

Background to the education policy review

It is the case that the majority of the planning degrees that the Institute accredits must consider a Subject Benchmark Statement on Town And Country Planning which defines the academic standards that can be expected of a graduate and describes the nature of the subject: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-town-and-country-planning.pdf?sfvrsn=e7f3c881_4

In 2003, the RTPI Education Commission concluded that the underlying discipline should be termed 'spatial planning', the essential idea of which, for higher education and planning practice, is *"critical thinking about space and place as the basis for action or intervention"*. It suggested that the Institute *"specifies and validates an educational, training and qualifications framework that provides an adequate and flexible basis for the supply of an effective cadre of professional planners"* both in the UK and, where appropriate, globally.

The resulting accreditation policy for planning degrees (as set out in the RTPI's Policy Statement for Initial Planning Education) underlines this point. Procedures and criteria for the quality assurance of planning courses and assessment of universities to be recognised as an 'Effective Planning School' are set out in the RTPI Partnership Guide and RTPI Guide to Accreditation.

The RTPI Education team is undertaking an education policy review programme given a changing context for initial planning education. Stage 1, research on the pipeline of planners, will report shortly while stage 2 is a review of the RTPI's partnership and accreditation policy and procedures.

The requirements for this programme of work is set out on page 23 of the RTPI Corporate Strategy, namely:

- Undertake a detailed review – Education for Everyone – to broaden access to the pathways into chartered membership, to reach out to attract diverse talent, which will include reviewing the time taken, the delivery mechanisms and the content of courses.
- Review the existing model of entry and learning outcome requirements for accredited planning schools to ensure it fits our new, more inclusive and reactive model, seeking to accredit future planning schools that support delivery of our vision and missions.
- Broaden planning education requirements to enable a wider pool of experts working in related built environment disciplines to become chartered professional planners.

A changing context for initial planning education

Since 2003 when the RTPI's current accreditation policy and procedure was introduced, potential barriers to entry or progression through initial planning education have been observed.

- Student fees were introduced and then increased for many home-domiciled students on accredited undergraduate planning courses at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
- Planning units rather than named 'departments' or 'schools' have become the norm, on the one hand reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the built environment but also efficiency savings within higher education faculties. The visibility of planning and its research has therefore been affected in some academic contexts.
- Dual accreditation (courses that are recognised by another PSRB) on an increasing number of planning degrees has led to competition for graduates.
- A proportion of planning students drop out of the required four year undergraduate courses after year 3, the usual point for an exit award in most HEIs (excluding Scotland), anecdotally due the factors above.
- These points contribute to conversion rates from student to professional planner / RTPI member which is lower than ideal. This is a priority action arising from the Corporate Strategy membership objectives.
- And while it is not solely the responsibility for HEIs to train what is often termed 'oven ready' planners, there continues to be a skills shortage, or questions from employers about the skills needed for graduates and debates on the balance of academic, analytical and vocational learning within a planning degree.

In addition both the Corporate Strategy and CHANGE action plan are key drivers to broaden educational access into the profession.

This lends itself to revisit some of the recommendations that came out of the 2003 Commission that are relevant to the changing context since then.

- A broad policy goal *"to seek to ensure that the educational framework has the minimum barriers to entry for those who start without a firm commitment to planning; and that it attracts mid-career entrants, thus promoting maximum inclusivity, opportunity and flexibility"*.
- That the RTPI's role in initial planning education is to *"provide indicative guidance rather than prescriptive course content criteria and identify emerging areas of intellectual debate and practice that planning education should address."*

- That *“the educational benchmark for qualification for full membership of the RTPI should be a Masters level qualification.”*
 - This means *“at undergraduate level the 3+1 format should be continued with either*
 - *A four year full-time integral 'MPlan'; or*
 - *A three year spatial planning degree, followed by a one year (f.t.e.) Masters course,*
 - *except in Scotland, where undergraduate planning education should continue to be the equivalent of four years' study to Honours level.”*
 - *“In all cases the key components must be the core discipline of spatial planning and a specialism.”*
 - This means *“at postgraduate level, planning education should be based on the same principle as that for undergraduate with the equivalent of a one year (i.e. twelve-month course work) post-graduate Masters level qualification.”*
 - But also, at undergraduate level, *“that it is important that there should be both three- and four-year full time options. We recognise the financial difficulties faced by students. We believe students need the flexibility of opting for three-year courses with the option of completing the Masters later.”*
- That the RTPI should encourage academic careers in planning by *“recognising work undertaken as part of a Higher Degree by research as fulfilling the requirement for a specialism in initial planning education”*.

At the time the Commission suggested that initial planning education consisted of:

- *“an understanding of what spatial planning is, and the skills which underpin it - based on both a grasp of the theory of the relationships between social, economic and environmental issues.... and how that theory translates into spatial action.... this understanding has global applicability, whatever the different cultural and economic circumstances.”*
- *“an in-depth understanding of an area of specialism within spatial planning. By specialism we mean a particular area of knowledge within spatial planning.,., 'Regeneration', 'development management' , 'urban design' and 'planning research' are examples of the scale of the categories implied.”*

This approach was adopted so that studying both these elements together in one degree, or in separate qualifications, was then the gateway to the APC: *“an assessment of professional competence, i.e. 'fitness to practice', reflecting the ability to apply the knowledge and skills acquired through initial education and continuing studies, demonstrated through structured experience and assessed reflection in the workplace.”*

The Institute therefore wishes to consider whether its current approach to initial planning education is fit for purpose and whether any changes to accreditation might be appropriate. The longer term outcomes from this new review should be that a broader range of students and diversity of graduates from different subjects and areas of expertise are attracted to and eligible for planning education and professional membership.

To note: a review of the APC is not within the scope of this project – while linked to the matters under consideration in the education policy review, the APC falls within the remit of the RTPI Membership team.

Project parameters

In revisiting the conclusions from the 2003 review, we are looking at ways to increase the number of students studying planning at existing accredited, or new (future accredited) HEIs in the UK, Ireland and globally. This could mean an increase in the number of planning courses the RTPI accredits, or recognises, for access to one of its professional membership classes, alongside options to ensure enrolled students complete a fully accredited degree.

We wish to understand better what barriers to entry exist within our accreditation policy and procedures and seek expert support from the project advisor to review our procedures and learning outcomes and safeguard HEI provision of initial planning education.

Any changes must not unnecessarily disrupt existing good provision by HEI partners. Implementation and transition of any structural changes will need to be considered as part of our response to the project.

This is focused on initial planning education.

December 2021