

## **EDUCATING PLANNERS, EDUCATING FOR PLANNING OR**

### **PLANNING EDUCATION: THE NEVER-ENDING STORY**

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Sixty years after planning education courses commenced in Australia we are presented with a rather confusing picture and even a series of conundrums, whether you are inside the system or looking in from the outside. The inherent value of urban and regional planning is often struggling for recognition. In some cases even the legitimacy of planning is being questioned (Gleeson 2000; Gleeson and Low 2003). There appears to be a constant process of shifting blame on to planning and planners for market failures and deficient government policy. For those immersed in teaching and educating planners this seems to run counter to a profession which appears to have an inherent logic and self-justification.

#### **The Diverse Roles of Planners and the Responses of Planning Education**

This paper seeks to explore these themes around some core questions including:

- what are our planning programs on about and what should be their focus?
- how do we in planning education reconcile the range of demands that are made on planning courses
- what sorts of roles and tasks will those who graduate as planners expect to perform and be expected to perform?

The issue is clouded by the realization that there is a *job* called a 'planner', which for much of the public appears to involve the administration of a set of legal and administrative systems and processes, and that there is also a *vocation* called a 'planner' that involves and embraces an almost indefinable set of tasks and roles across a wide range of situations and circumstances (Thompson 2007). Rather than shy away from that dilemma and those competing demands, we should welcome this as an opportunity to encourage a wider audience to understand planning. We should use it to generate opportunities for others to work with and be educated with planners. Increasingly we need to use this situation to find ways to regain and revitalise a core agenda around public policy and the spatial economy that values social justice, community benefit, the pursuit of greater sustainability, respect for the environment and the overall betterment of society.

Not only are we facing the difficulty in many areas of establishing (re-establishing) the legitimacy of planning, but ironically in many places the cry is for more planners. How do we explain this? Perhaps it is just a call for more people to process applications (or is that just 'approvals')? Is it just a request for more people to negotiate compromises between increasingly better resourced and more demanding

competing interests? Perhaps it is a call for more people to process the mounting levels of information and data that now accompany and are demanded for development proposals. We have moved to a situation where we need an increasing range of reports and studies before we can make a decision.

The demand for planners continues to be strong in the traditional area of employment in local government but also the surge over the last decade in the private sector is without precedent. Will this be sustained in the current economic circumstances? Perhaps not, but many planners are now employed to meet the ever-growing demands for more information and consultation and one suspects that the future growth of those areas will be almost exponential.

Persons with planning qualifications are also being sought in other areas of commerce and public service. Numerous government departments are finding that persons with planning qualifications and experience add considerably to their capacity. Many who were educated as planners often end up in other roles within a range of public and private sector organisations. To my knowledge, five current or recent CEOs of local governments in Victoria commenced as planners, and I understand that similar observations can be made in other states. As the Australian Managing Director of a very large multi-national engineering firm said to me recently, 'I find that planners are able to bring a unique set of skills to a problem. They seem to be able to approach a topic in a way that provides different insights because of their comprehensive and strategic approach and their capacity to approach an old problem from new angles.'

In response to the growing demand for planners the number and diversity of programs and courses on offer at universities at both undergraduate and postgraduate level across Australia is at a peak with more in the wings. Yet in many respects there is increasing confusion around what the term 'planner' actually means. What is the profession itself referring to when it uses the term planner and what is it that those planners are studying at universities? A selection of course objectives from some planning courses around Australia reveals the diversity of what planners are being educated in and prepared for:

- 'economic, human, political, legal, environmental and aesthetic issues.'
- 'land use and regional growth management, transport planning and community development, land and water management, ecology and conservation biology and pollution.'
- 'the design and appearance of cities and towns, as well as their services, facilities and communities.'

- ‘environmental and resources management, sustainable development in urban and non-urban planning contexts, and planning for climate change adaptation.’
- ‘land-use planning, urban design, transport and infrastructure planning, use and extension of information technology, heritage and conservation, resource management, environmental monitoring, planning law and practice, commercial and industrial development, and policy making and implementation.’

It is an impressive list of skills and competencies. Can we really deliver such multi-talented people? Turning to a selection of the diversity of subjects that are offered across our accredited planning programs reveals an extraordinary range of topics and issues that are being studied:

- Planning for Sustainability
- Planning for Economic Development
- Planning for Housing
- Rural Resource Planning
- Environmental Economics and Policy
- Earth Sciences and GIS
- Diversity of Life
- Ecological Theory and Practice
- Transport Planning, Environmental Pollution
- Tourism Planning and Development
- Parks Planning and Management
- Indigenous Environmental Management
- Disasters: Vulnerability, Mitigation and Planning
- Real Estate Development Planning
- Human Spatial Behaviour
- Water Policy and Management
- Globalisation and Sustainable Development
- Healthy Communities
- Shopping and Retail Planning

## What Do Planners Do?

While the diversity of what planners study may be confusing for some people outside of the profession seeking to understand just what planners do, it is also illustrative of the breadth and diversity of knowledge and skills that a planner could reasonably be expected to possess. In my opinion such a variety represents a clear strength. In a world where it is increasingly difficult to identify what knowledge and understanding will be needed in the future, the very diversity and adaptability of the planner's education is increasingly valuable. Despite some continuing criticism that our planning programs in universities have been slow in renewing programs, their content compares very favourably with many other disciplines.

Cities, urban areas and the state of the environment are not static. In many respects planning ideas and practices are still experiments in comprehending our spatial and environmental settings and in selecting and implementing tools to better manage and plan their futures. As I will argue later in the paper, given the complexity of the agenda that planners are being confronted with, the real value of the diversity and variety in planning programs is not just a core curriculum of diverse knowledge, but a range of subject matter that promotes inquiry, skills development, capacity to take on new agendas and cope with conflicting views.

We know very little about what the future will be like other than the fact that it will be different from the present. If our universities do nothing else they should be equipping students with skills that will enable them to readily adapt to change. In a world where change itself is the only constant, the first task of any university course surely should be to teach and give people the skills and capacity to work with change, to confront it and to shape it to achieve better futures. As Patrick Abercrombie observed over sixty years ago

‘Mankind might well be divided into two groups, in regard to their surroundings: those who instinctively set about shaping their environment and those who are content to accept the state of things as it exists. In spite of a general human tendency towards the pioneering spirit of the first group, there always persists a heavy weight of inertia’ (Abercrombie 1943).

What can perhaps appear at odds with that sense of change is that some of our graduates end up working in local governments or for consulting firms spending much of their working life processing someone else's application for approval. Others make a living as 'expert witnesses', or as perpetual advocates for whatever a favoured client can get a bank manager to support. It could be observed rather dismissively that some of our graduates may never actually *plan* anything. Some in planning education seem worried by that and I must admit my passion is for planning things and for vision and change. I worry sometimes about whether planners are always making choices and giving advice that embraces a broad social and

environmental agenda for an improved future.

I am reminded of an occasion some years ago when attending an Institute awards ceremony and sitting at a table with a mixed group of planners, some of whom were from some high profile consulting firms. We were listening to an address by a former Labor Premier of Victoria, John Cain. Cain, also a former shadow Minister for Planning, reminded his audience of the origins of planning and that it was about making a better world and trying to address some issues when capitalism and industrialization had gone off the rails. I observed that the more that John Cain spoke about this subject, the more agitated one of these consultants became. I confess I changed tables when he blurted out 'when did planning ever have anything to do with social justice?'

The somewhat antiquated term 'town planner' is still used but seems increasingly irrelevant, some would even say almost irreverent. In one sense specific training in town planning is sometimes criticized as equipping someone for a narrow range of duties and roles. However, the typical education of a planner at university includes building capacities to think, to critically analyse, to communicate with diverse professions and communities and to act strategically. These sorts of skills and acquired learning are the very essence of any successful and effective member of the community and professional in the twenty first century.

Yet despite this highly useful and marketable set of attributes, the planner and planning, as traditionally viewed at least, now appear to receive less respect and traction in terms of public policy. The idea that there is such a thing as a professionally trained and educated person who is skilled in designing and managing land use, the environment and spatial change for the betterment of society has little resonance with many in public policy and land development. It is a continuing concern to the Institute and to many who teach planning. To some degree it calls into question what is taught under the banner of planning and what the role of planning education is.

### **Two Responses by the Planning Institute of Australia**

In 2004, PIA undertook the *National Inquiry into Planning Education and Employment* (Planning Institute of Australia 2004) and in 2008 commissioned and released *Foundations for the Future – The Planning Education Discussion Paper* (Gurran et al 2008). Both documents are on the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) website. They discuss some fairly familiar agendas and offer ideas and suggestions as to the way forward. They recount the diversity of planning and the demands on planning and planners, and the increasing difficulty for planning education seeking to cope with a complex world. But both reports, perhaps understandably and forgivably so, fall short of expounding a definitive direction that some seek but others resist. It is, I suggest, a never ending story and the literature over the last generation appears to confirm that

(Sorensen and Auster 1999a; Mees 2000; Alexander 2005; Marshall 2007; Thompson 2007). Looked at another way perhaps in some respects it is one of the strengths of planning education. Is there anything inherently wrong or weak with a profession that is constantly trying to explain what it does? Because that will certainly keep what it is offering fresh, relevant and lively in an ever changing world.

While the National Inquiry was far reaching, the subsequent publicity and attention of the Inquiry tended to centre on two issues: concerns about the shortage of planners and the so named “toxic” workplace environment of many planners, particularly for those in local government. As Sue Holliday who chaired the Steering Committee, stated in her Foreword to the report, ‘the shortage of planners remains one of the greatest concerns to the planning profession and the integrity of the planning system. If you talk to any planning employer, the topic of how hard it is to recruit and retain staff, and especially experienced planners usually comes up in the conversation.’

The reality some five years later, despite the report and significant subsequent follow up efforts and initiatives, is still essentially the same. However the issue is now firmly on the agenda. Numerous education institutions have responded with more courses. Enrolments, particularly in postgraduate courses are up. PIA has consistently publicized the issue, state governments have responded with initiatives and local government and the private sector have been much more active in offering incentives packages.

However, more important than the shortage of planners, although linked to it because of the lack of senior planners to provide guidance and support, the Inquiry found that ‘planners are often subject to completely unacceptable work stress, political pressure, high volumes of work, legislative requirements, demands from the community and the development industry, and often in an environment with limited human and financial resources. Many planners are trying to balance the high expectations from the development community, elected representatives and members of the public’. In part that observation might explain another finding of the Inquiry - it was conservatively estimated that about 570 qualified female planners over 35 years in age across Australia are no longer working in planning.

The report tackled the perennial question, which has dogged planning educators since I suspect the first courses were developed. What skills do planners need? The Inquiry identified that with the growing complexity of our urban forms and spatial economy and the increased expectations of what planning can deliver, new planning skills have been required encompassing such areas as urban design, social planning, environmental planning, economic planning and transport planning. The Inquiry further noted that planners also needed an increasing range of generic skills such as negotiation, facilitation, project management, consultation, teamwork and complex analysis.

In a survey of young planners undertaken by the Young Planners Network, and reported in the National Inquiry, they indicated greater emphasis should be placed on the following skills in the planning degree – negotiation, conflict resolution, project management, practical ‘how to’ knowledge and planning law (National Young Planners’ Group 2007). These are now topics included in the Institute’s Certified Practising Planner professional development program. The young planners also acknowledged the value of compulsory work experience as part of the degree – a topic I will return to.

In the Institute’s education policy it is recognized that an academic objective is ‘to encourage students to think creatively, analytically and critically, and to be able to communicate effectively. Students should understand the benefits of sound land use planning in a complex decision-making environment. They should know about the effects people have on the natural environment and the use and management of natural resources and about conservation and change in the cultural and built environment. They should acquire a holistic view of the interrelationships between human society, natural resources and the built environment’ (Planning Institute of Australia 2002).

Perhaps it is this very complexity that has led to the Institute’s current position that it does not specify a precise planning curriculum. Rather, the Institute has outlined the knowledge and skills base, and the understanding of professional ethics, which are the national standard for educational attainment of those who enter the profession.

In 2007, the Institute, through its Education Committee, commissioned a Planning Education Discussion Paper (Gurran et al 2008). The Paper was drafted by Nicole Gurran with input from Barbara Norman and Brendan Gleeson and released in 2008. The paper was prepared to inform the future direction of the Institute’s involvement in planning education and provide a catalyst and framework for debate about the future education agenda of the Institute.

The Paper provides an overview of pressures and trends in planning, in education, and specific to planning education, and the implications for the profession and practice. It profiles the Australian planning education ‘landscape’, identifying universities as the key source of professional knowledge and research as well as of practitioners. And it describes and discusses the ‘creative tension’ between the expectations of industry, the community and the academy; and the reality of higher education rationalisation, competition and resources.

The Paper seeks to promote discussion, identify possible future directions and elicit comment. It does not – and nor should it – resolve questions, but rather sets out their dimensions and implications, and suggests possible courses of action.

The Paper asks many key questions such as

1. What are the key skills and capabilities required of planners?
2. What knowledge and experience are relevant to effective professional planning practice?
3. How best can planning education (each provider and as a whole) develop the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and experience of those who require it?
4. What is the role of accreditation in planning education?
5. What responsibilities do various stakeholders have in planning education, and what role should PIA play?

The Paper identifies that planners are increasingly at the forefront of societal issues and debates and that traditional planning programs are under pressure to expand their curricula to include new subjects and meet the needs and expectations of increasingly diverse employers. The Paper proposes that PIA affirm a central role for university planning programs in delivering organised and accredited planning education.

The Paper poses a number of critical questions for discussion and consideration, particularly in the context of the changes being initiated and imposed on universities.

- Is it important to distinguish between broader undergraduate education and more specialist postgraduate education?
- To what extent should the Institute's educational policy dictate clear expectations and roles for the different sectors now involved in planning education and what should these be?
- What should be the core foundations of undergraduate planning education in Australia?
- Should PIA encourage the current proliferation of postgraduate planning programs at the Master and Graduate Diploma level?
- Should the current PIA accreditation process be reviewed?

The Paper argues that PIA needs to develop a more explicit and ongoing awareness of the resource issues facing planning education and to commit itself to identifying ways of assisting planning schools to maintain capacity and quality. In respect to what should be the content of planning courses offered by universities, in the Paper's view the *objectives* for planning education in Australia should deliver planning curricula that are conscious of international directions in planning knowledge, skills and modes of learning while reflecting Australian circumstances. It should contribute to the development of generic competencies from written and oral communication skills to critical thinking and analysis, adaptability, and sensitivity to different social and cultural contexts.

The Paper concludes with a series of recommendations that outline processes and measures to progress the proposals contained in the report and future discussions arising from it. These include the question of whether it is time to review the PIA educational policy to recognise the specific roles of different educational sectors and providers, and reiterate the core role of University planning schools in providing initial planning education through to the production of future planning educators.

### **Comments on Some Key Issues**

I want to take up some of the issues raised in the Gurrans Report. The first is, should planning be an undergraduate and a postgraduate offering or should it be only a postgraduate course? For someone like myself, who got into planning through an arts degree in geography and history, I have strong support for the value of planning building on other disciplines in as broad a manner as possible.

I am frequently enthused by the new crop of postgraduate students who are seeking to get into planning because they have developed a real passion to take on a mid-career change and want to make the world better. As much as I am inclined to the view that the postgraduate route is better, however, there are two matters that I find that I can't address if we cut out undergraduate programs. I see so many young planners coming out of our universities with their undergraduate degree who within a very short period of time in the workforce are making a real difference. Secondly, if a person at 18 or 19 years of age knows what they want to do in their career and their passion is planning, why don't we provide them with the opportunity to do it just as so many other professions do? I am also keen to see people coming back into postgraduate study after having undertaken an undergraduate degree in planning and then having some life experience - life in the raw as it were - and then applying that experience in more disciplined study in later years.

The second aspect for comment is the value of work placement. I am a total supporter of work practice and in increasing doses starting as early as possible. The value of work practice in planning education is still being researched (Freestone et al. 2006), discussed and appears to be increasingly embraced. The Planning Institute at this point has no fixed position on it, but it does broadly support the concept and sees strong merit in it. A recent national study, which I was involved in with some colleagues from RMIT, Griffith and La Trobe Universities, reaffirmed the value of work placement, based partly on the experiences of those who had participated in it and had supervised it in the work place. To quote from the report:

'The project affirms the value afforded by planning programs to preparing students for professional practice. Those involved in structured work placements – educators, practitioners and students – strongly endorse this form of practice education in undergraduate programs ... Achieving practice capability is seen to encompass

complex learning outcomes of thinking, doing and being that are fostered in learning situated in 'real world' tasks' (Jones et al 2008).

The third commentary I want to make is to address the question: how is planning education to cope with the ever expanding demand to enlarge its coverage of contemporary issues? The planning curriculum is increasingly being complicated by many substantive factors and changes. Firstly, what we could term our role in respect to environmental management, sustainable development (whatever that is) and now climate change. We are still coming to grips with the problem of what is the role of planning in respect to climate change (Campbell 2006). We are, I suspect, in great danger of overstating our capacity to make a substantial difference. Planning can make important contributions but planning in itself, even in the broadest definition, is not going to make the fundamental changes that need to be made by government, business and people. A second factor is the neoliberal market that rejects the concept of the plan, let alone a comprehensive plan, as a guiding document. The concept that the market will deliver social justice outcomes is surely a phase and not a fundamental shift in beliefs. A third factor is the continuing increase in the demand by the public to know everything that is going on and to participate directly in decision making. It is a trend that is extremely welcome, but it has made things slower, more competitive and unfortunately more adversarial. When I started in planning you could barely get a group of people to take an interest in what you were doing. Now the public is much better educated, they know their rights, they have amazing access to information, many people have more time on their hands and potentially everybody is an expert. In planning we are now seeing one of the beneficial impacts of an educated democratic society. Planners and other professionals are now subject to challenge and rightly so. This factor alone has raised new issues for planning courses and requirements for new skills.

Sandercock (2006) in a recent series of articles introduced and used the rather provocative title, 'Spirituality and the Urban Professions: The Paradox at the Heart of Planning' to challenge all of us to think about what it is we are doing. Whether we are practitioners, theorists or academics, we need to be sure that when we plan that we do so in a manner that does not lose sight of the core values that underpin human life and the societies and communities we create and nurture. The opening assertion of her article is worth restating in full:

'Planning deals with people's visions for the future of their cities. What could be more precious, in terms of giving meaning to life beyond the here and now? Planning deals with land, what it means to people in the present and what they want it to mean in the future. What could be more precious, in terms of our attachments to home and place making? Planning deals with how people relate to each other within and between groups and communities. What could be more precious, in terms of our deep need for connection with others? And

planning deals with how we as a community take care of one another (or don't, but should). What could be more precious, in terms of our universal human fears of sickness, old age, poverty, and death? So why do we have all these sterile terms for describing what it is that we do? We talk about the rational comprehensive approach, the communicative approach, the political economy approach, the institutional approach, the modernist, the postmodern, making ourselves as a profession incomprehensible to those who live, love, and struggle in cities. Perhaps we need a different way of talking about planning, at the heart of which is the human spirit in its everyday struggle to make meaning and create a better world' (Sandercock 2006).

Planning applied to cities and regions is a way of viewing the world and being a constructive part of the development and direction of society. It can be both elitist and inclusive in the way it operates. It is elitist in that it inevitably involves making determinations and decisions on behalf of society and the community. But it can and must be inclusive and democratic because a planning process takes information from as many sources and people as possible, talks with whoever wants to listen and provides a process so that anybody who wants to can shape the direction.

Planning presents information so as to raises choices about the future and the means to pursue and implement those choices. Planning assembles information so as to be able to evaluate particular paths towards the future. Planning proposes interventions because the current trajectory takes us to places we don't want to go. It is axiomatic that if the assessment of the current trajectory comes to the conclusion that the future is a worse place than where we are now, then to be true to our profession the planner must propose interventions. Of course all this presupposes values. What values does the planner hold? It is my increasing concern that the base of planning continues to reflect a predominantly conservative, Australian born, city based, middle class view of the world that marginalizes much of Australia and many Australians.

### **Planning Education – A Suggested Way Forward**

In my assessment we appear to be faced by three distinct choices in terms of planning education. Firstly, to continue on largely as we have – that is to recognize the difficulties and issues but largely do what we have always done in education generally. That is providing an interesting mixture of tradition and adaptation. It is about delivering old and renewed content, and in a rather *ad hoc* way, to slowly build on to what has gone before. Courses are renewed but rarely rewritten, some new courses come along that seek a vibrant contemporary theme or look but are largely based on what has gone before but repackaged and rebranded. Despite my apparent criticism, it is a process that has in some respects served us quite well. It is what I

term a mix of planning education and educating planners.

Secondly, we can make a much clearer distinction in what we teach and recognise that many of those who work in planning (town planning) need to be taught a set of skills in order to be practitioners in a regulatory system. We recognize that they will operate in an increasingly adversarial world and they will need to be equipped for that. Others will exercise what are often seen as more creative skills and will build and rebuild our cities and landscapes because they are more attracted to a visionary role. Some will move between these two roles but many will not. Brian McLoughlin (1994) concluded that a sharp dichotomy had emerged between education and practice. He offered the view that planning education would need two entirely different streams, *training* on the one hand and *education* on the other. Training for those who will perform what many know as *town planning*, as distinct from the requirements for an education designed for those who will actually *plan*. For many years before his death McLoughlin (1992) saw the role of planning education as being to prepare strategic social science-based policy experts with analytical skills. But he also developed the view that development control was a much simpler task that could be learned in the classroom and applied on the job. While I firmly embrace his concept that planners need a fundamental grounding in spatial political economy and that geography is a great start, it seems to me that not exposing those who will work solely in development control to this wider agenda further compounds the problems that he identified. It also my observation that those who work in development control make a very substantial difference to how our cities and rural areas look and function and for that they need a much wider education than simply a set of technical skills. My advice to young planners, even if they tell me that they don't like development control work and say they never want to work in it, is to spend at least two years behind a Council counter working directly with the public if you really want to know the full spectrum of planning.

The third choice, which is what I largely advocate, is to recognize that there is a core body of knowledge about cities, regions and the environment that will serve the planner well, whatever sort of planning they do. The real idea of planning is a way of thinking, acting and operating in a political economy that produces spatial outcomes. Planning courses need to embrace a set of values, skills, and capacities to equip planners to function effectively whatever aspect of planning they choose. To do that effectively will draw upon a wider set of knowledge and a much more diverse range of material than many traditional planning programs have done and PIA has advocated. This is what I would term 'educating for planning' – of preparing young professionals to be increasingly influential and respected participants in a changing world and in changing the world. This means grounding practice in method and research, with research focusing more on the realities of practice. Planners will operate in a world where choices and decisions will be increasingly based on better

research and information. The need to make better decisions will be increasingly paramount. Educating for planning means that we still educate 'town planners', but that we increasingly seek to bring a wider group into renewed and revitalized programs because we include knowledge, concepts and skills that will also serve those wider audiences.

We frequently forget that the idea of most people living in close density in large cities, and in situations where a capitalist economy operates in a spatial setting based on the private ownership of property, is actually incredibly new. We have very little experience to draw upon. The reality is that much of what we are proposing in planning is still experimental and we are yet to see how it will really play out. We need to educate planners who can be on the edge of discovery and implementation.

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