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## **TRENDS AND PROSPECTS FOR PLANNING EDUCATION IN NEW ZEALAND**

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This paper reflects on the experiences of the planning profession in New Zealand over the last decade as a consequence of wide ranging reforms. It identifies several crises in practice as the planning profession has responded to demands engendered by the reforms. These crises and demands have influenced the nature and type of planning education currently offered in five New Zealand universities, along with changes in funding. The paper goes on to identify several factors that are likely to influence planning practice in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, creating new demands and expectations of planners. The implications and prospects for planning education are discussed.

### **CHANGES IN CONTEXT AND APPLICATION**

In the last decade or so, planning as a discipline has undergone a particular set of changes nationally and internationally. These changes have taken place in a changed climate of our understanding and perception of the age we live in. Planning has to contend with discourses of post colonialism and post modernity.

Contexts for planning have become devolved and decentralised. Planning has become more environmentally focused as notions of sustainable development have been embraced. Planners have been challenged about the relevance of their contribution as more disciplinary interests are brought to bear on issues such as urbanisation. The market led ideologies of the 1980s in the western world did much to constrain planning as a discipline with more emphasis on the market accompanied by deregulation. Planning became unpopular. It was seen to be heavily interventionist. Planning was perceived to unnecessarily constrain property owners and the rights of the individual. The "P" word became problematic overseas as it did here in New Zealand.

The neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s affected the practice of planning significantly in New Zealand. A sweeping range of institutional reforms at the central and local government level was enacted in New Zealand with the broad aims of rationalisation, privatisation and devolution (Boston, 1991; Jesson, 2000; Kelsey, 1993; Mulgan, 1994). Reform of local government and resource laws was heavily influenced by the philosophy of devolution and the notion that local communities should take greater responsibility for the environmental consequences of their decisions. A major reorganisation of local government restructured regional and local authorities to create new regional and district councils. In parallel with local government reform, a review

of environmental laws resulted in the creation of the Resource Management Act 1991. Regional councils were given responsibilities under the Resource Management Act for integrated management of natural resources of their regions, along with some others such as transport planning, while district councils continued the wide range of functions of the previous local councils, including land use planning and subdivision.

The advent of the Resource Management Act placed greater emphasis on effects-based management with a more instrumentalist approach to planning. At the same time, the Act placed emphasis on sustainable management drawing on the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The tensions created by this dual mandate have been played out through the 1990s as economic reformers have attempted to get to grips with environmental regulation.

“Noise” about implementation of the new Act peaked in the mid 1990s. Mandatory plans were slow to emerge from district councils. Many that did were large and complex. Developers were critical about the costs of resource consents, although the intention of the reformers was to internalise costs where they fell and ensure that “users-paid”. Government had not supported the new planning regime with great enthusiasm so that implementation was left largely to local government with varying degrees of capacity and understanding of the new planning mandate. In turn, communities responded in various ways, some rejecting strongly attempts to develop more innovative effects-based plans. The prospect of groups marching in the streets about new plans was almost unimaginable a decade ago. It’s not often that such passion about planning is displayed publicly! In the last two years the commissioning of a “think-piece” by the then Minister for the Environment and the various reports that followed can be seen as attempts to appease the right and downplay the inherent contradictions embodied in the statute (McShane, 1988; Minister for the Environment, 1998; Ministry for the Environment, 1998a and 1999b). In the end, there will always be conflict about resource development, whatever world view and statute is in place.

## **CURRENT ISSUES IN THE PROFESSION**

Despite significant changes in context, planning has proved to be adaptable and flexible in surviving and embracing change, as in other countries. While there are signs of yet further change ahead with a shift towards more social democratic policies of a new Labour-led government, several critical issues emerged in the last decade which require our attention. These issues have relevance for planning educators as we anticipate the needs for planning education in the future.

### **A crisis of identity:**

It has always been hard to define planning, particularly beyond the traditional development control and plan-making roles. The fuzziness around the edges was brought under scrutiny by the advent of the new regime. In part, this relates to our history as a profession that was heavily influenced by a statutory mandate, legal formalism and changing views of the role of the state. In part, perhaps because our roles are not nearly as easily definable as those of other professions. In part, because planning is interdisciplinary in its nature. It draws on a theoretical base to apply

knowledge from other disciplines, such as architecture, law, ecology, economics, and so on.

The inclusion of wider environmental considerations in a statutory planning framework posed new challenges for planners. Professionals from several disciplines were now much more actively involved in what has become styled as effects-based planning. There was a prevailing view in some quarters that “anyone could be a planner”.

Tensions between scientists and planners were particularly evident in regional councils where there had not been a strong planning history. Consequently, pressure was brought to bear on the New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI) to widen membership to include those working in planning, with several years of experience, but without formal qualifications. This highlighted for the Institute the dilemma of drawing boundaries around sets of knowledge bases that could be legitimately construed as “planning”. Where indeed do you draw the line? How do you determine who is a planner? What skills make a planner?

This challenge required planning practitioners to reflect on the nature of their work and what it was that they had to offer. Further, academics teaching planning programmes had vested interests in wanting to maintain the quality of the education they offered students and the value of their degrees. At the same time, there was a proliferation of environmentally oriented degrees offered throughout New Zealand universities with various labels, such as environmental studies, resource studies, and so forth. This was quite consistent with notions of providing choice. But it posed dilemmas for their graduates who became employed in planning positions, sought professional recognition, and then discovered that they were required to take additional papers to become a formal member of their profession.

Boundaries can of course always be contested. The Institute’s response to these tensions is one example that can be legitimately challenged as being exclusionary and narrow. The alternative is of course to forget about drawing lines in the sand and be inclusionary of everyone who considers themselves a planner, no longer concerned whether planning constitutes a profession. We are what anyone wants us to be! While this argument is raised from time to time in various academic and professional circles, it has not yet found favour. Numbers belonging to professional planning institutes both here and overseas continue to increase. Of course, new professional groupings have emerged as well. However, regardless of one’s view, the need to be clear about the nature and distinctiveness of the planner’s contribution remains.

### **A crisis of confidence:**

Along with the challenge about identity, came a crisis of confidence. Initially, planners were accused of being slow to embrace new ways of thinking about planning as we struggled to come to terms with the new regime. Some early plans, for example, did not look dissimilar to plans prepared under former legislation. There was much exhortation about what plans should or should not look like. Indeed, much of the rhetoric in the early years of implementation of the Act undermined the confidence of the planning profession. There was a view that much of what was associated with the former planning regime was of little value for the new era. This even extended to the

name of our profession. The NZPI came under considerable pressure in the early 1990s to change its name to embrace a more narrow perspective of what was then termed “resource management”. Some planners changed the way they referred to themselves, no longer calling themselves planners, using terms such as resource management consultants.

In hindsight, some of the rhetoric was naive and simplistic, couched in terms of ideological thinking, rather than the more practical realities of developing and implementing plans. Planners were cast in the mould of being defenders of the old order or advocates of the new. Experience showed that much of what planners could offer was still relevant, but that we could no longer rely on prescriptive controls and blunt instruments. In short, we had to lift the game, and develop some new skills to implement a more sophisticated regime.

### **A crisis of typecasting:**

The crises of identity and confidence were, in part, a response to the reforms in local government. Planning tasks were reframed in line with managerial principles of efficiency, transparency, and accountability. The institutional coherencies for planning had gone. The resulting uncertainties about the nature of planning and its contribution have been quite evident in NZPI membership interviews conducted over recent years, particularly from newer graduates. Essentially, the oral interview is a test of how conversant and confident the candidate is with the discipline and practice of planning. Candidates are always asked to define planning and to discuss some of the broader contextual issues facing planners and the practice of planning.

The frequency of poorly articulated responses by graduates to questions seeking their understandings of planning has been the subject of some concern for NZPI Council members. It is clear that many newer planners are not exposed to the “bigger picture” within their councils or consultancies, let alone beyond. However, given the instrumentalist nature of the reforms and the splits between policy and regulation that have taken place within local government, we should not find this trend surprising. Planners are not exposed to the same breadth of planning work as they may have been in the past. The fragmented manner in which planning tasks are now organised within government does not encourage critical reflection. Neither do the pressures to produce an arbitrary target number of consents per week provide much opportunity for more qualitative considerations.

An unfortunate emphasis has emerged in that resource consent administration (i.e. the process of controlling development / issuing permits) is viewed as almost a clerical processing activity rather than more considered analysis, drawing on experience, knowledge and judgement. This view is not helpful on three counts. First, it discounts the importance of the task. The outcomes are the ultimate tests by which the contribution of planners (and council plans) will be judged in the community. Second, it may mean that connections with other council policies are not made. Third, it provides a limited perspective of planning.

The longer term consequences of increasing fragmentation of planning tasks raises questions about the breadth and depth of expertise that will be available in years to come as planners, with others, are called upon to address problems of increasing

complexity. The challenge is to ensure that planners do not become simply typecast as policy analysts or consent processors but rather as experts in the development of local policy and its implementation, retaining our unique professional focus. In particular, planners need to maintain flexibility in practice without losing the integrity of our discipline.

### **A crisis of ethics:**

For any profession, ethical considerations underpin the way we practice. A consequence of the crises noted above is that for planners traditional ethical boundaries have become less distinct. The contexts in which we work have become more integrated. The closer interface between the public and private sector is one example. The rapidly changing nature of way in which planning is organised in local government has increased conflicts of interest. For example, contracting out by councils require planners in councils and consultancies to make choices about how they position themselves. And decisions by councils to build capacity in consultants, rather than in their own staff, requires consultants to be diligent about how they use information derived from various projects. Of particular concern is that Environment Court Judges and Commissioners<sup>1</sup> are advising us informally that planners are presenting as advocates rather than expert witnesses in the Court.

At the heart of this lies fundamental tensions about whose interests planners serve- the public as clients, or the wider public/community interest? In part, this tension is derived from the straddling of two traditions: land use planning from a more social-democratic era, and the more limited effects-based approach of the neo-liberal reforms. In addition, the increasingly diverse roles undertaken by planners highlights these dilemmas, particularly in the context in which advice is given. However, these tensions have to be acknowledged and confronted as our practice becomes more sophisticated. As our discipline is reformulated, so too do we need to constantly review and update our code of ethics, and reflect carefully on the ethical issues underpinning our work.

### **Some implications for practice:**

So how do some of these crises manifest themselves in practice? In the neoliberal environment of the 1990s, planners have been found wanting in terms of some of their skill bases. There has been a reliance on judicial processes and case law to provide clarification of legislation to guide practice. In the early part of the decade, innovation in terms of new approaches and methods was slow to develop. Integration of science and policymaking in topics such as significant natural areas and landscape was not effective. Plans have taken a long time to move through democratic processes.

Research that I am involved with, funded by the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology, is a case in point. The research programme, Planning Under A Co-operative Mandate is a collaborative effort, involving staff at the universities of Waikato, North Carolina, Auckland and Planning Consultants Ltd,

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<sup>1</sup> The Environment Court is a specialist appeal body, established by the Resource Management Act. It hears appeals and references on decisions made by councils. It has the powers of a district court and is made up of Environment Judges and Commissioners. A right of appeal against Environment Court decisions, on points of law only, be heard in the High Court (Ministry for the Environment, 1999, 14).

Auckland. The first phase of the research looked at determining what made a good plan and identifying the organisational factors that influenced plan quality (Ericksen, Crawford, Berke and Dixon, 2001). A method for coding plans was developed, drawing on eight principles: clarity of purpose, understanding of the mandate, identification of issues, integration with other plans, factual base, internal consistency, monitoring, organisation and presentation. A review of 34 district plans and 16 regional policy statements revealed that most plans were of average to poor quality. What was evident was that skills you would expect planners to show competence in, such as the identification of issues, the “knitting” of objectives, policies, methods, and so on were lacking in many plans. In part, this can be attributed to inexperience as many senior planners had moved on, in part perhaps to many disciplines being involved in planning teams. However, it did expose weaknesses in our abilities to construct plans, albeit in a different way, a skill that is very much the mark of a planner. There had been too much focus on process and consultation, at the expense of research and analysis.

Producing plans with good environmental, community and legal “fit” is of course a major achievement, as those planners who spend several years working on them will tell you. The operational environment within which planning occurs is highly influential in determining outcomes. But process should not dominate at the expense of substance.

## **CHALLENGES FOR NEW ZEALAND PLANNING EDUCATORS**

The paradigms of the new right and environmentalism posed particular challenges for universities teaching planning programmes. Was sustainable development now the new goal of planning? To what extent should planning education be driven by the demands and requirements of a new statute? Given the emphasis on environment, and less on social and economic concerns, should emphases shift from design and social concerns to a more singular focus on scientific and legal knowledge? With the state providing less on-the-job training for graduates should universities provide more vocational skills in their programmes? The dual mandate, as implied, also raised questions about how well planning graduates were placed to participate in the market place and the environment in relation to those from other disciplines, such as economics and environmental science.

Most planning programmes were restructured, embracing notions of sustainable development and management to varying degrees. Major reviews of planning programmes took place at the universities of Auckland, Massey and Lincoln. A new professional postgraduate diploma in resource and environmental planning was introduced at the University of Waikato in the mid 1990s. Massey University, for example, provided specialisations in its BRP degree so that students could develop a second strength to complement the core of planning. The MRP degree was offered on a block mode basis to provide practitioners, amongst other things, with a theoretical base on which to assess practice. Lincoln University developed several planning streams within existing undergraduate and graduate degrees in resource studies and resource management. The Masters degree in resource and regional planning at the University of Otago underwent some revision.

These changes of course took place in the context of a new managerial environment, as applied to central government. A competitive model of education has imposed constraints on staffing and funding of programmes. Resources are finite. Much more attention is being given to benchmarking, accountability, and so on as standardisation gains credence. Accreditation of professional programmes by professional bodies and others has thus gained more importance.

All five planning programmes received favourable reviews from the NZPI accreditation committee. However, issues of capacity (staff and resources) are likely to loom large as pressures on university budgets increase. Whether it is sustainable to support the numbers of programmes that we have in New Zealand remains to be seen. Major challenges lie ahead for professional planning programmes. A government committee, the Tertiary Advisory Education Commission, is reviewing the funding regime for universities. It is highly likely that one outcome will be that budgets will be more tied to research performance (New Zealand Vice Chancellors Committee, 2001). This has implications for professional programmes where staff need to commit energies in building and maintaining networks with practitioners and other stakeholders, and where research is not always produced in traditional academic avenues.

In the meantime, the challenge is to ensure that the programmes are regularly updated as the pace of change is rapid. Currently, the Local Government Act 1974 is being reviewed. A proposal to require councils to prepare 'long term council plans' brings planning onto centre stage with a broader emphasis than has been evident in the last decade (Department of Internal Affairs, 2001). While details are sketchy, these plans are likely to encompass social and economic considerations, along with environmental matters. This poses a challenge to planning programmes that have been heavily influenced by reforms of the last decade with a strong emphasis on resource management.

## **PROSPECTS FOR PLANNING EDUCATION**

Having outlined some current issues in planning, and choices we face, I want to turn attention towards the future of planning. Despite the rough passage of the last decade with its calls for reduced intervention, it could be argued that planning is benefiting significantly from the challenge of the new right. The challenges to our work have resulted in considerable strengthening. There has been a proliferation of plans as tools for managing various aspects of environmental change beyond those of traditional statutory planning. Planners are taking on a wider range of roles such as mediators, negotiators, project managers, commissioners, and so on. There is a resurgence in strategic planning and much greater attention to new forms of collaborative planning at local levels as we enter a new decade. The Auckland regional growth forum is a case in point where politicians have voluntarily engaged in development of a regional growth strategy for metropolitan Auckland (Fookes, 2000). This is a significant achievement in the context of parochial local government politics. New and exciting opportunities for planners are opening up in fields such as infrastructure, heritage and development planning. This diversification provides a capacity to extend our skill base. More creative planning is occurring outside of statutory instruments. Work on sustainable living communities in Auckland City Council is one example. Another is

the use of structure plans by several councils to manage development of greenfield areas in Auckland and elsewhere.

In many respects, planning in New Zealand could be regarded as finally coming of age as we

- move outside of the straitjacket of statutes,
- become more innovative in the development of non-regulatory approaches, and
- develop very much a New Zealand style of planning (embracing Maori concerns more fully than ever before).

The coming decade is seeing some encouraging innovation as we build on the lessons of the 1990s and develop a more sophisticated toolkit. Looking back, we may come to judge this period as a transition (with all its growing pains) from what characterised planning in the past to a more inclusive style of planning, with its notions of sustainability, empowerment and collaboration.

### **What are some of the likely challenges and responses?**

In looking ahead, there is a wide range of possible conditions and responses that will shape our work. I identify some of these below:

- institutional contexts will continue to shift quickly and there will be no resting point. Restructuring will continue in public and private sectors under financial restraints.
- there will be less emphasis on central government and more on local levels, although the planning domain is still likely be defined by the central state, even under a social democratic government. Local government is likely to take on wider roles.
- planning will therefore become more negotiated, facilitative and enabling, requiring new “people skills” for planners working at local levels.
- however, despite more time being spent on building partnerships and collaboration, the complexity of issues will enhance demand for robust analytical skills to inform participants and assist decision-making.
- old dualisms of professionals and community may become less important as we work more intentionally with communities. In turn, they will become more informed. Iwi (tribal)/Maori, communities and interest groups will be able to participate more equitably as partners of local government, and will demand more of us.
- plans will become different as more reliance is placed on instruments such as strategies, codes of practice, protocols with various community groups, self regulation of resources, co-management initiatives, monitoring, and so on.
- there will be more emphasis on internationally adaptable skills and standards, requiring more understanding of international treaties, conventions and protocols.

- planners will be called onto to do more than simply manage effects of human activities but to manage change across a range of areas (e.g., infrastructure).

In summary, planners are likely to need:

- The ability to be flexible and adaptable across a range of institutional contexts
- Confidence in their own disciplinary foundations and of their contributions as planners
- The ability to facilitate, co-ordinate and integrate a range of planning instruments across government and non-governmental groups
- A high level of analytical skills
- International awareness and ability to transfer skills
- Commitment to ensure that in policy and implementation, issues are addressed in terms of social and physical sustainability, equity and democracy
- Capacity to articulate own values, recognise others and where difference resides- consequently, this requires a strong professional and personal identity

### **Planning education for the future:**

In shaping planning education for the future, we need to consider the following requirements and we will struggle to reconcile some of these:

- provide graduates with a capacity to contextualise and work comfortably with communities, specialists and other constituencies
- build strong constituencies (institutional and individual, across private and public sectors, within New Zealand and beyond) both to strengthen teaching and research initiatives. Be clear about commitment to Treaty of Waitangi<sup>2</sup> principles.
- build innovative research programmes to inform teaching and develop strong PHD programmes
- promote interdisciplinary linkages (both for new teaching programmes and research) within universities and outside
- capture informal knowledge in practice as research thereby drawing closer links between practitioners and academics, planners and communities
- ensure continuing focus on theoretical considerations to ensure that practice is informed by theory
- reduce attention from statutes so that graduates can see that planning is more than meeting demands of legislation- can't afford to ignore social and economic aspects of development

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<sup>2</sup> The Treaty of Waitangi is one of New Zealand's founding documents which establishes the relationship between the Crown and Maori as Tangata Whenua (people of the land or given place).

- provide flexibility in delivery (web, block teaching) without compromising outcomes
- encourage diversity in curriculum to encompass difference, e.g., gender, ethnicity
- provide specialisations in curriculum so students can develop strengths alongside planning
- continue provision of practical components to maintain professional focus

## CONCLUSIONS

In providing an agenda for planning education, we are forced to make choices. These are contingent on various factors as I have already discussed. Thus, I note some final considerations:

- have to prioritise and implement those priorities
- give high priority to increasing research outputs
- build on established strengths
- given the rate of change, ensure that staff are attuned to needs of practitioners and communities, and informed by practice, adjusting programmes regularly
- ensure research outputs inform teaching and practice
- need to provide education that gives graduates capacity to develop beyond university rather than simply information transfer
- build a series of partnerships and networks with various constituencies in the community (as practitioners are doing in their communities)
- acknowledge political realities of economic pressure on universities so that funding cuts are minimized and new areas targeted for development

In a small country like New Zealand, there are close relationships between universities and the professional community we serve. Thus, we are very sensitive to the requirements of the profession, impacts of changing government policy, and the need to deliver a sound academic education for our students. The preceding discussion in this paper points to two possible directions that we could take as educators, although these are not mutually exclusive. Both of these are evident in practice.

First, we could allow ourselves to be driven by the more limited approach of the reforms and focus on the vocational aspects of our work. This can be characterised as an instrumental approach, dominated by statute and process, and very much influenced by political changes of the day. This choice allows planning to be defined by law. The second approach is to pursue more actively a path of leadership, recognising that for the last decade, we have been operating in a more reactive than proactive way. This will require us to be clear about the knowledges that will be informing the practice of the future and our professional identities as planners work increasingly alongside other professionals.

The opportunities opening up as a consequence of the experiences of the last decade and on-going reforms gives us a window of opportunity in which we can claim back

some territory. As a profession we have much to offer. As educators we are in an influential position in that the people we teach make a difference in the community. There is little doubt that the next year or two is likely to bring change that may significantly affect our ability to operate effectively as planner educators. In the meantime, our obligation is to provide the best quality education that we can for our students, the profession and the many, diverse communities that we serve.

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