

good practice in planning education

John McCarthy and Samer Bagaeen outline the findings of a report on good practice and innovation in planning education programme content and delivery

In 2014, the Higher Education Academy in York, the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Conference of Heads of Planning Schools co-funded the authors of this article to undertake a survey on good practice in planning education in the UK, and then produce a report disseminating relevant ideas and innovations with a view to widening their use in RTPI-accredited higher education 'planning schools'. For the purposes of our report, *Sharing Good Practice in Planning Education*,¹ we saw good practice as that which provides creditable outcomes in terms of learning and teaching effectiveness, as indicated by higher education providers and supported by wider evidence. Elements of good practice that we considered included experiential learning/problem-based learning/place-based education; study visits, and reflective learning and writing; employability and links to practice; use of technology; and research-informed teaching and use of specialists.

The report is based on documentary evidence as well as a survey of opinion in UK planning schools conducted in spring 2014. It is intended to be of interest not just to academics within planning and the broader built environment field, but also to practitioners and employers with an interest in initial (or pre-qualification) education and/or lifelong learning, for instance through involvement in teaching/learning, mentoring or similar activities.

The report focuses on practice within UK planning schools, but also makes reference to implications for lifelong learning. Moreover, the main components of good practice were assumed to be largely generic within the built environment field, and therefore potentially transferable between relevant disciplines/professions. For instance, reflective learning and professional development planning are generally common requirements for professional



Photos: Samer Bagaeen

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Brighton planning students at Ypenburg, the Netherlands, in 2014

membership as well as lifelong learning in the field, so all relevant professions can benefit from the embedding of such activities within higher education programmes.

Context

The report was written in the context of a range of challenges affecting planning education relevant to the delivery of good practice. External challenges include the erosion of the perceived capability of planning, and the challenge of competing professions which arguably have greater capability for some specialist functions within the spectrum of planning activities. There has also been reform to many aspects of planning, with changes to national policy and legislation that govern the different systems across the UK. The way that planning professionals engage with, promote and manage development has therefore been in flux.

Internal challenges (within higher education) include pressures for institutional restructuring, affecting disciplinary identity and coherence; a reduction in activities perceived as resource-heavy, such as real-life project work; and internationalisation of education, involving, for instance, the need for enhanced student support and demands for greater emphasis on (cross-national and transferable) skills rather than (context-based) knowledge.

For planning education, these external and internal challenges present a context in which the sharing of good practice is increasingly valuable.

Framing, encouraging and assessing good practice in planning education

Several external mechanisms serve to frame, encourage and assess aspects of good practice in UK higher education. In relation to framing and encouraging good practice, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*² sets out the expectations that providers of higher education are required to meet in designing and delivering study programmes. It thereby gives providers a shared starting point on assuring the academic standards of education awards and the quality of learning opportunities. 'Academic quality' refers here to how well providers support students in relation to learning, teaching and assessment, and covers aspects such as assessment and equal opportunity, the learning environment, and student engagement.³ By contrast, 'quality assurance' refers here to the process for checking that academic standards and quality meet expectations. While the *UK Quality Code* assists the QAA in supporting and reviewing providers (for instance universities) in meeting their responsibilities, providers themselves are ultimately responsible for their own academic standards and quality.

In relation to assessing good practice, the National Student Survey (NSS) gathers the opinion of final-year undergraduate students on the quality of their courses. It has run since 2005 and is conducted by Ipsos MORI and is commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of related UK institutions and providers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The resulting data is publicly available and may be used by prospective students to compare similar programmes.

In addition to highlighting differences between institutions and programmes in relation to student perceptions, the NSS has highlighted areas for general improvement across institutions, such as assessment and feedback; this, it may be argued, has assisted in driving up standards generally.

Higher education providers also use the advice and expertise of external examiners who act as independent assessors of academic standards and quality. The role includes not only scrutiny of the quality of assessment, but also the identification of

good practice and the encouragement of quality enhancement. Moreover, as indicated above, the RTPI's system of partnership boards provides a framework for overview of the ongoing effectiveness of planning schools in delivering initial planning education. Boards apply a constructive form of engagement which includes the RTPI, providers and employers as partners, and involves a scrutiny role on standards as well as support and encouragement of quality enhancement through 'innovative, creative and flexible education provision'.⁴

Components of good practice

In higher education generally, Gunn and Fisk⁵ outline generic aspects of *teaching* excellence, focusing on the notion of dynamic engagement, with the intended outcome of understanding and active participation by students; this links in turn to elements such as research-teaching linkage. In addition to such elements – as applied to initial planning education – the *Sharing Good Practice in Planning Education* report also makes reference to aspects of good practice which link to lifelong learning.

Suggested components of good practice in the report were derived in part from what planning schools themselves see as potential good practice, as noted in the annual reports of their partnership boards. The components also show some linkage to the RTPI learning outcomes – for instance in relation to interdisciplinary working (outcome 12), reflective learning and experiential and problem-based learning (outcome 13), and research-informed teaching and the use of specialism (specialist outcomes). However, it is acknowledged that many good practice examples cover more than one component, and good practice may fall outside the boundaries of these components.

The data on good practice in the report was derived from an online survey of 27 UK planning schools, with 12 respondents (44% response rate). The respondents comprised a mix of types of provider, including, for instance, established and newer universities. They were asked to indicate their coverage of good practice in RTPI-accredited programmes by indicating their first, second and third priorities. These were then scored, with priority 1 assigned score 3, priority 2 assigned score 2, and priority 3 assigned score 1, to show what providers see as their strengths in good practice provision. The results illustrated the breadth of schools' perceptions of their good practice, with a clear emphasis on enhancing employability (seven first scores) – perhaps to be expected in the light of the difficulties experienced by graduates as a consequence of the downturn in the construction sector after 2008.

Interdisciplinarity and interprofessionalism

Davoudi and Pendlebury⁶ suggest that 'multidisciplinary' approaches to planning education (with disciplines coming together but working



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Experience of learning between related disciplines and professions can be particularly valuable for planning students

independently by 'picking and mixing') are more evident in the UK than 'interdisciplinary' approaches (with greater integration of disciplines). Nevertheless, there would seem to be a general consensus that experience of learning between related disciplines and professions (allowing each to appreciate the working opportunities and constraints faced by others) can be extremely valuable.^{5,7-9} This is perhaps particularly so for planning students, in part because interprofessional project team working increasingly represents much contemporary practice.

This would appear to be recognised by planning schools, as indicated by the emphasis given to the 'interdisciplinary' approach, which scored second-highest overall in our survey. The opportunities for such project working would also seem to be enhanced by the growth of cross-disciplinary programmes, linking planning to geography, for instance, since these often incorporate modules delivered by staff from other disciplines to a mixed-discipline student cohort. The need for interdisciplinary education in this context is also emphasised in the Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment,¹⁰ which calls for all built environment courses to prepare for cross-disciplinary understanding through the use of a common foundation year in higher education for all built environment students.

At postgraduate level, Queen's University Belfast's postgraduate MSc in Environmental Planning programme involves a project within the 'Design in the built environment' module which is run in collaboration with stage 3 (BSc in Architecture) students who are preparing design proposals for key sites in a local town. Planning students start by developing skills in visual communication and design, using specialist software such as Photoshop

and SketchUp, and then work in groups to prepare an urban design strategy, after which they act as development management professionals, meeting and advising 'architects' (architecture students) on their design proposals. This allows planning students to develop skills in site analysis, review of visual information prepared by other built environment professionals, and negotiation.

Similarly, the University of Plymouth's postgraduate MSc in Planning programme includes an exercise in which students work with other disciplines (from the Sustainable Environmental Management and Environmental Consultancy programmes) in a day-long mock public inquiry relating to a case of mining development in a sensitive location. Students are videoed to allow more effective reflection on their experience.

A further example is provided by the University of Sheffield's 'integrated project' within the postgraduate MA in Town and Regional Planning/dual MArch in Architecture and Town and Regional Planning. This project, undertaken in the second semester, applies knowledge and skills from the first semester to a real-life planning problem. It leads to design proposals and financial appraisals, and subsequent adjustments to design. Planning students work alongside real estate students as well as those on the dual MArch programme, culminating in negotiation on a development scheme. Practitioners are also involved, including staff from the local regeneration agency.

The above examples all show how interprofessional working can be effectively applied through project working within a built environment context, with evident benefits in terms of preparing students for the realities of much contemporary practice.

Experiential learning/problem-based learning/place-based education

The interdisciplinary approaches considered above overlap substantially with experiential learning approaches, as shown for instance by Higgins *et al.*¹¹ Temple⁷ highlights the importance of experiential learning, with work-based elements where appropriate, and this is linked to 'problem-based learning', which can be achieved via 'place-based education' involving real-life projects. The latter can enable students to understand issues such as sustainability via immersive engagement with places and communities, encouraging motivation and collaboration. The value of such practice is endorsed by Kotval¹² in the US, where community service is extensively applied in higher education to connect theory with practice.

While such activities have often been known as 'studio' projects, they are not limited to architectural design elements, since studio work can equally involve policy or strategy development, and can develop skills such as policy analysis and report writing.¹¹ The key element is the learning-by-doing approach within a quasi-real world situation, often involving group working and group dynamics skills. As Scholl *et al.*¹³ suggest, 'Using unsolved problems with real connections to actual practice must be the core of learning'. In addition, Pijawka *et al.*⁹ point to the advantages of a problem-based learning approach in the specific context of education for sustainability.

Many planning schools apply such approaches, often making use of real-life clients. For instance, the University of Newcastle's consultancy project, in the final year of the undergraduate Diploma in Town Planning/MPlan is taken by students after a job placement year. The project involves student groups providing consultancy work for a named client, and students can choose from several real-life projects, with client organisations including local authorities, Planning Aid and the Environment Agency. This allows the client to investigate an aspect of work that they have been unable to explore themselves because of resource or time constraints. Project briefs are prepared by the client, with assistance from the planning school, and students meet the client regularly and present their findings to the client usually via a presentation and report – although in some cases outputs may be different, as in the case of a practitioners' workshop for Planning Aid. Clients are invited to comment on the student work, and how they intend to use it subsequently.

In addition, the University of Westminster's postgraduate MA in Urban and Regional Planning programme involves a module in which students develop proposals for sites, produce client reports and prepare planning applications (applying skills and knowledge in policy, design and development finance). Students then assess the applications of other groups working on different sites, and prepare

planning committee reports. Local planning practitioners assist in site selection, provide briefings to students, and play the role of councillors at a mock planning committee. Such interaction (in a similar way to external mentoring) also, of course, provides the potential for network-building, which might eventually lead to employment.

The use of a real-life client-based approach as in the examples above creditably reflects much of contemporary practice, and thereby enhances the experiential learning process. As a refinement of this approach, some programmes apply elements of community-based working by assisting local communities directly. For instance, the University of Brighton's postgraduate MSc in Town Planning programme involves students contributing to live planning projects in Brighton and Hove; students have participated in the creation of the Hove Neighbourhood Plan in conjunction with the Hove Neighbourhood Forum, and have joined local residents in a community consultation event.

Moreover, the planning programmes at UCL in 2010 involved a public engagement initiative called 'UCL Just Space', organised in connection with the London Just Space Network, an informal alliance of community groups, campaigns and independent organisations which came together to challenge policies in the London Plan. The aim was to connect London-based community groups (which needed planning expertise) with planning students and staff who were willing to do voluntary work on London-relevant planning and urban regeneration issues, including the preparation of responses to inquiries from the public related to the London Plan and neighbourhood plans.

The above examples illustrate innovations which again reflect many contemporary practice contexts and are therefore extremely valuable for students.

Reflective learning and writing

While the reflective learning and writing element in isolation scored lowly overall, purposeful reflection on learning, including reflective writing, is integral to wider processes of experiential learning,¹¹ and may also, of course, figure significantly as part of interdisciplinary working. Indeed, reflective learning has now become embedded within much of higher education, as well as professional practice, linked in part to requirements for professional membership.¹⁴ In addition, Kitchen¹⁵ endorses the importance of reflective practice in forming and enhancing relevant skills. However, the effectiveness of approaches in practice is mixed, with students often seeming to polarise in their appreciation of methods such as learning journals.^{11,16}

Reflection may be applied in many ways. For instance, the University of Brighton's postgraduate MSc in Town Planning programme involves a 'Learning log' module which develops critically

reflective practice and is linked to an external mentoring programme. The module allows students to take a reflective overview of their studies, and to develop linkages to related personal and professional experience, as well as linkages between other learning modules and the wider external professional environment. It therefore helps students to get the maximum benefit from their studies and to ensure that they contribute to personal and professional development.



The above examples show creditable applications of reflection which prepare students for effective lifelong learning. In addition, reflective learning on planning programmes may be particularly geared to assisting students to prepare for professional membership requirements via the RTPI's Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) (with a similar requirement for the RICS), by reflective writing in relation to general learning and/or direct experience/project work. For instance, the University of Manchester's 'Professional and career development' module, undertaken in the final year of undergraduate programmes, involves a specific assignment related to the RTPI APC, and the University of Ulster's undergraduate MSc in Planning and Property Development programme applies a module which involves a reflective exercise related to both the RTPI and RICS APC requirements.

Employability and linkage to practice

All elements of good practice are intended ultimately to contribute to employability, and there is a very clear overall top priority assigned to this element. McLoughlin¹⁷ outlines the changing context for planning education and employability, highlighting the need for greater practitioner input, practice-based student projects, and encouragement of work experience. This may be achieved, for instance, by involvement of practitioners in teaching through conventional 'guest lecturer' presentations, and/or through their involvement in practical project exercises.

Both mechanisms allow students to experience the world of practice indirectly, and can inform students' career choices. While involvement of practitioners in this way involves risks such as inconsistency and fragmentation within programmes, these can be mitigated by appropriate curricular design, briefing of practitioners, and monitoring of student feedback.

Employers also value direct practical experience for students in the workplace.¹⁷ Consequently, many planning schools assist students seeking vacation work experience, either paid or through internships, or through year-long placements where possible as part of 'sandwich' undergraduate programmes. Planning schools may make use of scholarships provided for students by local authorities, linked to vacation work opportunities and possibly obligations for students to work for a time post-qualification. In addition, they may encourage broader strategic partnerships with local authorities to facilitate practitioner involvement in teaching and project work.

Some planning schools also incorporate modules related directly to placement working. For example, the University of the West of England applies a six-week 'agency project' within its final year of its BA in Architecture and Planning programme. Students are placed in a work context on the basis of stated preferences, and are required to develop a brief for an appropriate piece of work in collaboration with the employer. Students subsequently submit a project plan and final plan, as well as a reflective account.

An increasing practice for planning schools in this context is the application of 'external mentoring', with students allocated a practitioner 'mentor' who can provide advice on issues such as career direction and opportunities. Such arrangements can vary in formality, and they may be time-limited, with continuation on a voluntary basis, possibly extending later to mentoring in relation to requirements for membership of the RTPI or RICS. Such an external mentoring scheme at Heriot-Watt University, for instance, applies in the third year of the undergraduate BSc in Urban Planning and Property Development programme, and at the University of Brighton in its postgraduate MSc in Town Planning programme. These examples provide students with added opportunities for advice and guidance which can lead to significant benefits during and after qualification.

Use of technology

It is perhaps surprising that use of technology, including social media and online/virtual teaching as well as assessment feedback, was not assigned high overall scores by planning schools, since the use of technology is increasingly evident throughout planning education, and effective feedback to students has been highlighted as an issue by NSS scores.

In relation to wider programme delivery, many planning schools make extensive use of enhanced blended learning for on-campus students and online

or distance-learning offers for remote students. The latter has been extensively applied, in particular by the Joint Distance Learning Consortium (JDLC), managed by the University of the West of England (UWE) and delivered by four universities (UWE, Leeds Metropolitan University, the University of Dundee, and London South Bank University) on an equal-ownership basis.

The use of social media is also increasingly applied in many planning schools. For instance, the University of Reading uses a planning 'Facebook' group to encourage student engagement. In addition, Heriot-Watt University has set up Twitter feeds (@socsus and @urbanIM) for two courses, to help integrate information which is fast-changing. These are used mainly for one-way traffic; students are encouraged to follow the two accounts to receive updates in their timelines, and these are retweeted from the course leaders' own Twitter feeds. To assist students not using Twitter, feeds are available from a link in the University's virtual learning environment.

Conclusions and recommendations

The components of good practice outlined here – and there are more in the report itself – demonstrate a breadth of good practice across a wide array of elements, with much evidence of innovation in programme content and delivery. Moreover, the suggested components and examples represent a very partial and time-limited 'snapshot' of the more obvious innovations in relation to selected elements of good practice as indicated by planning schools and informed by wider evidence.

Further innovation is inevitable, and what would therefore seem helpful in this context is the development of an ongoing platform or 'bulletin board' for the dissemination of good practice as it evolves. This could potentially go beyond highlighting specific innovations (as currently done by partnership boards) to show more comprehensively how 'good practice' is perceived and applied – for instance, through a more formal survey mechanism for planning schools/partnership boards. While there could be resistance in view of a perceived lack of time or the risks of sharing information with competitors, it is suggested that the wider benefits of sharing good practice outweigh the risks. Planning schools represent communities of interest as well as isolated agents in competition, and many problems and challenges – including those relating to good practice – are arguably best addressed in a spirit of (albeit bounded) collaboration and collegiality.

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Notes

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