A vexed terrain: Exploring assumptions and preconceptions around planning education in universities

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Introduction

In the course of its ongoing development, planning in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, has undergone an increasing process of professionalisation. Like medicine, law, engineering or accounting it has its own formal qualifications, based upon education and examinations, and its own regulatory bodies with powers to admit and discipline members.

The paper begins by exploring a growing awareness of the notion of 'diverse communities', both in terms of the communities that the planning professionals serve, and the way in which the planning profession itself is increasingly being made up of diverse communities of planning specialists.

Drawing, along with a range of other documentary sources, on a series of inquiries conducted over the last decade and inquiring into planning education and employment (NSW Department of Planning 2006; Planning Institute of Australia 2004; Gurran et al. 2008), the paper explores some of the key debates and/or tensions which have emerged repeatedly within these documents concerning the *type* of education that planning programs within

universities are expected, assumed or perceived to play in the provision of planning education to the growing diversity of specialist communities of interest that make up the Australian planning profession (Gurran et al. 2008 p4).

In exploring these debates and tensions the paper identifies a series of diverse perspectives on university planning programs. Yet, despite their diversity, what these perspectives highlight is that all decisions pertaining to the structuring and development of educational programs are inescapably position-based. Far from being neutral and objective, educational decisions are, in large part, determined by, and adopted to conform to, sets of pre-existent values, expectations and aims. They are thus both informed by and conditioned by sets of established beliefs, preferences, and prejudice which define how educational programs are to be constructed and what they are 'for'. Education is thus normative in two senses: while, on the one hand, it establishes what is to be learned by the student, on the other, this education (i.e. what is to be taught to the student) is itself already preconditioned by the viewpoint or position of those determining that education.

Given the brevity of this paper we focus on three specific positions that seek to impact on and shape university planning programs.

Firstly, the paper explores the assumption that university planning programs constitute 'education for practice' in its prosaic sense, intended to address planning skill

shortages in the various communities of interest that form the contemporary practice of planning in Australia.

Secondly, we explore the position that planning programs are not only for practice in the sense outlined above, but deliberately seek to address the higher purpose of fostering *critical engagement* with planning (Gurran et al. 2008 p5). In this way the notion of 'simple' or merely pragmatic training is replaced with the provision of an increasingly refined knowledge of planning itself and with the development of increased intellectual rigour informing such critical engagement with, and sophisticated analysis of, planning. In exploring these first two positions the paper briefly examines the underlying *purpose* of university planning programs, and highlights the obvious but often overlooked questions: *what* is to be taught, *why* is it to be taught, and *on what basis are these decisions made*, questions which might conveniently be rephrased as 'what is *supposed* to be *learned* within planning education programs, and who makes such decisions?'

Finally, the paper offers a perspective on the emergence of university planning programs from a position within the academic community, a position that is framed by ever-increasing competition, by the constraints of government budgets and policies, by expectations about teaching or research, and so on, all of which impact on the nature of educational curricula, on the 'evidence' of educational quality, and ultimately on the key issue of the relevance of planning programs to the university.

Planning's diverse communities of practice and the diverse communities they serve

Planning literature abounds with references to the notion of *community*, both in Australia and overseas (Fookes et al. 2001; NSW Department of Planning 2006; Planning Institute of Australia 2004). One fact that emerges within this literature is that planning no longer deals with the notion of community *per se* but with the idea of *diverse communities*. Traditionally community has been defined as a group of interacting people living in a common location. However, the definition of the word community has evolved to mean individuals who share characteristics, regardless of their location or degree of interaction. This paper explores the diverse communities that are both served by and make up the planning profession, ranging from a group of people living in the same locality, to groups viewed as forming a distinct segment of society, and thus to 'communities of interest', formed out of the collegiality of planning professionals who share common concerns or passions.

The planning profession in the 21st century aims to provide important services to that series of diverse communities of place, ethnicity and people that are viewed as forming distinct segments within society (e.g. gay communities). A key focus of the emerging profession is the need to "understand...their needs and expectations" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p4; NSW Department of Planning 2006). To this end, inquiries into the planning profession regularly recommend that the profession needs to "develop communication skills to deal with community" (NSW Department of Planning, 2006 p7). Within these inquiries specific reference is made to the need to develop better connections between the profession and specific communities;

'regional' and 'sea-change communities', for example, are described as suffering a critical shortage of planners (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 pi)

This flexible notion of community is not limited to the communities that the planning profession is understood to serve. The planning profession itself is increasingly seen as "becoming a broader, multidisciplinary sphere of activity" (NSW Department of Planning 2006 p6). The development of planning as a profession has created an umbrella for a broad and multi-disciplinary sphere of activity: strategic planning; environmental planning; transport planning; urban design; social planning, and heritage planning, to name but some. The profession itself can be understood as the coalescing of an increasing number of diverse and overlapping communities that share certain generic features, beliefs, interpretations and interests. The emergence of these diverse communities within the planning profession has "recently been recognised by the Planning Institute of Australia in its membership structure, with the establishments of chapters" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p5) which include an urban and regional planning chapter, an economic planning chapter, and others directed towards transport planning, social planning, urban design and planning law. Relations between these chapters are not without their tensions. Some chapters – by virtue, for example, of their longer history – may see themselves as somehow being more 'professionally-established' and thus more 'legitimate' than the other emerging communities of planning professionals. Another example, the "recent emergence and prominence of urban designers" (NSW Department of Planning 2006 p6) and their location within the planning profession, are being quietly contested by other closely aligned professional communities such as architecture through the formation of alternative professional bodies such as the Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA).

The planning profession is also impacted on by the expectations and pressures of other professional communities to which it is linked. The "development community" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p3 and 30) is a prime example.

Universities currently play a key role in the education of these diverse communities of planning specialists that make up the planning profession. As one inquiry into the planning profession recently noted, "close to 80% of...planners held a bachelor degree or higher" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004, p8). While the majority of these degrees were obtained through university planning programs, an increasing number of planning professionals come to planning with university qualifications that are obtained through associated disciplines – "increasingly skills needed...are provided by degree qualifications in other fields such as engineering, environmental science and economics...and these professionals may not need formal planning qualifications" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004; NSW Department of Planning 2006 p6). Given the central focus which the planning profession places on understanding the needs of 'communities', inquiries into planning education note tensions between – and raise concerns about – the disparities between the communities that are served and the representation of these communities within the profession. While many planners undertake work within or with Aboriginal communities, for example, inquiries note that "indigenous Australians are poorly represented in the planning course[s]" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p19).

Universities, of course, are not the only institutions that provide planning education to the diverse communities of interest that make up the planning profession. The education of planning professionals is also provided through on-the-job training, continuing professional education, private accredited colleges, and, most recently, through TAFEs, which are now beginning to deliver vocational training appropriate to the planning profession (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p31). Yet tensions and concerns have emerged within the profession about the capacity of vocational courses to provide skills that are adequate for the planning profession. Some secondary school subjects, such as geography, are also noted as being specifically relevant to the skill set that is required by planners, and is cited as one of the "primary feeder subjects" into tertiary studies in planning (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p21; Fookes et al. 2001).

Planning programs 'for' practice

The assumption that university planning programs are unequivocally 'for' practice has been brought to the fore in the past few decades as a result of the serious concerns expressed about the shortage of planners in Australia (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 pi; NSW Department of Planning 2006 pv), a skills shortage that has emerged in spite of the fact that enrolments in university planning courses increased significantly throughout the last decade of the 20th century (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p19) and in the first decade of the 21st century. Putting aside the various reasons for the shortage – long hours, high work levels, the poor professional profile of planners, problems with the government planning system itself, and so on (NSW Department of Planning 2006 p1-4) – this section of the paper focuses on the role that university planning programs are often *expected* to play in providing 'education for practice', in order to address "the serious issues of the current shortage of...planners in [Australia]" (NSW Department of Planning 2006 p1; Planning Institute of

Australia 2004 pii), especially in local government. In the face of this ongoing skills shortage one immediate response has been a call for university planning programs to turn out more students, particularly within those areas within the profession – professional communities – that manifest such shortages. As one newspaper article reported in 2005, "the universities should shoulder some responsibility for the shortage of planners" (Marshall 2005). In a similar vein, one recent inquiry into planning education wondered "[is] the annual number of planning graduates...sufficient to meet projected demand, given wastage and other factors [?]" (NSW Department of Planning 2006 p2). The references to projected demand and wastage provides some insight into the extent to which university planning programs are often though of as just a means for producing professional planners for practice, and that everything else that does not make it to practice is wastage. This presumption of purpose is reinforced by the fact that planning's professional body, the PIA, provides university course accreditation "and maintains the national standards for the educational attainments of entrants into the planning profession" (Planning Institute of Australia 2008).

All of the above views assume a certain purpose, namely that university planning education is for practice, and, it seems, not only for practice in Australia but also internationally. As one recent inquiry into Australian Planning education pondered, "does planning education in Australia, particularly tertiary...need to equip planners

for international planning?" (Gurran et al. 2008 p5), a question that has emerged in response to the fact that Australian planners are working across international borders, and to the increasing number of international students within university planning schools in Australia (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p19).

What are the assumptions and beliefs that underlie this presumption that university planning programs are for practice? This view, favoured by many planning practitioners as well as by many planning educators, is that practice is about doing, and thus that education is about learning to do. Such learning might conveniently be subdivided into learning what to do and learning how to do, and is thus consistent with the view of learning as the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and 'rules' pertinent to a given discipline, and of teaching as the imparting of such within a formalised situation.

While this *might* be accepted not only as a reasonable but also as a positive interpretation of university planning programs, it fails to take account of a range of issues which cast doubt on this assumption.

Prominent among these is the idea of training which, if not necessarily suggestive of either low-level learning or low levels of knowledge, usually implies both a particular aim (or set of aims) and a particular relation to practice. This might in turn suggest that university planning programs are conducted expressly for the purpose of learning to do something. If this is the case, then we might further assume three things. First, it is taken to be self-evident that this something is known in advance, i.e. that the learner can be informed, prior to acquiring the skills, what those skills will allow him or her to do. Second, it is further assumed that the acquisition of such skills is both teachable and learnable within the context of the 'training' environment, i.e. that these are not innate gifts but can be gained by study and practise. Third, it is surely taken as read that these skills, and the knowledge attached to them, are valuable for the ongoing conduct of the discipline involved, i.e. that just such skills and

knowledge are needed in order to practise the discipline you have chosen. What skills are required may, of course, change over time as the discipline itself develops.

While the above might appear self-evident to the planning practitioner, such a belief tacitly assumes that university planning programs do and should equate to skills (and associated knowledge) acquisition; that it is thus the very purpose of education about the discipline to provide such skills and knowledge; and thus that, educationally, university planning programs are obliged to provide what the profession 'needs'.

If this *is* the case, then we might also expect that the profession not only already knows what it needs, but can specify such needs in the familiar form of disciplinary competencies such that the universities can use these as the basis of their curriculum development. Beyond this, and in order to ensure that such competencies are actually imparted, a close relationship between academy and profession is implied. Indeed, this may in turn lead one to assert both that the profession should have an input into curriculum development within the institution, and that the profession should have a right to oversee the academy, typically by some means of formal accreditation such as that undertaken by the Planning Institute of Australia. It need hardly be said that, from a professional perspective, such a view of the academy's role is frequently taken

to be self-evident: in respect of the practice-base of planning, this is what institutional education is for, and, moreover, that, educationally speaking, this is sufficient!

In adopting, whether tacitly or explicitly, the position that university planning programs are *for* practice, the planning inquiries offer a bewildering array of views on how, through the development of core skills training, planning programs can better prepare graduates for practice. This discussion has been rendered more complex through the emergences of diverse communities of practise within the profession, each calling for specific skill sets. As one recent inquiry noted, planning "education and training concerns" are increasing because "planners [are] moving into new disciplinary [areas] (such as social, environmental and transport planning) which need different skills" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p30). The planning inquiry reports detail a perplexing array of diverse and often conflicting positions on what should constitute core skills for generalist planning practice (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p30). The views in the planning education inquiry reports came from a diversity of sources, including graduates, who take the position that planning programs need more "how to knowledge and planning law" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p30), through to the Institute of Australian Planners, which takes the position that "each planning course must offer knowledge, skills and professional ethics as set out in the institute's Guidelines for the Core Curriculum of Planning"(Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p5). Such calls for core skills training for practice accept both that practice is doing, and that such doing requires training to do – "how to knowledge" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p30) and information "to meet workplace needs" (NSW Department of Planning 2006 p13).

Planning of programs for fostering critical engagement with planning's diverse communities

Moving beyond the ongoing debates surrounding the role of university planning programs in providing training for practice, the inquires into planning education raise a further tension

that is worth discussing. This tension emerges out of the tug-of-war between the calls for university planning programs to provide 'training' in its most prosaic sense, as discussed above, and the belief that university education is expected somehow to be above this (Gurran et al. 2008 p16; Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p34; NSW Department of Planning 2006 p2; see also, Friedmann and Kuester 1994; Friedmann 1996), such that 'mere' training – learning how to do planning at a strictly practical or pragmatic level, at the level of competencies – can be dismissed in favour of a different form of engagement with planning (not just the profession of planning), and thus with a quite different attitude to training, and with a set of challenges beyond the professional level.

But how does this impact on education?

First, we might expect – and might presume practice to expect – that planning education within the university is directed towards fostering critical engagement with planning (Gurran et al. 2008 p4). Hence, notions of 'simple' or merely pragmatic training – usually derided by universities – are replaced with the provision of an

increasingly refined knowledge of planning itself, and the development of increased intellectual rigour informing such critical engagement with, and sophisticated analysis of, planning.

Yet, while this move away from training may be taken to be positive, the question remains: what is the purpose of such critical engagement and analysis? Two answers might be suggested here: one, that the intention of such an educational strategy is to impose discipline on both the future 'practitioner' and on planning itself; and two, and perhaps more significantly, that planning education is, and should be, proactive, such that it does not merely provide for a more sophisticated understanding of planning's current key issues, but establishes future key issues as an outgrowth of such critical interaction between the university and profession. As one inquiry report asserts, the role of "universities... [is to] undertake research and contribute to and lead debates on current planning issues" (Planning Institute of Australia 2004 p34). This suggests the necessity of an understanding of and a commitment to research in terms of future development of planning, which in turn reinforces the universities' position as the providers of such research.

Yet, positive as this sounds, two further issues demand attention. The first of these tackles the highly relevant but all-too-frequently overlooked question 'why would we assume that educational aims are the same for university and practice?', while the second addresses the increasingly common assertion that much university-based analysis overstretches its bounds, and thus its usefulness, and that it has become not only unnecessary – going beyond what is needed – but esoteric – divorced from, and thus unconnected to, both practice and discipline as conventionally conceived. Howell Baum (1997), for example, has suggested provocatively that planning education is skewed inappropriately in the direction of training for traditional academic disciplines – specifically social science research – and away from planning practice. This, he suggests is due primarily to the academic orientation and demands of the faculty leading the courses.

These two issues are, of course, closely connected, and are dependent on our understanding of what 'doing' in the university might mean, and of the values, aims and requirements that inform and condition such 'doing'. While it might readily be accepted that 'professional'

education should be delivered at a level significantly above that of the practitioner, challenging the profession and, as a consequence of this, providing its future leaders, this should not be taken to mean that university education is simply an elevated version of professional training, nor that they conveniently 'run in parallel'.

All education is based on values, and it might reasonably be assumed, therefore, that professional values are constituted by the established values of practicing planners (and many non-planners). But, this being the case, it might also be suggested not only that one role of the academy is to challenge, and thus potentially alter, these values, but also that it challenges these values not merely for and on behalf of planning, but because one of the values of the university itself is to inculcate its students with just such critical skills and intentions. In addition, it is important to point out that universities have institutional requirements that go beyond and are significantly

different from any needs or expectations suggested by, or potentially relevant to, external planning practice.

The first of these assertions suggests not only that university planning programs will always be different from professional training; nor simply that (akin to all professional bodies) universities inculcate their acolytes into the value system accepted by – and usually taken for granted by – that body; but, more significantly, that the emphasis placed on 'critical engagement with the field' itself institutionalises an ongoing and essentially never-ending 'crisis of faith' within planning. Thus, we may say, such criticality induces not just an intellectual desire to challenge, but a need to challenge, a need, moreover, that constantly reinvents and reinvigorates itself.

The challenges facing planning programs within academic communities

Previous sections within this paper addressed the ways in which university planning programs are assumed and expected to reflect the needs that emerge from within the planning industry and profession (Gurran et al. 2008 p45). This final section of the paper turns its attention to the pressures facing contemporary planning programs from within academic communities. We use the phase 'academic communities' rather loosely here to refer not only to the university system itself, but also to the broad range of people, which includes academics, undergraduates and postgraduates, and university administrators, amongst others, that have a certain degree of cohesiveness based on their place in a particular university. Collegiality is often cited as one of the mechanisms which provide cohesion within academic communities. Thus, for example, planning academics, in their role as members of the academic community, are expected to be able to converse with scholars across a range of disciplines, and increasingly to contribute to the formulation of widely applicable theory and research.

The planning education inquiries make reference to the challenges which academic communities face due to the impact of a broad range of factors such as the emergence of quality assurance processes (Gurran et al. 2008); the forthcoming shift towards the Bologna model for the delivery of university education (Gurran et al. 2008); increased budgetary restrictions being placed on universities (Planning Institute of Australia 2004); and the increased levels of competition between and within universities (Gurran et al. 2008; Planning Institute of Australia 2004). The inquiries also make reference to a range of challenges that

planning as a discipline, and planning education programs in particular, face within these emerging and evolving communities, such as how planning is becoming increasingly subsumed and integrated within the university (Gurran et al. 2008; Planning Institute of Australia 2004); the impact of internal and administrative structures and budgets of universities on the funding of planning programs and research (Gurran et al. 2008; Planning Institute of Australia 2004); and a range of other challenges.

There is often a vast difference between the way in which the profession imagines planning programs should operate, and the ways in which the academic community develops and houses planning within its bounds. Put another way, a significant amount of pressure is placed on planning program leaders (assuming they seek to respond to this broad spectrum of expectations and demands) to create planning

education programs that respond not only to the needs of the planning profession, but to the emerging academic community, and to a range of other stakeholders, such as various levels of government, on which the academic community depends.

The fact that, over recent decades, planning has emerged as a broad collection of diverse specialist communities under a professional umbrella has contributed to an ongoing perception of the multi-disciplinary nature of planning. As one recent inquiry into planning education notes, "planning is...a highly integrative, multi-disciplinary field" (Gurran et al. 2008 p35). Exactly when, where, and how these specialisations developed is not important for this paper. What is worth noting, however, is that the great amount of specialisation that has emerged over the last few decades has in turn required, over a very short time period, the development of specialised courses and research programs, and the generating of student support. In developing these specialisations emerging university planning programs have leant heavily on two established fields, social sciences and the design fields (in particular architecture), with faculties often recruiting staff trained in such disciplines as economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science. Naturally, planning has drawn on these social science and design disciplines for concepts, methods, and vocabulary to deal with the specialisations. The fact that planning has borrowed so heavily from other disciplinary backgrounds means that its highly integrative nature, combined with increasing demands for cost savings and efficiency within universities, has, over the last decade, led to the gradual disappearance of "single planning schools within [Australian] universities...to the point now where there is no planning department in their own right remaining in any Australian University" (Gurran et al. 2008 p32; also see Planning Institute of Australia 2004). This shift in the location and status of planning schools has also been accompanied by the modification of planning "curriculum offerings to meld within the larger faculty requirements" (Gurran et al. 2008).

What might come as a shock to the profession is that the position of planning programs within the academic community is not at all guaranteed within the current competitive climate. This climate of competition plays itself out not only in terms of educational curricula, student numbers, 'evidence' of educational quality, and so on, but also, and of increasing significance, in terms of research output, to say nothing of research funding input. Increasingly over the last few decades the academic communities within universities have been pressured towards measuring their teaching and research performance through increasingly complex qualities assurance and key performance indicator (KPI) systems that

have no relation to the needs of such professions as planning (Gurran et al, 2008). Within this increasingly competitive inter-university environment, the focus on research-specific KPI targets often leads to decisions to close rather than "maintain poorly rated programs or fields" (Gurran et al. 2008 p36). At the same time there is a growing fear that the Australian planning profession will emulate the academy in England where efforts to attain particular KPI targets and goals lead to actions that may not be seen as rational to those outside the academic community, such as the closure of departments with healthy student recruitment and high research output (Gurran et al. 2008 p35). What this dramatically draws attention to is not only the uncomfortable fact that the academic community is frequently obliged to measure research output against government-determined and university-centred performance

criteria, but also that individual discipline areas, as mere sub-sets within a larger academic framework, may be subject to centralised university strategies either unsympathetic or hostile to educational provisions focussed on professional needs.

Conclusion

Drawn as they are from questions that are both self-evident and yet frequently overlooked, many of our conclusions may well seem both obvious and somewhat platitudinous. Yet they nevertheless remain significant, and, in a rapidly changing academic and professional climate, planning bodies would do well to take note of them.

First, it bears repeating that, while, educationally speaking, planning bodies think and act with the vested interests of their diverse communities of practitioners at heart, it is by no means certain that universities have and/or can continue to have the same interests as *their* priorities. While it may be taken, by planning professionals, as being beyond question that courses addressing the specific professional needs of the various planning disciplines should and must be available within tertiary institutions, and thus that such institutions have an educational, perhaps almost a moral, obligation to provide such courses, it is not clear that universities share this same vision.

Second, therefore, it must be concluded not simply that the planning professions must continue their long-standing and fruitful relationship with the tertiary sector, but, more importantly, that this ongoing relationship be informed by a more sophisticated understanding of the needs of and the pressures being placed upon the universities. Increased competition between universities does not necessarily suggest a buyer's market in which there will be more planning courses to choose from, and greater opportunities to influence the content of such courses in directions favoured by the planning professions. Rather, the opposite might occur. Between the need to retain, if not actively increase, local student numbers, and the rush to attract more full-fee-paying international students ahead of one's competitors, harsh decisions will undoubtedly need to be made about the viability of extant courses and the marketing possibilities inherent in new ones. Whether this means the retention of existing courses but with dramatic changes to appeal to a new generation of students, or an 'out with the old, in with the new' mentality that abandons established but numerically-challenged programs in favour of new and market-driven ones, remains to be seen. But once this student-focused pressure is added to that brought to bear by the increasing emphasis on the research productivity –intellectual output *and* financial input – of academic staff, then the tertiary sector is set for an ongoing and potentially destabilising round of changes. What the

result(s) might be is beyond prediction, but one distinct possibility is that we might see 'education for the professions' – whatever this might be – relegated to 'third best' when set against sexy new courses and dynamic, high-research-output areas of endeavour.

Finally, we should therefore note that it is imperative that the planning professions both familiarise themselves with the pressures and potential changes that are facing the university sector, and interrogate further the needs of professional education from

a planning perspective. That the two may be congruent is devoutly to be wished for; that they are not, an open possibility.

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