelve from Israel and eight from Austria.

Of the different various genres that exist in the qualitative paradigm, this research was conducted using the method of case study in combination with instrumental case study and collective case study [26]. This is because it addresses each one of the research participants as an individual case, in order to understand the meaningful learning experience from the internal world of those who experience it and at the same time all as a whole holistically as a unique group [27].

### Research Instruments

To strengthen the reliability of the data, the research study was carried out at two points of time, at the start and at the end of the intervention program (UNP), and used triangulation of the research instruments.

- i. Personal and anonymous interview based on the Foresight Style Index [4]. The following questions were presented: When I consider my next decade, it makes me feel...; I am looking forward to the next decade of my life because; Do you believe that in the long run long-term goals are more important than short-term goals? Explain and give an example; Are you sacrificing your happiness/well-being in the short term to achieve goals in the next decade of your life. Explain and give an example from your life; How much do you think about your future? (Every day? Week? Month? Not at all? ...) Does the subject concern you? Explain your answer and give an example; Describe an imaginary scenario of your future as you “see” it.
- ii. Observations of films of the lesson at the start and end of the research, in order to focus on the descriptions of the participants that address the EFT, through



in-depth review of the following characteristics: richness of the sensory details, construction, cohesion, and involvement, and description, and in addition, the descriptions of FTP, with reference to frequency, importance, positive attitude, and connectedness.

- iii. Student feedback on the program in a reflective look.

### Data analysis

First, the interviews were analyzed according to thematic analysis before the intervention program and after it, with the use of text passages and not only words and expressions. In this way, a broad and rich picture of the interviewees' statements was created. The analysis was carried out in five stages.

- i. **Initial coding:** The division of the interviews into descriptive categories.
- ii. **Mapping analysis:** Broad analysis of all the interviews, identification of core categories, and creation of secondary categories.
- iii. **Focused analysis:** Collection of the categories into the most meaningful supra-categories.
- iv. **Descriptive analysis:** Presentation of descriptive narratives, which give a changed-focused look at the Future Time Perspective (FTP and Episodic Future Thinking (EFT).
- v. **Theoretical analysis (theorization):** Connection of case studies into a joint discussion with the research literature [25].

Second, the observations in the recordings of the lessons led to a wealth of data, when it was possible to follow up after the students' participation during the course and to examine whether there is a descriptive narrative influence according to the characteristics of the EFT and FTP. Third, the participants anonymously provided in the Moodle system feedback for the course. Through the feedback, it was possible to get the impression of how they perceived the course, with its challenges and its contribution on the personal and college levels.

**Validity and reliability:** To validate the findings and increase the overall reliability, the research design includes the following components:

- i. The findings were collected continuously on the time axis (at the start and end of the program) for an entire system.
- ii. Uniform information was collected about all the participants, thus enabling comparison between the fixed indices.
- iii. Development of the categories and themes of the interviews was held separately by two researchers until agreement was reached.
- iv. Triangulation of the research instruments was carried out.

**Ethics:** All the research participants expressed their consent to participate in the research study. In addition, to maintain the participants' resilience, the participants were given pseudonyms and all details that might have betrayed their anonymity. In addition, the participants were explained that the data collected in the interviews, observations, and feedback would be used solely for research purposes.

### Findings

This chapter presents the participants' insights at the start and end of the UNP intervention program in order to focus on its contribution. The findings address emotions, expectations, and frequency of the participants' thoughts regarding their future. In addition, this chapter presents the importance they ascribe to their future in the short and long terms, the sacrifice they are willing to make in the present, and the writing of imaginary scenarios that describe the long-awaited future.

### Valence of the emotions caused by thinking about the distant future

The students primarily exhibited positive valence, which was expressed in considerable optimism when they went to describe the feelings caused in them by the thought about their future in the coming decade. The lion's share of their responses included expressions such as curiosity, excitement, enthusiasm, hope, and happiness. Only a few of the responses indicated negative emotions, which were concern and anxiety. The feelings and emotions in the context of the distant future were shared by the Austrian students and the Israeli students. There was no difference between men and women, and there was no change between before the Utopia Now intervention program and after it.

### Expectations raised by the thinking on the distant future-Main domains of the future thoughts

Examination of the students' expectations from the future in the coming decade of their life indicates three types of expectations: personal-family expectations, as indicated by the words of an Austrian student in the stage before the Utopia Now intervention program: "I am looking forward to starting a family and living my best life..."; professional expectations, as can be seen in the words of an Israeli student in the stage after the intervention program: "I'm gonna work with kids and I'm good at it", and combination of the two types of expectations, personal and professional, as can be seen in the words of an Austrian student in the stage before the participation in the intervention program: "It will be the decade where I get a job, get married, have a family of my own and be able to live completely independently."

The students' statements presented above reflect the mood that is expressed in all the students' words, of positive and optimistic future thinking.

An interesting finding arose among the Israeli students, expressed in expectations for the future accompanied by positive feelings of freedom: "I'm free to be who I really am", "Free from the shackles of society." The feelings of freedom were expressed in the ability to travel the world: "I will probably have more time to travel the world", "I'm going to learn a lot, travel to many places, and meet good people", "There are so many things which I would like to try, study, places to visit, etc." A possible reason for this finding, which was expressed primarily among the Israeli students, can be found in the difference between the life path of the Austrians and that of the Israelis. When the Austrians complete twelve years of schooling, they can choose to travel, to work, or to begin their academic studies, from a professional future intention. In contrast to the Austrians, when the Israelis complete their high school studies, they enlist into compulsory military service and become soldiers for a period of two to three years. Thus a situation is created in which they do not experience the sense of freedom when they leave the learning framework but enter immediately into an even stricter framework. With the end of the military service, most discharged soldiers need a sense of freedom and connection to the individual. Therefore, the practice in Israel is for the soldiers to embark on a "great trip" after their military service, and only then do they begin to plan their professional and academic future. It is possible that some of the Israeli students in the program did not embark on a great trip before they began their academic studies and therefore they linked the view of the future optimistically with going on a trip around the world. Alternatively, since the soldiers' experiences as looking forward to a good and optimistic future was embodied over intense years in their lives in the post-military freedom and departure for a trip around the world, it is possible that this positive expectation was etched into their awareness as illustrating an optimistic view of the future even in other life situations [9].

### Frequency of the thoughts about the future

The frequency of the thinking about the future examines the extent to which the thinking about the distant future occupies the students and the volume it fills in the daily flow of thought. Examination of the frequency of the thoughts indicated that the Utopia Now intervention program had a contribution to the frequency of thought, but it influenced only the students who thought about their personal future. The findings indicated that among the Israeli and Austrian students, regardless of differences in sex, who thought about their personal future, there was an increase in the frequency of thinking concurrently with the level of optimism in the view of the future. This finding supports previous research studies [9]. This, for example, arises from the statements of an Austrian student before the intervention program: "I do not think about it on a regular basis. Given recent events, it concerns me, but the world keeps turning." In contrast, an Israeli student after the intervention program said: "I think about my future every day, but the subject doesn't concern me... no matter which path I will choose, I will be fine... I will always have my family and friends to support me." However, among students whose thoughts about the distant future focused on the global future and not on the personal future, far more pessimistic thoughts were observed, and the frequency of the thought was lower. Thus, for example, the words of an Austrian student before the intervention program indicate, "Every week. The subject is very interesting and it concerns everyone. For example, the climate change affects my well-being and health. World problems concern me. They do not only concern a few people, they concern any human in the world." This was seen in the words of an Israeli student after the intervention program. "I do not think of it too much, maybe once a week. My future concerns are not only about me or my family but about my country and its politics and geopolitics problems. Other thoughts are of global nature and climate problems."



It is possible to assume from these findings that following the Utopia Now intervention program that contributed to the optimistic view of the future there was an increase also in the frequency of thinking about and engaging in the future. However, in cases in which the future thinking focuses on a global view, such as, for example, the future of the country, the future of the planet, or the future of humanity, the view of the future is pessimistic and the intervention program did not help raise the level of optimism in thoughts of this type and did not influence the frequency of the thinking. It is possible that the reason lies in the fact that in light of global events, the simple person's level of control is rather low and as the level of mastery and ability of influence are perceived by the person to be low, the person's ability to see the future optimistically declines. When the view of the future is perceived as pessimistic without a realistic ability to change it, the frequency of thinking about the future also declines. It is possible that in the future it is necessary to consider a continuation program to the Utopia Now Program, in which to attempt to provide a more meaningful response also to aspects of global future thoughts.

### Level of importance of the short-term goals versus the long-term goals

The examination of the level of importance attributed by the students to future goals found that most of the Austrian students ascribed to the long-term goals greater importance than to the short-term goals before the participation in the Utopia Now Program and afterwards, according to the Construction Level Theory (CLT) [28]. This arises, for example, from the words of an Austrian student before the intervention program: "Yes, long-term goals are more important, because long term affects your life much more and short term can disappear. Example: you have to find a work for the summer time. After the summer time you have to do it again. It is better to find a work for a life time." In a similar vein, there are the words of an Austrian student after the intervention program: "Yeah, long term is more valuable, because if you work out for example only 2 weeks and then quit, then it was pretty useless." In contrast, it appears that before the Utopia Now intervention program most of the Israeli students ascribed to the short-term goals greater importance than to the long-term goals. "I don't think so. I believe that short-term goals are the basics of the long-term goals." Another example: "No. I do not think that long-term goals are more important than short-term goals because to fulfill the long-term goals we need the short-term goals. Many short-term goals will build the one long-term goal." Alternatively, they ascribed to the two types of goals equal importance: "I believe that both of them are important, because in a way, long-term goals might achieve greater goals, but reaching short-term goals can help you gain confidence in your abilities. They also lead to achievements that will encourage you and others to continue working for your cause. For example, working hard on a project in school while studying will give me the courage and confidence to try bigger projects in the future and in teaching in general." After the Utopia Now intervention program there was a significant change among the Israeli students, and the decisive majority began to attribute great importance to future goals and to prefer them to goals for the present." [10]. For example, "Sure, major changes or significant achievements are gained only on long-term plans." It appears that the intervention program significantly changed the way in which the Israeli students perceived the long-awaited future and consequently the Israeli students ascribed far greater importance to future goals as a factor with considerable importance in the achievement of the picture of the future they expect, as can be seen in the words of the Israeli student after the Utopia Now intervention program: "long-term goals are the beacon in light of which the plans will be built and it will be possible to build the short-term goals that are more the application and the way to reach and fulfill the long-term goals." From the aforementioned statement, it can be seen that with the end of the Utopia Now intervention program, the Israeli students and the Austrian students perceived the long-term goals as having considerable importance in the building of their expected future. In the attempt to deepen and examine the degree of involvement of students and the feeling of affinity between the present and the anticipated future, the students were asked whether they feel that they sacrifice of their happiness and enjoyment in the present, in order to improve their future development. The reference to this question is presented in the following subsection.

### Sacrifice in the present for the long-awaited future

The examination of the students' responses indicates that there was no change after the implementation of the intervention program, and the decisive majority of the Austrian students, as well as the Israeli students, felt that they are sacrificing of their enjoyment and happiness in the present in order to achieve a better future. This is both before and after the program, as can be seen in the words of an Austrian student before the intervention program. "Yes. Right now, that I am in Vienna for a semester I have left... my friends, my family, things I used to do. But it will be worthwhile." and

in the words of an Israeli student before the intervention program. "I totally agree because the degree which I'm doing is the first step in achieving my ultimate goal." The change that occurred in the answers of the Austrian and Israeli students after the Utopia Now intervention program was not expressed in the question of whether they feel that they are sacrificing in the present for a better future, since both before the program and after the program the students from both countries felt that they are sacrificing of their happiness for their future, but the prominent change was in the way in which they expressed the awaited future, as a constructed, coherent episodic future scenario rich in sensorial details and with involvement, in which there is a sense of closeness between the "present self" and the "future self". Evidence of this arises from the words of an Austrian student after the intervention program: "Yes. I believe it is important to have a vision of yourself and of the world in the long term because a long-term vision can help you to plan... For example, if your long-term goal is to become an inclusive teacher, this will influence your short-term goals for the classroom e.g., having a library including books from all cultures, learning about other cultures, project work, etc." An Israeli student said after the intervention program: "I sacrifice because my future concerns me because it is crucial for me to fulfill myself and feel that I do something helpful and have a positive impact on others and on the society. Example: After studying law and working about 7 years in the Israeli energy field, I chose to change my professional direction because I felt this is where I belong. Fortunately, so far, I feel it was the right decision."

### Imaginary scenario for the long-awaited future

In this theme, the students' descriptions of their future self in their longed-for future picture were examined. It can be seen from the imaginary descriptions of their future self before and after the Utopia Now Program that all the descriptions were optimistic and with a positive attitude towards the future, both before the program and after it, and in all of them affinity and psychological closeness to the figure of the future self in the long term and realization of the current expectations were observed. An example can be seen in the statements of the Israeli student before the program. "I work in a good school close to my house, I find my grounding as a teacher." and in the words of the Austrian student before the intervention program: "After finishing the semester in KPH, I will return to my home country and I hope I will find a job in my profession as a teacher." Descriptions of the future scenarios after the participation in the Utopia Now Program, as expressed in the words of the Israeli students as well as the Austrian students, included affinity and positive attitude to the future, in which the present expectations were realized, but in contrast to before the program began, they were richer in detail and words and the scenario was built in a logical, continuous, and coherent manner and great involvement between the present self and the future self was exhibited [18]. An example can be seen in the words of the Austrian student after the intervention program. "I see myself working in a school in Dubai. I see myself learning about different cultures through first hand experiences and developing as an inclusive and caring teacher. I see myself offering additional support to children outside of school hours and devoting the next decade of my life to teach other children to the best of my ability." Another example can be found in the words of an Israeli student after her participation in the Utopia Now Program: "An imaginary scenario of my future as I 'see' it would be getting married and having 2-3 children. Besides that, keeping a close relationship with my mother and sister and my many friends in Israel and Switzerland. Professionally, I'd like to be a teacher who is meaningful to her students, contributing to their development into responsible and curious adults as well as contributing to my fulfilment. I'd also like to be promoted to a role that can affect the Israeli education system, even a small part of it."

### Conclusion

The Utopia Now Program (UNP) for intervention contributed to the increase in the level of frequency in which the participants thought about their personal future, with positive valence and optimism, as the thoughts had an episodic character. In contrast, thoughts with a more semantic nature, which discuss a global future that addresses, for example, the future of humanity, the country, or the planet had low frequency and negative valence, or in other words, a pessimistic viewpoint. Since there was improvement in the FTP measures, such as frequency, perceived importance, and personal valence, we estimate that in the long run there will be an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of the participants in the program towards the environment because FTP plays an important role in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of people towards the environment [4]. There is room to consider another examination a number of months after the intervention program. The way in which we imagine our future, given the thinking term (short or long), is influenced by our goals and desires in the present [4]. In early adulthood, the goals and desires revolve around the building





of a family and the starting of a career [29], and accordingly it was found that personal-family expectations, professional expectations, and the combination between them were dominant.

Following the program, the expression of the (personal) long-awaited episodic future was richer in sensorial details, with better coherence, easier to construct, and with perception of personal involvement in the scenario. Moreover, the construction of future scenarios after the program included a higher level of connection and positive attitude, richness in details and words, logical and coherent continuity, and a considerable involvement between the present self and the imagined future self. Hence, the participation in the UNP developed and cultivated a higher foresight style index that is composed of a stronger tendency towards future thinking, thus indicating the development in FTP. In addition, the estimate of the ability for the more in-depth construction of future scenarios was observed, thus leading to the development of the EFT estimate. The development in these indices invites a multiplicity of results and likelihoods that can broaden strategies for decision making and problem solving [16]. However, a semantic expression of the long-awaited future did not indicate a change of attitudes and perceptions. It may be necessary to consider the development of the program for broader and more inclusive aspects, or it may be necessary to carry out a later measurement to understand secondary effects of the improvement of foresight [30].

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