

Futures Training in Sri Lankan Universities

The Director of the Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC), Dr. Juha Kaskinen, together with Junior expert on Futures Studies, Kalpani Pavithra, conducted a comprehensive week-long training program on Futures Studies from December 10th to 13th, 2024. This engaging initiative was hosted at Uva Wellassa University and Sabaragamuwa University in Sri Lanka, attracting enthusiastic participants eager to dive into futures methodologies and climate-resilient development. The training provided a platform for interactive learning utilizing a participatory approach, promoting skills in envisioning and planning for sustainable futures.

Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka

The Futures Studies training program in Sri Lanka commenced with its first session at Uva Wellassa University. The event began with a series of formal speeches, reflecting on the progress and significance of the ongoing project. The Vice-Chancellor of the University delivered an inspiring address, followed by insights from the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture. The session concluded with a warm welcome to the trainers, Dr. Juha Kaskinen and Kalpani Pavithra, delivered by the project coordinator. This ceremonious start set the tone for a week of engaging and impactful learning. In the training sessions, there were approximately 40 participants.

The training session began with a presentation on an overview of Futures Studies, covering key theoretical concepts and their significance to students. Following this, an overview of the planned Futures Studies course was shared, outlining its objectives and structure. The session concluded with a lively and fruitful Q&A segment, where the enthusiastic and active audience engaged deeply, posing insightful questions and encouraging an active exchange of ideas.

The first day's evening session was dedicated to a Futures Workshop focused on creating Preferred Futures Scenarios for Climate-Resilient Development (CRD) in Sri Lanka by 2040. Participants applied the theoretical concepts learned in the morning session to tackle the complex challenges posed by climate change through hands-on activities. The workshop began with the "Understanding the Present and Mapping Emerging Signals" theme. This initially included two critical steps: the Applauding Phase, where participants identified Sri Lanka's current successes and progress toward CRD, and the Problematic Phase, which explored key obstacles and challenges impeding further progress.

After a brief break, the session resumed with a Mental Time Travel exercise, encouraging participants to creatively and imaginatively think about the future. This prepared them for the final phase, the Futures Signals Phase, where they examined and categorised the main issues affecting CRD. Participants

identified key drivers and classified them into Mega Trends, Trends, Wild Cards, and Weak Signals, providing a structured framework for addressing these challenges.

The day concluded with a reflective discussion, where participants shared their experiences, insights, and thoughts on the workshop. They explored which aspects were particularly engaging or challenging and they understood how impactful these tools were in learning and improving in all aspects. This engaging workshop marked the end of an intensive and impactful first day of the Futures training, setting a strong foundation for the sessions. After the training sessions, a Letter of Intent (LOI) was signed between Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka and the Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC) at the Vice Chancellor's office which marks a significant step toward future collaboration in advancing Futures Studies and sustainability initiatives.

Wednesday, December 11, 2024, began with an insightful session on Futures research approaches and methods, exploring their practical applications in real-world contexts. Participants delved deeper into Futures thinking and methodologies, preparing for the continuation of the Futures Workshop from the previous day. The focus of Day 2 was on “Building Future Scenarios and Pathways”. The workshop resumed with the Futures Table Phase, where participants defined a range of alternative future states for the key drivers identified on Day 1. This process outlined multiple possible directions for each driver.

Next came the Futures Images Phase, where complementary future states from the Futures Table were combined to create vivid and compelling scenarios. Participants envisioned what Climate-Resilient Development (CRD) in Sri Lanka could look like by 2040, crafting detailed and imaginative futures. Building on these images, participants worked collaboratively to develop Pathways and Strategic Steps for achieving their most desired future scenarios. They outlined milestones, key actions, and strategies to guide Sri Lanka toward a sustainable and climate-resilient future.

The day concluded with each group presenting their preferred futures scenarios in creative and innovative ways, utilizing various AI tools to enhance their visual and conceptual representations. A reflective session followed, where participants shared their learning experiences and feedback. They expressed satisfaction with the interactive and hands-on approach, gaining valuable insights into Futures Studies and its transformative potential. Day 2 ended successfully, with participants feeling confident and inspired to apply their new knowledge and tools in their respective domains.

Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka

Thursday, December 12, 2024, began with the signing of a Letter of Intent (LOI) between Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka (SUSL) and the Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC) at the Vice Chancellor's

office. This agreement marked another important step toward strengthening collaboration in Futures Studies and sustainability initiatives. Following a brief discussion with the Vice Chancellor of SUSL and the successful project team, the day's training sessions commenced. The agenda mirrored that of the previous sessions at Uva Wellassa University (UWA), starting with a presentation on an overview of Futures Studies and theoretical sessions in the morning. In the evening, the participants engaged in a Futures Workshop, gaining practical experience in applying Futures tools and concepts to real-world challenges. There were approximately 30 participants in the training session.

One notable difference was the mode of workshop facilitation. At UWA, participants worked in a traditional format using poster boards and sticky notes, whereas at SUSL, the workshop was conducted on a virtual platform, the Miro Board. This decision was influenced by network connectivity strength and SUSL's preference for a digital approach. Before the workshop, a brief introductory session was held to familiarize participants with the Miro Board. Trainers explained its features and demonstrated how to use it effectively for collaborative tasks. Despite initial unfamiliarity, participants quickly adapted to the platform and actively engaged in the exercises, successfully achieving the workshop's desired outcomes.

The hands-on approach, combined with the digital tools, provided participants with a unique and enriching experience, reinforcing their understanding of Futures concepts and methodologies while demonstrating the versatility of digital platforms in collaborative problem-solving.

Reflection

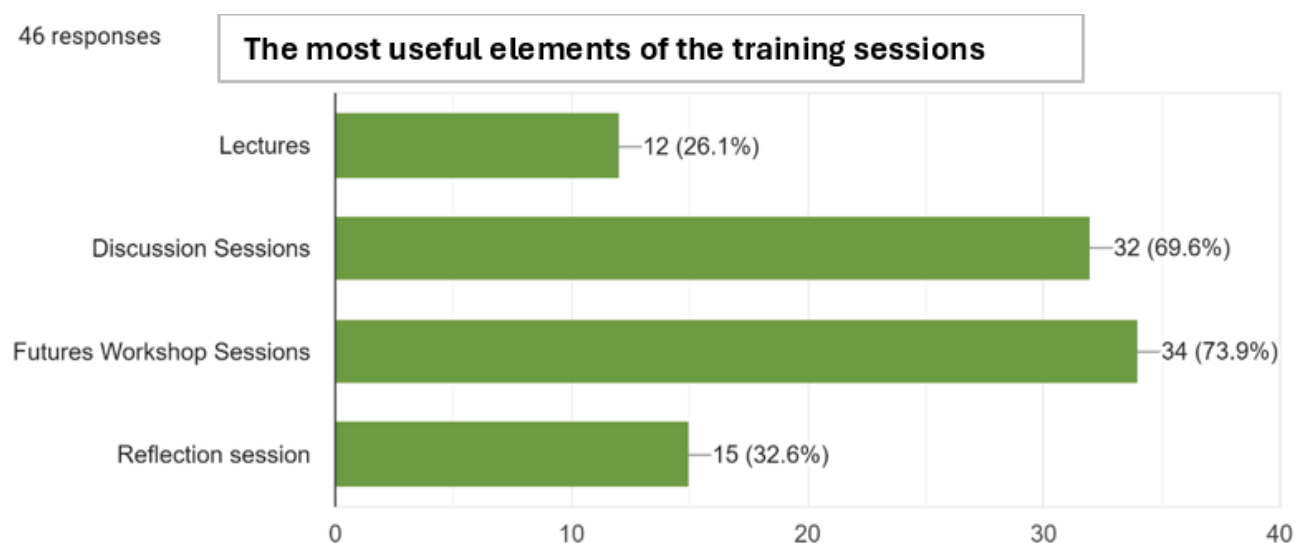
A noteworthy observation from the training sessions at both Uva Wellassa University and Sabaragamuwa University was the high level of engagement from the participants. Despite the intensive nature of the two-day sessions, there were no dropouts, and the participants remained fully involved throughout. Their enthusiasm for learning Futures concepts and their active participation contributed significantly to the success of the training. This dedication not only enriched the sessions but also helped the facilitators overcome time constraints, ensuring the program achieved its objectives effectively.

The training sessions concluded on a high note, with participants from both universities expressing their appreciation for the opportunity to engage in such an innovative and transformative learning experience. The workshops and presentations provided them with valuable insights, hands-on experience, and practical tools to envision and plan for sustainable, climate-resilient futures.

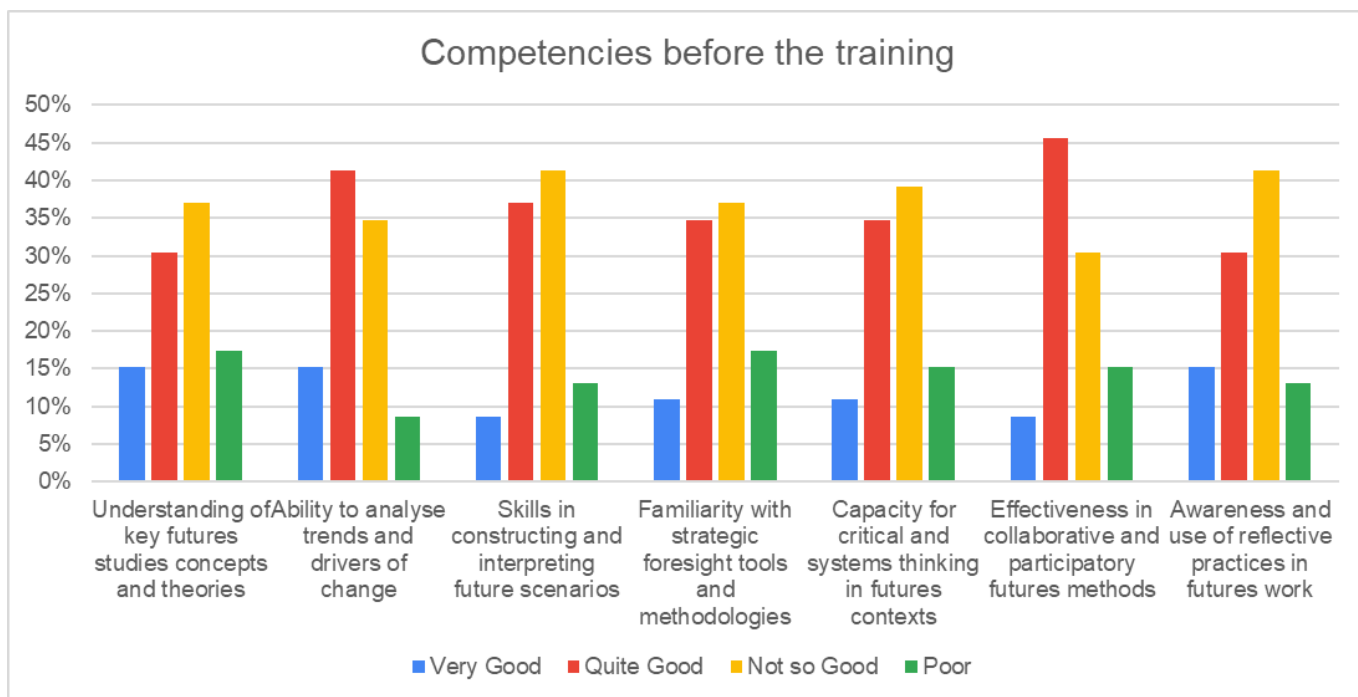
Based on the feedback received after the training, the Futures workshop sessions emerged as the standout element, appraised positively for their engaging format and practical applications, highlighting the valuable insights and collaborative discussions that took place (See Graph 1). The feedback indicates that the training session was appropriately balanced in difficulty, not too easy and not too hard. While some participants found identifying the drivers to be a challenging task, the majority felt comfortable with it after a thorough explanation of the topic. The majority of participants found the learning outcomes, provided materials, and online platform to be clear, well-organized, and easily understandable, enhancing their overall experience and engagement (See Graph 7). Developing future scenarios was highlighted as the most useful aspect of the training by the participants, along with other activities. It was encouraging to note that there were no significant topics considered irrelevant. Additionally, the most common suggestion was to increase the number of interactive group sessions and to extend the duration of the training in the future.

Overall, the training experience was rated highly in terms of content, the competency of the facilitators, interactivity, and engagement (See Graphs 4 – 6). Participants demonstrated a deeper understanding of the concepts and practices related to these approaches compared to their knowledge before the session (See Graphs 2 & 3). This improvement indicates that the training effectively equipped attendees with the skills and insights needed to apply futures methodologies in their fields, fulfilling the training session objectives. The collaboration between FFRC and the two universities marked a fundamental step in expanding the reach of Futures Studies in Sri Lanka, laying the groundwork for continued efforts to build capacity and inspire innovative solutions for pressing global challenges.

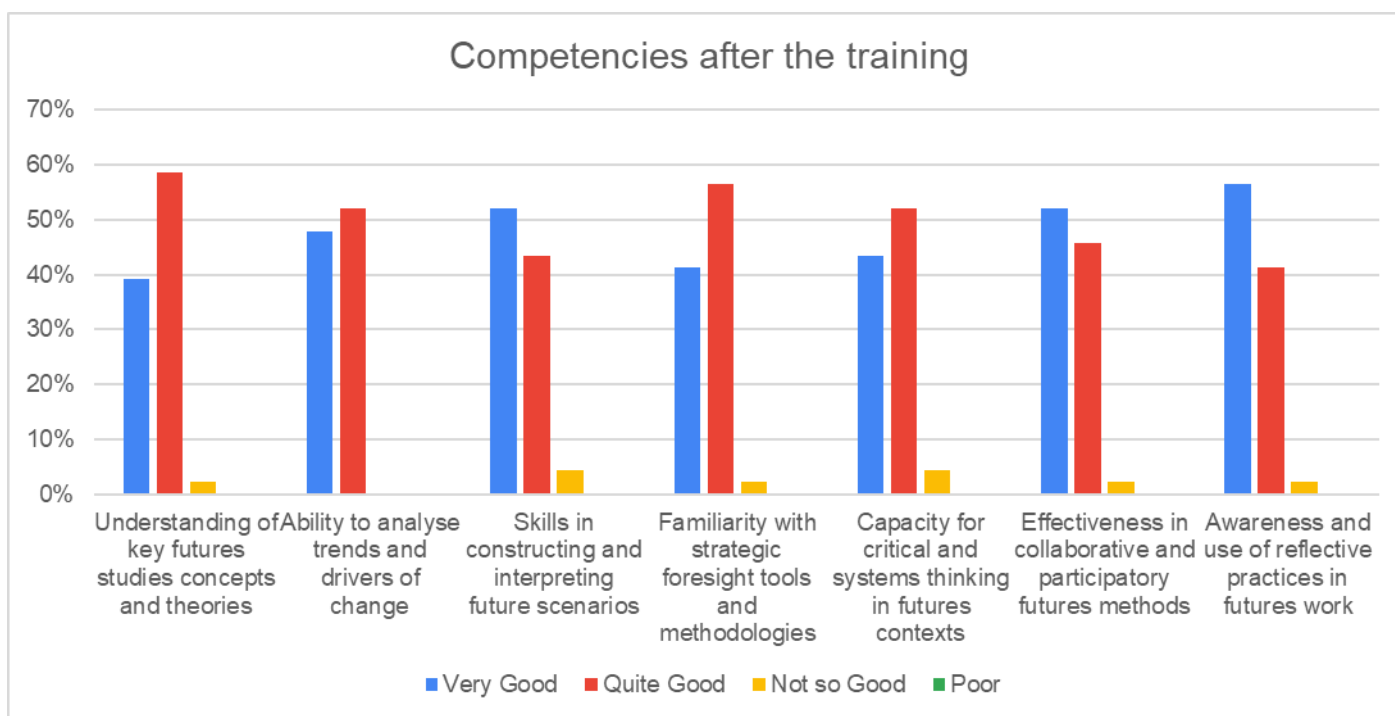
Some of the key results of the post-training feedback are presented in the graphs below.



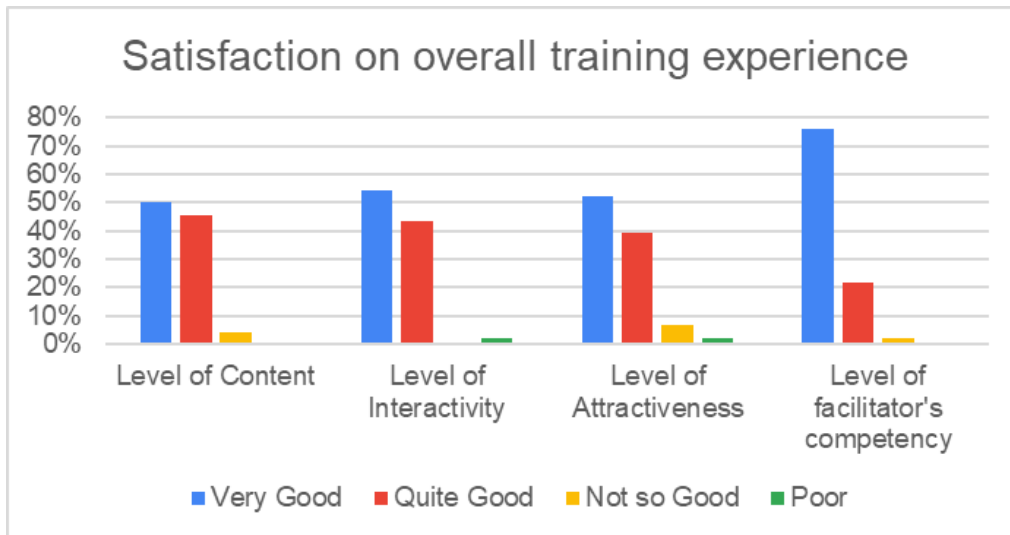
Graph 1: The most useful elements of the training sessions selected by the participants



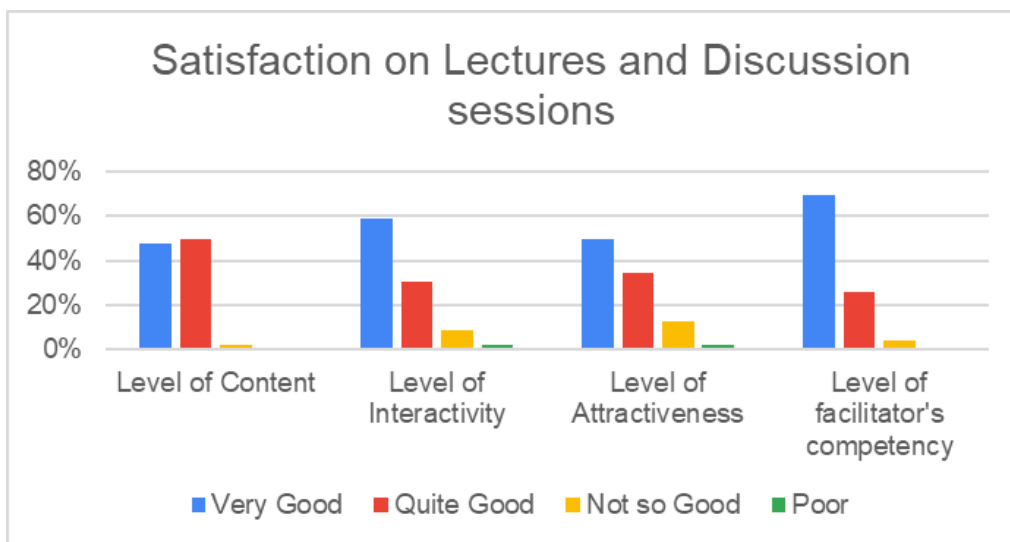
Graph 2: Level of competencies before the training sessions



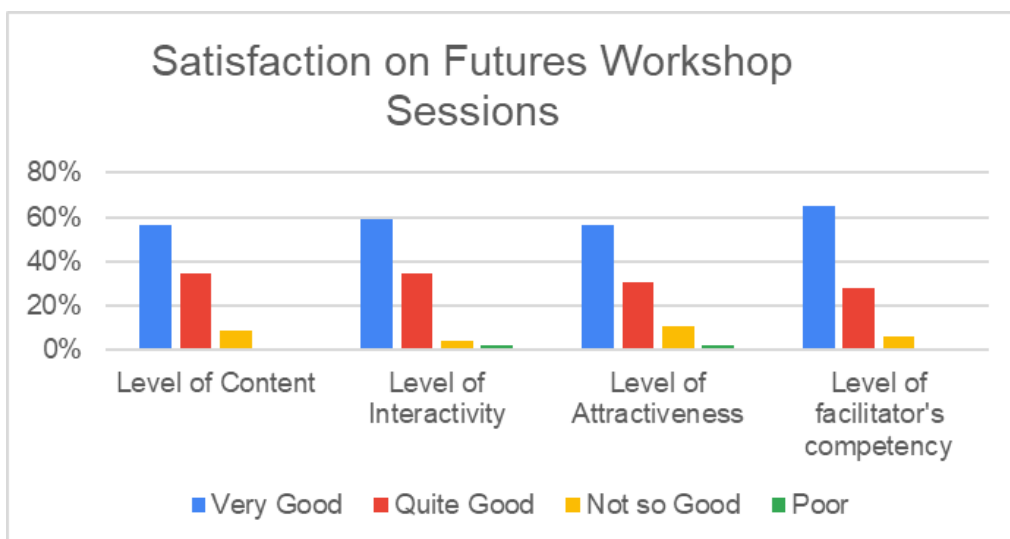
Graph 3: The level of competencies after the training sessions



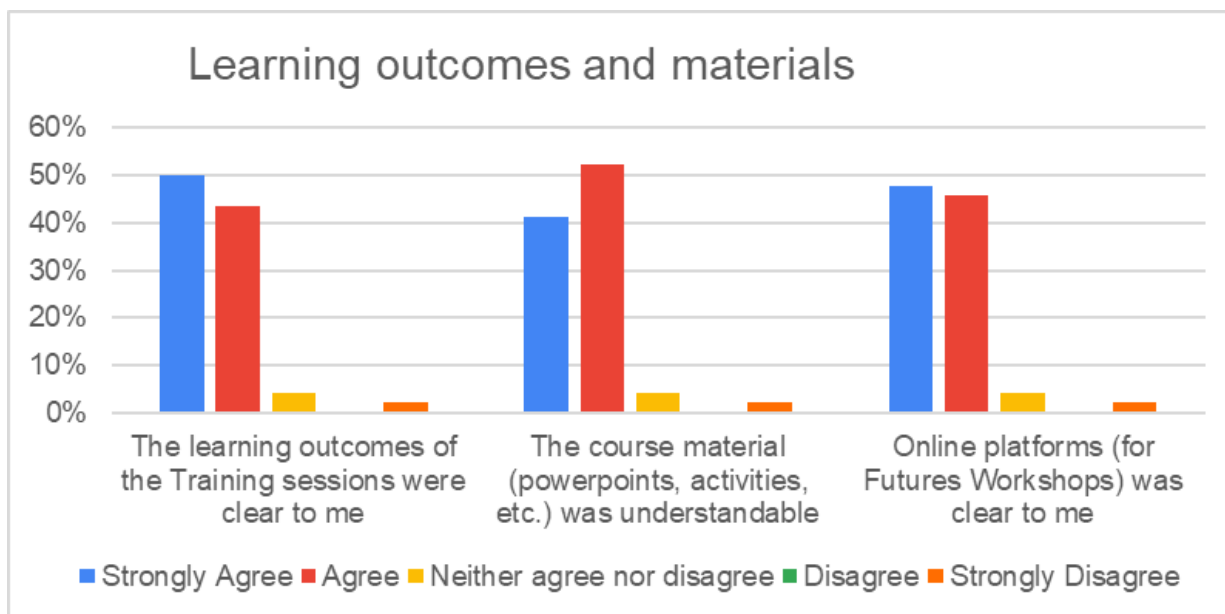
Graph 4: Level of satisfaction with Overall training experience



Graph 5: Level of Satisfaction with Lectures and Discussion Sessions



Graph 6: Level of Satisfaction with Futures Workshop sessions



Graph 7: Level of agreement with the Learning Outcomes and Materials

Some of the pictures taken during the training sessions are attached below.



Theoretical Training by Juha Kaskinen, provides key insights and foundational knowledge



Workshop facilitated by Kalpani Pavithra, creating an engaging and interactive learning experience



Group discussions using digital platforms, fostering collaboration and idea-sharing



Brainstorming with paper-based inputs, encouraging traditional methods of discussion



Teamwork enhanced through digital tools, promoting interactive engagement



Creative presentations using digital media, showcasing innovative group ideas



Traditional paper-based presentations, highlighting creative group findings in a structured format



Reflective session with participants, sharing key takeaways and experiences