Sharing good practice in planning education

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1. Introduction

1.1 Aims, coverage and structure

The aim of this report is two-fold. First, it aims to highlight aspects of good practice in planning education in the UK (with 'planning' variously known for instance as spatial planning, urban and regional planning, city and regional planning, and town and country planning), in order to disseminate relevant ideas and innovations and thereby widen their use by 'planning schools' (the Royal Town Planning Institute [RTPI]-accredited higher education discipline units teaching planning). Second, it aims to provide suggestions for how to improve the sharing of good practice within planning schools. Good practice is seen here simply as that which provides creditable outcomes in terms of learning and teaching effectiveness, as indicated by higher education providers and supported by wider evidence. The report is based on documentary evidence as well as a survey of the opinion of UK planning schools conducted in Spring 2014. It is intended to be of interest to academics within planning as well as the broader built environment field, but also to practitioners/employers who have an interest in initial (or pre-qualification) education and/or lifelong learning, for instance via their involvement in teaching/learning, mentoring or similar activities. It was sponsored by the Higher Education Academy, the RTPI and the Conference of Heads of Planning Schools.

The report covers all aspects of such good practice in ensuring appropriate knowledge and skills/ competencies. It focuses on practice by planning schools within the UK. In addition to initial planning education, the report makes reference to implications for lifelong learning. It is relevant here to note that 'planning' programmes may be accredited by professional bodies other than the RTPI, and such bodies may have their own distinctive views on good practice in learning and teaching. However, for the purpose of this report, the main components of good practice are 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 membership as well as lifelong learning in this field, so all relevant professions can benefit from the embedding of such activities within higher education programmes. In addition, where appropriate, the report makes reference to the broader context of higher education generally.

The report is structured as follows: first, broad issues of context are set out. Second, knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes are considered in conceptual terms. Third, the way in which good practice is framed, encouraged and assessed is described. Fourth, the parameters of good practice are considered and suggested components (with illustrative examples) set out in detail – namely inter-disciplinarity/inter-professionalism; experiential learning/problem-based learning/place-based education; study visits, reflective learning and writing; employability and links to practice; use of technology, including within feedback; and research-informed teaching and use of specialisms. Finally, conclusions are suggested, including on how to improve the sharing and application of best practice.

1.2 Context

This report is in the context of a range of challenges affecting planning education which are relevant to consider here since they impact on 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.

1.3 Knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes

It is appropriate here to refer briefly to terminology in relation to knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes as the outcomes of initial planning education. Knowledge is perhaps the easiest to distinguish, as reflected by information relayed to – or gleaned by – students on planning courses. As to skills, competencies and attributes, Kitchen (2006) argues that these broadly overlap in most practical usage. Using 'skills' as his preferred term, he distinguishes between technical skills; planning system and process skills; place skills; customer skills; personal skills; organisational, management and political context skills; and synoptic and integrative skills. He also acknowledges the relevance of generic skills for sustainable development as highlighted by the Egan Committee (2004), as well as the skill sets identified by bodies such as the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and the RTPI (considered below).

McLoughlin (2012) considers specific attributes, skills and knowledge relevant to employability, though this is based on a practitioner survey and it might be argued that the views of practitioners in this context can be rather transient. Nevertheless, he shows how generic or transferable skills such as communication, negotiation and problem-solving are valued more highly by employers than subject-specific skills relating for instance to Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Earlier assessments of 'skills gaps' based on employers' views (Durning and Glasson 2006; Higgins et al 2007) also highlight the need for generic skills such as negotiation, but suggest the additional need for specialist skills in relation to aspects such as development finance and urban design. In addition, planning employers frequently highlight the need for proficiency in aspects such as viability, since this is increasingly a material consideration for decisions on planning permission (Early 2014). However, it is important to highlight here that initial planning education provides a critical and analytical component that is essentially and qualitatively different from what may be seen as 'training', with the latter more appropriately forming part of continuing professional development (CPD) and lifelong learning. This issue is returned to in the conclusion to this report.

In this context, the RTPI has called for 'critical thinking about space and place as the basis for action or intervention' (RTPI 2012a, p.2), and the RTPI's *Policy Statement on Initial Planning Education* (RTPI 2012b) sets out the RTPI's approach to setting the parameters for educational providers in planning, providing a framework for RTPI accreditation of planning programmes. The statement describes detailed requirements in relation to form, length and mode of study, as well as the criteria by which planning schools are judged to be effective. Programmes are defined as 'spatial' (setting a broad context after which an additional 'specialist' element is required to provide the basis for future RTPI membership); 'specialist' (involving a distinct emphasis in one area of planning); or 'combined' (with both 'spatial' and 'specialist' elements).

The statement does not specify a prescribed curriculum or inputs; rather, it sets out indicative learning outcomes (revised in 2012) which 'are intended to highlight and, wherever possible, integrate essential aspects of planning knowledge, skills and value awareness' (p.10), so planning schools can themselves decide how such outcomes are best achieved. In relation to relevant skills, it adds that some will be particular to planning while some will be more generic and transferable, and skills and knowledge are often integrated within programmes. Specifically, the statement sets out 13 learning outcomes for 'spatial' programmes which include, for instance, that graduates should 'Recognise the role of communication skills in the planning process and the importance of working in an inter-disciplinary context, and be able to demonstrate negotiation, mediation, advocacy and leadership skills' (outcome 12); and 'Distinguish the characteristics of a professional, including the importance of upholding the highest standards of ethical behaviour and a commitment to lifelong learning and critical reflection so as to maintain and develop professional competence' (outcome 13) (RTPI 2012b, p.11). 'Specialist' programmes are also expected to show for instance how they 'Engage in theoretical, practical and ethical debate at the forefront of the area of the specialism'; and 'Assess the contribution of the specialism to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change' (RTPI 2012b, p.13). The full learning outcomes can be seen in the statement (available at: http://rtpi.org.uk/media/8479/microsoft_word_-_policy_statement_on_initial_planning_education_2012.pdf).

1.4 Framing, encouraging and assessing good practice in planning education

Several mechanisms external to planning schools 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 (QAA)'s *UK Quality Code for Higher Education* (QAA 2014) 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 in relation to 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 (QAA 2012). Quality assurance by contrast refers here to the process for checking that academic standards and quality meet expectations. While the 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 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 are 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. In addition, higher education providers use the advice and expertise of external examiners who act as independent assessors of academic standards and quality. The role includes not only scrutiny in relation to the quality of assessment for instance, 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 relating to consideration of standards as well as support and encouragement of quality enhancement via 'innovative, creative and flexible education provision' (RTPI 2011, p.3).

2. Components of good practice

In higher education generally, Gunn and Fisk (2013), for instance, 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 – this report also makes reference to aspects of good practice which link to lifelong learning.

Suggested components of good practice are set out in Table One below. These are derived in part from what planning schools themselves see as potential good practice in their provision of planning education, via the annual reports of their partnership boards. The components are also informed by the RTPI learning outcomes described above, for instance in relation to inter-disciplinary working (outcome 12); reflective learning, and experiential and problem-based learning (outcome 13); and research-informed teaching and use of specialism (specialist outcomes). It is acknowledged, however, that many good practice examples cover more than one component, and good practice may fall outside the boundaries of these components. So they are intended to act essentially as starting points to highlight what may be seen as the most important contemporary aspects of good practice in planning education.

The table indicates how some schools perceive good practice in terms of the strength of their contribution to such practice under the suggested component headings. The data were 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 under the suggested headings in the table, by indicating their primary (1), secondary (2) and tertiary (3) priorities. The component scores (aggregating priorities across schools, with priority 1 assigned score 3, priority 2 assigned score 2, and priority 3 assigned score 1) therefore show what providers see as their strengths in good practice provision.

Table One: most important areas of good practice*

Components	Respondents (planning schools [anonymised]) *indication of perceived good practice by planning schools, with 1 as a primary priority, 2 as secondary and 3 as tertiary priorities for the planning school												Score
Assessment feedback, including online											3		1
Online/virtual teaching, including gaming			1										3
Use of social media		3	3		3								3
Use of study visits					2	3			3	3	1		8
Inter-disciplinary/inter-professional project work		2			1	2			2			1	12
Enhancing employability/ providing linkage with practice	1	1		2	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	29
Reflective learning/writing/ linkage to APC & lifelong learning	3											3	2
Use of specialisms in teaching			2	3				3	2				6
Linkage of teaching to research	2			1			3						6
Other use of IT								2					2

Source: authors' survey

The table illustrates the breadth of schools' perceptions of their good practice, with a clear emphasis on enhancing employability (seven first priorities), which is perhaps to be expected in the light of difficulties

experienced by graduates as a consequence of the downturn in the construction sector after 2008. The survey also asked for suggested illustrative good practice examples.

The main suggested components of good practice are considered below in more detail, with illustrative case studies as supplied by planning schools. For further information on the cases presented, please contact the authors (email: j.p.mccarthy@hw.ac.uk or samer.bagaeen@uclmail.net).

2.1 Inter-disciplinarity and inter-professionalism

In relation to planning education, Davoudi and Pendlebury (2010, p.639) suggest that 'multi-disciplinary' approaches (with disciplines coming together but working independently by 'picking and mixing') are more evident in the UK than 'inter-disciplinary' approaches (with greater integration of disciplines). Nevertheless, there would seem to be a general consensus that experience of integrated learning between related disciplines and professions (allowing each to appreciate the working opportunities and constraints faced by others) can be extremely valuable (Temple 2004; Kidd 2007; Ellis et al 2008; Gunn and Fisk 2013; Pijawka et al 2013). This is perhaps particularly so for planning students, in part because inter-professional 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 'inter-disciplinary' element shown in Table One (with second-highest overall score). 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 inter-disciplinary education in this context is also emphasised in the *Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment* (Farrell 2014), which calls for all built environment courses to prepare for 'cross-disciplinary understanding' (p.11) with the use of a common foundation year in higher education for all built environment students.

In practical terms, Ellis et al (2008) show how difficulties in inter-professional project work arising from mutual suspicion between professional groups, and lack of experience in team working, can be ameliorated by incorporating ice-breaking elements and team building at the outset. They also show that, while many students 'default' to a reliance on familiar skills (rather than gaining new ones), this can involve useful reflection on the appropriateness of such skills, and on the limitations of problem-framing from a single profession/discipline viewpoint.

An ambitious example of inter-professional working was provided at undergraduate level by Queen's University Belfast, as part of its undergraduate BSc Environmental Planning, which included a module called 'Inter-professional Working in Healthy Urban Planning'. This brought together second-year planning students and medical students, in order to promote new insights into the health impacts of urban development. The module was prepared and delivered by a partnership involving a wide range of local stakeholders, and the project was integrated into the local programme of the WHO Phase IV goals for Healthy Cities. The module was an option offered initially to a maximum of ten students from each programme. Learning outcomes focused on the professional skills involved in conducting a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) and generic skills relating to independent research; data analysis; verbal and written communication; and teamwork. Students were also required to demonstrate awareness of the links between health, planning and the built environment, as well as different professional roles in the process. They were allocated into mixed groups which were to assess the health impacts of major local development schemes, including the widening of a major urban motorway. Staff provided core resources including websites on health impact assessment, background data on the road scheme, a list of key contacts and a concise reading list. After a brainstorming session to identify key issues, each group chose a theme, and thereafter worked independently with staff available twice a week to discuss problems. Groups then presented interim findings to staff, after which groups produced a final report, an oral presentation and individual reflective journals.

This module clearly stimulated students to think from very different disciplinary/professional viewpoints. Arising from this experience, Ellis et al argue for the potential for collaborative learning with disciplines such as law, psychology and politics for instance, as well as medicine. However, planning programmes more usually

involve inter-professional working with other built environment professions such as architecture and engineering, given the clear linkage to many real-life work contexts. For instance, Heriot-Watt University's intensive 'collaborative week' in the final undergraduate year of the BSc Urban Planning and Property Development programme involves students working in mixed-discipline groups (including planning, real estate, architectural engineering, civil engineering, construction project management, quantity surveying, and interior design) to produce a development scheme for a real-life client. This has also involved interaction with relevant local communities, and is highly valued by students.

At postgraduate level, Queen's University Belfast's MSc Environmental Planning programme involves a project within the 'Design in the Built Environment' module which is run in collaboration with Stage 3 BSc 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 Planning programme includes an exercise involving students working 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 Town and Regional Planning/Dual MArch in Architecture and Town and Regional Planning. This project, 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.

In addition, several of the University of Westminster's postgraduate MA programmes (Urban and Regional Planning, MA International Planning and Sustainable Development, and Urban Design) include a module in which urban design and planning students work together to produce a baseline study of a chosen project area and develop strategic action plans which identify opportunities for improving environmental, social and economic sustainability. Students then diverge into their own disciplines, with planning students developing a neighbourhood plan setting out key policies for future development, and urban design students developing a spatial framework with proposals for urban structure and movement. All students subsequently come together to present and discuss their proposals.

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

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

Inter-disciplinary approaches such as those considered above overlap substantially with experiential learning approaches, as illustrated more generally by Higgins et al (2009). Temple (2004) 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, which can encourage motivation and collaboration. The value of such practice is endorsed by Kotval (2003) in the US, where community service is extensively applied in higher education in order 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 (Higgins et al 2009). 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 (2012, p.10) suggest, 'Using unsolved problems with real connections to actual practice must be the core of learning.' In addition, Pijawka et al (2013) 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 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 clients to investigate an aspect of work 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 them usually via a presentation and report – though in some cases outputs may be different, such as a practitioners' workshop for Planning Aid. Clients are invited to comment on the students' work, and how they intend to use it subsequently.

In addition, the University of Westminster's postgraduate MA 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, considered below) also, of course, provides the potential for network building which might eventually lead to employment.

Similarly, the University of Manchester's Client-based Project, in the fourth year of the undergraduate Master of Town and County Planning/MSc Planning programmes, applies students' accumulated knowledge to a 'live' situation for an external client. The project also applies a degree of inter-disciplinarity since it involves students focused on real estate and regeneration as well as planning. Students carry out empirical work leading to a group report and presentation which outline their findings and recommendations. Possible topics available to students for 2013 included recycling behaviours in Longsight, an Oxford Street retail strategy, and a Garston Village Masterplan.

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 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 joined local residents in a community consultation event.

Moreover, the planning programmes at University College London (UCL) in 2010 involved a public engagement initiative called 'UCL Just Space' 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 of the initiative was to connect community groups (which needed planning expertise) with planning students and staff (who were willing to do voluntary work on planning and urban regeneration issues including the preparation of responses to inquiries from the public related to the London Plan and neighbourhood plans). In 2012-13 students contributed extensively to support for community organisations in this way (see http://ucljustspace.wordpress.com/), and a protocol for co-operation was prepared to guide activities in an ethical and safe manner (see http://justspace2010.wordpress.com/welcome-to-just-space/about-2/research-protocol/). Consequently, three students gave evidence in 2012 at the Examination in Public of the changes to the London Plan at City Hall. This activity also led to a new teaching module called 'Community Participation in City Strategies' taught by UCL geography and planning staff.

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

An additional innovation is provided by the University of Dundee's second-year Design and Development module (part of the undergraduate MA Town and Regional Planning programme), which involves primary school pupils working with students. The module includes preparation of a site development brief, and in 2013 students were asked to explore options for employment-led regeneration at Seabraes, on the Dundee waterfront, to support Dundee City Council's ongoing efforts to ensure the city is an attractive and sustainable 'live and work' destination. Students collaborated over a two-month period with Primary 7 pupils from St Mary's Primary School, Lochee, who were working on a school project on past, present and future employment in the city. Students discussed ideas for the site with pupils, who made interesting suggestions such as setting-up a centre linked to historical craft bodies in the city. These ideas were then used by students in creating their strategies for the site, and students shared their final reports with pupils at a presentation at the university. The students gained experience in working with a distinct stakeholder group. In addition, the pupils gained insights into planning and decision making, resulting in a final project which won a local education award, and which was also a component of a successful submission to the 2013 Scottish Quality in Planning Awards by the Dundee Waterfront Project. This not only shows evident elements of innovation but also clear added value for both students and pupils.

2.3 Study visits

Study visits (often international) are very commonly applied and valued by planning schools, as indicated by Table One (with this element scoring third overall). There is a link here between experiential learning and the use of study visits, since Datta (2014) suggests that the value of such visits often derives from a learning-by-doing approach. She also shows how international study visits can assist with research-led teaching. Such visits can also assist in achieving aims for broader internationalisation within planning education as well as for academic institutions more broadly (Yigitcanlar 2013). These visits can enhance cross-cultural sensitivity and understanding of diversity, and can introduce planning issues and problems which cannot be faced in the same way in the home country. In addition, they can make students more responsive to global market forces, in the context of planning consultancy practices which increasingly work across international boundaries and cultures. Equally, such visits can encourage critical appraisal of planning mechanisms and assumptions, since they can provide a new perspective on planning issues in the home country. Again illustrating a linkage to experiential learning, Yigitcanlar suggests that the benefits of study visits are optimised where they are directly linked to a project started in the classroom and continued after the trip has finished.

Applying Datta's endorsement of study visits to contexts outside the EU/UK, the University of Newcastle's postgraduate MSc Planning/MSc International Spatial Planning programme involves an annual ten-day study visit to Delhi, Agra and Chandigarh, in order to observe the practical issues that arise when rapid economic and physical development are unchecked by rigorous planning. A focusing topic is selected each year, with 'globalisation and social justice' – explored via housing demand and supply – selected in 2014. Students will work alongside those from Delhi's School of Planning and Architecture, and will visit a range of housing sites, with assessed outcomes including posters and oral presentations. This ambitious programme clearly presents students with distinctive but relevant comparative issues which are increasingly faced in many other contexts in the global south.

More commonly, however, study visits are focused on European cities for reasons such as cost as well as easier comparability of context. For instance, the University of Westminster's postgraduate MA Urban and Regional Planning programme involves a study visit which develops students' skills in the analysis of relationships between land use, urban form and planning policy. Students visit a fast-growing European city with an historic core, to allow examination of urban extensions and how older areas have adapted to modern use. Walking tours consider a range of planning issues and impacts, and there is an emphasis on analysis of the quality of public spaces, with students producing illustrative sketches supplemented by text. This example shows how study visits can incorporate elements allowing clear points of comparison with UK contexts.

2.4 Reflective learning and writing

While this element in isolation scored lowly overall in Table One, purposeful reflection on learning, including reflective writing, is integral to wider processes of experiential learning (Higgins et al 2009), and may also figure significantly as part of inter-disciplinary 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 (McCarthy 2011). In addition, Kitchen (2006) endorses the importance of reflective practice in forming and enhancing relevant skills. However, the effectiveness of approaches to reflective writing is mixed, with students often seeming to polarise in their appreciation of methods such as learning journals (Roberts and Yoell 2009; McCarthy 2011).

Reflection may be applied in many ways. For instance, it may be directed to learning exercises such as role-play, and the University of Plymouth's postgraduate MSc Planning programme involves such an exercise in which students act as mediators, and are videoed (as in another example from the university considered above) to allow them the opportunity to reflect on their role and its outcome.

In addition, the University of Brighton's postgraduate MSc Town Planning programme involves a 'Learning Log' module which develops critically reflective practice and is linked to an external mentoring programme (referred to below). The module allows students to take a reflective overview of their studies, and develop linkages to related personal and professional experience, as well as linkages between other learning modules and the wider external professional environment. It therefore assists students to get the maximum benefit from their studies and ensure that these contribute to personal and professional development.

Furthermore, the University of the West of England's (UWE) Agency Project, within the final year of the BA Architecture and Planning/postgraduate Master of Planning programmes, involves students (after a placement employment period) submitting a reflective learning account of their experience on the placement.

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, in the final year of relevant undergraduate programmes, involves a specific assignment related to the RTPI APC, and the University of Ulster's undergraduate MSci Planning and Property Development programme includes a module which involves a reflective exercise related to both the RTPI and RICS APC requirements.

2.5 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 in Table One. As indicated above, McLoughlin (2012) 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. Temple (2004) also highlights the value of work-based learning and assessment in enhancing employability. It therefore seems desirable for planning education to have closer links with practice, and this would also seem to apply in other EU member states (Fubini 2004). This may be achieved for instance by the involvement of practitioners in teaching via conventional 'guest lecturer' presentations, and/or via 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 (McLoughlin 2012). Consequently, many planning schools assist students seeking vacation work experience, either paid or via

internships, or via 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 instance, the University of Manchester's Professional Placement module (in the final year of the undergraduate Master of Town and Country Planning programme) provides structured professional work experience. It is supervised academically by the planning school but managed by a planning practice, local authority or non-governmental organisation. Students are required to work for a minimum of 15 days, with some flexibility as to when this is done (for instance over the teaching semester or during the Christmas or Easter vacation). After the placement they produce a placement review which explains the tasks carried out and provides a critical and reflective account (linking to reflective learning) which integrates theory and practice. Students also present aspects of their placement experience as part of a seminar with other students.

In addition, the UWE applies a six-week Agency Project (referred to above) within its final year of the BA 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.

Such placements as outlined above clearly enhance students' engagement with the linkage of theory and practice, as well as their overall employability.

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 Urban Planning and Property Development programme, and at the University of Brighton in its postgraduate MSc Town Planning programme. These examples provide students with added opportunities for advice and guidance which can lead to significant benefits during and after qualification.

The involvement of university careers services can also assist planning schools to enhance employability. While many planning schools make use of such services in relation to generic elements such as CV writing and interview skills, some go further to satisfy discipline-specific needs. The University of Reading, for instance, has (since September 2011) provided a dedicated planning school-based career development advisor, enabling students to receive advice and guidance at key points in their programme to suit their own needs. This is highly appreciated by students and the advisor has received a University 'Gold' award for her career development work. Moreover, the University of Sheffield's planning school has recruited an employability officer who is employed as a teaching associate to assist in enhancing and developing student employability. This officer has worked with employers and the university careers service to develop student placement opportunities (within the MPlan undergraduate Urban Studies and Planning programme), employability sessions and student materials. Such work has led to international placements with global consultancies, as well as strategic links with private sector consultancies, and it is much appreciated by students; indeed, relevant NSS scores for 'personal development' rose from 82% to 93% after the appointment of the employability officer.

Planning schools may also incorporate professional/career development directly into modules; for instance, the University of Manchester's Professional and Career Development module (in the final year of the undergraduate Master in Town and Country Planning programme) includes general careers advice for instance in relation to CVs, interview techniques and presentation skills, with particular reference to the built environment professions.

Such examples of enhanced and integrated careers advice and guidance clearly provide students with valuable enhanced support to assist with employment and subsequent career development.

2.6 Use of technology, including within feedback

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

Use of technology is also increasingly evident in planning practice. For instance, as LeGates (2009a; 2009b) suggests, spatial information technology such as GIS is now very common in many contexts, and Higgins et al (2007) point to the need for skills enhancement for the use of such technology in practice. Such methods (particularly two-dimensional concepts using off-the-shelf software) are in fact taught in many planning programmes. LeGates asserts the need for basic appreciation of GIS and related technologies as a core element of all planning education, though he acknowledges the need to ensure a focus on concepts and principles rather than (fast-changing) software skills and operations. However, McLoughin (2012) indicates that planning employers do not regard GIS skills as a very important component of higher education.

Technology has also been applied extensively in relation to urban design, and UCL's undergraduate and postgraduate planning programmes developed (via a commission to an external design consultant) a Moodle module in 2012-13 entitled 'Planning to Plan: Graphics workshop'. This self-taught module introduced students to basic design skills relating to urban graphics software packages such as Sketchup, Photoshop, Illustrator and Design (all available via the UCL Myriad system). This was done by using UCL buildings, streets and spaces as the focus for online exercises. This tool was subsequently developed further as a response to student feedback as well as the opportunity to commercialise the package, and it was replaced by the Urban Skills Portal (see https://extendstore.ucl.ac.uk/catalog?category=3), a commercial version available free to students of the planning school and which includes additional workshops on urban film and photography, masterplanning in AutoCAD and urban mapping in GIS. In addition, from 2013-14 all planning school students (and staff) have free access to relevant Adobe software (in dedicated clusters as well as personal computers and laptops), which allows students to experiment and combine different digital software in order to become confident in using these in coursework. This innovative approach clearly enables students to obtain significant benefits in skills development with maximum flexibility.

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 have been extensively applied in particular by the Joint Distance Learning Consortium (JDLC) which is 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. Students are registered and graduate as UWE students but each partner shares responsibility for student learning, with students able to access relevant support and services from all partners. The consortium delivers its MA Town and Country Planning postgraduate programme entirely through online teaching and learning, via the UWE Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE), which hosts a variety of resources including core module texts and supporting reading. Module leaders can also embed videos, podcasts and web links in order to more effectively engage students, who interact with the materials via guided exercises ensuring effective progression through the content. While modules are delivered concurrently, with assessments submitted at the end of each module, students have complete flexibility over when they access materials and at what rate. This is distinct from the more structured model used by the Open University (an external consortium partner). Students can also interact with staff via telephone, email, Skype and social networking.

In parallel to academic learning resources, students also have remote access to personal and professional support materials via videos and webpages. Interactive pages (such as the UWE library-supported 'Study Skills' pages) serve as instructional guides for a variety of skills, and other support mechanisms – such as the 24-hour

online UWE librarian 'chat' service – aim to ensure that students in any location have access to support whenever they need it.

In addition, Heriot-Watt University applies extensive independent online distance learning education, including for its postgraduate MSc Urban and Regional Planning programme.

Such examples of blended and online approaches clearly show how learning opportunities can be enhanced for both on-campus and remote students.

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. The JDLC MA programme also embraces Facebook within its offer, as a result of the internationalisation of the programme, which made it increasingly difficult to continue with the use of two residential teaching sessions in the UK each year. The phasing out of these sessions was enabled by the increased use of ICT-based delivery, and students are now encouraged to join a closed Facebook group when they enrol on the programme. This enables the formation of an effective collegial group and sense of belonging between students in widely-varying locations who otherwise would have limited contact with one another. In practice, Facebook is used by students for sharing information, experiences and asking questions. While the JDLC course director (at UWE) acts as page administrator, a light touch is taken to content management and students are encouraged to express their views freely; indeed, in the two years since the area was set up, no intervention has been needed. Such examples clearly engage with students' increasing use of social media including within education.

More generally, online feedback for coursework is increasingly applied by planning schools and valued by students, and UWE makes use of video feedback in a second-year undergraduate module. This enables students to more easily appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their work, and adds to the flexibility with which they can engage with feedback for coursework.

2.7 Research-informed teaching and use of specialisms

The application of research-informed teaching is increasingly required internally by universities, and externally by accrediting bodies such as the RTPI. It can also link with many of the elements outlined above (such as study visits). However, Kitchen (2006) suggests that much planning research relates to academic-related communities of interest with little in common with (or interaction with) practice-related communities of interest. This would seem to be a persistent problem, with for instance Thompson in 2002 highlighting the lack of practical use of planning research as perceived by practitioners, and McLoughlin in 2012 showing that many employers still consider planning education to be lacking in practical application. This implies the need for continued action to link research and practice more effectively within planning education, though, as indicated above, employers may fail to appreciate the need for planning schools to prioritise core skills/competencies above 'training' for specific tasks which is more appropriately delivered via lifelong learning.

Research-informed teaching can clearly link to the application of specialisms within planning schools, since the RTPI's accreditation processes require a distinctive educational philosophy and defined specialist element/s (RTPI 2012a; 2012b). In many planning schools, this is a straightforward process which builds on their clear strengths and expertise, often related to the local geographical context as well as local practice needs. One example would be the focus on coastal planning by several planning schools with an appropriate location and curricular orientation. The specialism can be reflected in a variety of ways relating to research-informed teaching, as well as via student research contributing to dissertations for instance.

In addition, UWE has specialist expertise relating to the promotion of healthy and sustainable communities and the greater integration of health and planning. The planning school has promoted this via core modules within its planning programmes, and has also hosted several public health professionals who have contributed to lectures, seminars and field visits.

Similarly, the University of Sheffield offers a range of research-led specialist option modules for postgraduate planning students, reflecting its research specialisms. These modules allow students to develop knowledge of current issues as well as understanding of the research process. Relevant modules (around ten in any one year) include natural resource management; transport planning; and justice and judgement in planning. Students choose between one and four of these depending on their programme.

The above examples clearly show how planning schools can use their key strengths in research to enhance the distinctiveness of their offer and add value to learning and teaching.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The components outlined above clearly demonstrate a breadth of good practice across a wide array of elements, with much evidence of innovation in programme content and delivery. This may be related to factors such as increasing competition between institutions, increasing importance of student feedback, increasing value-awareness on the part of students, and wider availability and sophistication of ICT-based mechanisms to assist learning and teaching. While good practice is evident across the suggested components, there is a clear overall emphasis on employability, inter-disciplinarity and experiential learning (as indicated in Table One as well as the examples of good practice provided), with a degree of overlap and linkage between these.

Nevertheless, it is equally clear that the innovations in and applications of good practice have not completely addressed a number of persistent tensions: between research and practice; between core skill development and 'training'; and between traditional face-to-face and online delivery mechanisms. Consequently, the components and examples of good practice set out above should not be seen as narrowly prescriptive, since the determination of what is 'good practice' is inevitably context-dependent to some extent, and often contested. The components and examples suggested above are therefore intended to act simply as starting-points for planning schools to consider in their framing of programmes geared to their own specific aims, needs and resources.

Moreover, the suggested components and examples in this report necessarily represent a very partial and time-limited 'snapshot' of the more obvious innovations in relation to selected elements of good practice as indicated in 2014 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 via a more formal survey mechanism for planning schools/partnership boards. While there could be resistance in view of the risks of sharing information with competitors, it is suggested that the wider benefits of sharing good practice outweigh such risks. Planning schools represent communities of interest as well as isolated agents in competition, and many problems and challenges – including with respect to good practice – are arguably best addressed in a spirit of (albeit bounded) collaboration and collegiality.

In addition, given the persistent lack of alignment of the aims of planning schools and employers as illustrated above, what would also seem to be needed is an ongoing systematic method of garnering and understanding what the practice community see as necessary components (skills and knowledge) of initial planning education as well as lifelong learning/CPD. As indicated above, one-off research projects on this theme have taken place, but these have not formed part of a systematic process. While annual partnership boards represent a means

of highlighting the requirements and demands of individual board practitioner representatives, this process would seem to be rather patchy and lacking in co-ordination and comprehensiveness. A more systematic or formal mechanism – such as a regular (for instance annual) survey or forum for debate relating to employers' views on good practice in, or 'gaps' relating to, the development of relevant knowledge and skills would therefore be helpful.

This leads in turn to the related issue of which delivery mechanism or provider is most appropriate in the context of perceived gaps in knowledge or skills/competencies, for instance in relation to initial planning education vs lifelong learning/CPD. What would seem appropriate here is a more systematic and reflective approach to considering how such information (particularly on filling 'gaps') could most appropriately and effectively be translated into action. To ensure the latter, it would seem useful to view the spectrum of potential delivery mechanisms holistically so that the most appropriate form of delivery/provider can be identified from a suitable matrix in a rigorous manner. In this way, the emergence, for instance, of employer demands for skills/knowledge in relation to aspects such as design or finance could lead to consideration of how these could best be delivered in suitably innovative ways for example by universities, the private sector, RTPI Learn (the RTPI's web-based lifelong learning platform), or a suitable partnership between these and/or other agents with expertise.

Implementation of the above suggestions could more effectively inform the work of planning schools and partnership boards, and could link directly to the work of the Conference of Heads of Planning Schools as the umbrella organisation representing planning schools in discussions with the RTPI. In addition, the resulting information could inform pedagogic research in the field and could be linked for instance to a possible permanent track on this theme in the annual Planning Research Conference.

In summary, therefore, this report provides a means for planning schools to consider how they can innovate in what may be seen as 'good practice' in planning education. But, to carry the benefits forward, more systematic gathering of and reflection on both educational innovation (as 'good practice') and perceived needs – as outlined above – would seem to offer significant advantages for all those involved in education and planning practice. This could in turn enhance the wider delivery of planning services.

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