

The Future of the Planning Academy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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RTPI
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1. Introduction

The planning academy provides a range of important functions that help support other parts of the professional community of planning. This most obviously includes the core function of initial professional education, but also activities that are crucial to a vibrant and robust profession such as knowledge production, policy development, lifelong learning and fostering independent, critical analysis of planning theory and practice. The last twenty years have, however, seen major changes in both higher education and in planning practice that have fundamentally changed the relationship between the academy and other parts of the profession. This has prompted the RTPI to undertake the *Future of the Planning Academy* project¹, in order to:

- Establish a demographic profile of academic staff currently employed in RTPI-accredited planning schools in the UK;
- Identify key drivers of change in UK planning academia;
- Assess the implications of the profile and trends within the planning academy for future planning education;
- Explore the evolving links between planning academics and planning practitioners and the relationship between the number and type of planning academics and the output of planning graduates;
- Recommend to the RTPI how it could address any issues arising from the research.

The Institute appointed a team of researchers from Queen's University Belfast, led by Geraint Ellis to undertake the project in two phases:

- *Phase 1*, commissioned in August 2008 consisted a literature review and identified secondary data sources, resulting in a Scoping Report² published in November 2008.
- *Phase 2* was commissioned in July 2009 and consists of a series of primary data gathering activities. This has included:
 - A series of interviews with 11 key individuals in the academy, practice and RTPI;
 - A census of planning schools, completed by all Heads of accredited planning schools in the UK;
 - An online survey of planning academics, completed by 211 individuals, about 42% of the planning academy;
 - A survey of planning practitioners, completed by 1525 individuals, about 16% of the RTPI membership;
 - A series of four focus groups involving 29 academics.

The final report includes a brief historical review of how the academy has evolved and highlights some of the main issues raised in the earlier Scoping Report. It then reports the insights from the research, under the headings noted below.

2. A profile of UK planning schools

There are currently 24 RTPI accredited (and 3 provisionally accredited) planning schools in the UK, providing 118 accredited courses. Provision is more extensive and more diverse than it has ever been. This should provide the RTPI with a high level of confidence that there continues to be a robust basis for university-based planning education, which will continue to provide a supply of planning graduates at the Institute's required accreditation standards. Nevertheless,

¹ See more details at: <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/item/2982>

² Available at: <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/download/6849/Future-of-the-Planning-Academy-Scoping-Report-2009.pdf>

current strategic developments in higher education raise a number of threats and opportunities to planning schools and planning education as a whole.

A key dimension here is the staff recruitment policies of planning schools, which are now dominated by research performance, with professional experience and RTPI membership being low priorities when looking for new staff in all but a few schools. This may mean that in 10-15 years many planning schools may struggle to have any professional representation amongst their staff. While most Heads consider that their School has a healthy and productive relationship with the RTPI and the wider planning community, there are signs that there is a weakening of relationships between the RTPI and planning academics.

The average number of staff in a UK planning school is 20.4, with 50% of schools having fewer than 16 staff. They do, however, vary substantially in their size, outlook and institutional context. 13 are in pre-1992 universities and 14 in post-1992 universities and only 25% are in stand-alone departments – most are merged with a range of other disciplines. Planning schools offer a greater variety of planning courses and have a higher number of planning students than ever before, at the same time as achieving greater research performance, from which students and the broader professional community can benefit.

At the time of survey, Heads of Planning Schools were positive about the future and suggested there would be relative stability in terms of changes in staff, students and educational provision. Since the surveys were undertaken there have been a number of significant changes, in particular emerging details of a period of financial austerity that will see education budgets substantially cut. This is likely to induce further change within the planning academy, with potential threats to a number of planning schools, particularly within the smaller units or those performing less well in the RAE/REF.

The main report uses the responses to a range of survey variables to characterise UK planning schools into four different “types”, termed “Practitioner-Teacher” schools, “Research-led teaching” schools, “Regional Hubs” and “Planning Leviathans”. These can be used as a framework for the RTPI to review how each type relates to its desired goals for planning education and research.

3. A profile of the planning academy

The profile of the planning academy appears to have changed significantly over the last ten years in terms of entry qualifications, experience and demography – it is now more international and more representative of the population and the overall profession. It is also notable that different planning schools tend to employ staff with different attributes, thus reaffirming the notion that planning schools have a range of distinctive characteristics.

Despite anecdotal evidence that suggests that the planning academy is becoming less professionally engaged, the three key indicators of RTPI membership, experience of professional practice and professional planning qualifications amongst academics appear to suggest a continuing strong presence of a shared professional identity. Overall, 54% of academics are members of the RTPI, 58% have a professional planning qualification and 71% have some form of practice experience.

There does not seem to be any immediate staffing crisis arising from an upcoming “retirement bulge” as there are a large number of staff in younger age groups, particularly under thirty. Different age groups of staff do, however, offer different professional profiles. While younger cohorts of staff have high proportions of planning qualifications and work experience, they do not have an encouraging profile of RTPI membership. One potential way to combat this would be to

review how the qualifying criteria relate to academic careers and whether it is possible to establish an academic route to chartered membership.

The report also explored the identities expressed by planning academics, showing that there remains a relatively strong sense of professional commitment, with 54% regarding themselves as professional planners, more than those that see themselves as higher education teachers or administrators. Members of the academy also have a clear idea of how they are able to contribute to the wider profession and are keen to do this within the constraints of contemporary academic life. Above all, academics see that their most valuable contribution can be their independent critical engagement with planning theory and practice. They also recognise their responsibilities in terms of being educators of future members of the profession and a need to provide more direct and productive inputs to policy debates. There is strong feeling that this contribution is not well appreciated by the wider professional community.

67% of academics are engaged in research, teaching and administration, with an expectation that they should perform at a high level in all three areas, with the result that extra-mural activities, covering many valuable aspects of the academic relationship with professional planning practice are given a low institutional priority. A key challenge therefore is to review how fruitful practice-academic relationships can be better aligned with the institutional interests of the universities that employ planning academics.

A specific issue is related to the way planning academics feel they are represented collectively at the national level, with only 8% believing that this was undertaken in a coherent or effective manner.

4. The practitioner-academic relationship

The survey of planning practitioners provides some useful insights into how they relate to the planning academy. This shows that a majority of practitioners have Master's degrees, with under 1% having a PhD. 23% have links with universities; usually through attendance at seminars or conferences, rather than more interactive encounters. There is also a rather poor appreciation of the research produced by the academy; academic journals were ranked as being least important source of advice and information for their professional role.

For those in practice, the academy's prime role is one of education, however many practitioners have a rather narrow conception of what this should be and greater exposure to ongoing lively pedagogical debate would help foster the emergence of a more mutual understanding of planning education. Indeed, there appears to be a poor understanding of what the academy can offer the world of practice and there is some evidence that many practitioners are confused about this.

Planning academics are engaged in a very wide area of research activity, much of which has direct relevance to practice. Academics do acknowledge the need to relate this research directly to policy outcomes, but overall they see the key research role as being to provide a critical and independent voice on planning issues. This role is not always appreciated by planning practitioners and far more could be done to disseminate the increased level and quality of planning research.

While there is a degree of mutual empathy and understanding of each others' roles, the findings suggest that although academics have a keen interest and respect for the world of practice, there is less appreciation of the world of academia by those working in planning practice. This situation has been further frustrated by declining opportunities for individuals to move in either direction across the academia-practice boundary, which points to the need to rethink the opportunities open for increasing mutual understanding.

As a result of these issues, there is some evidence of an increasing distance between academia and practitioners. It is clear that the accreditation process remains a vital tool for the RTPI to engage with planning schools. While planning schools greatly value the benefits of accreditation, there is evidence that the broader links and opportunities to work with the RTPI are not being fully exploited.

5. Conclusions

The main report highlights the substantial changes that have occurred in both higher education and planning practice over the last twenty years. Most of these changes have placed increasing pressure on the academic-practitioner relationship, particularly the changing composition of the academy, the capacity of the academy to work on professionally-related issues and the perception of the academy held by the wider profession. Above everything else, the project underlines the importance of viewing the planning academy as an intrinsic part of the planning profession, rather than an eccentric fringe group or contract supplier of education services. There is a strong feeling amongst both practice and the academy that the relationship has begun to break down and that there is a need to reconnect and increase dialogue between them. The main report draws together the findings of the research to make a number of suggestions on how this may be done around five main themes:

5.1. Development of long-term scenario and related policies for planning research and education.

It is suggested that the RTPI use the evidence in this report, along with recent predictions of future land issues produced from the Foresight programme, to generate a series of long term scenarios (i.e. 20 years+) for planning schools, upon which an action plan for securing the viability of planning research and education can be based.

5.2. Increasing dialogue, interaction and mobility between the academy and practice

There is a need to increase interactions and career mobility between the practitioner and academic parts of the planning profession and the report makes a number of suggestions of how this could be further encouraged. This includes increasing placement opportunities for academics in practice and short-term research opportunities for practitioners in the academy; reviewing how planning schools interact with local branches of the RTPI; joint events for academics and practitioners; new dissemination outlets for research findings; encouragement of doctoral study by practitioners; increasing the profile of academics in RTPI affairs; and creating a specific academic route to chartered membership.

5.3. The definition of an “effective planning school”

The report has noted that although some of the links between the academy and the RTPI have weakened, the latter still retains a powerful lever in terms of its accreditation responsibilities, which could be used to further influence how the academy engages with the wider profession. A key area is how the RTPI defines an “effective planning school”, which could be reviewed to take into account the diversity within the planning academy, increase dissemination of research outputs and specify appropriate proportions of academic staff that should have RTPI membership.

5.4. Increased knowledge transfer

The increase in the quality and quantity of planning research has not yet been effectively exploited for the benefit of the wider profession, which remains unclear about how it can best access and use the resulting findings and expertise. It is suggested that the RTPI should

encourage further knowledge transfer through the development of a specific mid-range publication for research findings; engaging the research community on issues of greater relevance to practice via direct research funding or working with existing funders; and increasing the research literacy of the practitioner community through CPD events or targeted doctoral programmes.

5.5. *Communication and leadership*

There appears to be a need to review the way the RTPI communicates with the planning academy, taking into account the diversity of planning schools and planning academics highlighted in the report. There also appears to be specific issues with leadership of the planning academy and how it is collectively represented at a national level. It is suggested that the RTPI review how it can encourage the emergence of leaders and collective representatives from within the academy, such as a specific electoral college within the General Assembly and greater representation on its Committees.