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**A Comparative Study of the Views of Planning Students and Professionals about
Planning Education in Western Australia**

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A Comparative Study of the Views of Planning Students and Professionals about Planning Education in Western Australia

ABSTRACT: *This paper reports the finding of a study into the relevance of Planning Education in Western Australia (WA). Phase one involved surveying students studying Planning at both Curtin and Edith Cowan Universities and WA Planning professionals. Participants were asked to rate the importance of the various 'streams' of planning education, their passion for planning, and to identify what were the key attributes of an 'excellent' planner. The survey was followed up with qualitative research involving focus groups of selected students to explore in depth the similarities and differences between the views of students and professionals and the issues raised by the results. The key similarities in views on the planning education streams showed the importance of environmental and sustainability planning, regional planning, strategic planning and infrastructure planning. There was agreement that research methods, planning history and computer aided design were the least important. The key differences concerned the importance of statutory planning and evaluation techniques (professionals saw these as important and students saw them as unimportant). In regard to key attributes of an 'excellent' planner, there was agreement that communication and negotiations skills, being ethical, being adaptable, being innovative and thinking strategically were key attributes. The passion participants expressed for planning from all groups was high, being over 7 out of 10 for all groups. The results of the focus groups are reported and explored.*

Keywords: *planning education, planning excellence, passion.*

1. Introduction

This work follows on from recommendations made by Edwards and Bates (2011) regarding the need for ongoing surveys, conversations and focus groups with local practitioners, surveys of alumni to better understand the types of skills and knowledge on which they rely, and surveys with students (also recommended by other authors such as Seltzer and Ozawa 2002; Orlick 1993). Such processes allow for some reconciliation among academic versus practitioner notions of required planning knowledge and skills and encourage localized emphasis in planning schools to be recognized and developed. These results from students and professional practitioner surveys in Western Australia show some interesting developments in student's views on the importance of subject streams and also where it differs from practitioners. This work carried out by the Universities of Curtin and Edith Cowan is revealing interesting feedback into teaching improvements and also exciting opportunities for further research.

The initial purpose of this survey was for the two planning departments to obtain feedback from students on the two courses, as part of preparatory work for the re-accreditation of the two courses, and to establish a process for annual feedback from students. In particular, the views of students were sought on:

- How each student rates their passion for planning;
- How each student rates the importance of the main planning education streams; and
- What are the attributes of an 'excellent' planner?

After two years of doing this survey, it was decided to extend the survey to practicing planners. This paper reports the results from these two surveys. Section 2 discusses the methodology used in this research and Section 3 sets out the results and discusses their significance. Section 4 discusses the key issues that emerge from the results and Section 5 discusses future directions for the research. The final Section draws some final conclusions.

2. Methodology

The first part of this research was the survey of both students and practicing planners. Participants were asked to firstly rate their passion for planning on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being high passion. The planning education streams used in the survey were drawn from the units offered by the two universities, and the streams identified in the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) discussion paper on Planning Education (Gurran, Norman et al. 2008) and the National Inquiry into Planning Education and Employment (Planning Institute Australia 2004). Streams were also drawn from the PIA Young Planners survey. Participants were asked to rate each planning stream on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest in importance.

The attributes of an excellent planner were initially identified using an open question when the survey was first trialed. The attributes that received multiple mentions during the trial were used as the basis for drawing up the list in the final survey. All students in both planning departments, both undergraduate and post graduates were given a copy of the survey during the first week of classes to complete and completed surveys were collected at the end of that class. Recruitment of professionals was voluntary. A letter was written to each Local Government Planning Department, each planning consultancy, and to each State Government agency who employ planners, especially the Department of Planning. Participants were given the option of completing a hard copy of the survey or a Survey Monkey version. Most (over

80%) chose the Survey Monkey option. The second stage of the study involved working with a small group of students to better interrogate the comparative data. A similar survey is planned for a small group of planning professionals, but this was not completed in time for this paper.

3. Results and discussion

The urban and regional planning departments/programmes at Curtin University and ECU are reporting on a research project aimed at seeking direct feedback from planning students and the wider planning profession in Perth/WA on how planning education is viewed and the significance placed on the key streams in planning education. Three key areas of information were sought:

How each student/practitioner rated their passion for planning;

How each student/practitioner rated the importance of the main planning education streams; and

What were the attributes of an 'excellent' planner?

Stage 1 involved a survey of 249 planning students and 46 professionals (a further 55 professionals responded following this initial analysis), which provided quantitative data on the above.

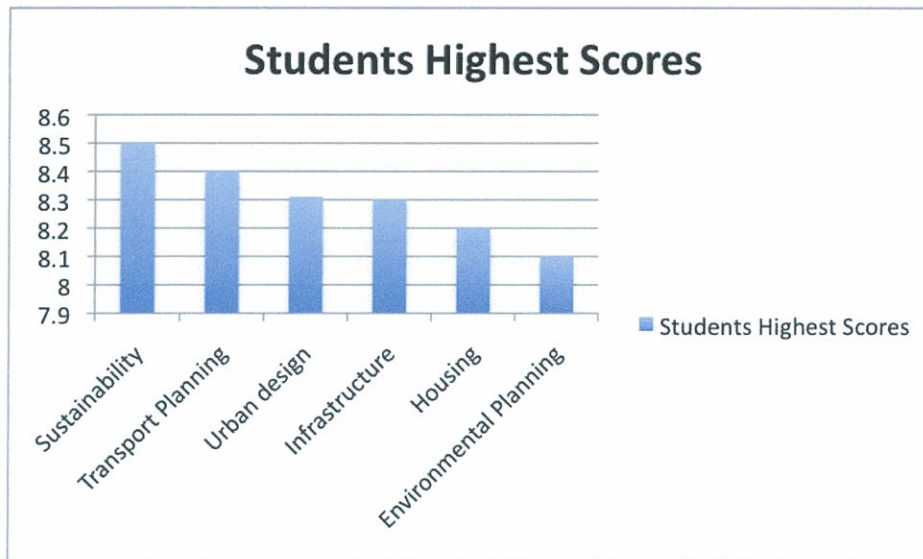
Stage 2 involved a focus group of fifteen students to further interrogate the results and investigate some of the issues that have arisen from the surveys. Both of these stages are reported in this paper. Participants in the focus group were selected from those studying a unit called Regional Planning, both third year undergraduate students and some post graduate students. These students volunteered to be part of the focus group, and the session was run in a separate room during a normal class studio for the unit.

Stage 3 involves further opportunities to explore the questions raised at the end of the paper, continue giving the surveys to students and professionals to develop longitudinal data intended to gauge any changes in attitudes over time and run focus groups with professionals and academics to further explore the issues.

3.1 Planning Streams

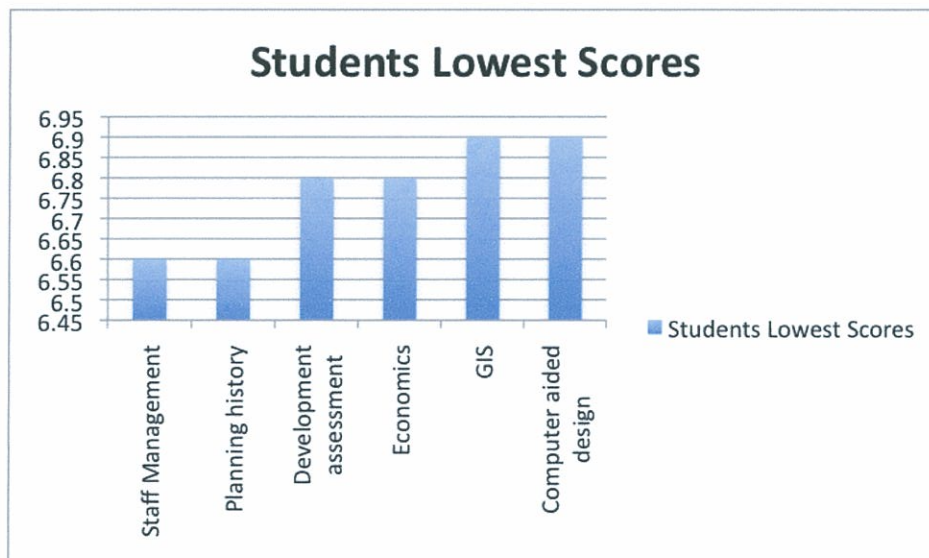
Student survey participants were initially asked to rate (according to a 1-10 ranking, 10 being the highest) the importance of the various ‘streams’ of planning education. The students’ top six were sustainability, transport planning, urban design, infrastructure, housing and environmental planning as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Student’s highest ranked planning streams



According to the students surveyed the lowest ranking streams of relevance to planning education were staff management and planning history (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2. Student’s lowest ranked planning streams



Professional survey participants were asked to rate the importance of the various ‘streams’ of planning education. The Planning professionals top six were Strategic planning, Negotiation/conflict resolution, Statutory planning, Local Planning and Sustainability as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Professionals highest ranking planning streams



Results also show that the Planning professionals considered the lowest ranking streams of relevance to planning education as Computer-aided design, Thesis and Planning History (Refer to Table 4).

Table 4. Professionals lowest ranked planning streams



The key areas of similarity between the professionals and the students on the planning education streams are the importance of; - environmental planning; sustainability; regional planning; strategic planning; and infrastructure planning as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Similarities between professionals and students in ranking planning streams

Rank	Professionals	Score	Students	Score
1	Strategic Planning	8.4	Sustainability	8.5
2	Negotiation/ Conflict Resolution	8.2	Transport Planning	8.4
3	Statutory Planning	8.2	Urban Design	8.31
4	Planning law	8.1	Infrastructure	8.3
5	Local Planning	8.0	Housing	8.2
6	Sustainability	8.0	Environmental Planning	8.1
7	Development Assessment/ Evaluation Techniques	7.9	Strategic Planning	7.9
8	Environmental Planning	7.7	Climate Change	7.9
9	Infrastructure	7.7	Coastal Planning	7.8
10	Regional Planning	7.7	Regional Planning	7.8

The key differences were the importance of statutory planning and evaluation techniques (professionals saw these as important and students saw them as unimportant). The results are shown in Figure 6, and this raises an interesting point regarding statutory planning discussed latter in the paper.

Figure 6. Similarities and differences between professionals and students in ranking planning streams



3.2 *Attributes of an Excellent planner*

There was agreement that generic professional capabilities such as communication and negotiations skills, being ethical and honest, being adaptable, being innovative and thinking strategically were key attributes of an ‘excellent’ planner. Planning knowledge and skills were also ranked very highly. These and the other top ten rankings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of characteristics of an excellent planner

Rank	Professionals	Students
1	Communication skill	Communication skill
2	Planning knowledge, skills and experience	Ethical and honest
3	Negotiation skills - able to manage conflict	Negotiation skills - able to manage conflict
4	Ethical and honest	Planning knowledge, skills and experience
5	Objective with good analytical skills	Strategic 'big picture' thinker
6	Interpersonal 'people' skills	Innovative and lateral thinker
7	Strategic 'big picture' thinker	Open minded
8	Innovative and lateral thinker	Adaptive thinker - thinks on feet
9	Adaptive thinker - thinks on feet	Works from sustainability principles
10	Motivated, driven, passionate	Awareness of economic issues

3.3 *Passion for Planning*

The passion expressed for planning was high, being over 7 out of 10 for all groups. The professionals have been divided into sub-categories as shown in Table 6, however the statistical representation of planners from the DOP was not a reliable figure. The broad group of professionals gives a better indication, especially noting that local government planners rated their passion for planning equal to consultant planners.

Table 6. Various professionals and students rank their passion for planning.
 (The vertical axis indicates the “passion score” with 0 being no passion and 10 being extremely passionate)(note: no NGO’s were surveyed)



4. Key issues raised from the results

There is research suggesting that students consider the “usefulness of the course” as the most important predictor of teacher effectiveness (Young and Shaw 1999 cited in Belanger and Longden 2009). The researchers found that the students consider the most desired attributes needed to effectively communicate knowledge and skills was the subject’s usefulness complimented by effective communication, a comfortable learning atmosphere, a concern for student learning, student motivation, and course organization. In a later study Belanger and Longden (2009) add the teachers ability to “identify important ideas, to give good examples, and to connect the material to real life” (p 336). Usefulness of the taught materials (one would logically assume) is particularly relevant to a professional degree such as planning. Working with other stakeholders on a “work-responsive curriculum” (Garroway 2010) is recognised by PIA at a part of this and is achieved to some degree in most planning programs in Australian Universities.

The results presented in this paper suggest that it is not so much usefulness of material at it is interest of the material that appeals to students in the classroom. Statutory planning for example is agreed as important by the professionals and yet poorly ranked by the students. Discussions in the focus group revealed that this is essentially due to the boring nature of statutory planning, that it is considered unimportant and would be “better taught in the

workplace”. Another participant presented the view that because it is perceived as boring (or is boring) they do not want to work in statutory planning and therefore do not consider it important to learn about. This raises the question about what type of planning job students hope to do in their first post? It also questions where they get the idea that statutory planning is boring and also questions the way it is taught? And finally it questions what is conveyed by the title, and whether a subject title regarding development and ethics may be more attractive? It provokes a response centred on the development of creative students, creative solutions to teaching and creative teachers (Gibson 2010). The emerging role of the constructivist approach to teaching (Schweitzer and Stephenson 2011), and the evolution of more student centred teaching approaches that encourage the student to be developed as an active learner, and the teacher as the facilitator or even “coach” (Baird and Gordon 2010) may all provide stimulating alternatives to traditional learning and teaching methods. Furthermore the emergence of more creative teaching environments allowing flexibility and adaptability in the classroom may embrace workshops using tools such as role playing simulations in urban planning (Meligrana and Andrew 2003). These ideas may provide some of the solutions to teaching what are still regarded by professionals as essential subjects of key importance. Students themselves may have the ideal answer for planning academics and professionals alike in developing a mutually beneficial and manageable work-integrated approach.

Furthermore students ranked sustainability, transport planning, tourism planning and urban design as important and in the focus group this was explained by them being considered topics of high importance, high media interest, high personal commitment, “glamorous” and even “sexy” by participants. Arguably they are also more creative and more interesting subjects in the classroom. One student in the focus group commented on tourism planning as the ideal subject to study as it offers a form of “escapism” in the classroom. This provokes the retort as to how many students get a job in tourism planning? It appeared that the student’s preferences suggest a contradiction between the “entertain me” in the classroom and the desire for a more idealistic approach around the shift away from capitalism towards sustainable development.

Participants from the focus groups also reflected back a one-word comment to summarize their overall response to the study’s findings with 14 out of 15 showing a positive response and the word “interesting” being used by several participants. Further positive

feedback was received from the focus groups that "uni lecturers must be doing a great job" given the nature of the two different worlds of students and the professional planning practice world and the results showing values are really quite similar. Focus group participants were on the whole very encouraged and relieved to discover the similarities in level of passion of both groups reinforcing that they had made a good career choice. This outcome could be argued to differ from previous indications that professional planners are "struggling" with their passion for planning given their job satisfaction is low and their career change rate is high. In a report to the NSW Standing Committee, the NSW Division of PIA (2005) stated that experienced planners are leaving the profession because of "burn-out" or morale issues (p3). As a result of this, recommendations have been made suggesting that "PIA and state/territory governments work to improve the working conditions for planners, particularly development assessment planners, with a range of strategies including support for training, flexible work practices, resourcing, and clear relationships with elected representatives"(PIA 2005 p6).

5. Key areas raised for further consideration and research

It was raised in the focus groups that there is scope for further clarification of the questions and wording in the survey. The focus group participants felt that those students who participated in the survey may have felt some ambiguity in answering the "how important" questions as they may have been confused over whether this meant the importance of the subject on the whole to their planning education (as it was meant to) or their like for a subject. Furthermore a question was raised as to whether survey participants may have answered the passion questions with what they think "someone" would want to hear. Given this work is of a longitudinal nature this will be clarified in future surveys.

The results of the passion question suggests that planners in fact maintain the passion well into their planning careers. This offers a different perspective to other national data and may be related to the work of a planner in a resource rich economically thriving state such as WA or to a shift of attitudes of planners towards not staying in a single area of planning (such as statutory planning) for too long thus avoiding burnout. Further study into this positive professional passion is planned for the next stage of this research.

Sustainability is a topic of significant interest to students and one of slight departure from their professional compatriots. Students ranked it higher and also in the focus groups wanted to emphasize it as a key difference, explaining it as a message of the media, their lecturers and that they are a more socially and environmentally aware generation (challenging the “me” generation image). Are the current practicing planning professionals perhaps “brainwashed by corporatism” as raised by one focus group participant? This is an exciting area of future exploration and may be explained in any of the following ways: 1. Students are representative of a new generation, with changed views from the previous generations of baby boomers and gen-x to shift away from endless resource use through capitalism and corporate domination towards a genuine sustainability approach. 2. Students are demonstrating recognition that the tenets of spatial planning such as strategic planning are not enough and the role of attitudinal shifts in social society for the common good are necessary. Possibly an approach moving closer to the heralded quadruple bottom line? 3. Finally it may merely represent the change of view from idealist to pragmatic, as is often reported when one moves from student to professional and sees a shift from sustainability to strategic and statutory design.

The type of role and approach of teachers in the tertiary sector remains contested. Statutory planning is a professionally agreed to be a priority in planning streams and yet students are not prioritising it as important. This raises many issues already elaborated on in this paper but especially the role of the creative approach to teaching and work integrated learning. It is argued that the impact of teachers can influence both the emphasis of the planning schools and student’s values. Edwards and Bates (2011) recognises that a “strong academic persona may influence a school’s identity even beyond his or her tenure” (p10). In the classroom it is the same. There is a possibility that students’ emphasis on importance of subjects is inherited from the academic staff they are most inspired by or most exposed to. It is suggested that dynamic, passionate approaches to sustainability and transport planning in the tertiary classroom may be partially responsible for student’s emphasis in these areas. Furthermore the idealistic tag given to students may in fact be characteristic of the planning school, whether articulated or not. If articulated then Edwards and Bates (2011) recommendation to be “engaging faculty, students, alumni, and practitioners in the conversation about “how we do planning here” may have already lead to a “clearer sense of identity for the program within the university and among planning educational institutions” (p.10). An initial survey of several key planning academics suggests that this is the case

(certainly in the classroom) however further surveys of academics need to be done to follow up the breadth and reach of this concept.

A further question has been raised through the analysis of these results as to whether the naming of subjects in fact impacts the rating of “importance” to all respondents and that as academic institution and programme designers need to pay more attention to the name given to subjects. For example, statutory planning was not given a very strong importance by students yet is a key component of planning to understand (as shown by the professional results). It could be argued that planning history is the same as is research. Perhaps *Statutory planning* would be more popular if it was called *Development and ethics* and *Research* had the name *Data collection and analysis skills for planners*?

6. Conclusion

The results of this survey have opened up several interesting areas to for further exploration. It is encouraging to all concerned that students and professional practitioners are experiencing similar levels of passion for the planning profession. Students have demonstrated a different emphasis to the professional practitioners with greater importance given to sustainability and transport planning and a lesser emphasis given to statutory planning and evaluation. This may be due to the influence of the planning school or teacher, the generational differences or the role of idealism in the classroom. The emphasis students place on enjoying a class rather than valuing a class for its usefulness has also been discussed. As this research is planned to continue the answer to many of the questions raised in this paper hope to be provided.

The next stage of this research will involve a focus group of professionals and some of the issues discussed above can be further explored. Both the WA universities involved in this study will to continue to survey of students on an annual basis as away of tracking student enthusiasm for their courses (passion) and the relevance of individual units to contemporary student and professional needs as a way of helping to inform course design through accreditation.

It is the view of the authors that this study has potential to be expanded nationally to provide a useful research tool, an ongoing gauge of course relevance and act as a bridge between planning education and the profession.

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