

An understanding gap? Planning education in a time of change: a response to Taylor and Close

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Commentary

An understanding gap? Planning education in a time of change: a response to Taylor and Close

Building on Taylor and Close's (2022) commentary reviewing the skills gap concerning how planners are educated and trained, this response places this 'gap' in the context of key relationships that shape this; between skills, knowledges and attitudes, including a more nuanced understanding of knowledge; between the Royal Town Planning Institute, planning schools and employers and between planning and other built-environment disciplines. The resulting argument is that a more nuanced understanding of where different responsibilities lie for educating and training planners needs to be a pre-requisite for understanding how the skills gaps identified by Taylor and Close should be addressed.

Keywords: planning education, relationships, attitudes, skills, knowledges

Introduction

Debates over when, how and in what planners are 'trained', educated, or enabled in their professional lives have been a source of contestation for as long as the profession has existed, and have been apparent across the UK and other jurisdictions (Alterman, 1992; Sandercock, 1999; Frank, 2006). Various points of issue have been aired since at least the 1950 Schuster review of planning qualifications (MTCP, 1950). These include discussions over disciplinary boundaries, general versus specific skills, the scope of education and questions of multidisciplinary, all within the context of the roles played by different actors.

Some of these points are unlikely to be resolved with any degree of certitude or permanency, and disagreement and intermittent review are, in many ways, healthy. As we explain, one important outcome, or perhaps start point, is that all affected are aware of the limits, responsibilities and rationales for planning education arrangements. This should aid the discussions and thought given to changes in the scope and timing of change in any given decade.

As part of this opening-up of, what we hope is a more sustained dialogue, it is useful to explore who might be expected to provide the different elements of planning education in the medium-term future, and how this is to work, especially in a time when expanding skills and knowledge in planning are faced with resource constraints across sectors (including the universities).

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The recent article 'Minding the skills gap: a commentary on training needs, recruitment challenges and perceptions of professional planning in the UK' by Taylor and Close (2022) is a timely review of this changing and contested ground of planning education, coming as it does twenty years after a *Town Planning Review* article reporting on the work of the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) education commission (Brown et al., 2003). The 2003 Commission's work followed the RTPI's (2001) 'New Vision', at the time a radical agenda which tried to capture the shift from land-use planning to spatial planning and its implications for delivering sustainable places. The New Vision recognised the multidisciplinary and collaborative skills that would be required in planning, but also encapsulated new knowledges and attitudes that would be needed around considerations such as social diversity, and the flexibility of the profession in dealing with changing circumstances. This response recognises and welcomes the relevance of the Taylor and Close article in restarting the education debate, which has not been very much in evidence amongst planning schools themselves in recent years (although see Parker et al., 2020 which touches on this).

The literature assessed by Taylor and Close discusses three topics: 1) how the profession is viewed by others; 2) how planners are recruited and retained, and 3) how the ways in which planners are educated have evolved. The article is notable as it is authored by two RTPI officers and because there is recognition of the inter-relationships between the three headings. The article has motivated this response, in part, because its focus on the skills gap also brings to light gaps in understanding relating to planning education and because it has come at a time when the Institute has championed degree apprenticeships in England,¹ embarked on an(other) education review and is promoting leadership in planning – all of which shape the question of what kind(s) of planner are needed and ultimately what kind of education is required. This is particularly pertinent as the role of the then Town Planning Institute, was identified by Schuster to 'provide a centre for discussion between the "educational world" and the world of those who are concerned with the practical exercise of planning functions' (MTCP, 1950, 65).

Understanding planning as a profession has consequences for how planners are educated and trained. Table 1 summarises the approach to planning education in the UK in 2022, which positions the completion of an RTPI-accredited Masters-level qualification (typically one year, full-time)² as one stage towards becoming a chartered, 'professional' planner, over the course of at least three years.³

- 1 Degree apprenticeships involve studying for a degree-level qualification whilst working in a paid, related job. Tuition fees are paid by the employer and the experience and skills gained through work are seen as an integral part of the qualification.
- 2 Noting that, in the UK, most postgraduate taught Masters' programmes are now completed over one year on a full-time basis, rather than over two years full time, as typically remains the case elsewhere in the world.
- 3 Other routes to chartered membership have been introduced for those with significant planning experience, but without a planning qualification. These require additional years of experience in lieu of an RTPI-accredited planning qualification (see RTPI, 2022).

Table 1 RTPI stages of planning education

Stage	Approach
Initial Planning Education – Stage 1	‘Spatial planning education element’ – involving formal education on an accredited planning programme
Initial Planning Education – Stage 2	Specialist planning education element of the above – also typically achieved through university level study
Initial Planning Education – Stage 3	Assessment of Professional Competence (APC), which requires a period of structured experience in the workplace, culminating in a formal process of assessment
Lifelong Learning	Developed through a programme of CPD, led by the individual planner

This structure sets up a distinction between the roles of the universities/planning schools, employers, and the RTPI as the relevant professional body, at different stages from introduction and consolidation, to long-term development through lifelong learning.

This is set against a backdrop where the distinctiveness of planners’ roles amongst other built-environment professions has been a point of debate that has never really concluded, nor in our view can it be; disciplinary overlaps and reinforcement are inevitable and often desirable (see, for example, Pinson, 2004). Moreover, Donald Schön (1983) forty years ago, writing about creativity in planning, posited the need for reflection and deliberation. This brings into view parallel efforts to urge planners to be ‘leaders’ and raises questions about the skills and knowledges required both to fulfil this role and to enable thoughtful planning practice. Consequently, the implied task allocation between the academy, the professional bodies and the employers in shaping the profession needs to be addressed. That is to say, the question of *who* is providing planning education and training is critical in wider debates about *what* is being covered and *when*.

Thus, we wish to respond in the main to the third question or area highlighted by Taylor and Close, i.e. that of planning education and the skills and knowledges required, as well as the environment in which professional planners are operating. We should note that our orientation here is towards UK planning or, perhaps a little more broadly, the planning that the RTPI seems to have in mind. We also want to bring into view the roles that different actors (can) best play in education and training – not only the university planning schools. In doing so we hope to induce a more sustained dialogue around these themes and shape the platform for mutual understanding.

‘First, we have the naming of the parts’

The Taylor and Close article considers that further research is needed to understand whether ‘the skills required by employers “match” what is taught at university’ (2022, 368). In our view, this is not the correct start point. There must be an ongoing conversation about planning education and training given that all needs cannot be met by planning schools alone. We perceive that further work is particularly required on the relationship between planning schools and employers. A greater understanding of who is best placed to do what in the realm of professional development and education needs to be fostered. We assert that this key aspect of the profession needs to feature ‘mutual learning’ and the development of a shared understanding of ‘professional development’. In the traditions of communicative planning (Olsson, 2009; Healey, 2006), there is an opportunity to develop understanding and modify positions through discussion, rather than rely on an all too typical approach to public consultation, where everyone has their individual say, but there is little or no space in which to debate collectively.

As we explain, this question of shared understanding requires that the terminology, and basis of discussions are secure. This is a prerequisite before moves to effect formal changes to education are embarked upon. In this commentary we want to build on the Taylor and Close article and advocate for the rigour that will enable better understanding and enhanced clarity for all-comers, and to aid people to set this enduring debate into context. We also need to be clear that the idea of ‘training’ implies something much less ambitious than the kind of knowledge and skills base that a dynamic professional planner will need.

Decades before the ‘New Vision’ work, the Schuster review of planning qualifications concluded in 1950 that ‘planning was multi-dimensional, requiring not only physical design but a synthesis of several disciplines including economics, geography, sociology and public administration’ (Presthus, 1951, 43). The review recognised that many individuals input to planning. Moreover, since then other disciplines and knowledge fields have risen in prominence and hold relevance for planning.

In the early 2020s the system, in England at least, is again evolving to bring new requirements into the realm of the planning system, in linked but diverse areas including design codes, biodiversity net gain, and longstanding knowledge areas such as the mechanisms for understanding housing need. These types of changes will require new technical skills and knowledge, but also re-emphasise a need to maintain discussions about how professional attitudes may be eroded or otherwise affected and what it means to be a planner in the 2020s.

Other professionals and their knowledge contributions will continue to play an active and important role in planning, and this is without those individuals necessarily qualifying as a ‘planner’. If we accept that planning is indeed a ‘multi-disciplinary discipline’ as Pinson (2004) remarked, and that this professional cosmos reflects the diversity of the concerns and reach of planning activity, it is likely that a wide range of

skills and knowledge fields will be developed to a greater or lesser degree by different planners (formally recognised or not) during their careers. This sets up a dualism between planning relevancy and planning qualification scope and is a relationship that is likely to morph over time.

As we asserted initially, this is indeed a topic worthy of recurrent attention, persisting as it does in a changing world, a shifting policy environment and a technologically advancing context. It deserves both rigour and reasonableness to be applied in framing what is needed to deliver the outcomes society demands and what professionals themselves recognise as needed. There are numerous possible start points but thinking about the ‘who’ and ‘when’ questions, as well as the ‘what’ seems as good as any, and implies at least three points of reflection:

- where and when are elements or types of learning best deployed and experienced?
- how can planners across a spectrum of roles and specialisms access what they need over time?
- what knowledges are ‘specialist’ and are not therefore ‘core’ to professional planner status?

The above brings into view when or at what stage of professional development (student, early career etc.) and who (i.e. planning school, employer, third party) is taking a greater or lesser responsibility for some skills and knowledge development. Comments over ‘need’ alone do not take us far enough if we wish for all parties to contribute to planning education development more usefully and in partnership. We should be interested in how to ensure that all the ‘right’ skills and knowledges are in place but, without alignment between different parties’ conceptualisations of ‘the planner’, there cannot be a coherent understanding of how this should be achieved. We therefore want to drill down into the underlying parts in more detail.

While quite a few specific definitions or terms may need active discussion and clarification, our contribution here is to posit three sets of inter-relationships that structure how professional planners come to be deemed competent and which extend beyond a more limited notion of training. These are the development and maintenance of: 1) skills/knowledges; 2) relationships and 3) professional identity and values. We offer some attempt at clarification below, including furthering our understanding of how responsibilities may be most efficiently shared amongst the different groups involved or implicated. There is some healthy pragmatism here, bearing in mind capacities, dispositions and other practical, institutional and market-based constraints.

Skills/knowledges

The first element is planning skills and the common conflation of skills/knowledges, which needs to be understood in the context of the dynamic relationship between skills, knowledge and attitudes or disposition (Baartman and DeBruijn, 2011). All three of

those seem to us fundamental aspects of a planning education and none of them can be automatically assumed to have precedence over the other. However, we argue that some are critical to early stages of education; such that they tend towards learning development at the initial planning education stage – and indeed in some cases prior to that.

In terms of discussions about skills there is a noticeable interchangeability with knowledge that tends to feature in discussions about planning education. Kitchen (2007, 239) argues that ‘there is by no means a consensus either about a single package of skills for planning practice or about the ways of best describing these skills’. He of course meant delineating all relevant planning skills, which is clearly an issue. First though we need to distinguish skills from knowledge, or at least comprehend the overlap or relationship explicitly. Skills are best described as knowledge applied and relate more to the *techne* or the ‘craft’ of planning, as opposed to knowledge, which can be characterised in multiple forms. Muldoon-Smith and McGuinness (2020, 3) indicate how knowledge in planning typically falls into the following four forms:

- know what (broad knowledge about facts / information e.g. national policy guidance);
- know why (an understanding of scientific or theoretical principles);
- know how (context-specific expertise and technical skills);
- know who (i.e. the density and strength of social networks and understanding of roles in wider planning).

It can be conceded that very often skills activate knowledge or knowledge is needed to then apply planning skills – there is a relationship there but not a conflation. Thus, we start to see some forms of knowledge as either best learned in the workplace or at least extended or consolidated there, as opposed to university / formal classroom settings and some skills that will need to be refined in practice by dint of multiple or repeat experience. Certainly, there is a leading role for universities in the ‘know why’ aspects of education and we might go further and stress that if not established in academic study, then where? Similarly, a reverse argument could be applied in considering ‘know how’ or the ever-changing aspects of ‘know what’, i.e. the factual material necessary to operate with professional competence. This sits comfortably with learning and consolidation that should take place during the assessment of professional competence (APC) period (the RTPI’s third stage of initial planning education) and beyond, through lifelong learning (see Table 1).

Once such distinctions are drawn and clarity established over who is majoring on what, the next dimensions relate to when and who is skilling-up, or ‘educating’ planners in what aspects. There are at least four sources: universities, the RTPI and other third sector providers, and lastly but by no means least, the employers. This brings us to consider the types of knowledge, as above, that universities should attempt to cover in their programmes, and which can only realistically be absorbed through academic study as part of the first stages of ‘initial planning education’.

Currently 19 learning competencies are recognised by the RTPI, each individually quite broad and thus enabling planning schools to interpret and relate them to programme content for initial planning education. Table 2 illustrates how responsibilities for introducing, deepening and maintaining the relevant skills, knowledges and attitudes might be understood and distributed between planning schools, employers and the RTPI. Variances can be seen as driven by the extent to which these are generic across the planning discipline, context or institution- specific, and echo the four forms of knowledge described above.

Table 2 RTPI learning outcomes for initial planning education* (RTPI, 2012)

Learning outcomes	Provider roles (indicative)
A. Core spatial planning outcomes (x 13):	
1. Explain and demonstrate how spatial planning operates within the context of institutional and legal frameworks.	Planning school lead: Critical understanding of legal and institutional contexts for planning developed and assessed. Employer role: Planners will operate in a particular institutional and legal context, knowledge of this deepened through context-specific training.
2. Generate integrated and well substantiated responses to spatial planning challenges.	Planning school introduction: Introduce range of methods and critical reflection on their application, in response to a range of scenarios. Employer role: Day-to-day role of planners is fundamentally about selecting courses of action in response to planning challenges. RTPI role: Assessment of Professional Competence assesses how planners select and implement courses of action.
3. Reflect on the arguments for and against spatial planning and particular theoretical approaches, and assess what can be learnt from experience of spatial planning in different contexts and spatial scales.	Planning school lead: Critical understanding of overall arguments for planning developed and assessed, including international comparisons. Employer role: Planners likely need to justify role in a variety of settings.
4. Demonstrate how efficient resource management helps to deliver effective spatial planning.	Planning school introduction: Understanding developed of the range of different resources drawn upon by planning. Employer role: Direct resource management skills developed through context-specific training.
5. Explain the political and ethical nature of spatial planning and reflect on how planners work effectively within democratic decision-making structures.	Planning school lead: Critical understanding of social and political contexts for planning developed and assessed. Employer role: Planners likely to encounter a range of ethical and political scenarios through their work. RTPI role: Assessment of Professional Competence considers understanding of these structures.

Learning outcomes	Provider roles (indicative)
6. Explain the contribution that planning can make to the built and natural environment and in particular recognise the implications of climate change.	<p>Planning school lead: Critical understanding of environmental contexts for planning developed and assessed.</p> <p>Employer role: Planners likely to encounter a range of environmental scenarios through their work.</p> <p>RTPI role: Range of further issue and skill-specific training opportunities.</p>
7. Debate the concept of rights and the legal and practical implications of representing these rights in planning decision-making process.	<p>Planning school lead: Theoretical understandings of rights developed and assessed.</p> <p>Employer role: Direct engagement with rights depends on the planner's role and institutional context.</p> <p>RTPI role: Professional development opportunities around aspects such as updated legal frameworks.</p>
8. Evaluate different development strategies and the practical application of development finance; assess the implications for generating added value for the community.	<p>Planning school introduction: Introduce critical understanding of role played by development finance.</p> <p>Employer lead: Attitude and direct engagement depends on position within sector, supported by further, context-specific training.</p>
9. Explain the principles of equality and equality of opportunity in relation to spatial planning in order to positively promote the involvement of different communities, and evaluate the importance and effectiveness of community engagement in the planning process.	<p>Planning school lead: Theoretical understandings of participation and diversity developed and assessed.</p> <p>Employer role: Implicit importance of equalities in everyday practice, supported by further training.</p>
10. Evaluate the principles and processes of design for creating high-quality places and enhancing the public realm for the benefit of all in society.	<p>Planning school lead: Ability to engage critically with quality of place developed through knowledge and application.</p> <p>Employer role: Direct engagement with design depends on the planner's role and institutional context.</p>
11. Demonstrate effective research, analytical, evaluative and appraisal skills and the ability to reach appropriate, evidence-based decisions.	<p>Planning school introduction: Role to introduce range of methods and critical reflection on their application.</p> <p>Employer lead: Employer role to provide opportunities for practical application.</p>
12. Recognise the role of communication skills in the planning process and the importance of working in an interdisciplinary context, and be able to demonstrate negotiation, mediation, advocacy and leadership skills.	<p>Planning school introduction: Importance of strong communication skills, applied through a range of assessments.</p> <p>Employer lead: Range of skills applied through everyday planning work, developed through further training in specific skills.</p>

Learning outcomes	Provider roles (indicative)
<div>1. Distinguish the characteristics of a professional, including the importance of upholding the highest standards of ethical behaviour and a commitment to lifelong learning and critical reflection so as to maintain and develop professional competence.</div>	<div>Planning school introduction: Ideas around what it means to be an ethical planning professional.</div> <div>Employer role: Planners likely to encounter a range of ethical scenarios through their work.</div> <div>RTPI lead: Assessment of Professional Competence tests whether Code of Conduct upheld.</div>
B. Specialist learning outcomes x 4 (PG)	
<div>1. Engage in theoretical, practical and ethical debate at the forefront of the area of the specialism in the context of spatial planning</div> <div>2. Evaluate the social, economic, environmental and political context for the area of specialism</div> <div>3. Evaluate the distinctive contribution of the specialism to the making of place and the mediation of space</div> <div>4. Assess the contribution of the specialism to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change</div>	<div>Planning school introduction: Introduction to breadth of planning as a discipline, alongside core knowledges. Some elective modules may provide opportunities to deepen relevant knowledges. Enable student planners to apply theory and questions of ethics to a range of situations.</div> <div>Employer role: Specialist roles developed through issue and skill-specific training opportunities.</div>

*Note: We have used the lists for postgraduate education here.

When debates over changing these learning outcomes are rehearsed, the skills and knowledges conflation tends to appear, with claims over deficiencies or gaps (i.e. the reason for the title of the Taylor and Close article) being a problem, or a need for more coverage to be achieved, becoming common. In 2008 when a conference, organised by Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE), convened to discuss the structure and delivery of planning education, similar issues of coverage and generalist versus specialist skills and knowledge were identified, as well as what could, and could not, be ‘learned on the job’ (see Webster, 2008). Following from the indicative sharing of responsibilities illustrated by Table 1, it would be interesting to reflect also on different knowledge types and how these are spread across learning outcomes and the roles of the different partners.

What is recognisable is that learning by doing (skill development and knowledge enhancement and application), as well as learning parameters are critical, and universities can set people up and even seek to introduce a range of skills and knowledge application, but they will always be found wanting if judged against the test that time spent in practice can provide. So, if we accept different types of knowledge, then the distinctions between ‘training’, as opposed to education also becomes less

opaque. Training will invariably relate to categories such as know-what, how and who (e.g. the latter via networking activity and other forms of day-to-day interaction). Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that the skills and knowledges delivered through employer training will be the product of a particular institutional setting, with its own distinctive culture, and with the tacit intention of instilling a particular attitude toward planning.

It is worth pausing to reflect that the idea of ‘practice’ itself needs care too, particularly when it is claimed there isn’t enough of ‘it’ in formal and accredited planning courses and given that ‘it’ is diverse. Friesen (2013) argues that planners are often split into different types with their skills and knowledge oriented across roles that emphasise the ‘synthesist’, the ‘scientist’ and the ‘broker’ and these are just three broad types. Indeed, the evolving list of skills quoted by Taylor and Close as being lacking could never be mastered by one individual alone. This tension needs to be part of the debate while acknowledging that the reality of teamworking appears widely accepted by employers. Whatever ‘practice’ experience a university provides, bar perhaps a year placement in work (which is not possible for postgraduates unless they are following a part-time/apprenticeship route), they cannot match the skills derived from relevant professional employment.

Relationships

Secondly, the inter-relationships between employers, planning schools and the RTPI as the professional institute is in the frame here. Expanding on the role of the Institute, and its relationship with universities, the Schuster Review (MTCP, 1950) goes on to assert key principles of its educational responsibilities around advancing knowledge and thought, and designing a system for recognising qualified planners, but also asserts that its education committee should be half constituted by the universities.

In this same spirit, Pinson (2004) notes that professional organisations (employers) apply the knowledge, while the role of the professional institutes is to attempt to indicate core competencies (necessary skills and knowledge) that practising professionals should be expected to hold. Given that the Taylor and Close article was not explicitly discussing education, the roles of the universities and employers was not assessed. Yet the varying relationship between all these drives the quality of the planning profession, with each having their own structuring influence on how planners are educated and trained, and how planning cultures and attitudes (see below) are shaped. These *all* have subsequent implications for the quality of the places that result from planning activity.

We argue that it is rather unhelpful to see the relationship between planning schools and employers as binary and more is needed to sustain a more effective partnership – with mutual understanding being a component of this. Indeed, part of this relates

to better understanding of the scope, purpose and limits of education taking place at different stages and by different educators. A new look at where and how such matters are discussed is worthy of attention, which might bring into view longstanding mechanisms such as annual Partnership Boards,⁴ the Partnership and Accreditation Panel (PAP)⁵ and Planning Schools Forum.⁶ All of these bring together some combination of the RTPI, employers and planning schools, but none have, to date, provided a forum for sustained engagement between all three. It would be useful for stakeholders to reflect on how to refresh all of these in the light of what we are arguing.

To assist with such tensions, the very necessary concept of lifelong learning has been embraced, and continuing membership of organisations such as the RTPI (and other global professional bodies for planners, such as the American Institute of Certified Planners and Canadian Institute of Planners) is predicated on continuing professional development (CPD) activity. As such the timing question comes into view again; what skills and knowledges and when are they realistically taught and practised across initial planning education, APC period and then on into lifelong learning and professional development. Attempting to overload universities cannot be the answer here.

Identity and professional values

Thirdly, we bring into view the position of the professional planner amongst a constellation of built-environment professions, including the issue of what it means to be a professional beyond the skills/knowledge measures – what we term the question of ‘professional identity’. Taylor and Close cite the 2004 Egan review in their compilation of skill shortages. Yet it is worth emphasising that the Egan review was of the skills necessary to deliver sustainable communities amongst built-environment professionals more broadly and specifically did not focus on the skills of a particular built-environment profession. Indeed, Egan positions ‘Built Environment occupations’ (2004, 53) amongst a whole range of occupations that influence the development of sustainable communities and so, are we really talking about the skills that planners need? Or a wider overlapping skill set amongst a wider set of partners and professionals? What is it in such an assessment that planners can do without and instead rely on others to input? In short, what defining characteristics are we looking to instil in initial planning

4 Partnership Boards take place annually for each RTPI-accredited planning school and bring together a mix of RTPI officers, practitioners and external academics to review whether they remain an ‘effective planning school’.

5 Partnership and Accreditation Panel synthesises the outcomes of Partnership Boards and identifies key lessons from these.

6 Planning Schools Forum brings together all RTPI-accredited planning schools around the world, to discuss common issues, share practice and meet collectively with the RTPI to discuss the relationship between planning schools and the Institute.

education? For us this centrally involves coverage of why we plan, how professionals need to approach planning challenges, and methods and analytical frameworks that underpin understandings of context and change.

Shaping the professional requirements

Planning schools in the UK are themselves diverse and each offer their own take on the learning outcomes specified by the current policy statement for initial planning education introduced in 2003, revised in 2012 and again, lightly, in 2017 (RTPI, 2012). Each school's interpretation tacitly instils a particular attitude or balance of knowledge, skill development and perspectives in their graduates. Furthermore, the RTPI's own Code of Professional Conduct (RTPI, 2016) tries to do the same, albeit in a way that attempts to unite an increasingly diverse and fragmented profession around a set of specific principles and guide its members toward ethical practices (Hickman and Sturzaker, 2022).

Beyond technical or even more narrowly theoretical knowledge coverage there are some meta roles and education coverage that need to be considered as 'core'. These relate to questions of professional integrity and the goals of planning. The axiomatic inter-relationships between planning skills, knowledges and attitudes provoke ongoing recognition of 'public interest' planning as a guiding principle for planning (Inch et al., 2022). This orientates service to goals that benefit society in the long term and to counter tendencies for some employers to emphasise different attitudes, such as a focus on 'customer service' or narrow considerations of client interest (Kitchen, 2007).

The implication is that any temptation to overemphasise skills in a refocussing of planning education could undermine this responsibility and potentially impair skills of analysis and reflection, particularly in an era where degree apprenticeships show one direction of travel or emphasis towards training above the kind of education maintained in the past. This is where another feature of partnership becomes apparent, i.e. the need for each to understand the others' contribution to learning.

Given the diversity of context and setting it is moot what commentators have in mind when asserting the relevancy or relative importance of certain skills and knowledges and in some instances an implicit denial of others. This reminds us that the identity and scope of definition of the label of 'planner' is patrolled, if loosely by professional bodies. Whatever the current definitional boundary the actual practice of such attempts to define and demarcate will be, to at least some degree, imperfect; it is destined always to be more limited than the actual reach and span of practice and the emergent nature of individual skills and knowledge in application. The attainment of RTPI membership denotes the attainment of a *basis* for professional practice and identity and, as such, the core needs to be prioritised.

Reflection

The Taylor and Close commentary cites the shift away from land-use planning to spatial planning, bringing new considerations into the realm of planning (Legates, 2009). However, it is ironic that this shift occurred around the time when an RTPI-accredited postgraduate degree in the UK moved from two years to one year full-time, leaving less time and credits – less thinking space – to educate students, to instil in them the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to deal with a broadening of planning knowledge and practice. The settlement reached has had to involve active lifelong learning and there is no realistic prospect of universities being able to row back on this.

The context of change and expanding needs of the profession (as opposed to all individual planners) needs to be kept in view. In such circumstances the challenge becomes ever more about how to enable planners who can navigate a context that is evolving along multiple planes (see Parker et al., 2018 on the ‘multi-change environment’ of planning) and to ensure that all active parties are aware of what education is and what is not covered, when and by whom. A question is therefore prompted around the appropriateness of the almost total, if sometimes implicit, focus on the public sector in discussions about the education of planners.

The regularity of such changes emphasises the importance of ‘know why’ knowledge when educating planners who can adapt to changes in how systems are institutionalised and evolve to embed new priorities; this may alter the required ‘know how’ and ‘know who’ with it, but a consistent foundation on which early career planners can draw from and build new technical knowledges and skills is ever more important.

Echoing the way that local government in the UK has been asked to deliver more and more functions with less and less resource, the RTPI’s role in this situation is analogous to the role of central government; the RTPI has the power to ‘enforce’ learning requirements through its accreditation policies but a question remains; if new requirements are determined then a new problem of what needs to be removed or displaced from initial planning education to make the necessary space arises.

Against a context of continuing resource constraint, particularly amongst UK local authorities (Slade et al., 2019), there is a danger that planning schools end up being seen as the institution required to deliver (many of) these skills and knowledges whilst continuing to be confined by the structure of UK higher education where a Master’s degree involves 180 credits (and most universities will strictly regulate how this equates to a specific number of teaching hours, volume of assessment and even assignment word counts). We therefore need to be wary of the potential for a rather haphazard approach, where each and every new topic for planning concern is seen as a responsibility of the planning schools, and covered potentially at the expense of other knowledge priorities.

Thus, education needs to be properly considered in the context of the complementary role played by different actors *together* and over *time*, for a profession whose

needs have changed and will continue to change, but where core skills, knowledges and attitudes evolve rather than transform. Within this wider picture, a reasoned approach to what type of knowledge base the planning schools should attempt to cover in both a time-constrained initial education phase and an increasingly market-oriented university sector (e.g. Jarvis, 2021) will inevitably form part of the mutually drawn conclusions to each round of review now and in the future.

There appears a difficulty in dealing with a diversity of practice and, in particular, reaching agreement of when and how education is delivered, as much as what needs to be learned by professional planners. Our plea is that the less obvious abilities to think deeply, creatively and to lead are defended and based on a set of moral and ethical principles which underpin all else.

Some of the reported criticisms of universities need to be tempered by some self-reflection about in-house training and development offered by planning employers too, as well as the overall organisation and timing of certain skills and knowledge development after initial education and through lifelong learning. A focus on what can best be done, by whom and when and to maintain transparency for all active parties is useful at least so that debates over education can be informed and positive. The active partners will need to reflect on how the universities will need to keep focus on core knowledges that endure and act to tutor entrants about professional attitudes and values – lest Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) be allowed to become (mere?) training facilities, following the trend towards a business orientation in many HEIs globally (Mandell and Jelly, 2020; Gibbs, 2001). If that were allowed to happen the profession will be seriously undermined and its confidence eroded.

It is helpful to remind all-comers about the roles and contributions that key protagonists make. The universities need to ensure they cover, and cover well, core and fundamental knowledge that cannot readily be delivered by others; preparing graduates to enter a practice environment and helping them to know what might be expected of them but also fostering attitudes and appreciating tools needed to enter that environment with a critical awareness and ability to make their own, independent evaluations of practice.

For institutions such as the RTPI, their critical roles lie in information, sustaining mutual understanding and orchestration of assessment of professional competence requirements as well as lifelong learning activity. For the diverse set of employers out there, it is desirable they recognise their responsibility to be aware of their own employees' learning needs and reflect on their expectations of universities who are rightly attempting to maintain core knowledge, and what LeGates (2009) terms 'spatial thinking competencies' and identity development, while operating in a market-oriented education environment.

We are not arguing to maintain the status quo however. When it comes to the relationships between employers, planning schools and the RTPI, and their relative

role in shaping the attitudes, knowledges and skills of planners, a renewed emphasis on dialogue should follow. This needs to challenge all three key parties to reflect critically on their roles in shaping planners at all stages of their career. So, we end on a plea to tread carefully, amidst the risk that the wrong balance of responsibilities could serve to relegate planners to be servants of the change happening around them at a time when shaping and directing change has never been more critical to the future quality of the places that we inhabit.

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