

# *Enhancing quality in planning education across Europe: towards an ethos of sharing and mutual learning in AESOP Quality Recognition*

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# **Enhancing quality in planning education across Europe: towards an ethos of sharing and mutual learning in AESOP Quality Recognition**

## **Abstract**

The role of national and international associations of planning schools in the promotion of planning education has attracted increasing interest globally over the past few years. This paper provides a history concerning the involvement of the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) in planning education and discusses recent deliberations and decisions on the long-standing issue of AESOP's role in promoting quality in planning education across member schools. The AESOP QR Programme today is to be understood as a peer-to-peer service whose role is to support the development and enhancement of planning programmes of member schools through quality recognition, sharing and mutual learning.

Key words: planning education; quality recognition and promotion; peer learning; planning programmes; principles of pedagogy; AESOP.

## **Introduction**

AESOP Quality Recognition (QR) today is a voluntary programme for continual quality support based on peer learning and sharing of best practices for the enhancement of quality in planning education in AESOP member schools. This article tells the story of how the QR Programme arrived at such a position.

Quality sharing and quality enhancement stand at the core of AESOP's QR mission. Rather than assessing or accrediting planning programmes in member schools, the underlying pursuit of the AESOP QR Programme is to continually learn and enhance the scientific, professional and pedagogic qualities of planning programmes whilst sharing best practices and creating a culture of sharing. AESOP QR is complementary to the role of other European quality assurance and accreditation institutions in the field of higher education. The outstanding potential of AESOP lies in its capacity to moderate mutual learning processes among schools of planning in Europe and beyond, whilst considering different planning environments, cultures and higher education systems.

AESOP QR has substantially and procedurally evolved over the years. The AESOP Heads of Planning Schools annual meetings have traditionally focused on planning education, and

successive meetings have served to identify and define a role for AESOP in promoting planning education across Europe. The Bologna process appears to have been the initial trigger for reflections within AESOP on its role with respect to planning education (Davoudi and Ellison, 2006). Peter Ache, for instance, pointed out that the Bologna survey<sup>1</sup> conducted by AESOP provided a better understanding of the ‘products’ delivered within AESOP member schools (Ache, 2008).

The AESOP Heads of Schools meeting organised in Leuven in 2007 provided a second occasion to reflect on AESOP’s role in promoting planning education within member schools. This was an attempt to engage specifically with mobility concerns thrown up by the common platforms introduced by the EU in the General Services Directive (DG Market) to enable free movement of professionals throughout Europe. AESOP was at the time also working closely with the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP-CEU) - an umbrella organisation of national associations of spatial planners within the Council of Europe positioned between the EU and the European Commission. Questions concerning the competences of professional planners and the outcomes of planning education were being actively debated at the time (Vogelij, 2008).

This article provides a history of AESOP’s involvement in planning education and discusses recent deliberations and decisions on the long-standing issue of AESOP’s role in promoting quality in planning education across member schools. The next section discusses the Core Curriculum of AESOP, adopted in 1995 and still in use. This is followed by a section detailing some of the main objectives and challenges identified in AESOP’s work with the ECTP, drawing on deliberations at the AESOP Heads of Schools meeting at Leuven in 2007. Next, a section on the initiative to establish an AESOP Pool of Experts in the early 2010s is outlined. The launch of the QR project alongside the experiences following from the Pilot Phases are then presented. This is followed by an account of the most recent innovations and experiences of the Standard Phase from 2018 to date. Finally, the article discusses current approaches on what AESOP’s role should be in the field of planning education and also how this vision has influenced the QR process as adopted today.

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<sup>1</sup> See the published results from the survey here: <https://www.aesop-planning.eu/uploads/news/2006-bologna-survey.pdf> (last accessed 09-01-2021).

## AESOP Core Curriculum

AESOP was founded in 1987. The AESOP core curriculum was written in 1995 by an AESOP Working Group on the curriculum of planning education. The aim of this group was to define a set of common principles for ‘high quality planning education across Europe’ (AESOP Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education, 1995). The principles thus defined have been later adopted to assess membership applications to AESOP.

The Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education defined planning education as *“the scientific study of and training in creative, conceptual and practical thinking on the relation between society and environment at various territorial levels and in the search, development and advancement of opportunities for purposeful intervention in that relation to ensure sustainable development”* (AESOP Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education, 1995, p.2). The core of planning education was subsequently defined to be threefold:

- “Theoretical and practical knowledge on the desirability of legitimacy of and conditions for purposeful planning intervention;
- Theoretical and practical knowledge on the preparation and advancement of such interventions and on judging the effects thus generated;
- Technological knowledge and skills to actually engage in planning activities in real life situations” (AESOP Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education, 1995, p.2).

One of the main challenges encountered by any pan-European attempt to define a core curriculum for planning is the diversity that currently exists in planning education across Europe. While this was explicitly acknowledged by the Working Group, it nevertheless held on to a belief that there were common requirements that every planning school in Europe should adhere to and that this could be expressed in terms of main fields that a planning education must cover and that courses should be of a specific length and intensity. The main field of studies were thereafter listed under headings of knowledge, practical competences and attitudes.<sup>2</sup> The need for providing opportunities for specialisations in particular fields was also highlighted.

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<sup>2</sup> A full list of these can be obtained here: [http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en\\_GB/core-curriculum](http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en_GB/core-curriculum) (last accessed 09-01-2021).

To cover the range of knowledge, competences and attitudes for developing a professional planner, the Working Group estimated that the length of a planning programme would be at least 4 years of undergraduate study and/or 2 years of graduate study. In terms of intensity, it was specified that “regular exposure to and interaction with planning practice” was a requirement (AESOP Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education, 1995, p.4). The core curriculum also urged member schools to adhere to the core curriculum requirements albeit with due regard given to local and national planning education traditions so as to promote planning thought at the European level.

Several changes have evidently taken place since the formulation of AESOP’s core curriculum 25 years ago. Some of the generic and far-reaching issues already identified have acquired new nuances and multiple new issues have emerged. Also, the governance framework of higher education within which planning education takes place has since developed to keep pace with wider environmental, socio-economic, cultural and technological shifts; changing demands of students; changing demands of employers; and new national pressures on higher education. This includes the signing of the Bologna declaration in 1999, which specified the learning outcomes and competences of a student on completion of a degree. This specification typically would involve 3-4 years of undergraduate study and 1-2 years of postgraduate study. It is time for AESOP to revisit the core curriculum to make it fit for purpose today. The QR process we discuss in this article provides a springing board to start thinking about the parameters for such a change.

### **Quality Assurance across Europe: The role of AESOP and ECTP**

Cooperation for accreditation and recognition of planning programmes were initiated between AESOP and ECTP following the AESOP Heads of Schools meeting in Leuven in 2007. The collaboration was based on ECTP’s perceived need to develop a wider ‘common platform’ of European associations of planners aimed at strengthening the recognition of the planning profession in Europe (Vogelij, 2008).<sup>3</sup> In this context, the ECTP president at the time suggested that AESOP reflected on the actual pursuit of planning and on determining a set of minimum

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<sup>3</sup> ECTP’s claim to reinforce the profession was justified on the grounds of the inextricable fragmentation of planning generated by the wide diversity of institutional and legal contexts, cultures of governance, planning practices as well as the contents of planning education across Europe.

requirements ('a common core') for planning education on the basis of 'the actually extremely different educations in planning' across the continent (*ibid.*, p. 6).

Agreed upon and adopted by national associations of planning professionals, the "New Charter of Athens 2003" represented ECTP's own rationale for professional planning and also, in their view, the basis upon which other European associations of planners should abide by in order to kickstart the process of establishing a common platform for the planning profession.<sup>4</sup> Whilst AESOP's own position on professional recognition seemed to differ in intention and procedural terms, a strong willingness to partner with ECTP in the pursuit of a common platform and professional recognition agenda at the EU level was evident at the outset (Geppert, 2008; Verhage & Meier, 2008).

As a liaison between planning professionals and the European Union, ECTP deemed the constitution of the common platform an initiative that should take place beyond the scope of regulation. Its underlying rationale was straightforward: to specify the purpose of planning and to jointly advance a common core for the planning profession applicable throughout Europe (Vogelij, 2008). On the other hand, AESOP's initial perceptions concerning the establishment of a common platform were based on a rather formal and extensive procedure to be activated in the case where existing legal barriers hindered the mobility of planning professionals between EU countries. Such a process would start with a proposal to the European Commission, followed by national expert assessments, a negotiation between the European Commission and member states, and a formal approval through the EU decision making process (Geppert, 2008). Accordingly, the essence of the platform would be to determine minimum standards (requirements a planner should meet to be entitled to work in Europe) and compensatory measures (additional competences a planner should meet to work in a determined country demanding more qualifications beyond the minimum standards) on the basis of the existing pre-requisites in at least 2/3 of the member states (Geppert, 2008.). In summary, the divergence between ECTP and AESOP in terms of the procedural rationale of the platform became evident: whilst ECTP conceived the purpose of the platform as a bottom-up means to determine a common core and definition, AESOP abided by the European

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<sup>4</sup> The 'New Charter of Athens 2003' denoted ECTP's urban vision for the 21st century. Appeal to the 1933 Charter of Athens was purposefully made to denote that the 2003 charter implied a transition away from 'classical' planning ideas towards a new role for spatial planning based on social, economic and environmental connectivity. See: <http://www.ectp-ceu.eu/images/stories/download/charter2003.pdf> (last accessed 09-01-2021).

directive and thereby did not perceive the need for bottom-up processes at least at the time and in the sense suggested by ECTP.

ECTP and AESOP however substantially converged in agreeing that a common platform would reinforce the professional status of planning whilst making it more recognisable amongst professions. Another key motivation for the dialogue between ECTP and AESOP was the positioning of both entities as key representatives of the planning discipline in Europe. Both also shared an interest to safeguard the comparative quality of planning education (Verhage & Meier, 2008). Whilst ECTP would eventually consider the idea of the common platform to be not applicable to the planning profession (van der Kamp, 2014), the substantial convergence established between ECTP and AESOP would lead to further dialogues for cooperation between both entities within a wider international platform of representative professional planning associations that included the International Society Of City And Regional Planners (ISOCARP) and the International Federation of Housing and Planning (IFHP).

### **The AESOP Pool of Experts**

Following successive rounds of deliberations in AESOP Heads of Schools meetings it was deemed that AESOP member schools would prefer a light assessment of quality and would prefer expert advice (Salet & Finka, 2010). The institution of a Pool of Experts was to be the medium whereby AESOP member schools would engage with learning and by receiving expert advice they would have the opportunity to enhance the learning process. The aim of the Pool of Experts was to provide ‘independent’ advice drawing from international expertise but with knowledge of local/regional specificities; to allow for ‘user friendly reflection’ of local schools based upon their own problem definition; to support competitiveness between AESOP member schools and finally to gain experience within AESOP in order to develop differentiated quality indicators. The Expert Pool was meant to work across all three cycles of planning education - Bachelors, Masters and PhD - identified in the Bologna process (Salet & Finka, 2010).

In terms of operation, the Pool of Experts was meant to only intervene on the request of local schools and at the expense of inviting schools. The inviting schools were also meant to do a SWOT analysis of substantive matters and define the dilemmas for the future. A coordinator of the Pool of Experts would then deliberate with local schools and decide on the level of engagement of the Pool of Experts. In terms of organisation, the President of AESOP was to act as the Coordinator of the Pool of Experts. A Quality Officer was to be responsible for the



implementation of the programme, be the visible point of contact for AESOP member schools and also nominate experts and ad hoc groups of experts as and when required. Experts were to be drawn from member schools, nominated by either CoRep, ExCo or by self-nomination. A ‘QA Pool of Expertise Web Archive’ would archive the experience gained through the workings of the Pool of Experts. The Council of Representatives meeting at Liverpool in 2009 approved the proposal for the Pool of Experts (Salet & Finka, 2010).

Following the above, the Council of Representatives meeting in Tirana in 2011 approved a process for appointing the Expert Pool and the subsequent Council of Representatives meeting in Perth in 2012 approved the list of Experts as well as the financial framework for the implementation of the programme. Soon after in 2012, a second list of Expert Pool of members were nominated.

Since its constitution, there is no evidence of the Expert Pool working along the lines envisaged at inception. Subsequent minutes of Council of Representative meetings instead refer to the Expert Pool only in relation to recommendations to accept applications for membership to AESOP. This continued until 2015 when the Expert Pool was dissolved. The procedures for assessing applications thereafter ceased to refer to the Pool of Experts altogether. Lessons from the unrealised ambition of the Pool of Experts is however important for the design and redesigns of the QR project.

### **The AESOP Quality Recognition Project: Genesis and the Pilot Phase**

The need for a framework for quality recognition emerged in early 2014, after a series of deliberations held during ExCo and Heads of Schools meetings, over the need to provide some manner of support to planning programmes, in particular for curricula development.<sup>5</sup> A Working Group (WG)<sup>6</sup> was then set up to debate AESOP’s potential role in establishing an initiative aimed at providing a form of quality recognition, supplementary to, yet also distinctive from, formal national accreditation and quality assurance schemes and processes. Envisioned as a project to foster added value, the first efforts comprised defining AESOP’s

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that, from inception, AESOP already recognises planning schools sharing joint values and principles through its categories of membership, see: [http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en\\_GB/membership](http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en_GB/membership). (last accessed 09-01-2021)

<sup>6</sup> The Working Group of the Pilot Phase (2014-15) was constituted by Francesco Lo Piccolo (University of Palermo), Maros Finka (Slovak University of Technology), Anna Geppert (University Paris-Sorbonne) and Kristina Nilsson (Luleå University of Technology).

own approach to quality, which resulted in an emphasis on the European and international dimension of planning programmes. The AESOP QR project was thus conceived from the outset as an AESOP service and procedure that would abide by ‘...principles of cooperation and mutual support, recognising the plurality of approaches, traditions and cultures in each national and local context’ (Lo Piccolo, 2017, p. 90).

At the 2014 Heads of Schools meeting in Lisbon, an intense debate yielded the decision to test categories or modalities for quality recognition of the European and International dimension in planning programmes. A classification advanced by the WG included the following categories:

- Recognition of excellent qualities of planning study programmes according to European standards expressed in the AESOP Core Curriculum.
- Recognition of European international profile and excellent quality of planning study programmes according to European standards expressed in the AESOP Core curriculum.
- Recognition of cross-continental international profile and excellent quality of planning study programmes according to European standards expressed in the AESOP Core curriculum.
- Recognition of European/cross-continental international profile and excellent quality of post-graduate/life-long learning programmes in planning (Lo Piccolo et al., 2015).

While some perceived this style of recognition to be appealing and practical in assessing the substance of distinct planning programme profiles (Frank, 2018), others (including the WG itself) contended that the use of categories could unintendedly increase the competitiveness between schools to attract students (Lo Piccolo, 2017). To avoid potential misinterpretations, the WG opted for the provision of a single certificate in accordance with AESOP’s core requirements for a high-quality European Planning Education contained in its Core Curriculum (AESOP, 1995).

The implementation of AESOP’s QR project started with a Pilot Phase launched in August 2014, where 20 member schools (a total of 26 programmes covering most geographical areas in Europe) voluntarily submitted reports on the basis of an application form prepared by the WG. The aspects of quality reflected in the form, and thus considered for the evaluation of the reports by the WG, included the high quality of the academic environment (e.g. interdisciplinarity; European profile of teaching staff); a comprehensive study programme in

the field of spatial planning (in accordance with the highest level of European standards as depicted by the AESOP core curriculum); and the use of teaching methods fostering teamwork and interaction with the broad European/transnational environment (e.g. delivery of joint diplomas, international workshops, summer schools, and so forth).

At the 2015 Heads of Schools meeting in Madrid, the WG led an interactive workshop with the purpose of discussing the process and outcome of the Pilot Phase with the AESOP community as well as debating how AESOP should continue to offer this service in the future (Geppert & Finka, 2015). Being generally well received, it was concluded that a certification process be institutionalised on the basis of: i) an ad hoc international review panel (of academics and practitioners) for each individual evaluation; and ii) a pan-European quality board of experts acting as guardians of the process. In terms of outputs, it was concluded that the certificate of quality should be accompanied by a document emphasising the quality of each programme's specialisation according to a list of specialisations (Geppert & Finka, 2015). The certificates were to be valid for 6 years.

The Pilot Phase ended with the delivery of standard certificates in January 2016. Whilst the suggested governance and output adjustments for future quality recognition efforts would partly gain momentum, the question of how to go about 'evaluating' applications had remained largely intact. Questions around how exactly member schools would benefit from the QR process were also mooted in CoRep meetings. A rationale for this and a clear mission had to be developed if the QR process was to be institutionalised for a longer term.

### **The Standard Phase and the Creation of the Excellence in Education Board**

After the completion of the Pilot Phase in 2016, the WG advised ExCo and CoRep to constitute an AESOP board of quality with a certification mandate. An Excellence in Education Board (EEB) was thus conceived as a group of experts responsible for coordinating the evaluation process. The CoRep was asked to nominate three experts per country with expertise in: i) running higher education planning programmes, ii) international cooperation; and iii) evaluation.<sup>7</sup> It was further suggested that each individual application be reviewed by an ad hoc expert panel from the EEB, ideally composed of two academics (one from the same country

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<sup>7</sup> A total of 10 AESOP countries nominated 3 members, 7 countries nominated 1 or 2 members and 8 countries did not make any nominations.

and another from elsewhere in Europe) and a practitioner nominated in coordination with national or international practitioner associations.

The QR project transitioned from the Pilot to the Standard Phase during 2017-2018. A Chair of the Excellence in Education Board was elected by the CoRep at the 2017 Heads of Schools Meeting in Warsaw, where the WG of the Pilot Phase handed over the project to the new EEB whilst jointly setting forth the first steps of the transition. Daniel Galland, one of the authors of this article was elected as the Chair of the EEB. Taking into account the feedback received during the Pilot Phase and continuing with practice established by then, it was agreed that: i) programme ‘distinctiveness’ should comprise a key dimension to focus on during future rounds of the evaluation process, and ii) an explanatory report addressing the distinctive character of the recognised programme should accompany the Certificate of Quality. The distinctiveness dimension would emphasise the quality aspects of a programme’s academic curriculum, teaching pedagogy and planning specialisation in accordance with AESOP’s core requirements for a high-quality European planning education contained in its Core Curriculum. The two central concerns identified earlier - the criteria for evaluation and the rationale for the QR Programme - were temporarily relegated to the future and the first call for applications under the Standard Phase was launched.

### **AESOP Quality Recognition as a Permanent Programme: Developing a Mission of Quality Sharing and Learning**

While the first call for applications under the Standard Phase drawing from experiences in the Pilot Phase was underway, a WG<sup>8</sup> was convened by the Chair of EEB to deliberate how the QR Programme ought to be run in the future. An initial meeting at the University of Porto in 2019, focused on how WGs should evaluate applications in the future. This was directly addressing one of the relegated issues (discussed in another forthcoming article). Here, we focus on the second relegated issue - the rationale for the QR Programme - what it is, why it is so and how this is constitutive of the processes subsequently adopted by the QR Programme.

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<sup>8</sup> The first Working Group of the Standard Phase (2018-19) was constituted by 6 members, including the EEB Chair (Daniel Galland, Aalborg University Copenhagen), a member of the WG in the Pilot Phase (Anna Geppert, University Paris-Sorbonne), and 4 EEB members: Angelique Chettiparamb (University of Reading), Alex Deffner (University of Thessaly), Tijana Dabovic (University of Belgrade) and Francesco Moccia (University of Naples Federico II).

Through the historical account of AESOP's involvement in planning education presented herein we have seen that the diversity among member schools, which emerges from particular planning practice cultures, particular histories of wider higher education trajectories and particular organisational settings and practices of planning programmes was, and continues to be, one of the major challenges in advancing any unified concept of planning education amongst AESOP members. However, as Verhage (2010, p. 61) points out "European countries are becoming more and more aware that exactly their differences ... are perhaps the most important assets of this continent". It was clear then that the QR mission had to see diversity as an asset and build upon such a view in its QR approach.

In spite of the diversity amongst member schools, there was also a set of common problems that planning schools across Europe were facing. These in part derived from attempts to promote mobility driven by the Bologna Process; forces of globalisation that all member states were subject to (see Kunzmann, 2015); generic professional skills required from a planner, and at least some shared planning issues that were not just confined within national borders. This has led Verhage (2010, p.6) to state that "European countries to a large extent face the same kind of planning problems". This then suggested that the QR process could be built around values of mutual sharing and learning.

Kunzmann (2015) paints a picture of international, rapid globalisation and technology-driven change that planners of the future everywhere will need to continuously cope with in their profession. Priorities change and the knowledge, skills and attitudes required of a planner will consequently shift in turn, making fresh demands on planning education. The QR process will therefore need to embrace an ethos of continuous change and reinvention if it is to remain up to date and relevant in the wider world within which the professionally trained planner would practice.

The historical narrative around AESOP's involvement in planning education, also reveals a focus on quality as a central concern. The 2010 issue of Planning Education edited by Anna Geppert and Giancarlo Cotella is in fact titled "Quality Issues in a *Changing* European Higher Education Area". It has been claimed that this, at least partially, is an outcome from neoliberal pressures on higher education which urged professional bodies to rally together to specify professional standards against the onslaught of overwhelming efficiency demands resulting from decreasing public resources (Greene, 1994). In aspiring to an "Efficient and Effective higher education system", the European Commission announces that "The effectiveness and

efficiency of higher education systems relate, in part, to the availability of funding and the promotion of a culture of quality” (European Commission, n.d). Quality therefore had to be a core concern of the QR process wherein it had to be true to its name.

Building on the above values, the core mission of QR was discussed and written out collectively by the WG<sup>9</sup> convened by the EEB Chair at the University of Belgrade in 2020. The final mission statement draws on the above values of safeguarding national planning cultural traditions, promoting a culture of sharing and peer learning, continuous evaluation and enhancement, and safeguarding notions of quality.<sup>10</sup> The formulation of procedures that would uphold the above mission in the detail was the next challenge.

### **How does the QR process take place in practice and what are its main benefits?**

The AESOP QR Programme today should be understood as a service whose role is to support the development and enhancement of planning programmes of AESOP member schools through quality recognition, sharing and mutual learning. Applicants are provided with opportunities to engage in critical and constructive dialogue with a WG consisting of EEB members appointed by the Chair by jointly catering to different aspects of their programmes, championing best practices and fostering a continuous ethos of quality enhancement. This occurs through procedures that reflect the QR mission and its underlying values:

- Preparation of the QR application: AESOP member schools from all across Europe are encouraged to submit their QR applications after the launch of an annual call. The form demands that applicants engage in constant intra-institutional reflection whilst evidencing every claim made in relation to the requested criteria on programme distinctiveness and principles of pedagogy.
- Review of application submissions: The appointed WG reviews the applications whilst preparing a first interim feedback report, which is then forwarded to the applicants in preparation for a first physical or virtual meeting alongside the WG.
- First meeting: The interim feedback report serves as the basis through which applicants and the WG engage in dialogue deliberating on missing programme-level and

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<sup>9</sup> The WG in 2020 consisted of 6 members, including: Daniel Galland (Aalborg University Copenhagen), Angelique Chettiparamb (University of Reading), Maros Finka (Slovak University of Technology), Tijana Dabovic (University of Belgrade), Paulo Silva (University of Aveiro) and Ana Peric (ETH Zurich).

<sup>10</sup> For the full mission statement visit: [http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en\\_GB/quality-recognition](http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en_GB/quality-recognition) (last accessed 09-01-2021).

pedagogical evidence in relation to any claims being made. This exercise is aimed at jointly identifying best practices that can contribute to develop a clear understanding of the different characters and identities of the planning programme across Europe and how it fulfils the stated criteria.

- Successive rounds of re-submissions and meetings: an iterative process consisting of 1, 2 or more rounds of re-submissions (each followed by interim feedback reports and subsequent interactions between the applicants and the WG) are held until the final application fully complies with the criteria. It is important to note that there is no rejection of applications. When applicants are unable to satisfy specific criteria, the application is taken forward and continued within the next annual QR process. The underlying approach is then to secure a continual improvement of planning education amongst AESOP members.

The QR annual timeline allocates a total of 4-5 months to the above processes.<sup>11</sup> The full recognition is formalised by the AESOP Certificate of Quality, which is accompanied with an Evaluation Report showcasing best practices in terms of the programme curriculum, its identity and fulfilment of principles of pedagogy. The certification is valid for 6 years and awarded at the annual AESOP General Assembly. The AESOP Certificates of Quality alongside their Evaluation Reports showcasing best practices are displayed on the AESOP QR webpage to promote a proactive and cooperative process of collective improvement of quality in planning education among the AESOP member schools.

## **Conclusion**

The involvement of AESOP in planning education comprises a long trajectory of collaborative efforts that began with the formulation and adoption of its Core Curriculum for high quality European planning education in 1995, followed by substantial attempts alongside ECTP to explore common means to assess and recognise the quality of planning programmes whilst reinforcing planning's professional status across Europe. Over the past decade, several rounds of deliberations held annually during AESOP Heads of Schools meetings have led to four key

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<sup>11</sup> The Quality Recognition timeline is published in the AESOP QR website in the early fall. To check out the current timeline visit: [http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en\\_GB/quality-recognition-timeline](http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en_GB/quality-recognition-timeline) (last accessed 09-01-2021).

interventions aimed at promoting quality enhancement in planning education: i. the constitution of an advisory Expert Pool in the early 2010s; ii. the Quality Recognition Project in 2014; iii. the establishment of an Excellence in Education Board in 2016; and iv) the adoption of the Quality Recognition Programme as a permanent AESOP activity and service for its member schools in 2019.

Rather than ‘assessing’ quality, or ranking schools or comparing curriculum contents, the history of AESOP in promoting quality in planning education across its member schools has entailed specific recognition approaches based on cooperation and targeted to support and endorse the quality of planning programmes. The experience of AESOP has been grounded on values of distinctiveness, mutual sharing and learning, which are today reflected in the processes of deliberation that allow for the continual improvement of the scientific, professional and pedagogic qualities of planning programmes. The AESOP QR Programme today should thereby be perceived as an opportunity not only to promote and develop increased self-awareness about planning programme profiles and possibilities, but also as an occasion to identify best practices whilst showcasing them to the rest of the world.

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